
H-France Review Vol. 2 (February, 2002), No. 32

James Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001. x + 326 pp. Notes and index. \$49.95 US (cl). ISBN 0-674-00624-0.

Review by David A. Bell, Johns Hopkins University.

One of the stranger results of the “linguistic turn” in our discipline has been to make a great deal of actual history sound suspiciously like a graduate seminar. Today, historical actors are always being described as inventing concepts, attributing meanings, and developing understandings. They are seen as producing representations, telling stories, revising received ideas, and even working at discourses. They sound, in short, very much like historians.

I have been as guilty of this tendency as anyone else, and on most days I am ready to defend it to a certain point. Since historical reality can only be perceived through the veils of linguistic representations, these representations necessarily constitute our first object of study. Yet it is also important to recognize that the tendency has come at a high price. It takes away not only much of the color and drama of the past, but also much of its strangeness. By boiling down so much of historical action to a species of mental work, we make it seem deceptively familiar. Very few people in history have spent quite so much of their lives as we do manipulating symbolic concepts. All actions derive their meanings from symbolic fields, but this obviously does not mean that all actions are *solely* symbolic.

These musings are prompted by James Livesey’s intelligent and useful, but also somewhat frustrating monograph. Livesey takes on a big question: what, in the final analysis, did the French Revolution really change? Like Isser Woloch in *The New Regime* he refreshingly insists that to provide an answer we need to move beyond the deeply-trodden territory of 1789-94 and focus particularly on the period between the passing of the quasi-religious exaltation of the Terror and the solidification of the Bonapartist dictatorship.^[1] We need to take seriously the initiatives of the Directory, the writings of the *Idéologues*, and the attempts at institution-building by post-Thermidorian figures such as Pierre-Claude-François Daunou and François de Neufchâteau. Like Woloch, Livesey concludes that quite a lot was accomplished in these years (Woloch devotes much attention to the Napoleonic era as well). But where Woloch concentrates on the institution-building, particularly in the realms of administration, education, social welfare, and conscription, Livesey highlights the production of new political and economic cultures. In the end, he argues grandly, what this period saw was nothing less than the making of democracy in France.

This is an intriguing proposition, but it is also counter-intuitive, to say the least. It is one thing to show, as Woloch does, the formation of durable new institutions such as schools and departmental administrations. It is quite another to argue that democracy was “made” in a period that saw, in the most obvious and immediate sense, its spectacular failure: massive political instability and corruption, a series of *coups d’état*, and finally Napoleon’s seizure of power in 1799. To get around this problem, Livesey is forced to define democracy in an unusual manner, putting the formal institutions and practices of democracy almost entirely aside. He pays barely any attention to such matters as elections, assemblies, or constitutions (the Constitution of the Year III gets two paragraphs), and the word “voting” does not even appear in the index. Instead, he prefers an “alternate model of democratization”

that centers not on these formal practices, but on what the political scientist Robert Putnam has called “social capital”—a frustratingly vague term that is very close to what the *philosophes* meant by *moeurs*, encompassing habits of thought, social relations and networks, and elements of social organization. [2] Livesey follows Putnam closely, departing from him principally in Livesey's claim that democracy does not need long, slow cultivation over the centuries, but can be brought about with, literally, revolutionary speed. In his conclusion, Livesey remarks that “the transformation in the way farmers and peasants talked about their land was of more significance than any constitution” (p. 247).

This sort of statement makes me think the conceptual distance between the seminar room and our historical subjects has grown excessively small. To begin with, democratic ideas and attitudes are important things, but they are not “democracy.” They are not even sufficient conditions for democracy. Certainly, it is possible to look around the world today and conclude that the mere institutional framework of democracy means little without the accompanying attitudes. But conversely, French history itself abundantly suggests how little purchase democratic attitudes can have without a workable, durable system of constitutional protections—which France arguably lacked until as late as 1958.

Then there is the problem of how we deduce “social capital” and political practices from the discourses that have survived to us *about* them. Livesey is insistent in his introduction that this is not simply a book about discourse. “We need,” he asserts, “to understand how the notion of the democratic republic was expressed through institutional forms that could be the sites of political learning for elements of the population, and how it created a social basis for itself” (p. 18). Yet in practice the book spends relatively little time analyzing these “institutional forms” and far more time analyzing discussions about them. Indeed, Livesey often drops the distinction between discourse and action or practice entirely, with the result that he unintentionally makes revolutionary politics sound like an abstract exercise in political philosophy. Brissot's “real problem,” for instance, was “his failure to devise a conceptual machinery through which to represent democratic citizenship” (p. 45). Later Livesey states, “Consumption and citizenship were difficult to align,” and he then adds: “The republican state continued to work on this problem” (p. 67) (a pity the Directors had not read Bourdieu!). Livesey's book might have been better titled *Talking About Democracy in the French Revolution*, for its principal subject is the discussions about how to create democracy that went on among intellectuals, within the French government, and, to the extent he can find the sources, in the larger population, especially where it came into contact with the state. The sources are abundant where the intellectuals and administrators are concerned, but Livesey never pauses to ask if these figures talked about democracy so incessantly precisely because of their often farcical inability to make it work in practice.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with writing about ideas of democracy under the Directory. On the subject, Livesey has many keen and original things to say. He has gone through an impressively vast collection of writings and distills out of them what he claims was a fundamentally new and coherent vision of politics and economics—what he calls “commercial republicanism”—which coalesced in the years after Thermidor. By this phrase, Livesey means a republicanism that was democratic and egalitarian but not hostile to the operations of a modern economy and the free market. To the contrary, its exponents argued that the moral autonomy necessary for good citizenship was impossible when not grounded in material autonomy, and that the latter was best ensured in a commercial economy. Not surprisingly, Livesey associates this modern republicanism with the great defender of the “liberty of the moderns”: Benjamin Constant. Livesey's research here accords very well with an important recent article of Keith Baker's which in a similarly Constantian vein distinguished between different strains of republicanism in France *before* the Terror, arguing persuasively that the Jacobin version, hostile to modern commercial society, was not the only one on offer. [3]

The great strength of Livesey's book is that he does not stick narrowly with Constant, or with his predecessor Condorcet, but shows how the spirit of commercial republicanism spread out much more widely during the years after Thermidor. In successive chapters he analyzes agricultural policy, the

debate over the division of common lands, educational policy, and artistic policy. In each case he finds a genuinely democratic ideal at work. He even posits that the Directory rejected the misogynistic stance of the Jacobins and implicitly included women within the logic of its democratic project. He makes this argument on the basis of a close examination of proposed curricula for the republican schools. These curricula privileged a reading of literary texts and therefore inculcated notions of sentiment—a domain as open to women as men, if not more so—rather than of masculine honor. This choice rendered the curricula “useless as the basis for a defense of privilege, even gender privilege” (p. 197). It is an intriguing idea, although one for which Livesey does not adduce sufficient evidence.

By far the most important and impressive of Livesey’s chapters concern the debate over the division of common lands. Here, he goes well beyond the pages of treatises and periodicals and shows how the language of “commercial republicanism” turns up in the writings of French farmers and peasants. The debate, he argues, “drove participants to consider the relationship of interests, norms and institutions and forced them to acquire more powerful modes of understanding and explanation...This process created the context for the rural population to acquire the language of commercial republicanism and to occupy the new orientation toward economy, society and politics that it contained” (p. 126). In other words, during the Revolution French peasants and farmers became democratic capitalists. They accepted the free market but also insisted on a degree of democratic egalitarianism.

But again, Livesey does not do enough to prove that changes in rural discourse reflected durable changes in rural practices and habits of thought. He does not, for instance, investigate in any depth whether the language articulated at the time of the debate over *partage* persisted in different sorts of rural sources, in respect to later quarrels, throughout the modern period. Nor does he confront the possibility that the farmers and peasants of the Directory were merely parroting the “commercial republican” language then being used by the administrators and deputies they often looked to for support. It does not help that Livesey rather grandiloquently concludes the book with the claim that this change in language “marked the end of an immemorial world of thought and experience” (p. 247), a notion that sits uneasily with the work of scholars like Liana Vardi on the profound changes that had taken place in rural France well *before* the Revolution.[4]

Overall, Livesey’s focus on a diffuse democratic “culture” has much in common with Patrice Higonnet’s recent, provocative, and thoughtful defense of “Jacobinism” as an alternate model of democracy.[5] It is also reminiscent of the nostalgia for the Third Republic that is currently so prevalent in France itself, both among academics (including Pierre Nora and Mona Ozouf) and “neo-republican” politicians such as Jean-Pierre Chevènement. In each case, the driving impetus seems to be to find a French model of democratic republicanism that is distinct from the Anglo-American variety: more oriented towards community values, more egalitarian, more comfortable with a powerful state, more insistent on cultural unity. This is an admirable goal, but in each case it involves making a somewhat artificial distinction between a set of values, on the one hand, and the troublesome historical context in which these values were developed, on the other. Higonnet does not shy away from this problem and confronts the fact that Jacobinism, in practice, mostly amounted to a tragic failure. The French “neo-republicans” are more slippery, hailing the values and institutions of the Third Republic while conveniently putting to the side its dismal history of revolving-door governments, the widespread disillusion and cynicism it fostered, and its ultimate weakness in the face of extremist ideologies.

Livesey’s book, in the end, suffers from the same sort of problem. He has written a lucid and important study in the history of ideas writ large. It will be indispensable reading for anyone concerned with the political culture of post-Thermidorian France. But it falters in making the larger argument about the making of democracy. I, at least, cannot accept Livesey’s dismissal of the importance of constitutions, formal guarantees of civil liberties, and voting. Nor am I convinced by an argument about democracy that never really addresses the problem of why, if it was indeed made in the 1790’s, it took so much time, effort, and blood to institutionalize.

Minor notes: *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* is in general lucidly written, and Harvard University Press has expertly produced it. But if there is a paperback edition, Livesey should correct a blooper on page 6 (in reference to Mona Ozouf's "*Les festivals de la Révolution française*"—the title is *La fête révolutionnaire*) and his error on page 203, where he states that "the Parlements never claimed to represent the sovereign nation; rather, they claimed to represent the Estates General in abeyance." The Parlements did make certain—albeit limited—claims to represent the nation, and in the eighteenth century they mostly did not present themselves as a stand-in for the Estates General, but as the true inheritors of the early councils of the Frankish nation.

NOTES

[1] Isser Woloch, *The New Regime: Transformations of the French Civic Order, 1789-1820s* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

[2] See Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[3] Keith Michael Baker, "Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 73, no. 1 (March, 2001), 32-53.

[4] See Liana Vardi, *The Land and the Loom: Peasants and Profit in Northern France, 1680-1800* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

[5] Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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See also James Livesey's response to David A. Bell's review.

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