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Jon Cowans, *To Speak for the People: Public Opinion and the Problem of Legitimacy in the French Revolution*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001. vi + 249 pp. Index. \$21.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-415-92972-5 (paper); \$85.00 (cl). ISBN 0-415-92971-7.

Review by David Address, University of Portsmouth.

Did the political actors of the French Revolution have a clear modern vision of the interaction of sovereignty, public opinion, representation, and political legitimacy? Did they, in their political actions, demonstrate any consistency in their application of such concepts? Were one to direct questions such as these to any scholar of the revolutionary decade, the answer would most likely be, after only a little thought, "No, of course not." A modern historiography that begins with François Furet and which encompasses Mona Ozouf, Keith Michael Baker, Roger Chartier, Lynn Hunt, Lucien Jaume, Sarah Maza, Patrice Gueniffey and a number of others has shown that, without a doubt, the politicians and commentators of revolutionary France not only did not hold to any of these concepts in the way we understand them today, but were also mired in self-contradiction when it came to applying what they did believe, and that such contradiction deepened over time.

Knowing this, one turns to a new study on this very subject, expecting a fine-grained exploration of what such terms and concepts did mean to revolutionary actors, taken as a group, or divided by time or ideological leaning. What one gets from this book, unfortunately, is not that. In the introduction, Cowans clearly states that this will be a study not of revolutionary public opinion, but of the politics of the notion of "public opinion" as played out amongst the national political elite (p. 6). He uses the *Archives parlementaires* and the *Moniteur* to sample speech in the National Assembly and Convention, the minutes of the Paris Jacobins, and a selection of other major newspapers. His underlying approach lies somewhere on the Furet-Habermas axis, with a slight dash of Foucault on discourse. Thus ideas and language have power, and any sense of material determination is resolutely downplayed. Such an approach meshes with some key aspects of revolutionary political life, in which ideological purity and the sovereignty of the national will were the cardinal points of reference. It can only be, however, an approach, which must then be broadened into an analysis through appropriate, precise, and contextualised consideration. This is where Cowans falls short.

This work has its merits. It concisely reiterates some of the underlying themes of revolutionary political discourse and demonstrates yet again, in solid detail, how confused and confusing were attitudes on the great questions around the role of "the people" in revolutionary political life. What is unfortunate is that this demonstration fails to offer any convincing overall explanation for these attitudes, falling back on counterfactuals, the very mention of which betrays a lack of grasp of just how very "counterfactual" they were in the 1790s. On his penultimate page, Cowans notes that:

The problem [of public opinion] might have been resolved by making more modest claims about the government's relationship to the will of the people, by presenting representation in a more positive light, and by treating public opinion as a force that advised but did not dictate to elected rulers (p. 197). Since that "might have" would have involved wrenching the whole political culture from its foundations

and standing much of it on its head, such a suggestion is not very illuminating.

Cowans' doctoral research was on public opinion and legitimacy in post-Liberation France, as measured by opinion polls. The current work is thus an interesting attempt to direct attention to the same issue at the birth of the political, rather than social-scientific, use of public opinion. However, one of the things that intrudes into this process and inhibits its success is a series of apparent errors, omissions, and possible misunderstandings. For example, although the title "Legislative Assembly" appears briefly (p. 87), denoting the body whose legitimacy had collapsed in the summer of 1792, an extended discussion of attitudes to the "National Assembly," (pp. 79-81) makes no distinction between the Constituent Assembly, with its freight of nobles and clergy, and the body elected in 1791, conflating remarks on the presence of first- and second-estate members with comments on the spring of 1792. Posing a slightly different problem is the final chapter, which claims to move "from Thermidor to Brumaire." There are somewhere around one hundred primary citations in this chapter, but the number that date from after September 1795 is scarcely above a handful. Every author who has written on the whole revolutionary process, this reviewer included, is tempted to wrap up the second half of the decade in one chapter, but for a study such as this, some more detailed treatment of Directorial politics would seem necessary.

Likewise, although Cowans notes that the study has a "focus on Paris" (p. 6), his discussion of the influence of Parisian politics on the Assembly and Convention is clouded by a series of apparent misunderstandings. There is evident confusion between the Districts of 1789-90 and the Sections that succeeded them. For example, the term "sections" is used to refer to events in 1789 (p. 50). The latter only came into existence in mid-1790, were based on a different franchise to the Districts, with sometimes different boundaries, and with a clearly-defined and limited constitutional role. Thus, it is untrue to say that Sections "could make a particularly compelling claim to represent public opinion given their origins in the electoral districts that had chosen representatives to the Estates General" (p. 67). The essentially conservative social and political nature of the Sections in 1790-91 thus also is elided, as is all conflict within Parisian municipal politics, so that the city appears as a more-or-less constant pressure from the left on national politics. When discussion moves into the period of the Convention, the term "sans-culotte" is used loosely to discuss the so-called Parisian popular movement, conflating social and political attributes in a fashion that detailed scholarship disproved fifteen years ago.<sup>[1]</sup> Cowans' main sources for Parisian popular politics seem to be Albert Soboul and George Rudé (see, for example, pp. 36-9, 146), along with brief mention of the work of R.B. Rose, which uncritically follows their Marxist schema (p. 74). There are other minor issues. For example, the significant, but not especially eminent, member of the Committee of Public Safety, André Jeanbon St-André, becomes a "Jacobin leader" (p. 108) and is frequently referred to as "Jeanbon" (pp. 111, 120, etc.). The work overall gives the impression of not having as firm a grasp on the complexities of revolutionary politics as it should.

Where further problems emerge is in methodology. Cowans has clearly worked through the various records and journals in detail and extracts from them a great deal of eminently quotable material—my personal favourite is Collot d'Herbois to the Jacobin Club on 29 July 1794: "The Jacobins are the Convention! The Convention is the people!" (p. 131, in the chapter on the Terror; but again, the fact that this is two days after 9 thermidor, and the very day on which "Robespierrists" were purged en masse from the Jacobins, is unmentioned.). It is the presentation and working-through of all this material which is problematic. It often appears as if Cowans' central analytical categories for dividing up the members of the Assembly and Convention are "some" and "many" (pp. 36, 58-9, 83, 89, 112, 135, 158, for example), and he presents clusters of terms around "public opinion" and "public spirit" used by deputies at different times, without ever really establishing the lineage or user-constituencies of any of them (pp. 56-7, 100, 132-3). It is part of Cowans' argument to portray confusion amongst revolutionaries over the use of such terms, but this mode of presentation cannot help the reader make sense of what may underlie this appearance. It seems unlikely to have been utter formless chaos, but Cowans has difficulty suggesting otherwise. In the chapters on the Terror and after, there is effectively

no attempt to draw out meaningful distinctions between groups of individual speakers. One would have to acknowledge that labels such as "Hébertist" and "Indulgent" are less than precise, but some indication of political divergence would have been valuable as a point of reference. While the chapter on 1792-3 clearly has more material to work with in dissecting the Girondin-Montagnard split, it also contains statements such as this:

Unanimity being utterly unrealistic even in a far less dysfunctional political community than this, a more attainable goal would have been the kind of indirect consensus in which people agreed not upon specific leaders and policies, but merely on the procedures used to choose leaders and policies and resolve disputes (p. 120).

Since Cowans must immediately admit that the most that revolutionary politicians could ever agree on was "a few vague platitudes," one wonders what is the value of such a clearly counterfactual statement. Running through this book are passages which seem to indicate that Cowans believes that some sort of "other" French Revolution was possible, in which legitimacy could have been a stable commodity of political life, but that the language of politics kept inexplicably running away from this noble goal, through confusion, delusion, or whatever. What he seems to neglect is that the language of public debate overlay other sets of assumptions, one of the most important of which was that political factions believed that their enemies intended to slaughter them. After all, from the September Massacres to Thermidor, slaughter is exactly what was meted out to political enemies and what had been feared ever since July 1789. The Girondins confronted the Montagnards knowing, or at least fearing, that the September Massacres had almost swept them away at Robespierre's bidding. In return, the Montagnards cherished the belief that Brissot's allies had plotted to prevent the 10 August uprising, and thus, implicitly, to cause the defeat of the revolutionaries and their death at aristocratic hands. The survivors as old men would repeat in their memoirs the conviction that the other side had been in correspondence with Austria all along.[2]

The rather optimistic view taken by Cowans also covers his interpretation of the Revolution's precursors, noting that "historians have shown that before 1789 those interested in the formation of public opinion valued sociability, politeness, and civility" (p. 119, an unreferenced contention.). Indeed, no doubt many writers during the Revolution called for such values, but many writers before the Revolution had also traduced such values and had done so more than occasionally in the pay of the political elites, who practised such "civility" in their personal interactions and read political pornography in their leisure-hours. It seems that Cowans has not read enough Robert Darnton (or indeed other authors on the political strife of the 1750s-80s).

On a more detailed point of historiography, this work makes no mention of the studies of Jacques Guilhaumou and Bernard Conein into the concept of the "porte-parole" or speaker for the people during the revolutionary decade. Cowans' exclusive focus on speech within the national political forum may excuse this, but by neglecting this angle, he loses a valuable and possibly critical counterpoint to his own scrutiny of the deputies' speech as it claimed to look "out" to the people.[3]

The question of how far one can go down the road of treating revolutionary political discourse in isolation from its cultural and social milieux, and from concrete political events and eventualities, has occupied the minds of French Revolutionary historians for some time now.[4] If there is one service that this work performs for the historical community, it is perhaps to demonstrate that, sooner or later, there really is little further to be gained from such an approach.

## NOTES

[1] R.M. Andrews, "Social structures, political élites and ideology in revolutionary Paris, 1792-4: a critical evaluation of Albert Soboul's *Les Sans-culottes parisiens . . .*," *Journal of Social History* 19 (1985-

6): pp. 71-112.

[2] I discuss these perceptions briefly in my "Representing the Sovereign People in the Terror," in *The French Experience from Republic to Monarchy, 1793-1824: new dawn in politics, knowledge and culture*, ed. M.F. Cross and D. Williams (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

[3] See Jacques Guilhaumou, *L'avènement des porte-parole de la République (1789-1792): Essai de synthèse sur les langages de la Révolution française* (Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998).

[4] For a recent concise overview, see R. Schechter, "Editor's Introduction," in *The French Revolution: The essential readings*, ed. R. Schechter (Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

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See also Jon Cowans' response to David Andress' review.

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