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Peter R. Campbell, Ed. *The Origins of the French Revolution*. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. v + 371. Notes, bibliography and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-333-71704-X; \$28.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-333-69348-5.

Review by Jack R. Censer, George Mason University.

This book, focused on the origins of the French revolution, can be best understood as an English response to the historiographical developments that emerged elsewhere over the last 25 years.^[1] Specifically, the English approach might be characterized as empirical, focused on social rather than cultural history, committed to linking social history to political events, and quite uninterested in the postmodern and feminist approaches current elsewhere, particularly in North America. Illustrating this approach in the last decade or so, English historians have published a raft of political histories concerning the eighteenth century.

The modern English *academic* study of the French Revolution emerged as a distinctive tradition in the postwar era, led by luminaries Richard Cobb and Alfred Cobban. The two scholars hardly shared a similar perspective, except their skepticism toward Marxism. Emerging even more clearly among their students was the view that social conditions underpinned politics. Yet these English historians specifically disputed the connection articulated by Marxists in France, as Cobban found only an occupational group, the lawyers, rather than the bourgeoisie, as the progenitors of the Revolution. Similarly, his intellectual descendent Colin Lucas saw only “social stresses” between groups rather than all out class conflict as the problem in the Old Regime. In discounting social factors, some like William Doyle would go further.

Perhaps Doyle provided the most complete account of the origins of the revolution by an English scholar. He almost completely discounted social causes and introduced somewhat more the role of ideas, by describing a disgruntled society having lost confidence in monarchical competence in governing. This step into broader political culture was not widely followed. All these historiographical tendencies paralleled those in the United States.^[2]

By the 1970’s, even some French scholars, particularly François Furet, assaulted the Marxist orthodoxy (that revised Marx but still relied on his insights). At first, Furet held the same position as some Anglo-Americans, emphasizing social but not Marxian explanations, but then gradually changed his approach. Assimilating the insights offered by the “linguistic turn,” Furet offered an interpretation that featured discourse analysis and argued that the Revolution and the Terror issued from the domination of Rousseauist thinking, in particular the rule of the majority, rather than the rule of law.^[3]

Although English born and educated, Keith Baker, who has spent his teaching career in the United States, was Furet’s most famous associate on this side of the Atlantic. However, most of Furet’s acolytes were not from the Anglo-American professoriate. While accepting the value and originality of Furet’s interpretation, scholars in England and North America tended at first to continue to do what they had before. By the 1980’s with the cultural turn, a surge of new work divided the English from the Americans who were more influenced by Furet. Even though the latter mainly eschewed discourse theory, the history of ideas in one form or another surged far more than in Doyle or others of his countrymen. Generally the Americans studied not the philosophes but a lower brow stratum including the press, the theater, the legal profession, and religious combatants. Knitting together this work was a

general notion of political culture which both Baker and Furet had embraced. The influential leadership of Princeton's Robert Darnton surely had an impact in this regard.[4]

The field of women's history also developed in America as scholars such as Joan Scott, Lynn Hunt, Joan Landes, and Dena Goodman among many others sought to relate the revolution's origins to shifts in gender relations in the eighteenth century. Although feminist historians tended to focus more on the impact than the cause, the latter issue figured prominently. For example, Hunt saw the origins of the demise of the monarchy in the general weakening of patriarchy; Goodman envisioned the retreat of the feminine salon as an opportunity for abstraction and contestation in the late eighteenth century.

These developments would have transpired regardless of the role of Furet, although his emphasis on discourse accustomed French historians to think along these lines. Generally, they relied on discourse theory to show how the revolutionaries put forward a decidedly subordinate role for females during the revolutionary decade and beyond. Perhaps Jürgen Habermas, who like Furet did not directly consider gender, was more influential, as Joan Landes, in particular, relied on his notion of the public sphere as a beginning for her feminist critique. Whatever the influence of Furet and Habermas, this field surged the most among Americans studying the French Revolution.[5]

English historians took another route away from their pre-Furetian agenda. First, their numbers simply declined relative to their American colleagues where faculty hiring remained much stronger. Further, despite the prominence of Oxford's Olwen Hufton, they were largely uninterested in women's history or gender.[6] Likewise, the history of ideas and political culture received comparatively far less attention. To be sure, the English did not stop studying the French Revolution. Colin Jones blew fresh air into Marxian analysis; Alan Forrest contributed to our understanding of the military; and Simon Burrows broke ground in the history of the press.[4] But the most work went into a revitalized study of politics, especially court politics, during the revolution and produced a spate of monographs that in particular expanded an understanding of eighteenth-century France.[6]

An important aspect of this English "school," and to a lesser degree the American, has been an emphasis on contingency in explaining the connection between these social and political problems and the revolution itself. As opposed to the Marxists who argued class conflict long existed and Furet who asserted that very early in the revolutionary crisis the die was cast, these English historians and their American counterparts extended the period when accident and chance played a role.

Thus, an English tradition has come to exist that, grounded in the social history of politics, has highlighted politics itself. Interestingly, the English have not followed American trends. And more important, this book reviewed here essentially emphasizes themes that have emerged, surely without any guiding hand, over the last half-century in the English view of the revolution.

In fact, the general point made by this collection is not immediately apparent. Although introductions often focus upon the substantive articles that follow in the collection, this one apparently reflects the view of Peter Campbell, editor of the compilation. As such, the collection presents two different viewpoints—that of the introduction and another arising from on the total impact of the other articles. Although Campbell's initial chapter indicates the English view, it more deeply reflects the field in general.

Hampering this very well-informed opening chapter is a surfeit of information, compressed into a relatively few interesting and instructive pages. After reviewing and critiquing various interpretations of the Revolution, Campbell dismisses them as contradictory and turns to his own. The structure for his introduction, emphasized by social scientists in the 1960's and used by historians ever since, examines

long-term, mid-term, and the short-term causes and concludes with a narrative of the revolutionary crisis.

In a nutshell, Campbell argues that the Old Regime government remained rigid, never really developed the suppleness that would have allowed it to respond to challenges. As such it grew weak, but contemporaries did not really realize how weak it had become. In the midst of this situation, a restless bourgeois class flourished. Cultural practices, such as individualism and a reliance on the market over corporatism, emerged, though they did not fit well with the monarchical insistence on its sovereignty in theory combined with constant compromise with other elites. Campbell does not assert these last two points with the same vigor as his view of state weakness and, interestingly, he scarcely refers to the Enlightenment, even indirectly.

For mid-range factors, Campbell does turn to issues prominent in other historiographies of the revolution—specifically an emergent spirit of contestation and doubts regarding the mystical powers of the monarchy. The second of these notions may be most commonly encountered in the work of Americans while contestation was first associated with the work of Keith Baker. Yet Campbell suggests that only with the revolution did contestation become serious because during the Old Regime, whatever the level of rancor, only the traditional actors could participate in politics.

Finally, Campbell's short-term influences mainly include the fiscal and bureaucratic failures occasioned by the American War. By 1787, this crisis was compounded by provincial resistance to monarchical solutions. Still, according to Campbell, none of these problems alone amounted to revolution.

It would be the actions of various groups activated by the crisis that created a revolution. Here, Campbell strongly emphasizes the serendipitous developments, including in this category the decision by the *parlement* to favor an elite-dominated Estates General that would surely support stasis. But despite this rebuff, the Third Estate continued into July 1789, beyond Bastille Day, to plan for change but offered a compromise to old regime adherents. Turmoil throughout the country upset these hopes, but the leadership temporized. Only the rather surprising decisions of August 4 led to an overthrow of the "feudal" regime and directly to real change, enabled by the simultaneous collapse of royal power. Even then the elites from the bourgeoisie on up remained cautious in the face of popular demands.

Campbell's introduction obviously discusses a plethora of issues raised about the revolution including its culture and contestation. Most reflective of English and American tradition as well is the author's insistence that the revolution emerged from immediate, unstructured circumstance, haltingly at the last minute, and not all that decisively as well.

The articles that follow show more clearly a strong adherence to the English emphasis on politics in considering the origins of the revolution. It is worth noting again that, in treating these articles as the creation of a collective interpretation, I used them for a purpose for which they were not created. Most important, though they may reflect the English school, they do not encompass all the work by English scholars. And more important, the contributors are not all English; four in fact are American. Finally, the articles also deserve to be considered as investigations of particular topics on their own terms, and I shall give some attention to that as well.

Whether or not written to link together, these articles, in fact, do just that. The first group concentrates on the events leading up to the revolutionary crisis and together stresses the serious political breakdown. The care taken in this narrative to explain the faltering of the Old Regime is evident in the three substantive articles, respectively by Joël Félix on finances; John Hardman on royal decision making; and Campbell himself on the *parlements*. Félix points to the fundamental problem of the

enormous debt caused by the American Revolution. As long as the war continued, Félix demonstrates in a most interesting fashion, the debt might be tolerated. When hostilities concluded, the public quickly grew restless about these expenditures. And structurally, the omnipresence of privileges and the resistance by the privileged to sharing the financial burdens made difficult any substantial rise in revenues.

Complicating a coherent response to this fiscal crisis was the monarchical approach to decision-making. According to Hardman, political faction always disrupted the situation and limited royal authority. Furthermore, the more difficult the situation, the wider the area of disagreement became. Specifically, the revolutionary outbreak capitalized on both principles of difficulty and factionalism, leading to paralysis. Pursuing the political machinations that led to the calling of the Estates-General, Hardman concludes that the decision in 1786 to convoke the Assembly of Notables, which led to the revolutionary chain of events, did not have to take place. Potentially tax increases, which the King hoped the Notables would ratify, could have been achieved had these simply gained more support in royal councils. Rather abruptly Louis XVI had sided with Calonne's approach to call for the Notables, even though much of the cabinet disagreed. Advocated by a faction, these tax reforms were resisted by many advisors; and the king's position was fatally weakened.

These initial articles indicate the danger posed by taxes and the weakness of the monarchy in dealing with them; Campbell completes the picture by describing the relationship between the Bourbons and the *parlements* in the eighteenth century. Here, contrary to many scholars who have emphasized the ideological differences over constitutionalism, Campbell avers that the divide was factional, the language rhetorical. And, indeed, Hardman also insists that factions were important in this crisis in the late 1780's. In fact, exacerbating this disagreement was a divide in the *parlement* over the Diamond Necklace Affair that made it impossible for the King to count on the Queen's allies to support a less volatile solution.

Thus, the focus here emphasizes politics embedded in practical, factional disputes and, to some extent, privilege. Although the interpretation has a social aspect, it is far more constricted than that put forward by the previous generation led by Cobban and Cobb, who saw the "social" as encompassing much beyond political elites. Still farther away is any resemblance to a Marxian approach or to discourse analysis as pioneered by Furet and Baker. This volume's coverage of ideas is encompassed by Marisa Linton's chapter on the Enlightenment and Mark Ledbury's article on dissonant messages found in cultural life. Linton's main focus is to make more complex the relationship between the Enlightenment and the revolution; in fact, she sees the revolution actively reshaping the philosophes' messages. Ledbury deftly shows the way in which the stresses in society and artistic trends combined to create a cultural project that reflected its diverse origins and purpose. But despite these cogent analyses, the message is too general to do any reshaping of the overall argument put forward in the first three chapters. Likewise an essay by William Scott on cultural history raises only theoretical and disparate questions.

It is the article by Dale Van Kley that strikes a somewhat dissonant chord. Van Kley is justly recognized for showing how Jansenist ideology, by advocating sovereignty in the *parlement* as a virtual representative of the people, penetrated the Paris *parlements* and significantly helped to create a constitutional challenge to absolutism. Indeed, Van Kley's argument has influenced, it seems to me, Baker's discourse analysis of the revolutionary crisis. Yet here in this volume Van Kley poses less of a direct contradiction to the thesis of the initial chapters.

In this essay, extraordinary for its chronological range and clarity, Van Kley answers the question how the revolution became anti-religious in a society in which religion, particularly the Catholic religion,

was the basis of the individual's political inclusion in the seventeenth century. The actions of Henri IV had cemented this connection between religion and political participation, but according to Van Kley, in the 1690's Louis XIV began to break this by siding with the Pope who contested Gallican claims to the primacy of French councils. Seeing these councils as a threat to his power, Louis XIV joined with the Vatican and then relied on the papal censure of Jansenists. Thus, the king started out down the long road in which he ended up opposing Jansenism, seemingly a more devout form of religiosity. Eventually, the coronation of Louis XVI confirmed the weakening of sacrality.

Not only had the king lost his complete identification with religion, in the revolutionary cauldron so would his opponents. Already during the Old Regime, Enlightenment had overtaken and absorbed the most salient remnants of Jansenism, particularly its resistance to the monarchy. Thus, the revolutionary solution of the Civil Constitution was more highly secularized than any previous outcome. Not only did constitutional control by parishioners invert more strongly than before the hierarchy of the church, but likewise the clergy lost its status as an order and all contemplative vocations were eliminated. In a sense a "radical" version of constitutionalism prevailed that led to the secularization of politics.

In this account, the ideologies of Jansenism, Enlightenment, and constitutionalism play roles, but the driving force remains the royal decision to choose Papal authority and abandon "true" religiosity. Furthermore, the eventual outcome--the Civil Constitution--comes unpredictably, as well it might with all sorts of new players figuring in the mix. Thus, Van Kley's interpretation colors but does not confront the previous essays' focus on royal deficiency and unforeseen results.

Two final essays carry the story from the early days of the revolution through to the August 4 decrees (1789). In part, these articles are more difficult to connect directly to the English interpretation because they mainly focus on a neglected period. In general, the revolutionary decade following the seizure of the Bastille has been far less studied than the causes, by the English historians as well. Even though Marxists had concluded long ago that the revolution was the working out of the class conflicts raised in 1789, Anglo-Americans had done little more than argue, without a lot of research, for a liberal period until 1791 followed by an unexpected radicalism. After Furet and his associates made the summer of 1789 such an important crucible for the slide toward the Terror, it follows that others would examine this period. And, in fact, the articles included here do that in a way consistent with the "English" interpretation.

John Markoff's "Peasants and their Grievances," which summarizes and extends his groundbreaking work on the cahiers, provides valuable background to the last two essays, yet does not seem particularly connected to the "English" interpretation. This article is valuable because of its breadth, as it argues that anti-seigneurial feeling among the peasantry became significant as early as 1770 and continued to the August 4 days and beyond. Such attitudes provide a backdrop to the huge events of that day that makes the deputies' response more understandable.

Yet the two essays on the revolutionary events by Kenneth Margerison and Michael Fitzsimmons link directly to the English interpretation because they highlight contingency over inevitability. Unlike other work in this tradition, the authors treat ideology as well as politics, but this is just a necessary part of all studies concerned directly with the revolution. In fact, the main point of Margerison's clear and compelling article on the pamphlet wars (1788-89) is to dispute the inevitability of the Terror as predicted directly in the Furetian account and, indeed, implied by Marxian studies which see class warfare embedded in the revolution's origins. In fact, Margerison argues that Siéyès's radicalism, which proclaimed the preeminence of the Third Estate, was less important than historians had later asserted. To the contrary, a platform calling for unity among all three orders provided the dominant theme. Not only does he agree with Timothy Tackett about the persistence of unity in the National Assembly,

Margerison further argues that quest for reconciliation continued stronger and longer than Tackett found.[9]

Likewise, Fitzsimmons's well-developed article, concluding the book, disputes interpretations of inevitability concerning the decrees of August 4. Fitzsimmons believes that the reasons for these actions, which utterly transformed the social fabric from privilege to equality before the law, to be varied. He gives greater emphasis to the absence of a plan than do most accounts. And the overarching theme that penetrates the entire analysis is the role "...that unforeseen circumstances and contingency played in the outcome (p.289)."

By emphasizing immediate circumstances and accident, these last two articles extend the spirit of the English interpretation while adhering to its essence. Perhaps it is the absence here of new topics, which particularly have dominated the current American scene, that place this book squarely in English historiography. While gender absorbs tremendous attention on this side of the Atlantic, the book remains silent on this subject. Likewise, as many American scholars are beginning to see the revolution in global perspective, this book and English scholars of the revolution in general have less to say. To be fair, most "global" interest does not concern the origins of the revolution, but as Robert R. Palmer and Jacques Godechot showed long ago, it could do so.[10]

What should one make of a book that reprises a venerable tradition that to some is out of step with other scholarly approaches? First, the book is more valuable and interesting than its physical appearance, as its cover and publicity suggest an undergraduate reader. The existence of editorial summaries before each article, a glossary and suggestions for further reading all point to a student audience. This is, however, a book that deserves serious scholarly attention as well as evaluation as a student reader. For the latter, it can be edifying as the articles are of a very high caliber. On the other hand, many of these essays would be difficult for a novice because of the writing style, and the lack of historical and historiographical background is all more comfortable for advanced scholars. Also, as the collection omits several areas of important work, teachers would have to add other readings.

I find much to recommend the approach of this book. The attention to detail and the quality of research are both impressive. More important, the theme of these articles highlights an emphasis on politics and contingency too often ignored in other histories. While I personally would be much more inclusive in constructing a general interpretation, as would probably all of the authors included here, the tighter focus of this volume makes sense. It forces those who would emphasize discourses, ideology, gender, and global perspectives to come to grips with the inexorability of politics that characterized daily life in that period. As the English tradition is revived, "histoire totale" is encouraged. On the other hand, I see these articles as only part of the whole, and they too require learning from other points of view.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Peter Robert Campbell, "Introduction: The Origins of the French Revolution in Focus"
- Joël Félix, "The Financial Origins of the French Revolution"
- John Hardman, "Decision-making"
- Peter Robert Campbell, "The Paris Parlement in the 1780s"
- William Scott, "From Social to Cultural History"
- Marisa Linton, "The Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution"
- Dale Van Kley, "The Religious Origins of the French Revolution, 1560-1791"
- Mark Ledbury, "The Contested Image: Stage, Canvas, and the Origins of the French Revolution"
- Kenneth Margerison, "The Pamphlet Debate over the Organization of the Estates General"

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- John Markoff, "Peasants and their Grievances"
 - Michael Fitzsimmons, "From the Estates General to the National Assembly, May 5-August 4, 1789"
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NOTES

[1] For much of the background material to this review, see Dale K. Van Kley, "Pure Politics in Absolute Space: The English Angle on the Political History of Prerevolutionary France," *Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997): 754-84; and Jack R. Censer, "Social Twists and Linguistic Turns," *French Historical Studies* 22 (1999): 537-62.

[2] William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

[3] François Furet and Denis Richet, *The French Revolution* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970); and François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[4] Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge and New York : Cambridge University Press, 1990); Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopedie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979).

[5] Joan Wallach Scott, "The Uses of Imagination: Olympe de Gouges in the French Revolution," in *Only Paradoxes to Offer : French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1992); Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1988); Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1994); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c.1989).

[6] An exception is Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989) in which gender plays significant roles.

[7] Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 13-40; Alan Forrest, *Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990); Simon Burrows, *French Exile Journalism and European Politics, 1792-1814* (Suffolk and Rochester, NY: Royal Historical Society, 2000).

[8] For example, see Munro Price, *Preserving the Monarchy: The Comte de Vergennes, 1774-1787* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Julian Swann, *Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754-1774* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); John Hardman, *Louis XVI* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1993).

[9] Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[10] Jacques Godechot, *France and the Atlantic Revolution of the Eighteenth Century, 1700-1799* (New York: Free Press, 1965); Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959, 1964).

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