

H-France Review Vol. 2 (February, 2002), No. 33

Response to David A. Bell's Review of James Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution*.

By James Livesey, Trinity College, Dublin.

David Bell's review of *Making Democracy* includes two criticisms that in turn open issues of general, as opposed to personal, concern. Bell contests the validity of the idea of democracy that I investigate and the utility of the methodology I use to do so. My empirical point, that the French model of democracy was elaborated under the Directory, is largely uncontested. There will be other forums where that position might be more properly debated. However, Bell's arguments illustrate some of the limitations that inhibit our work on the French Revolution, and in the hope of opening this more general debate I offer this response.

It is obvious, even in mature democracies, that there is a tension between rights and citizenship. The very term "liberal democracy" advertises that neither word exhausts the meaning of the other. When we move to analyse the evolution of modern political forms, the vital questions arise precisely at the fracture between liberal and democracy, between rights and citizenship. These questions arise for historical actors as well as for scholars. It is perfectly understandable that Bell "cannot accept" a history of democracy that does not prioritise "constitutions, formal guarantees of civil liberties, and voting;" however, such a response is of little assistance in understanding a political tradition that doesn't prioritise these elements either. French democracy is and has been far more Jeffersonian than Hamiltonian, and whether we approve or disapprove our first duty is to understand. The problem we face as historians, as opposed to political philosophers, is to overcome our own intuitions about the meaning of democracy in order to excavate what other meanings historical actors have held. In the French case that means we have to understand what citizenship meant and how it structured social and cultural institutions despite the evident political instability. One hardly needs to go to an archive to see that formal French politics did not provide a context through which the population could work through their intuitions of liberty, equality, happiness, virtue, utility, and the rest of the panoply of values that attend modern politics. Formal politics did not play the co-ordinating role we might expect it to have. As a result the task that faces historians of modern France is working out which institutions allowed the population to negotiate their values and interests. Viewing this complex history through the optic of contemporary political forms would make it invisible. We just have to learn to accept that which is difficult. We cannot expect to see our own values reflected back at us wherever we look.

The debate on methodology is more difficult to elaborate since the criticism is less sharply focused. When David Bell is anxious about boiling down "historical action to a species of mental work," I suspect that the positivist we all have lurking in our closet has leapt out and mugged him. In any case the anxieties about cultural history are misplaced as the book departs from culture as its core category and replaces it with institutions. I regret that confusion, and indeed frustration, may have been generated by my use of the idea of institutions. Had I included an elaborated discussion of this idea the strategy of the research might have been more apparent. Institutions are any set of objects that allow individuals to co-ordinate their behaviours toward one another on the basis of reasonable assumptions about the behaviour of others. Institutions range from the highly formal, such as a railway network, to the highly informal, such as promise-keeping, but in all cases institutions relate individual interests through norms.

For this model to work it is important that the norms and the interests are not reducible to one another. Markets do not work because they operate in the interests of those who own capital and seek profit, or at least not for that reason alone. The history of institutions allows us to marry the concern for meaning characteristic of the various varieties of cultural history with that for agency which was more prominent in earlier paradigms. Rather than look for the cultures or discourses that overdetermine action, the task is to find the institutions through which individuals co-ordinate action and order communication. Rebecca Spang's account of the restaurant is a good example of the way in which an institution opens up the space for agency while at the same time creating the possibility of order. Democracy is not itself an institution but a norm, and my goal was to find the institutions that were animated by that norm. This makes the task more difficult since a history of ideas and a history of institutions run in parallel, neither stable, each constructing the other. My only excuse is that doing the history of a period as difficult as the Revolution drives you to these kinds of methodological pyrotechnics. I hope that as the history of the Revolution revisits issues of politics, economy, and society, this kind of institutional approach will become more common.

As any reader of the preceding review will know it raises other, more specific, criticisms of elements of the book. The book must answer to those itself; it would be an abuse of the forum for me to nitpick on specifics. I congratulate Bell on his professional, even-toned response to arguments and perspectives he clearly does not share. I hope our disagreements produce more light than heat.

James Livesey □
Trinity College (Dublin)
jlivesey@tcd.ie

Copyright © 2002 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172