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Response to David Andress's Review of Jon Cowans, *To Speak for the People: Public Opinion and the Problem of Legitimacy in the French Revolution*.

By Jon Cowans, Rutgers University, Newark.

The book reviewer's most basic task is a very simple one: to give readers a clear picture of the book's content. On that crucial point, among others, I find this review deficient.

The problems begin with Andress's failure to characterize the book's purpose or approach. His statement that the book claims not to be about revolutionary public opinion neglects to explain how the book's approach to studying public opinion differs from that of most previous studies (see pp. 1-3). For the record, the book is indeed about revolutionary public opinion, but it treats it as a rhetorical device and a representation rather than a sociologically verifiable phenomenon. It thus seeks to show how the French envisioned public opinion, describing their views on whose opinions were considered legitimate, how one should ascertain public opinion, what its political role should be, etc. It also shows how those notions were changing during the Revolution and how basic disagreements about a concept on which so much weight suddenly was placed fueled a chronic legitimacy crisis.

Andress chides the book for expecting the revolutionaries to hold a "clear modern vision" of these concepts, and he scoffs at my sense "that some sort of 'other' French Revolution was possible." In writing this, Andress completely overlooks one of the book's main arguments, namely, that more pluralistic outlooks were not only thinkable at the time but were actually stated repeatedly (see pp. 64-5, 119, 180-3). As the book argues, the Revolution's adoption of deeply illiberal notions of public opinion took place not because they were the only ideas thinkable then or even because most people freely preferred them but rather because at several key moments factions with deeply illiberal outlooks used violence to crush their rivals. Andress also suggests that because counterrevolutionaries were trying to stop the Revolution through violence, it is silly to suggest that differences might have been settled through talking. Here we have a fundamental disagreement, for whereas Andress sees revolutionary violence as a given fact from which all analysis must proceed, I view revolutionary violence as something that needs explanation, and I reject Andress's deterministic view that what happened was the only possible outcome. Andress may believe (as he argues on page 165 of his *French Society in Revolution*) that the violence of the Terror was inevitable given counterrevolutionaries' violent intransigence, but I am not among those adhering to that rather dated view of the Terror.[1]

As for some of the review's narrower charges, Andress objects to my statement that "before 1789 those interested in the formation of public opinion valued sociability, politeness, and civility," suggesting (wrongly) that I have not read Darnton on prerevolutionary conflicts. That criticism misses the point that I claimed that those actors *valued* sociability and civility, not that they always *practiced* them, and in chapter 1 I do refer to prerevolutionary conflicts and discrepancies between ideals and practices of public opinion (pp. 14-16). As for the lack of a citation on that point in chapter 2, I am by then referring to a point made in the previous chapter, which, by the way, also refers to works by Dena Goodman and Daniel Gordon.[2]

Regarding the treatment of the districts and sections, the passage on page 50 of my book might have made certain distinctions clearer, but the criticism is irrelevant to the (overlooked) argument that the districts and sections, despite certain differences, played a similar and consistent role in undermining nationally elected representatives' authority. Although the districts and sections were constituted differently, and though their members' class statuses and political views changed over time, I maintain that those activists articulated a fairly consistent three-part doctrine: 1) that citizens gathered in the districts and sections were the real sovereign people; 2) that the sovereign people had the perpetual right to command and remove their representatives; and 3) that Parisians, being physically present, had the right and duty to act for those elsewhere. In that sense I do not consider it improper to lump the districts and sections together. I would make a similar point about my use of the term "National Assembly" as a generic reference to both the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies, each of which had a right wing that many Parisian militants felt was obstructing the people's will.

The review also complains of uneven chronological coverage in the last chapter. It is true that chapter 6 focuses mainly on the period from July 1794 to September 1795, but that is because I believe the new regime took shape in that period, after which it largely defended its power by the methods and concepts already analyzed. Although I reject the very assumption that chapters must always devote equal attention to each year they cover, I did examine events after September 1795, and because I count 35 primary sources cited for the period after September 1795, I cannot agree that the number of such references is "scarcely above a handful."

At the risk of joining Andress in dwelling on minor points, I wish to point out that treatment of André Jeanbon Saint-André's surname has long varied. The indexes of some works place him under "S," but others place him under "J." Among those who routinely referred to him by the shorthand "Jeanbon" one finds not only some of his contemporaries but also his biographer (L. Levy-Schneider, *Le conventionnel Jeanbon Saint-André*, 1901). Jeanbon, by the way, was his family name, Saint-André being a name he added to downplay his Protestantism. As for my calling him a Jacobin, I stand by my claim, for he was a frequent speaker at the club, and he even served a term as its president. He did speak less frequently at the club once he joined the Committee of Public Safety, but he remained a Jacobin while helping lead France's government.

The charge that the book does not distinguish between factions or identify which faction each speaker was from also seems unfair, for in countless cases the book does indeed distinguish between factions and identify speakers' affiliations. I chose not to stop and discuss every speaker's politics, or to remind readers of what was happening on, say, 9 Thermidor, partly because I had already explained those things earlier and partly because, given space limitations, I relied on readers to have a basic level of familiarity with the Revolution. Yet I also chose not to discuss each speaker because the book analyzes rhetoric on more than one level. At times, that is, it seeks to portray a given faction's unique strategies, but at other times it discusses strategies common to multiple factions. The analyst of political rhetoric, in my view, should certainly identify what was specific to each faction but should also take a broader view and examine practices that spanned the political spectrum. So while it may be possible to speak of each faction having its own political culture, because rival factions were also part of a broader political culture I consider it legitimate to speak of what "some" or "many" deputies did.

Andress also complains that I present clusters of terms such as public opinion and the public spirit without keeping their users and usages clearly separate, but here Andress again misses one of the book's central arguments, for the book shows repeatedly that the collapse of former distinctions among terms was a crucial development of the time, and one that harmed efforts to secure political authority and stability through deliberation. In my view, it would be foolish to maintain careful distinctions between individual terms if contemporaries did not do so, though as the book notes, a few speakers did object to their colleagues' linguistic carelessness. And while it is certainly true that conservatives and radicals meant very different things when using a term such as "public opinion," the book makes that very point

on numerous occasions.

If I may engage in a bit of contextualization, my reading of Andress's publications suggests to me that the root of his view of *To Speak for the People* is his strong dislike of revisionist studies of revolutionary political culture and language, with their generally negative portrait of the Revolution. So whereas Andress, for example, complains of my failure to examine "material determinants," I reject the determinism of his belief that no other Revolution was possible, and whereas he faults my work for a shortage of socio-economic analysis, I find his survey text on the Revolution, which contains but two references to public opinion during the Revolution, weak on political culture, language, and ideas. Finally, I do not share his adherence to a basically Marxist and *annaliste* approach to political analysis, which holds that politics can only be understood by looking at the supposedly more fundamental socio-economic realm.

Yet despite our differences, I welcome other scholarly approaches to the Revolution, and I find much value in Andress's work on the Champs de Mars massacre. I would not want everyone to write history by the same methods, and I believe that a diversity of approaches serves the field best. As its introduction states, my book does not purport to tell us all we need to know about the Revolution's legitimacy crisis, but no one has yet written a book-length study of public opinion throughout the whole Revolution, and I believe this work's arguments will need to be considered in any full explanation of the Revolution's legitimacy crisis. Some readers may have preferred to see extensive socio-economic contextualization for all the quotations, but given space limitations and the extent to which others have already studied the Revolution from a socioeconomic perspective, I chose to focus more closely on the logic and dynamics of the rhetoric of public opinion. The approach may not please those mainly interested in "material determinants," but perhaps when it comes to the French Revolution it is too much to expect harmony among historians from different political and methodological camps.

NOTES

[1] David Andress, *French Society in Revolution, 1789-1799* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

[2] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Jon Cowans
Rutgers University, Newark
jonco58@aol.com

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