

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Barricades: The War of the Streets in Revolutionary Paris, 1830-1848

Review Number:

321

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 April, 2003

Author:

Jill Harsin

ISBN:

312294794X

Date of Publication:

2002

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

426pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

Pamela Pilbeam

This substantial volume is about more and less than the title indicates. Jill Harsin, known to specialists of nineteenth-century France for her earlier book, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Princeton University Press; Princeton, 1985) has here produced a detailed narrative of the role of Paris artisans in revolution and popular unrest between 1830 and 1848.

Do not turn to this book for a summary of the historiographical debate. Some of the works of most of the historians who have studied this subject appear in the bibliography, but the author prefers the original sources. The research base is impressive, extensive and rendered with meticulous thoroughness. Her territory is Paris and she has thoroughly studied a good range of newspapers, pamphlets and periodicals. She has ploughed manfully through the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, which records details of court proceedings, has worked on the extensive police and judicial files in the national archives (CC, BB18 and BB30 ? hopefully before the Archives Nationales made life almost impossible for foreign researchers). She has even done some research into the army archives at Vincennes, which has been quite an effort in recent years. Excellent use is made of the multi-volume reprints of contemporary pamphlets and newspapers on nineteenth-century French Revolutions.(1) Memoirs, rather neglected by historians in recent years, have provided intriguing details.

With the exception of Part I, the time line is largely chronological. The book is divided into five parts each encapsulating what the author considers the preoccupations of the participants. These are 'Honour', 'Insurrection', 'Assassination', 'Recrimination' and 'Defeat'. In her introduction to the first part 'Honour', Harsin identifies the overarching sentiment which she considers dominated the thinking of the artisan combatants on the street during the July Monarchy as *montagnardism*. She defines this as an insurrectionary revolutionary approach committed to violent means and terror tactics, rooted in the ideas and policies of Robespierre and Marat.

The question why a nation today committed to republicanism took so long, with so much upheaval, to agree on a republican constitution, has attracted the attention of historians. However nearly all earlier investigations, with the exception of the regrettably as yet unpublished thesis of David Shafer (2), embraced reform as well as revolutionary movements across all social groups, including the works of Georges Weill, Maurice Agulhon, Claude Nicolet, R. Aminzade and indeed this reviewer.(3) The present volume focuses on how one social group and principally one gender embraced one strand of republicanism during the July Monarchy. There is nothing wrong with a specific focus, if the exclusion of other issues is sustainable and the perspective is convincing.

Three fundamental aspects of the author's arguments are questionable. First she claims that it was the failure of the liberals to make more radical changes after the 1830 revolution that acted as the catalyst for the emergence of the artisan Jacobin-style revolutionary behaviour she chronicles in this book. Was there really a break in the insurrectionary tradition? The Restoration (1814-30) was peppered with small outbreaks of unrest: Grenoble (1816), and the activities of the *charbonnerie* (1820-22) which attracted support both from elite and artisan participants, often men who had fought for Napoleon. The link between former Jacobins and Bonapartists had been forged during the Hundred Days.(4) The partnership of artisan and middle-class activists has been explored by Newman.(5)

Thus, far from stimulating a novel revolutionary phase, 1830 saw the continuation of aspects of an insurrectionary tradition briefly interrupted by the middle-class-led *Aide-toi, le ciel t'aidera*, which had directed attention to parliamentary objectives in the late 1820s. One should also note in particular (which Harsin does not) the impact of the publication of Philippe Buonarroti's *Conspiration pour l'Egalité dite de Babeuf, suivie du procès auquel elle donna lieu* in Brussels in 1828 and of Buonarroti's arrival in Paris after the July Days. Buonarroti did much to shape republicanism in the early 1830s, to mould how people interpreted Babeuf, whose insurrectionary egalitarianism had been completely forgotten, and Robespierre and the Jacobins who had been universally condemned because of the Terror. Enthusiasm for an insurrectionary tradition owed much to Buonarroti, who became an icon for the republicans in the early 1830s; Auguste Blanqui learned insurrection from Buonarroti.

But to contest what a book does not say is easy, perhaps less so here because the author has the right of reply. Let us now turn to consider what is actually written. Part I insists that masculine honour was a prime concern for artisan republicans, who unlike early socialists, tended to ignore contemporary feminist aspirations. This was, of course, part of the tradition of artisan associations such as the *compagnonnages*, but

it was also an aspect of freemasonry to which many artisan (and other) republicans belonged, and which is not mentioned in the book. As an example of the overarching search for masculine pride, the section on 'Honour' begins in 1846 with the seventh and last attempt to assassinate Louis-Philippe by Joseph Henry and the penultimate, by Pierre Lecomte, is described next. While the pathetic details of their failed masculine pride draw the reader into the book, it might have been more effective to consider all the assassinations together.

Part II takes the theme of insurrection from July 1830 to the failure of Blanqui's rising in May 1839. The detailed description of the various small upheavals makes compelling reading, particularly the minute-by-minute account of the massacre by soldiers of a whole household at 12 rue Transnonain in April 1834. The reader is in thrall, hardly daring to breathe lest the rifle be turned on them. The imagination to recreate the tale, immaculately drawn from memoirs and archival material, is rare and precious, and the criticisms to be made here must not retract from the sheer industry and outstanding skill of the writer. But the account attacks a straw man and here is the second unsustainable argument on which the book is based. Harsin claims that by 1832 republicanism in Paris had become largely working class. Since the work of Newman, Pinkney, Moss and others, no-one would doubt that a large proportion of Paris republicans were artisans long before 1830, for all the reasons Harsin rehearses. However republicanism was not class-specific either before or after 1830; there were middle- and upper-class adherents, to mention merely the lawyers who defended those charged and leading figures like Blanqui and Voyer d'Argenson. Then we hit the third questionable claim ? that worker republicans became totally revolutionary. At no stage did republicans identify themselves as exclusively insurrectionary or reformist, with the exception of Blanqui. They responded to circumstances. Blanqui-style planned insurrections were uniformly disastrous. Insurrection was far more likely to be the accidental consequence of a combination of economic crisis with an attempt to argue against a particular government policy, as in 1830 and 1848, and on a smaller scale in Lyon in 1831 and 1834.

Republicans were interested in more issues than this book credits, and not only radical political change, whether by reform or revolt, and economic and social amelioration; their concerns at different times also included anti-clerical outbursts and education and health care. The focus on Paris also leaves out rural radicalism, which has been analysed by Peter McPhee.⁽⁶⁾ Further, when discussing the various small upheavals between 1830 and 1834, Harsin seems unaware that 'conspiracy' often existed only in the minds of police spies paid by results and with Orleanist officials only too aware that their own power was a consequence of artisan insurrection. The rising in Lyon in 1834 was far more the direct consequence of repressive legislation rather than the machinations of the Society of the Rights of Man. Silk workers were terrified that the new law against associations would make their mutual aid societies illegal.

Part III presents five of the seven abortive attempts to assassinate the 'republican king', Louis-Philippe, as part of 'the war of the streets'. While it is true that some assassins were self-proclaimed republicans, many republicans disassociated themselves from the murders. Republicanism involved morality, virtue, persuasion. The most successful assassination (18 killed and 20 injured) in 1835 was undertaken by Fieschi, whose motives were far from clear, although two of his associates were members of the Society of the Rights of Man. The book explores the narrative of each attempt in forensic detail. The trials revealed the personal inadequacy of the assassins. Surely more could be said about why there were more attempts to kill Louis-Philippe than anyone else in the century, and why they petered out. If the régime was increasingly disliked in the 1840s, one would have expected assassination attempts to escalate; similarly, attempts might have increased if inadequate individuals found the press and trial publicity gave their lives a motive.. Louis-Philippe was not prepared to hide himself away; his personal courage was remarkable. Yet the survival of monarchy depended on an heir. The Bourbons never recovered from the murder of the heir to the throne in 1820 and the Orleanist régime began to seem fragile after the death of the duc d'Orléans. This was such a sensitive subject that when the king commissioned a painting of himself and his sons in 1847, he had his dead eldest son painted into the portrait. Yet none of the assassins seemed to appreciate just how serious the implications of the king's death would be. None modelled themselves on the Decembrists in Russia in 1825 who had an alternative ruler in mind. Apart from personal inadequacy, the only common factor seems to

have been the appeal of theatricality.

Part IV has the intriguing title 'Recriminations'. It deals with the imprisonment of the 1839 conspirators in the 1840s, but the question that needs to be asked is why there was so little opposition in these years. The Guizot government actually increased its slender majority in the elections of 1842 and 1846. On the other hand, the economic crisis unleashed after the railway boom and the potato blight of 1845 stimulated renewed protests against Orleanist 'liberal' economic policies. Cabet created the first mass worker movement. His *Voyage en Icarie* (Paris, 1842) and Louis Blanc's *L'Organisation du travail* (Paris, 1840) each went through five editions before the February revolution and Proudhon was making a name for himself with *Qu'est ce que la propriété* (Paris, 1840). There is no hint of this here ? in some ways rightly so, since early socialists were more concerned with moral and economic solutions than with republicanism; but is it entirely reasonable to dismiss February 1848 as a total accident?

The final part, 'Defeat', deals with the 1848 revolution. This is arguably the weakest section. Despite its overarching theme, revolutionary republicanism, the book robustly asserts (while acknowledging the background of a serious economic crisis) that the February revolution blew up out of confusion and errors rather than insurrectionary ambition or economic and social conflict. Does this perhaps suggest that revolutionary republicanism was a mere spectre?

Where does such microscopic history lead? The narrative is apparently consciously naively innocent. The participants are left to speak for themselves. However, every student of history quickly learns that there is no such thing as objective or neutral evidence. So what is the purpose of modern narrative? Is the aim to clarify the detail, for others to analyse and interpret? Or is the intention to imitate the approach of so much of the news media today, denying explanation, and merely creating life stories? Perhaps ? although this is not said ? the intention is to stress the importance of place, the impact of particular features of the urban environment on individuals. Maybe the message is that all life is pure chance. Or perhaps the lack of analysis is imposed by the original material. The inquisitorial system often deliberately stripped out meaning: it suited a government prosecutor to find either simplistic explanations or no systematic reason why individuals joined insurrections.

This book is a brilliant evocation of events, but there is little attempt to analyse their significance. The reader's curiosity is inevitably aroused when presented with such a wealth of information about individuals and precise events. A book entitled *Barricades* surely should ask the sort of questions posed in the conference 'Barricades' hosted by Alain Corbin and the Société d'histoire du XIX^{ème} siècle in 1995 and since published (though not mentioned here). Why did barricades become a feature of urban insurrection uniquely in the nineteenth century? How effective were they? Why were barricades erected in some districts on some occasions, and not in others, as was the case in February and June 1848? Equally a book subtitled *The War of the Streets* should not ignore the issue of why troops and national guardsmen changed sides, to that of insurrection, in July 1830 and February 1848, but not in June 1832, May 1839 and June 1848.

In short, this recounting of narrative detail and multiple mini biographies is captivating, but ultimately frustrating. Perspective is lacking, the 'big story' is fractured and fudged. With so much detail to tell, stopping short at June 1848 is excusable, but not comprehensible. The streets of small towns in southern France ran with blood after 2 December 1851 and Paris lost thousands in Bloody Week, May 1871. To understand the significance of barricades and urban guerilla warfare one needs to include the end of the story. Above all, with such rattlingly good tales, one wants to explore the question why. If that is politically incorrect in today's narrative history, too bad. Historians will continue to ask questions and urge their students, who will devour this book, to do the same.

Notes

1. Les Révolutions du XIX siècle (43 volumes, Editions d'Histoire Sociale (EDHIS); Paris). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. D. Shafer, 'Revolutionary Republicanism: Aspects of the French Revolutionary Tradition from the

Advent of the July Monarchy through to the Repression of the Paris Commune' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of London, 1994).[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. G. Weill, *Histoire du parti républicain en France de 1814 à 1870* (Paris, 1900); M. Agulhon, *La République au village* (Plon; Paris, 1970), trans. *The Republic in the Village* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1982); C. Nicolet, *L'idée républicaine en France 1789-1924: Essai d'histoire critique* (Gallimard; Paris, 1981); R. Aminzade, *Ballots and Barricade: Class Formation and Republican Politics in France 1830-1870* (Princeton University Press; Princeton, 1993); P. Pilbeam, *Republicanism in Nineteenth-Century France, 1814-1871* (Macmillan; Basingstoke, 1995).
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. R. S. Alexander, *Bonapartism and the Revolutionary Tradition in France. The Fédérés of 1815* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1991).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. E. L. Newman, 'Republicanism during the Bourbon Restoration in France, 1814-1830' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1969); E. L. Newman, 'The blouse and the frock coat', *Journal of Modern History*, 46 (1974), 26-59.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. P. McPhee, *The Politics of Rural Life. Political Mobilisation in the French Countryside 1846-1852* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992).[Back to \(6\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/321>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1569>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>