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Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. ix + 351 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$42.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-3982-5. \$21.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8014-8809-5.

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I

About two decades ago, while a former B-grade movie actor was the president of the United States of America, historians of revolutionary France became interested in the parallels between spectacle and politics in the eighteenth century. The idea was not new; in his 1758 *Letter to d'Alembert Concerning Spectacles*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had alerted his contemporaries to the political dangers posed by Parisian theater culture and had suggested substituting civic festivals to eliminate distinctions between actors and performers. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Mona Ozouf and Lynn Hunt examined the political uses of revolutionary festivals fashioned in part on this Rousseauian model. Robert Darnton, noting Rousseau's re-reading of *The Misanthrope* in the *Letter to d'Alembert*, playfully suggested that the task of the Revolution had been to re-write Molière. Others, most notably Marie-Hélène Huet, have also looked at the relations between performers and their audiences for guidance in understanding the political upheavals in France at the end of the eighteenth century.[1]

It was not just the presidency of Ronald Reagan, of course, that inspired this approach. By the early 1980s, scholars in the United States in a number of disciplines were absorbing the ideas of Michel Foucault; many historians became interested in what he termed "micro-technologies of power". Foucault argued that unconscious forms of self-discipline, which began to appear at the end of the eighteenth century, controlled aberrant behavior that might otherwise disrupt or overturn civil society and the modern polity. In the guise of participatory democracy, he suggested, the state grew ever more powerful while its citizens became more docile. The French philosopher studied clinics, asylums, and prisons, but the cultural historians and their followers cited above were quick to realize that spectacles and public theater also offered promising venues for testing these ideas. Before the Revolution, in France and elsewhere in the West, theater audiences had been noisy and undisciplined. Yet today, spectators sit in the dark in silence, quietly watching the spectacle unfold before them. The beginnings of this transition date to the end of the eighteenth century. Could this change in the theater be linked somehow to the period's most cataclysmic political event, the French Revolution? In the work under review, the recipient of the 2002 David Pinkney Prize awarded by the Society for French Historical Studies, Paul Friedland pushes this suggestion to its extreme: "The argument...is that the French Revolution is fundamentally related to a revolution in the theory and practice of theater, and that both revolutions are manifestations of an underlying revolution in the conception of representation itself" (p. 3). He sets out to chart what he labels a "genealogy of theater and politics" (p. 3).

II

The first part of *Political Actors*, "The Revolution in Representation", provides an account of the theoretical changes in theatrical and political representation during the Old Regime. In the French theater before 1750, Friedland notes, theoreticians held that both actors and spectators believed that the performer metamorphosed onstage into the role he or she was playing. In other words, the actor truly experienced the emotions of the character; the desire of the actress playing Phèdre to murder her children was real. Anything less would have left the audience unmoved. Around 1750 though, according to Friedland, this theory of theatrical representation came under attack, first from Luigi Riccoboni, then from Denis Diderot, both of whom argued that actors should present the illusion of emotion, rather than experiencing it themselves. In this new approach, the actor became a technician counterfeiting emotions in an effort to persuade the audience member that the illusion of pathos was real. This new theory, however, shifted the burden of belief from the actor to the audience, a transition that demanded much greater attention from spectators than was common in the public theaters of mid eighteenth-century France. Hence writers, performers, architects, and other observers worked to transform the *salle de spectacle* into a darkened, quiet space where spectators' attention would be focused uniquely on the illusion being generated onstage. By 1789, Friedland claims, an invisible "fourth wall" was in place (p. 28). On one side of the wall, actors went about the business of creating the illusion of reality, supposedly oblivious to the presence of an audience watching them; on the other side, the audience sat in rapt attention, gazing at the spectacle of reality being staged before them.

This profound shift in the theory of theatrical representation had its parallel, Friedland suggests, in the changing theory of political representation in the eighteenth century. Before 1750, the primary theory of political representation was what the author calls "embodiment" or the actualization of the nation as a *corpus mysticum*, a mystical body. From the Middle Ages to the 1560s, this mystical body came into being, literally incarnating France, whenever the king, or the "head," summoned the three estates, or the body, to meet with him. The deputies of the three estates were not, however, representatives in the modern sense of the term, free to represent an abstract sense of the public will; they were bound by mandate to present the will of the three estates, expressed in *cahiers de doléance* that summarized the demands of the clergy, nobles, and commoners, to the king. When the Estates presented the *cahiers* to the king, head and body merged their wills into one. Thus the *corpus mysticum* spoke with one convincing voice, just as the actor's body truly experienced the sentiments represented onstage.

As with the theater, however, Friedland claims that political theory began to change around 1750. The challenge came initially from the theorists of the *parlements*, who argued that these thirteen law courts scattered around the kingdom together represented an intermediary body between the nation and the king.^[2] The novelty of their claim, Friedland writes, stemmed from an assertion that they could represent the nation without actually compiling binding *cahiers*. Once they bypassed the grievance procedure, Friedland writes, the *parlementaires* had begun the construction of a political "fourth wall" between themselves and the people whose will they claimed to represent. The emptiness of the *parlementaires'* claims to representation became evident during the Maupeou coup (1771-1774), but the struggle to represent public opinion between the crown and its opponents during the first fifteen years of the reign of Louis XVI (1774-1789) marked a crucial shift; political representation became, at least in theory, the articulation of an abstract, ungrounded public opinion, rather than the collection and collation of actual *doléances*.

For Friedland, the key issue that erupted after the king's decision to convene the Estates-General in August 1788 was the nature of the *doléances* compiled throughout the kingdom over the following months: would they be binding upon the representatives to the Estates-General, as they had been in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance? In early 1789, the abbé Sieyès and other pamphleteers definitively rejected the model whereby the king and the Estates-General combined to become the *corpus mysticum*. They argued instead that individual representatives to the new entity, the National Assembly, were no

longer expected to report dutifully the will of those who sent them to Versailles with lists of grievances. Rather, their task became the articulation of the general will of the nation through the use of their own reason. In other words, Sieyès and others suggested that representatives were no longer bound to their constituents; they were now empowered to act on behalf of the nation as a whole. Friedland suggests that the new system of political representation dismembered the mystical body, breaking it into individual wills, then silenced those wills by failing to create a means for their direct political expression (p. 123). Over the course of the summer of 1789, the National Assembly put the pamphleteers' ideas into practice. As Friedland notes, by the end of 1789, the delegates to the National Assembly had forfeited the legitimating function that the *cahiers* had bestowed upon delegates to the Estates-General in the old practice of political representation. They now depended "upon the willingness of the political audience to suspend its disbelief--to believe, in short, that the people who composed the National Assembly were not simply a bunch of political actors speaking nothing but their own opinions, but rather the legitimate representatives of the nation, accurately reflecting the will of the nation themselves" (p. 163).

The second part of the book, "Representation in the Revolution", details the degree to which revolutionary politicians succeeded in convincing their "audience", the French nation, of their political legitimacy in the 1789-1794 period. Friedland begins by describing the merging of the theatrical and the political in this period, a phenomenon he labels "métissage." Actors such as Collot d'Herbois, divested of the Old Regime prohibitions against their military and civil administrative participation, suddenly appeared in Paris and elsewhere at the head of armies and in political assemblies. Politicians such as the marquis de Mirabeau, a speaker so gifted he aroused the envy of professional actors, employed the oratorical strategies of the stage to advance their political agendas. Parisians enjoyed a spectacle called the *Assemblée fédérative*, where they could pay money to play the parts of the Revolution's great orators in re-enactments of key legislative debates. Generals and foreign affairs ministers consulted extensively with theater entrepreneurs in preparation for the invasion of Belgium, where they acknowledged the need to win the propaganda battle in the playhouses of Brussels. Everywhere one turned after 1789, it seemed, theater and politics had mixed so completely as to seem indistinguishable. But *métissage* also brought a backlash, in the form of critics on both the left and the right who dismissed the new political and military actors as *comédiens* irretrievably tainted by their association with the theatrical stage. The appearance of the actors Naudet and Grammont at the head of Parisian National Guard units inspired the anonymous pamphlet *Les Comédiens commandans*, which cast the officer-actors as *farceurs* incapable of mustering enough genuine authority to command loyal patriots against the enemies of the Revolution. Others had difficulty imagining how actors who had formerly played Figaro or Harlequin might one day perform the office of Mayor of Paris or President of the National Assembly. As Friedland suggests, "the prospect of having theatrical actors perform political and military roles was simply too problematic" to go unchallenged (p. 198).

Ultimately, however, the problem extended beyond the political and military aspirations of the newly enfranchised stage players to the legitimacy of France's elected legislative representatives themselves. Counter-revolutionary writers noted the new legislature's break with the ancient representational concept of the *corpus mysticum*; they attacked the revolutionary legislators for trying to create abstract representations of the general will, or the nation, rather than incarnating the political body as the old unions of the King and the Estates-General had done. Friedland argues that these attacks, in which the National Assembly was often likened to a hydra, or to other monstrosities of nature, stemmed from a mistrust of abstract representation that pre-dated the Revolution. Curiously, Jacobin rhetoric displayed a similar mistrust of abstractions; the radical left did not question the revolutionary theory of political representation, but it worried obsessively that "evil geniuses" might infiltrate the assemblies and pervert the new political rituals of representation. Political extremists on both ends of the spectrum displayed an almost rabid antipathy to the abstract nature of the representational regime consolidated on the political stage in 1789.

Meanwhile, revolutionary audiences, in both playhouses and legislative assemblies, initially refused to play the quiescent role assigned to them by the new theories of political and theatrical representation. Friedland cites the well-known 1789 controversies over Marie-Joseph Chénier's anti-monarchical play, *Charles IX*, as an example of spectators breaching the theatrical fourth wall in the early days of the Revolution. At one point during the uproar, the pro-revolutionary actor Talma proposed opening the company's costume warehouse and outfitting audience members to play the roles his colleagues refused to perform (p. 265). For a while, spectators in the National Assembly followed suit, intervening in the legislators' deliberations in a raucous display of direct democracy. Beyond the Assembly, political clubs, sectional assemblies, and other organizations provided forums for the expression of opinion outside the purview of the elected representatives. In spite of the Le Chapelier law of 1791 forbidding many such gatherings, Parisians continued to intervene in the proceedings of the national legislative bodies well into 1793. With the proclamation of the Terror in September of that year, however, Friedland suggests that the politicians finally fortified the political fourth wall between themselves and the citizen spectators who repeatedly stormed the political stage. During the Terror the Jacobins closed off audience participation in the political spectacle, telling the nation that they would speak for them. Friedland finishes his last chapter with the tale of Collot d'Herbois in Lyon in autumn 1793. Legend has it that while overseeing the destruction of the city, Collot sought out and executed the Lyonnais spectators who had jeered a play in which he had performed years before. The actor had finally silenced his critics in the pit; the politician could kill off his constituency with impunity.

III

It is a curious fact, in a book that is well informed by critical theory and current historiography, that Friedland mentions Michel Foucault only once by name, in a note at the beginning of his chapter on *métissage*. Yet the influence of the French thinker is more pervasive in this book than that of more frequently mentioned theorists or historians, such as Jürgen Habermas or Keith Baker. Perhaps cultural historians have so thoroughly incorporated the lessons of Foucault into their work that explicit references are no longer necessary, or perhaps the scars of the "culture wars" in the US during the 1990s run so deep that the name is suppressed. In either case, Friedland has articulated the argument that the philosopher himself had only implied, but never explicitly stated, regarding the place of the French Revolution in his thinking. The frustrations of this promise have even led Baker, one of Friedland's mentors, to sketch out in print the missing contours of a "Foucauldian French Revolution."^[3] Friedland's insight into this problem is at base a chronological one. Changes in prisons and asylums can be traced over decades via theoretical tracts and actual practices, but there is no single date one can identify as the decisive moment in these shifts. Theoretical changes in theatrical and political representation also took place during the final decades of the Old Regime, as Friedland argues in the first half of *Political Actors*, but the shift in political representation was institutionalized in a single year, 1789, when the King resurrected the Estates-General and the representatives then transformed it into the National Assembly. Friedland achieves an impressive effect by anchoring this epistemological shift to the outbreak of the Revolution and by constructing a narrative of theatrical representation that also centers on the same year. The notorious political instability of the Revolution, and the turbulence in the French public theaters of the 1790s, were manifestations of this epochal shift in French strategies of representation. The argument, elegant and powerful, is made even more compelling by the clarity of Friedland's prose and the depth of his research. The book's creative explorations of theater as a metaphor for politics, and vice versa, might well have deteriorated into cliché in the hands of a less witty writer.

For all its strengths, however, this book should raise some questions among historians of both French theater and politics in this period. Friedland's arguments are at times too dependent on printed texts at the expense of archival evidence. While Riccoboni and Diderot might have postulated silent theater audiences by 1789, others have shown that audiences in practice became more vocal, and more physically violent, in the decades before the Revolution. The political uses of performances of *Tartuffe*

during the Restoration and the reception accorded Hugo's *Hernani* in 1830 hint that even a generation after the Revolution spectators had not lapsed into the sedated state they display in today's playhouses. And Friedland's own evidence in the book's final chapter, entitled "Breaching the Fourth Wall," suggests the extent to which audiences continued to intervene in live performances in the 1790s.^[4] Neither is it clear that the advent of the Terror marked the definitive, or inevitable, triumph of Friedland's "political actors" over their restive audience. The overturned elections of the Directory might argue for the continued intervention of the supposedly quiescent spectators into the affairs of the *comédiens* on the political stage. The succession of regimes in the nineteenth century, punctuated by significant popular uprisings in 1830, 1848, and 1871, offered the spectacle of ongoing spectator intervention in the national political drama.

While a Foucauldian methodology may be responsible for some of these chronological problems, one must ultimately look elsewhere to understand the inspiration for the provocative and troubling conclusion to the book. In an epilogue, Friedland restates his main point: the French Revolution marked the triumph of representative democracy in France and the West. To a large extent, he argues, those of us living in today's representative democracies are still residents of the world created in 1789. While others have celebrated the democratic outcome of the Revolution, holding it up in contrast to those who blame twentieth-century totalitarianism on the precedent of the Jacobin rise to power, Friedland urges a closer look at what transpired in the first half of the 1790s. "[R]epresentative democracy is *not* democracy," he writes (p. 299, his emphasis), by which he means that when French representatives uncoupled themselves from the binding mandates of the *cahiers de doléances* in 1789, the people lost the possibility of direct participation in government. Once that happened, political power flowed, unsteadily and provisionally, to the best performers. In Friedland's view, the situation has not substantially changed since then. He thinks that political actors like Ronald Reagan, or his successor who recently played the role of a fighter pilot landing his plane on the flight deck of a battleship, continue to perform before constituencies whose opinions are ignored or suppressed. Friedland does not advocate a return to the *corpus mysticum*, but he does imply that we have yet to find a way out of a conundrum that has entrapped representative democracies since the end of the eighteenth century. Not all of his readers may agree, however, that they are silent spectators forced into a passive role in the playhouse of contemporary politics. The parterre, one hopes, is not yet silenced.

NOTES

[1] Mona Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire, 1789-1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976; English translation 1988, with foreword by Lynn Hunt); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1984), 52-86; Robert Darnton, "The Facts of Literary Life in Eighteenth-Century France", in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*. Volume I, *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, ed. Keith M. Baker (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1987), 261-91; Marie-Hélène Huet, *Rehearsing the Revolution: The Staging of Marat's Death, 1793-1797*, trans. Robert Hurley (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982); James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1995); Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater: the Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815-1830* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2000). Professor Susan Maslan, a French literature specialist at the University of California, Berkeley, is also preparing a study of political and theatrical representation during the Revolution.

[2] Friedland's account of French political culture from 1750 to 1789 relies heavily on the work of Keith M. Baker, Dale Van Kley, David A. Bell, Thomas E. Kaiser, and many others who have adapted Jürgen Habermas' thesis regarding the appearance of a "bourgeois public sphere" in eighteenth-century Europe to the specifics of France in the period. For a synthesis of this work, and a comparison to other eighteenth-century European cases, see James van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[3] Keith M. Baker, "A Foucauldian French Revolution?" in Jan Goldstein, ed. *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Cambridge Mass and Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 187-205; in the same volume, see also the essay by Roger Chartier, entitled "The Chimera of the Origin: Archaeology, Cultural History, and the French Revolution."

[4] Ravel, *Contested Parterre*, 161-90; Johnson, *Listening*, 9-34, 53-70; F.W.J. Hemmings, *Theatre and State in France, 1760-1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 123-36; and Kroen, *Politics and Theater*, 229-84. Diderot's *Paradoxe sur les comédiens*, one of Friedland's prime theoretical supports for the shift in theatrical representation, circulated only in manuscript to a highly limited audience until 1830. One might also question his assertions about pre-1750 theatrical representation; spectators who attended *Comédie-Française* performances of the great neo-classical seventeenth-century tragedies also laughed uproariously at the way the notion of "embodiment" was parodied at the *Comédie-Italienne* and the fair theaters.

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