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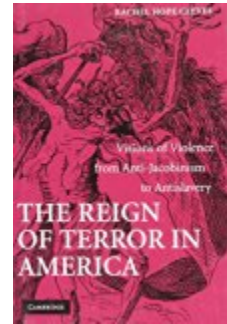
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rachel Hope Cleves. *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xvi + 296 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88435-8.

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Be Afraid. Be Very Afraid.

From the earliest days of the American republic, when moderates led the movement to abolish the Atlantic slave trade and founded the American Colonization Society, through the antebellum period, when radicals fought for immediate abolition, Federalists and their descendants were at the forefront of the movement to remake the United States into a nation without slavery. Eminent historians have struggled collectively to provide one clear rationale for why so many northern conservative elites agitated against slavery.[1] At last, in this intelligent and intrepid investigation, Rachel Hope Cleves provides the best explanation to date. Focusing her lens on the American reaction to the French Revolution, she illuminates how the violent anti-Jacobin language Federalist and Calvinist conservatives deployed in sermons, orations, and pamphlets to denounce their democratic political opponents during the First Party System, evolved into a lethal arrow in the quiver of abolitionism and various other nineteenth-century humanitarian reform movements. She makes a powerful and convincing case.

The book begins unorthodoxly, with an account of the author's personal encounter with homicidal violence on two college campuses, the first during her undergraduate years in Massachusetts and the second while teaching in Illinois. Though the frank discussion will unsettle traditionalists, it sets the stage for an evocative exploration of violence in America. More than another history of violence, however, this is a study of the discourse

violence generates and its power to promote and perpetuate the very thing it condemns. An exhaustive reading of early American print culture reveals that antislavery advocates from the Northeast, regardless of race or gender, shared one thing in common, a deeply ingrained fear of violence. The source of this fear was not the large Indian population just to the west or the massive enslaved black population hundreds of miles to the south; it was instead the political violence of the French Revolution, what many Americans referred to generically as the "Reign of Terror."

The new republic faced east, Cleves reminds us. Immersed in European affairs, Americans understood the French Revolution not as a distant occurrence of little import, but rather "an event of profound local significance" (p. 5). Besides the salient political events, what attracted an early national audience from the revolution's earliest days was its violence. Unable to find words to describe the terrible events on the opposite side of the Atlantic, speakers and writers turned to the Gothic for a more suitable vocabulary. Readers of the written accounts of the revolution struggled to turn away from the fascinating and at times fantastic descriptions of infant impalement, gang rapes, mutilations, amputations, and cannibalism that covered the pages before them.

These almost unspeakable acts of violence provoked a response that was both political and sectional. Democratic-Republicans showed their support for the

revolution variously, from joining clubs to reenacting the beheading of Louis XVI and attending public guillotine demonstrations. The Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, the burning of effigies of U.S. Supreme Court chief justice John Jay and the stoning of secretary of treasury Alexander Hamilton by a New York City mob, underscored the revolution's proximity. These actions, along with Thomas Jefferson's famous insouciance toward the violent excesses of the Parisian mob, horrified northern Federalists, who saw in them the realization of their worst nightmares. A deeply ingrained Calvinistic belief in "original sin" and the inherent depravity of man produced the Federalists' dream of a society in which individuals controlled their most dissolute and degenerate passions. The result was a conservative and antidemocratic impulse that "inspired and fueled criticism of violent institutions within the United States, including southern slavery most significantly" (p. xiv).

Federalists' fears of Jacobin violence fired a fierce commitment to antislavery. Drawing on an extensive transatlantic ideology, they borrowed the inflated language of the Gothic to catalog the horrors of American slavery in sermons and orations, newspapers and pamphlets. Cataloguing the rapes, beatings, and other sordid brutalities that occurred on southern plantations routinely, Federalists speakers and writers labeled slaveholders monsters and cannibals, American Jacobins who by subjugating an entire race through terrible acts of violence succumbed to their most base passions and thus represented a grave threat to the republic. Though the Federalists who denounced slaveholders at times shared their commitment to white supremacy, Cleves insists on the legitimacy of their cause, which, she asserts, held great potential to ameliorate slavery. She provides evidence in the form of Lemuel Haynes, Prince Hall, and other free black New Englanders who infused their antislavery pronouncements with the language adopted by white conservatives. Faced with the daunting prospect of abolishing an institution whose roots were daily piercing deeper into the nation's foundation, northern black abolitionists embraced every ally they could muster, no matter how unlikely. Still, in Cleves's hands Federalist support of antislavery appears less counterintuitive than it once did.

Besides antislavery, anti-Jacobinism also helps explain northern conservatives' virulent opposition to the War of 1812 and their equally fervent support of public education. Long dismissed by historians as a trivial sectional disturbance, Cleves points out the significant level of popular resistance aroused by the second

War of American Independence—more than any other American war before or since. Federalists interpreted the conflict not as a defensive but an offensive war, one in which the U.S. invasion of Canada and the massacre of Native Americans unmasked the bloodlust at the core of American democracy. The Baltimore riot of 1812, in which a Republican mob murdered the revolutionary war hero James L. Langan and beat and tortured other anti-war Federalists, including the former Virginia governor "Lighthorse" Harry Lee, affirmed that the violent pronouncements of the war's advocates were not rhetorical. Federalists anticipated that the loudest war cries would emanate from the South, as they conflated the violence of the plantation with that which took place on the battlefield. As the possibility of Jacobin violence in the United States increased, northern conservatives revealed their fears in various ways, including a strong commitment to public education. Though a long tradition of support for public education had existed in New England since the days of Puritan settlement, now conservatives embarked on a mission to raise a generation of anti-Jacobin republicans who abhorred violence. In this scenario, the motives for eliminating the corporal punishment of children and enacting other educational reforms in the first half of the nineteenth century appear defensive and reactionary as opposed to liberal, progressive, and humanitarian.

A prosopography of the children who came of age in this conservative cultural milieu underscores one of the book's imaginative insights, that in addition to rejecting violence, anti-Jacobins simultaneously rejected nonviolence. While in the early national period advocacy of antislavery violence was figurative, it evolved into a literal endorsement of violence to abolish slavery and spark sectional war. No pacifists, the descendants of northern conservatives were at mid-century on the front lines of violent abolitionism. Lydia Maria Child, Theodore Dwight Weld, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and even John Brown, all came of age in the conservative homes, churches, and schools of Federalist-Calvinist elites who were steeped in anti-Jacobinism. Witnesses to and on occasion the victims of anti-abolitionist mobs, which wrecked havoc on towns and cities across the North, they embraced the violent language of their parents, pastors, and mentors. By the dawn of the Civil War, each either justified or advocated violence in the war against slavery.

Cleves's analysis of the violent language deployed by antislavery conservatives and abolitionist radicals is edifying. Where others might dismiss this language as purple prose, Cleves argues for its authority in the war of

words over slavery, insisting, “To pick up the pen and write in lines of blood is a violent act” (p. 103). This and other findings coincide with some of the conclusions reached in my study of American memory of the Haitian Revolution from the early days of the republic through the Civil War.[2] Yet our conclusions diverge on both the existence and intensity of white northerners’ fear of black revolution. Where Cleves skillfully locates northern conservatives’ endorsement of the black rebellion in the French colony of Saint-Domingue—something sure to surprise some readers—she underestimates the fear this unthinkable revolt inspired, suggesting that northeastern conservatives feared white Jacobins more than black Jacobins. Indeed, Cleves insists, “Fear of slave Jacobinism is little evident in northeastern writings” (p. 112). But if the “Reign of Terror” was a dark cloud over the early republic, then the “horrors of St. Domingo” were the thunder. More than a half-century after the Haitian Revolution, northern conservatives still displayed and deployed a pronounced fear of revolutionary black violence. An example is Edward Everett’s celebrated Union speech at Faneuil Hall in Boston shortly after John Brown’s Harpers Ferry raid, in which he employed many of the standard Gothic tropes to warn northerners of the horrors of a second Haitian Revolution in the United States should they embrace an abolitionist war over slavery.

The minor infraction detracts little from a valuable piece of scholarship, one that asks important questions about the cultural power of violence. The book further grounds the sectional debate over slavery in the early na-

tional period and demonstrates the impact of the French Revolution on the United States decades after its conclusion. It moreover helps mark a new era of scholarship in which electronic databases have become one of the historian’s most important resources. A brief appendix indicates the many tens of thousands of instances where words associated with the French Revolution appeared in early American newspapers, pamphlets, periodicals, and the like; presumably, Cleves reviewed most of them. It is an indication that her findings were impossible just a decade ago. Though electronic resources have not yet supplanted brick-and-mortar archives as the historian’s preferred method of research, they have become just as vital. If current and at times heated online discussions among students, historians, and independent scholars are any indication, the debate over who deserves access to many of these privately owned sources has only begun.

Notes

[1]. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); and James M. Banner, *To the Hartford Convention: the Federalists and the Origins of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815* (New York: Knopf, 1969).

[2]. Matthew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

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