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DEPUTIES, VOTERS, AND FACTIONS IN FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY POLITICAL CULTURE

Becoming a revolutionary: the deputies of the French National Assembly and the emergence of a revolutionary culture, 1789–1790. By Timothy Tackett. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi + 355. ISBN 0-69-104384-1. $29.95.

Elections in the French Revolution. By Malcolm Crook. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. xiii + 221. ISBN 0-521-45191-4. $35.00.

The notion of a revolutionary change in collective psychology has long been present in certain master narratives of the French Revolution. Georges Lefebvre deployed this concept in his analysis of the psychodynamics that propelled revolutionary crowds. He also introduced the notion more casually in discussing the 'patriot' elites who experienced a psychological upheaval when the *parlement* of Paris ruled in September 1788 that the forthcoming Estates General should be organized as in 1614, meaning that the third estate would be submerged under the weight of the two privileged orders. While William Doyle's revisionist synthesis has plausibly argued that the *parlement*'s intention was less nefarious (it wished to prevent the king from using new ground rules to pack the Estates with pliant deputies), it does not change the fact that public opinion would never be the same after that consciousness-raising event. More broadly, R. R. Palmer, in trying to convey the uniquely revolutionary thrust of the French experience in 1789 – having already contextualized it in relation to other European and American upheavals – wrestled with that issue in a section that he called 'The formation of a revolutionary psychology'.[1]

While Timothy Tackett's book can be situated alongside a recent spate of work on the Estates General/National Assembly – including books by Norman Hampson, Edna LeMay, Michael Fitzsimmons, Harriet Applewhite, and Ron Halévi and François Furet – it can also be viewed as an explication of that extraordinary transformation of attitudes that Palmer could only begin to suggest in his panoramic account. The typical subject matter of psychohistorical exploration in French revolutionary studies has been deviance or dysfunction: the revolutionary asceticism of Robespierre; the paranoia of Marat; the authoritarian personality of local terrorists; the oedipal drama of regicide and the gender phobias rampant among the band of parricide brothers; the fanatical messianism of Jacobinism as a secular religious faith. For Lefebvre and Palmer, however, the notion of a revolutionary psychology was largely positive: creative, liberating, empowering. But the term suggests that such change did not arise naturally or easily from the clash of contending values, ideas, or social interests in the old regime. Yes, the revolutionaries of 1789 were unmistakably successful men of the old regime – as Tackett's data demonstrate more amply than ever – but their roots in the old regime do not explain their revolutionary posture in the summer of 1789 and after. Their

[1] Robert R. Palmer, *The age of the democratic revolution: a political history of Europe and America, 1760–1800* (Princeton, 1959), I, ch. 15.

early experience on the political stage is what made them revolutionaries. For Tackett, arguments about disembodied discourses or straight-jacketing ideologies do not engage this experience.

Tackett's illuminating study rests on two solid pillars: a painstaking prosopography or collective biography of deputies to the Estates General/National Assembly, and an exhaustive survey of published and unpublished first-person accounts, including forty-five from third estate deputies. His database considers almost sixty variables, and calls attention to such significant facts as the markedly disproportionate urban origins of the deputies, and the surprisingly youthful age of the deputies who won leadership roles. As we would expect, almost 400 deputies of the third estate were either magistrates or lawyers; many were prosperous and successful but still in a decidedly transitional or indeterminate vocational and social status before 1789.

His profile of the second estate contrasts strikingly: the noble deputies came largely from the highest ranks of the traditional aristocracy, 70 per cent of whom could trace their noble lineage to the middle ages. This exclusive, aristocratic group was remarkably unrepresentative of the second estate as a whole, with its plethora of relatively recent *anoblis*. While only one eighth of the deputies belonged to the nobility of the robe, four-fifths had been or were still military officers. The modal type of noble deputy was a military noble of ancient lineage residing in Paris, extremely wealthy and a veritable aristocrat, a man with a stable sense of social identity and particular values. This group was, of course, leavened with men of strong liberal convictions, but the roots of second estate deputies pulled them in other directions, which goes a long way to explaining the sharp social animosities that erupted in the summer of 1789, and the commoners' eventual 'revolt against scorn and condescension'. The generally compelling recent consensus about a 'convergence of elites' in the late eighteenth century clearly runs out of explanatory steam at this juncture.

Was the revolution essentially of a revolution of the mind, a consummation of advanced beliefs and pre-1789 intellectual sociability? Tackett's answer seems to be no. Of course the intellectual basis for competing conceptual frameworks or political approaches predated the Revolution. But the ideological choices that emerged in 1789 arose as a function of political contingencies and of social interactions within the Assembly and between the Assembly and the people.

The first great revolutionary act was the creation of the National Assembly in June 1789, an outcome that could scarcely have been predicted from the *cahiers* or from the composition of the third estate with its cautious, practical men who had achieved success by working within the system. On the contrary one would have expected co-operation with the king, compromise, and piecemeal reform. Indeed the deputies initially resisted the aggressive position of the embittered Breton deputation. But the haughtiness and intransigence of the second estate – reacting to its own perception of potential threats against noble rights, property, and honour – tipped the balance. Even so, when the merger of the three estates finally occurred, the nobles were greeted with respect, hopefulness, and good will. If anything, popular unrest should have created a common fear of violence and disorder among most deputies.

Yet in less than three months from the day the Estates General opened, the deputies became revolutionaries, with a radically innovative position legitimized by reason, natural law, and the rights of man rather than irrelevant tradition and precedent. For Tackett, the key to the spiralling aggressiveness that propelled the National Assembly into one revolutionary act after another was factional formation and factional conflict.

Without taking anything away from the Breton Club and its progeny, the Jacobin Club, Tackett underscores the precocious organization of 200 to 300 moderate conservative deputies known as the *monarchiens*, committed to halting and, to an extent, reversing the revolution's course. With the equivalent of a central committee and 'a veritable party whip' in the person of Virieu, the *monarchiens* entered the crucial constitutional debates of September with a seemingly strong hand. These proponents of an absolute royal veto had more support (325 votes) than the radicals who opposed any royal veto (only 220). But the ensuing debate educated the deputies in the logic of the popular sovereignty they had already embraced. In part because of their intransigence, the *monarchiens* suffered a stunning defeat when the Assembly adopted a suspensive veto over their opposition.

Even then, and even after the victory of the left in the October days (when direct popular intervention forcibly returned the king and queen to Paris from Versailles), the combined forces of aristocrats and third estate conservatives remained a powerful presence, while the newly constituted Jacobins remained a distinct minority within the Assembly. As Tackett puts it, there ensued 'an ongoing political struggle between relatively evenly matched contingents on right and left' (p. 207).

Tackett traces the extension of the Assembly's reach into all manner of lawmaking and governmental administration after it streamlined its own organization, by shifting from an awkward method of deliberation in ad hoc subdivision called 'bureaus' that met in camera ('the tomb of patriotic zeal') to reliance on powerful standing committees that submitted reports to the full Assembly and in some cases became de facto executive ministries.

Meanwhile certain individuals emerged into prominence, thanks largely to their oratorical ability in a challenging setting of poor acoustics, intense competition from fellow deputies, and an often clamorous public gallery. This feature of the early Revolution was long since highlighted by the Third Republic historian Alphonse Aulard, whose doctoral thesis concerned the Assembly's orators. More recently Furet and Halévi have published a splendid edition of what they deem the most important speeches in the National Assembly.[2] But their useful anthology presents speeches from only eight of the forty deputies identified by Tackett as the leading participants and (presumably) opinion shapers in the body. Indeed Tackett's penchant for quantification produces the fact that only seventy-one deputies – mostly relatively young, urban lawyers and magistrates – accounted for two-thirds of the interventions in Assembly debates. In a nascent political culture without any commanding figures, parties, or well-established doctrines, the question of leadership is a fascinating enigma worthy of contemplation.

By now we are deeply into the daily life of the Assembly – a relentless schedule that went on around the clock, seven days a week, and where fatigue, lassitude, tension, and an obsession with aristocratic conspiracies took their toll. Most importantly, hardening factional alignments reinforced a sense of acute conflict: a small but influential group of conservative 'Impartials'; the 'Capuchins' of the extreme right (some 200 strong by Tackett's estimate); and the Jacobins (also about 200 strong and dominated by men who fostered a militant idealism with a new vocabulary of politics). The Jacobins' self-

[2] F. Furet and R. Halévi, eds., *Orateurs de la Révolution Française*, 1: *Les Constituants* (Paris, 1989). The thrust of their introduction contrasts markedly with Tackett's work. See also F. Furet and R. Halévi, 'L'année 1789', *Annales ESC* (1989), pp. 3–24.

conscious mission as a popular vanguard intensified factional passion beyond anything previously experienced, especially with their anti-clerical rhetoric as divisive church and religious issues took centre stage (p. 264).

But this tripartite alignment was not stable. Again the fluid dialectic of factional formation is Tackett's central motif. For the first time we see a theme that would bedevil modern French history: the desire to define an elusive centrist position. It was most tangibly expressed (at the expense of the Jacobins) in the formation of the Society of 1789 by Sieyès and Condorcet, with its aura of liberal Parisian elites, Enlightenment culture, and freemasonry. Having moved the Revolution so far forward, many deputies sought a greater degree of collaboration with the king. The official slogan, 'the nation, the law, the king', perfectly expressed the Society's view. On the other hand they could also co-operate with the Jacobins, particularly on ecclesiastical issues and in the sudden decision by the Assembly to abolish noble titles, which further alienated the right. After this loss of honour (for such was the decree's real significance), conservative nobles retreated into passivity or departed altogether. A briefly ascendant conservative coalition disintegrated and Louis XVI seemed left with little choice but to accept his role as a constitutional king. Disappointingly, but with a certain logic and practicality, Tackett ends his account here, with the festival of federation in July 1790.

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In one of its most far-reaching acts, the National Assembly established a system of elections not only for deputies but for all levels of local government and judicial office. A relatively non-contentious blueprint (though only relatively), it does not figure in Tackett's account as one of the polarizing issues that spawned or intensified factionalism. But the electoral arena ultimately became a prodigious generator of political or party conflict (as it came to be called during the Directory) at the grass roots. When the 'revisionist' politicians under Sieyès joined General Bonaparte in overthrowing the Directory, they rationalized their coup by denouncing the regime's record of electoral instability – the intense partisanship that allegedly disfigured the electoral process, and the arbitrary purges by the government to nullify unpalatable results. The mixed record of low voter turnout and sometimes mercurial electoral choice may well have disappointed the original *constituants*, whose idealism had led them to adopt the self-denying ordinance, by which they made themselves ineligible for election to the forthcoming legislative assembly of 1791.

Revolutionary elections have not exactly been a neglected subject. They figure prominently in certain older local studies and a few recent doctoral theses, and Alison Patrick has written on the electoral assemblies of 1792 for the Convention while others have studied elections of the Directory years.[3] But in the past decade three scholars have been working to encompass the broader electoral experience of the revolutionary decade, or the rocky apprenticeship of democracy, as it might be called. Melvin Edelstein has been making a *tour de France* to piece together a comprehensive statistical portrait of electoral participation at ground level, along with case studies of electoral sociology. In 1993 Patrice Gueniffey published a landmark interpretation, extremely

[3] The weightiest local study is Georges Fournier, 'Démocratie et vie municipale en Languedoc du milieu du XVIIIe siècle au debut du XIXe siècle' (Thèse de doctorat, Université de Toulouse, 1991), from which several articles have appeared. A. Patrick, *The men of the first republic: political alignments in the National Convention of 1792* (Baltimore, 1972).

suggestive but also pugnaciously critical of the revolutionary electoral experience, which is not surprising from a student of François Furet.[4] Malcolm Crook is the third member of this trio, an author of several groundbreaking articles and now of the synthesis here under review. Regrettably Crook's book does not really engage Gueniffey's arguments, but it does offer a balanced, lower keyed alternative overview.

The ground rules and experience of the unprecedented electoral consultation for the Estates General set many patterns that endured in the 1790s. The monarchy established a new principle of uniformity and proportionality, and encouraged a broad basic suffrage, though generally excluding the landless in the countryside and the urban poor. The practice of voting in public assemblies (albeit by secret individual ballot rather than voice vote) and the requirement of an absolute majority through the first two of three successive ballots became standard.[5] Most fundamentally, voting for deputies to the Estates General occurred through two or even three degrees of assemblies. For the entire revolutionary decade, indirect election overlay a democratic participation at ground level to create a filtering process that favoured property, local prestige, or articulateness. Except for municipal officials and justices of the peace who were elected directly, a relatively small group ranging between 45,000 and 30,000 electors at any one time actually chose deputies, departmental officials, and judges. Continuity in mechanisms and procedures in turn favoured a degree of continuity in personnel, notwithstanding a changing political climate and minor procedural changes, while designation as an elector was a manifest advantage for election as a local official by the departmental electoral assembly (p. 177).

Sharp analysis of debates over the franchise was a strongpoint of Gueniffey's work and Crook could not hope to add much here. The first policy by the National Assembly included a three tiered system of eligibility for primary voting, service as an elector, and eligibility to serve as a deputy to the legislature. As was pointed out at the time, the extremely high property requirement for the latter, known as the *marc d'argent*, would have barred Jean-Jacques Rousseau himself from the French legislature. While the modest censitary (tax-related) limit on primary voting also drew fire from the most committed radical democrats, it was the *marc d'argent* that stood out as a crude kind of class legislation and that finally proved unacceptable, even though the Assembly still regarded voting as a civic function (subject to qualification) rather than a natural right of all. In the flurry of revisions and enactments that marked the Assembly's final weeks (a subject that deserves a book in itself) the deputies revoked that third level of eligibility altogether even while revising qualifications for the other two levels (primary voting and service as elector) slightly upward.

In Crook's view this left at least 60 per cent of adult males eligible to vote (some might say more), and perhaps half of that pool eligible to serve as electors or officials, and in regions of wide peasant holdings many more. Only one in ten voting citizens, however, would have met the elevated threshold of the *marc d'argent*. Edelstein and Crook have been assiduously reconstructing the ebb and flow of electoral participation, 'from enthusiasm to abstention', as Crook puts it. He demonstrates an initial burst of

[4] Patrice Gueniffey, *Le nombre et la raison: la Révolution Française et les élections* (Paris, 1993), a revision of his doctoral thesis of 1989. For a recent sample of Edelstein's approach see 'Le comportement électoral sous la monarchie constitutionnelle (1790–1791): une interprétation communautaire', *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française*, 301 (1995), pp. 361–93.

[5] There are some useful pages on local electoral experience before 1789 in Peter Jones, *Reform and revolution in France: the politics of transition, 1774–1791* (Cambridge 1995).

enthusiasm and impressive participation followed by a gradual though not linear falling off.

Like Gueniffey, Crook focuses on the procedures that may have inhibited voting, including the inordinate running time of these assemblies and the lack of publicly announced candidacies. Gueniffey, however, has pushed the argument much further by suggesting how these procedures not only affected turnout but also the content or quality of voting, so to speak. The thesis of Augustin Cochin, taken up by Gueniffey and his mentor François Furet, held that most voters were deprived of meaningful choice and operated in the dark because, in a tradition dating from the old regime, openly declared candidacies (and not simply pressure or bribery) were categorically prohibited as morally compromising. But this, Gueniffey argues, opened the way for the domination of small, purposeful factions and cabals, practised in the 'democratic sociability' of the old regime (*sociétés de pensée*, freemasons lodges, and certain traditional corporate institutions), who knew how to manipulate the system. For his part, Crook, perhaps wisely at this juncture in our knowledge of local politics, does not pursue this question very far, but it assuredly remains open.[6]

Crook does suggest that strongly articulated rivalries between opposing clubs or other informal groupings were likely to raise participation, whereas 'consensual abstention' – the sense of not needing to waste one's time on a foregone conclusion – could drive it down. This was compounded by the laborious method of balloting which, notwithstanding minor modifications over time, took several days rather than hours. Moreover, scattered evidence shows much higher participation among those also *eligible* than those who were not. All told Crook concludes: 'An overdemanding electoral system, an inexperienced electorate and a deteriorating political climate were the main reasons for rising abstention. The assembly mechanism was, in fact, a means of exclusion rather than integration for many citizens' (p. 78).

The 'experiment with electoral democracy' – the brief advent of nearly universal male suffrage in 1792 – brought no dramatic reversal of these tendencies, although absolute numbers of voters in primary assemblies were sometimes higher, especially in towns. Again one sees determined minorities acting perhaps with the tacit consent of many others, even if the minorities in question differed from those of previous years (p. 95). On the other hand the first referendum ever, on the constitution of 1793, brought a healthy turnout of some 2 million voters or about 30 per cent – a benchmark that haunted the Brumaire government and led it to falsify the results of its own constitutional referendum so that the turnout would appear to have far surpassed the 1793 tally, though in reality it fell short of that figure.

Crook's chapter on the Directory years, aptly titled 'Parties, schisms, and purges', recapitulates a story at once engrossing and depressing. While all politics is perhaps local there was a subterranean movement toward party formation, which clashed with the official ideological rejection of parties and open candidacies as no better than faction or cabal. The first impetus came from the right, whether royalist or constitutionalist, which saw elections as the way to throw off the legacy and personnel of the Convention and its local acolytes once and for all. Later the neo-Jacobins came to regard themselves as a loyal opposition to the Directory and were gropingly on their way to becoming a

[6] Jeff Horn, 'Tout politique est locale: une relecture critique de *Le nombre et la raison : la Révolution Française et les élections* de Patrice Gueniffey', *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française*, 311 (1998), pp. 89–109. Horn draws on his work on the Aube department to raise questions about Gueniffey's interpretation.

party in everything but name. The self-consciously centrist government, however, tenaciously clung to power across these years. From a remarkable non-intervention in 1790–2, it moved to a consistent policy of interfering in elections and altering their outcome – by the two-thirds decree of 1795 (limiting the first election of the Directory era to only one third of the legislative seats and perpetuating the Convention's membership in the remaining two-thirds); by the Fructidor purge of the right after its landslide in the Year V (1797); by promoting schisms in electoral assemblies in the Year VI (1798) and by purging neo-Jacobin nominees when that tactic did not suffice. The schisms persisted into the Year VII elections, but by then the legislature condemned the practice and seemed to be moving toward a more honest system. While Bonaparte and Sieyès could point to a long and dismal record in which the government nullified elections of deputies and local officials, such repressive tactics had perhaps run their course. Reforms may have been on the horizon just when the Brumairians jettisoned the entire electoral system (except for plebiscites) and replaced it by co-option.

As against all this, however, one should keep in mind that voting in revolutionary France repeatedly produced dramatic outcomes and lawful shifts in local and national power. The elections of 1791 marked a peaceful transition to constitutionalism, while the elections to the Convention under very different circumstances empowered a radical and energetic (albeit fratricidal) group of deputies to lead the republic. When elections were restored in 1795–7, royalists and constitutional conservatives achieved stunning success working through the system. Then in 1797–8, when neo-Jacobins were allowed to re-emerge into civic life, they showed an impressive adaptiveness to the intricacies of electoral politics, regardless of the inhibiting strictures against candidacies and parties.

Aside from addressing two fundamental loci in the political culture of the French Revolution (and assessing their respective roots in the old regime without making too much of them) the books by Tackett and Crook would seem to have little in common. Yet by stepping back one does find an obvious and overriding common issue. It is of course the question of faction, and at bottom the nature of modern politics. The National Assembly was supposed to be an assemblage of individual deputies. Among other things, the Assembly nullified the traditional 'imperative mandates' that many deputies carried to the Estates General from their regional electoral bodies. For only without such constraints could these men interact as one wise, collective voice for the nation. Factions or parties as well as narrow regional interests were antithetical to this vision. Similarly, the Assembly's electoral system posited that millions of individual voters and tens of thousands of electors would act as autonomous individuals who, through some alchemy of good will, and in entirely disinterested fashion, would identify the best candidates for all offices without announced candidates, campaigns and the like. Yet both the revolutionary legislatures and the electoral arena were overwhelmed by factionalism and at times even incipient parties, not as hidden cabals but openly and manifestly, just as Madison would have predicted. Why, we must continue to ask, this chasm between theory and practice for over a decade in France? The theory, in any case, proved singularly appropriate for a government that combined authoritarianism and co-optive oligarchy, legitimized by symbolic plebiscites. Bonaparte and the Brumairians did indeed extinguish factions in their parliament and in their travesty of an electoral system.

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