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Kenneth Margerison. *Pamphlets and Public Opinion: The Campaign for a Union of Orders in the Early French Revolution.* West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1998. xiii + 258 pp. $36.95 US (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55753-109-4.

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Were the dominant forces in the early French Revolution "conceptually incapable of construing disagreement as anything but 'faction' "? (p. 1). Did a unitary and Rousseauistic understanding of sovereignty and the general will take hold of the revolutionary imagination as early as summer 1789, if not sooner? Was the possibility of workable constitutional government foreclosed from the very beginning by the incipient radicalism of revolutionary political culture? In this study of the early revolutionary campaign for a "union of orders," Kenneth Margerison, professor of history at Southwest Texas State University, provides strong ammunition for a negative answer to these questions, thereby joining a number of authors who have recently sought to counter the tendencies of historians like François Furet and Keith Baker to see 1789 as little more than a staging ground for Jacobinism and the Terror.[2] What is especially noteworthy about Margerison, in comparison to other critics of Furetian "revisionist orthodoxy,"[3] is his willingness to engage the Furet/Baker school on its own methodological terrain, the field of pre-revolutionary and revolutionary discourse.

Anchoring his study on a careful analysis of the ideological content of the many pamphlets appearing in late 1788 and early 1789 which called for the creation of a union of orders at the upcoming Estates-General, Margerison demonstrates that the union envisioned by those pamphleteers associated with the influential Society of Thirty was one in which each order had to "be prepared to accept political compromise and be willing to sacrifice certain of its long-held assumptions about its place in society to meet the nation's greater political objectives" (p. 41). Nurtured and promoted by a language of political accommodation and conciliation, such a consensual conception of union, Margerison points out, differs significantly from the "unitary" Rousseauian model of revolutionary unity generally posited by the Furetians, a model in which dissenters are automatically cast as evil and dangerous conspirators and ultimately, of course, subject to either "forced union" or the guillotine. Moreover, paying particular attention to the emphasis on the need for consensus found in Jansenist thought and in the work of Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, Margerison argues that the Society of Thirty's pamphleteers drew on well-established currents of eighteenth century political thought which had asserted that "a unanimous will could not be formed until all had agreed on what that will entailed" and which therefore "implied that dissent would remain legitimate" (p. 37). Thus, the balanced ideological analysis furnished by Margerison reminds us that the French revolutionary longing for unity and consequent distaste for party and faction (a distaste which, incidentally, was also quite prominent in late eighteenth century Anglo-American discourse) could, at least in discursive form, co-exist, however uneasily, with conceptualizations establishing imperatives of respect and accommodation towards political opponents.

In addition to resurrecting some of the neglected pluralistic strands in pre-revolutionary pamphleteering and in pre-revolutionary thought in general, Margerison's study makes an important contribution to our understanding of the early Revolution through a sensitive presentation of the complex interaction between ideology and immediate political circumstances in the activities of the leaders of the Society of Thirty. According to Margerison, the Society of Thirty and its campaign for a union of orders originated as a response by a group of liberal nobles led by Adrien Duport to the notorious *Parlement* of Paris ruling of 25 September 1788 that the Estates-General follow the forms of 1614. Seeking to distance themselves from the now discredited *Parlement* and its ideology of "parlementary constitutionalism" and, at the same time, to counter the ministerial offensive triggered by the wildly unpopular 25 September ruling, the leadership of the Society of Thirty devised "national constitutionalism" with its "unionist" demand for an enhanced

Third Estate and common deliberations among the orders as a means of finding some middle ground between the *Parlement* and the government from which to appeal to public opinion. Providing what amounts to a kind of prehistory of the Feuillant party, Margerison then follows the twists and turns of ideological retooling and strategic maneuvering undertaken by Duport and the national constitutionalists up to and through the summer of 1789 as they sought to maintain their political viability and, for that matter, their own unity, in the face of a dizzying stream of unprecedented events.

Having managed in the months leading up to the Estates-General to put themselves in prime position to assume revolutionary leadership, the national constitutionalists of the Society of Thirty and their allies among the deputies of the Third Estate soon faced a serious challenge from the abbé Sieyès, whose exclusion (in *What Is the Third Estate*) of the privileged orders from the idea of the nation posed a direct ideological threat to the unionist program. Margerison, however, fortified by an intriguing and at least plausible attempt to demonstrate that Sieyès' innovative ideas were not, in fact, meaningfully incorporated into the mental scaffolding of even favorably disposed readers, argues that the abbé's exclusionary discourse actually had little impact on public opinion or on the thinking of third estate deputies. Consequently, as Margerison sees it, the Third Estate's 17 June proclamation of itself as the National Assembly did not signify a decisive triumph for Sieyès and his anti-unionist ideas. Noting the enthusiasm with which an admittedly coerced version of union was effectuated in the aftermath of 17 June, Margerison instead contends that most of the third estate deputies still "understood the privileged deputies to be part of the national representation, with a legitimate role in the political process" (p. 147). While Margerison may have carried a bit too far his efforts to erase Sieyès' fingerprints from the momentous decision of 17 June, he does succeed in calling into question Furetian tendencies to see this decision as an emblem of early revolutionary proto-totalitarianism. For even after 17 June, the Assembly's political direction continued to be set, as he puts it, by those for whom "the general will lacked by its very nature the unitary character Rousseau and Sieyès associated with sovereignty" (p. 178).

In his final chapter, Margerison follows Duport and his associates through the key debates of the summer 1789, presenting them as the driving force behind the passage of the anti-feudalism decrees of 4 August and the suspensive veto of 10 September. In both cases, he argues, they crafted programmatic and discursive compromises in an effort to sustain their vision of constitutional government in an increasingly volatile atmosphere. Balancing the need to satisfy newly-powerful popular opinion with a continued commitment to moderate and constitutionalist ideological principles, the future Feuillants, Margerison contends, were able, however tenuously, to maintain their grip on revolutionary leadership, even as their arch-rival Sieyès faded into the background. At the same time, those national constitutionalists (Jean-Joseph Mounier, Gérard de Lally-Tolendal and the newly-crystallized "Monarchien" group) who failed to adjust to the "popular turn" of the summer 1789 found themselves quickly repudiated by the Assembly and soon consigned to counter-revolutionary status.

Briefly taking up the eventual defeat of his protagonists in his concluding paragraph, Margerison again targets Furetian conventional wisdom, asserting that "subsequent events, not a Rousseauistic conception of national sovereignty, destroyed the constitutional framework and the representative system these men created" (p. 182). Such a stark choice between an explanation rooted in ideology and one rooted in events seems oddly out of place, however, in a study which hitherto had so deftly handled the complexities of the relationship between ideological formulations and immediate political circumstances. In fact, Margerison himself had clearly indicated only two pages earlier that the idea of "a unified sovereign will that would accept no compromise with principle nor tolerate minority opinion," while not as immediately dominant as the Furet/Baker school contends, would indeed come to exercise a great deal of influence over future revolutionary events. But I would not want to make too much of Margerison's final recourse to a defense of the old *thèse des circonstances*. For the question of what led to the unravelling of the Constitution of 1791 is a question that belongs to a different book than the one he has written. As for the book he did write, which successfully and energetically demonstrates the ongoing vitality and weighty impact of moderate constitutionalist discourse through the first months of the Revolution, it is one which adds significantly to our understanding of this period and which therefore is well worth the attention of anyone interested in following new developments in French revolutionary research.

Notes

[1]. The phrase cited is Dale Van Kley's rendition of one of the key arguments in the work of François Furet (Van Kley, ed., *The French Idea of Freedom: The Old Regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789*, [Stanford, CA, 1994],

p. 9).

[2]. See for example Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Political Culture* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Remaking of France: The National Assembly and the Constitution of 1791* (Cambridge, 1994); and the present reviewer's, *Revolutionary Justice in Paris, 1789-1790* (Cambridge, 1993).

[3]. For the term "revisionist orthodoxy", see Gary Kates, ed., *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*, (London, 1998), p. v.

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