

Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution

Review Number:

1478

Publish date:

Thursday, 5 September, 2013

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ISBN:

9780199576302

Date of Publication:

2013

Price:

£65.00

Pages:

336pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Publisher url:

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199576302.do#.Ui2oScakpbU>

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

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For much of the late 20th century, the political leaders of the French Revolution were discussed by major historiographical schools as more or less puppets – either, in the Marxian formulation, of class interests, or, in the Furetian, of unchained political discourses.⁽¹⁾ Fortunately for them and us, other historiographical strands have continued to develop in other ways. Biographical interest in the Revolution's leading figures, which generally requires depicting at least the central individual of each study as a person rather than a plaything of shadowy forces, was never entirely submerged even at the height of Marxist or Revisionist tides – as the works of Norman Hampson, for example, attest.⁽²⁾ More recently, one of the most stimulating strands of reflection on the early period of the Revolution has come from Timothy Tackett's work on the transformation of the essentially old-regime mindset of the deputies elected to the Estates-General. His account of how different men found themselves 'becoming a revolutionary', and documented the process through their anxious, fearful and sometimes elated correspondence and journals has already become a classic of the field.⁽³⁾

Marisa Linton's new book is in the best traditions of such careful, detailed, biographically-conscious evaluations. It stands squarely against any contention that the experiences of those caught up at the Revolution's heart were in any sense the simple playing-out of social or discursive formulae. It is resolutely both biographical and contextual, refracting an impressive breadth of learning about the cultures of late 18th-century France down into a sharp and penetrating focus on the tiny group of men who ended by killing each

other in what she dubs the ‘politicians’ Terror’ of 1793–4. Though it provides an exhaustive guide to the relevant historiography, especially in the footnotes to the first two chapters, it is also resolutely monographical – the wider narrative of events is discussed only when absolutely necessary, and a reader not already familiar with the course of the Revolution might easily find themselves at sea. However, this is not a criticism: to do history in proper reflective depth requires this kind of concentration.

Linton’s central contention is twofold – that a series of overlapping cultural beliefs and expectations about virtue, friendship and power dominated leading revolutionaries’ self-perception through these crucial months; and that this combination, which would prove so toxic to them, had already begun to build in potency from the earliest months of the Revolution. She places great emphasis on the point that at every stage individuals had to choose how to respond to circumstances and others’ actions, but the picture she assembles of the constraints such men had placed on themselves poses an underlying question – if the forces of belief and expectation acting on such individuals were so strong, to what extent, if any, were they really free to choose other courses than the ones they took towards mutual destruction?

The book begins with a carefully-argued portrait of the various dimensions of political activity required of revolutionary leaders, explored in part through the contrasts and omissions of a dense field of historiography. Linton argues that to understand men who had been essentially thrust into public life (rather than, as with an old-regime courtier, trained up to it from birth), their whole experience of revolutionary politics must be embraced. Thus public discourse, however conveniently amenable to subtle analysis, can only ever be a part of the picture. She establishes persuasively that under revolutionary circumstances, the whole tenor of existence became political for those who would put themselves forward as leaders. Political life did not happen merely through the making of speeches and writing of journalism; much of it was literally face-to-face, hinging on critical judgments about honesty and trustworthiness, suspicion and fear. Politicians might use private gatherings to attempt to work out their policy responses, but even there they could not necessarily be sure of the motives of those who joined them, and all signs of behind-closed-doors dealing were read by others with an entrenched hostility towards forms of self-interestedness that seemed indistinguishable from conspiracy.

In such a pressurised context, it is a wonder that politicians did not simply give up, and one of Linton’s key arguments concerns the model of virtuous conduct they embraced, and how it drove them on in the face of hostility and denigration. The next stage of Linton’s text explores how the idea of public and private virtue in the 18th century (subject of a previous book) met and collided with pre-revolutionary political realities.⁽⁴⁾ Virtue had important classical and Christian roots, as well as significant anchorage in the literature and psychology of sentiment favoured by the pre-revolutionary generation. It balanced resistance to corruption and pursuit of public duty with openness of emotional conduct and personal authenticity. Men who believed in the model of virtue (and women too, for Madame Roland is a key witness here) found a particular point of tension around friendship – a theme that echoes through the book. In the old-regime world of court factions, friendship and patronage were an inextricable package. Knowing and liking people slid seamlessly into advancing their material interests, and expecting them to advance yours, whether as a simple exchange of favours, or in more complex webs of ambition. The same mechanism was also at work, more alarmingly for the virtuous, in reverse – expressions of friendship, particularly new-found ones, came with implicit expectations of future usefulness and partiality.

As Linton develops her story into the early months of the Revolution, we see these collisions at work in new circumstances. While some ‘patriot’ nobles very visibly espoused new political rhetorics of self-sacrificing virtue and public interest, the private dimension of their existence gave cause for concern to others. The radical journalist Camille Desmoulins reported in a letter to his father in September 1789 that the comte de Mirabeau had hosted him for a week, alternating between demagogic speechmaking in the National Assembly and dinners with ‘excellent wines’ and a table ‘laden with delicacies’, which Desmoulins understood quite clearly as ‘corrupting me ... I have all the difficulty in the world in resuming afterwards my republican austerity’ (p. 64). Dinners such as these, and more broadly the practice of elite semi-private sociability that would eventually, and in hindsight, be dubbed ‘the salon’, continued and developed through these months, as it seemed at first that men of the old order might well become the managers of the new

politics.⁽⁵⁾ However, by 1790 a new model was rising, taking centre-stage in a new institution, the political club epitomised by the group formally known as the ‘Society of Friends of the Constitution’: the Jacobins. Ironically, many of the first generation of Jacobin leaders were themselves nobles, working to set themselves up in a political position slightly to the left of a group around the marquis de Lafayette (and the demagogic Mirabeau). From initially vague and overlapping circles, these groups settled out by early 1790 into Lafayette’s ‘Society of 1789’, which met in private and was confined to members of the political elite, and the Jacobins, who from the start had opened their sessions to a public audience, and extended membership to any patriot (with the means to pay a substantial fee).

In a sense, all that remains from this point is for Linton to perform a series of elegant variations on a theme for the remaining some 200 pages of this book, because the basic mechanisms that would lead the Jacobin movement to destruction are already in place. Driven by the fear of counter-revolution, which repeatedly manifested itself in real plots and lurked perpetually behind all political calculations, succeeding waves of revolutionary politicians would bring down the men who preceded them on charges of compromise and conspiracy with the aristocratic enemy, raising the demanded standard of political and personal purity ever-more impossibly higher, until all fell in confusion at Thermidor. But of course, setting out these events through the interwoven structures of public and private life is not a mere exercise. It highlights important issues that run counter to many of the most influential interpretations of the Revolution, and offers a compelling account of just how thoroughly constrained the revolutionary leadership felt itself to be, and thus, tragically, was.

Linton’s depiction of the rise and fall of the Feuillants, Girondins and assorted groups of Montagnard Jacobins is too fine-grained to rehearse in detail. But the underlying themes are clear. Politics retained throughout these highly-pressurised years the essential contrasts between public and private that had been set up by the model of political virtue. Each leading group had to find a way to manage, and if possible manipulate, the external political forces present (up to and including violent mass insurrection) while also conducting the business of politics, policy-making and administration at the face-to-face level. No group ever found a way to do both with unerring success. The Feuillants, last survivors of the first wave of leading Jacobins, tried to work by asserting royal good faith and repressing unauthorised meetings and organisations, were condemned as conspirators, and found themselves pushed aside by the enormous force of public expectation that counter-revolution would be attacked more vigorously. The Girondins – acquiring that name only in the latter stage of their visible existence – were a loose coalition of men who rode the bellicose wave over the Feuillants and into power, while also taking the country into a war it proved woefully unprepared for. Girondin political identity sat on the horns of a dilemma: believing themselves genuinely superior men of virtue, they sought to nurture their talents and connections in private gatherings, while also engaging in a contest for public sympathies with their more radical and suspicious opponents. Those ‘Montagnard’ opponents, amongst whom Robespierre was pre-eminent, could not accept that virtuous conduct should include private caballing, alongside efforts to restrain popular radicalism that included accusations of tyrannical ambition, made by men who seemed bent on monopolising power. Girondin attempts first to forestall the king’s fall, then to save his life at trial, marked them out as hypocrites and traitors. And so arrived the period of ‘the Terror’, when the Montagnard leadership first cast a pall of suspicion over the whole country, and then, with ever-widening war rendering every confrontation a seeming matter of survival, tore itself to shreds in a slow-motion massacre of spiralling factional difference.

Yet while this cold summary is in one sense merely a well-known story, Linton gives it a texture all too often forgotten. As these political processes ground themselves out over months and years, they were agonising for the participants. Even when on the offensive, Girondins and Montagnards suffered and hesitated, sought reconciliations, struggled to find ways of not doing what rigid principles – or was it ripening ambition? – drove them to do. Desmoulins was a particularly striking example of a Montagnard who defamed Girondins shamelessly in print, blackening them with a potent combination of the inside knowledge of a friend and the bold assertions of an ideological rival, and then recoiled in horror when his words helped send men to their deaths. Robespierre stands out as a figure who at first helped place limits on the processes of political revenge, almost single-handedly preventing the persecution of the Girondins

spreading to engulf dozens of their less-committed supporters. Yet of course it was Robespierre's particularly consistent cultivation of the image of self-sacrificing virtue that positioned him to denounce former friends – including his old schoolmate Desmoulins – when further rounds of political collision made reconciliation with them impossible. How much pain that caused him may be gauged from the fact that he spent several of his final months in a state of nervous collapse.[\(6\)](#)

Why, then, did he do it? Why did they all do it? It is at this point that I am not sure that Linton gives us a fully compelling answer. Her title is, after all, *Choosing Terror*, and her conclusions return to the matter of Jacobins' choices, in complex practical and ideological circumstances, and above all under conditions of fear – fear of falling victim to the counter-revolution, but fear also, and perhaps more chillingly, of slipping from the pedestal of virtue beneath the wheels of the juggernaut their previous decisions had set in motion. This, for me, poses two questions. Firstly there is the one which will perhaps always be a matter of psychological speculation: were these men, especially in the final months of the Terror, actually in a mental state to enact something we (or a court of law, for example) would recognise as a free and informed choice?[\(7\)](#) One might hold up Desmoulins as an interesting example of someone who did speak out, quite clearly, against Terror. He did so in terms which were themselves extreme, condemnatory, and capable of being read as a threat – yet seemed to greet his arrest with incomprehension (and emotional collapse). We might suspect, as with his recoiling from the consequences of denouncing the Girondins, that he was not quite in touch with political reality at any point in this terrible process. Other accounts make it clear that after the condemnation of Desmoulins, and the hero Danton alongside him, most political actors were literally terrified into public silence.

The second question is about the larger circles within which the political leaders moved and reacted. Twice on her penultimate page, Linton mentions 'the Paris militants' who had helped bring the Montagnards to power, and whose 'denunciations' remained a powerful threat (p. 288). These slightly vague figures are only one of the various external dimensions of the Jacobin leaders' context that would ideally merit more consideration. The wider membership of the National Convention itself, while stunned into silence by the spring of 1794, had not been so reticent before. The Jacobin Club passed through several significant mutations of membership before becoming by that same stultifying point a refuge for provincial functionaries toeing a 'Robespierrist' line. The 'Paris militants' themselves were a complex hierarchy from the committees and clubs of neighbourhood 'Sections' to the city-wide membership of the 'Cordeliers Club' (which ran from Convention deputies to humble artisans), as well as the office-holders of the city government in the Commune, and a strong network of sympathisers implanted in national government through militant influence on the War Ministry. Individuals at all these levels were living out their own political and emotional dramas of aspiration and confrontation, often at a pitch little less intense than those of Linton's chosen targets, and in similar physical proximity to them. How they shared and contributed to the very personal environment of Jacobin politics must have a significance which is not fully explored here.[\(8\)](#)

As I noted above, it is perhaps inevitable that a desire to focus on the experience of a small central group will leave their wider contexts at times a little shadowy. Yet it may be that we will not fully understand the pressures on Robespierre and Desmoulins, on Danton, Couthon, Vergniaud and Saint-Just and all their factionally-varied fellows, until we have unravelled what can be said of all these layers and levels of traumatic opposition. If Marisa Linton has not written the definitive text on that wider situation – and it would need to be one much longer than this already-substantial achievement – she has certainly taken us much closer to recapturing the elusive human experience of her central characters. If we cannot know them perfectly as a result, we can see that they were far from unthinking puppets of class or discourse. How we judge them as a consequence, as people, as leaders, idealists and 'terrorists', will always be our choice.

Notes

1. See for example Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution, 1787–1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon* (London, 1974); François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Norman Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London, 1974); Danton (London, 1978); and *Saint-Just* (Oxford, 1991). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Timothy Hackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary; the Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789–1790)* (Princeton, NJ, 1996). For a broad multi-author survey of other recent trends in French revolutionary historiography, see the special issue of *French Historical Studies*, ‘89: Then and Now’, 32 (4), 2009. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Basingstoke, 2001). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Just how far the ‘salon’ phenomenon throughout the century had been dominated by considerations of power and prestige – in contrast to perceptions of the gatherings as the nursery of a critical Enlightenment – is discussed by Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons; sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2005). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See Peter McPhee, *Robespierre; a revolutionary life* (New Haven, CT, 2012). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. (One historian has already argued that, much earlier in the cycle of revolutionary violence, politicians were literally traumatized by the counter-revolutionary threat: Barry M. Shapiro, *Traumatic Politics: The Deputies and the King in the Early French Revolution* (University Park, PA, 2009). [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See Haim Burstin, *L’invention du sans-culotte; regard sur le Paris révolutionnaire* (Paris, 2005) for an overview of ‘militant’ life, and Morris Slavin, *The Hébertistes to the Guillotine: Anatomy of a ‘Conspiracy’ in Revolutionary France* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1994) for an examination of how the radical Cordeliers and War Ministry leadership brought about its own destruction. [Back to \(8\)](#)

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