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Timothy Tackett. *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790).* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. xvi + 355 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-04384-5.

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Revising the Revisionists?

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This book seeks to contribute to two debates, one on the evolution of the political life of the Constituent Assembly and another on the interpretation of the French Revolution as a whole. The agenda here is ambitious. The dominant interpretation of the revolution, based on the insights of Francois Furet, asserts that it developed following the logic of radical democracy. Scholars following this approach have argued that the revolution must be understood exclusively through its ideology. Timothy Tackett, professor of history at the University of California, Irvine, hopes to establish that the thesis of an ideologically over-determined revolution cannot be sustained in the face of the evidence of French political life in its first two years. He invites us to reimagine the workings of the Constituent Assembly from a number of perspectives: region, status, faction, religion, and so to repopulate our understanding of the revolution with principles other than ideology. The book must be evaluated for its analysis of the workings of the Assembly and for its proposed new approach to the entire revolution. It is precisely this interaction between local context and big issues that lends this book its importance.

The book concentrates on the subjective experience of the deputies who composed the Estates General, latterly the Constituent Assembly, in 1789 and 1790. The goal is to understand the paradox of 1789: how a group consisting for the most part of property owners could enact the most radical revolution that had ever been seen. Through a reading of the writings, letters, diaries, and speeches of 129 of the 1,177 members of the Assembly, Tackett charts the evolution of opinion among and between the deputies. He does not produce a traditional political narrative; instead he portrays the development of the institutional culture of the Assembly. The use of the techniques of cultural history on a body of sources that have been the preserve of traditional political history is fruitful. He adroitly avoids the problem of claiming to know what was going on in the heads of these men and instead looks at the collective and private representations of the nation, the revolution, and themselves that they generated. There is of course loss as well as gain, since this kind of approach misses the necessary hypocrisy of political life, where public statement and private conviction often diverge. What emerges is a genuine collective biography, one in which the detail of the politics enhances rather than obscures the broad themes.

This detail is put to use to assess the organization of opinion in the Assembly. Tackett argues that one cannot find an underlying series of assumptions concerning state and society among the deputies, that there was no *discours revolutionnaire*. Instead deputies acquired their initial positions from pre-existing networks, Protestant, Jansenist, and Masonic, but especially provincial. This observation is grist to the mill of the argument that the political consciousness of the deputies was not generated from their participation in institutions of the public sphere that promoted a "democratic sensibility," but rather from their practical experience of negotiation as members of corporate, professional, and civic institutions. The delegates of the towns of France brought to Versailles an aptitude for the politics of faction; they were veterans of tax strikes, back-door manoeuvres, and legal controversy. The deputies were the product of the political life of the late monarchy and so reflected its political culture, with all its strengths and weaknesses.

The single strain of radicalism that Tackett finds in the writings of the deputies for the Third Estate was their distrust of the status of the nobility. This particular strand of their writings was generated from the pamphlet war and election campaign of 1788-89. The pamphleteer deputies were critical of the honorific privileges that accrued to the nobility, not the existence of the corps itself. Contrary to what one might expect, Tackett finds here

a social rather than an ideological difference. In a long discussion of the social backgrounds of the deputies, he finds that though the deputies of the Second and Third Estates shared in the same forms of wealth, mainly land, they enjoyed very different amounts of it. To take but one of his examples, the mean income of the deputies of the Second Estate was nearly fifteen times that of the Third (p. 41). This fundamental difference was complicated by others. The deputies of the nobility were for the most part soldiers, or at least had some military experience, whereas the Third, as is well known, was dominated by lawyers and magistrates. Finally, the nobility and the Third exhibited differing orientations to religion. This is a difficult area and one in which it is very hard to assign definite opinions to particular people. It is Tackett's area of expertise, however, and he discerns that the Second Estate were significantly more orthodox in their religious opinions than the Third.

The bundle of differences in wealth, education, and religious sensibility drives Tackett to conclude that the deputies for the two orders inhabited substantially different social worlds. Tackett concludes from the genuine social differences between the deputies of the Second and Third Estates that Estate membership was a very good indicator of political position, and so supports Harriet Applewhite's similar findings about this correlation (Applewhite, *Political Alignment in the French National Assembly, 1789-1791* [1993], p. 193). The author follows Montesquieu's argument in *The Spirit of the Laws*, and sees honour as the central value through which the nobility understood itself. The deputies for the Third, on the other hand, lacked any stable social identity; their corporate identity was not meaningful for them. This lack of stable identity was what made them a potentially radical element. They were social mutants, neither Third Estate proper nor nobles, and their status anxiety could and did develop into a revolutionary programme for the reconstruction of state and society. On this evidence, the convergent elites thesis, which asserts that wealth alone created status in late-eighteenth-century France, simply does not describe the body of deputies that gathered at Versailles in 1789. At the very least Tackett succeeds in reintroducing social difference as a factor in the explanation of the revolution.

Tackett's narrative of the development of the revolutionary dynamic within this cadre is the best part of the book. He does a wonderful job of anatomizing the dialectic of interaction between factions and opinions that produced key moments of the revolution, such as the declaration of the National Assembly on June 17, 1789. In Tackett's view the declaration of the National Assembly was a radical manoeuvre forced on the "Commons" because of the steady erosion of support for voting by head among the other two orders. He establishes that majority opinion among the deputies initially favoured the position of the group from the Dauphine, who desired a negotiated compromise among the orders. It was only the refusal of the other two orders to negotiate that undermined and changed the balance of forces. The blockage of the moderate option surrendered the initiative in the Commons to the Breton option of confrontation. Movement toward a more radical strategy was itself the beginning of an education in radical politics for the majority of the Third. Participation in the debates of June 15-17 schooled deputies in a language of politics that had been foreign to them and made new initiatives, such as the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, thinkable. Tackett's revolution is contingent and open; his revolutionary culture was created, rather than enacted.

His account of the emergence of a revolutionary centre around the Club of 1789, a group of left of centre deputies many of whom were intellectuals, is particularly subtle. Tackett's argument is that the centre was the medium-term beneficiary of the Jacobins' victory over the "Noirs," or clerical conservatives, in getting the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (which made the state responsible for church organisation) passed in the spring of 1790. With the collapse of a credible clerical/noble threat within the chamber, the left split and an alliance of "Impartials," or right-wing constitutional monarchists, and the group around Abbe Sieyes and the Marquis de Lafayette became possible. The key debate, which revealed a new centre of gravity in the Assembly, was that of May 1790 on the power to declare war and peace. The Club of 1789's successful promotion of a compromise position between king and assembly announced the importance of this new grouping. Tackett's point is not to promote the "moderate" Club of 1789 over the "radical" Jacobins. Rather he shows that the development of revolutionary politics cannot be understood as the unfolding of a logic, that of the sovereign nation, but as the interaction between groups creating the nation between them. Successful political strategy cannot be accounted for by the current cultural interpretation of the revolution, and Tackett's logic of interaction is far more persuasive. That much of this interaction was confrontational should hardly surprise us, given how much was at stake. Tackett's conclusion, that the revolution was more complex and open than our current interpretation recognises, and that there was no dominating logic of intolerance to revolutionary culture, is cogent and com-

patible with recent scholarship, particularly that on the Constituent Assembly (see Michael Fitzsimmons, *The Remaking of France: The National Assembly and the Constitution of 1791* [1994], Ted Margadant, *Urban Rivalries in the French Revolution* [1992], and Barry M. Shapiro, *Revolutionary Justice in Paris, 1789-1790* [1993]). Tackett's book forces us to accept that our understanding of the Constituent Assembly is at odds with the cultural interpretation of the revolution.

Yet the book does not offer an alternative paradigm through which one might begin a general reinterpretation of the revolution. Our central problem remains unanswered: Why was a revolution of world-historical significance created by a body of small-town lawyers and magistrates? Tackett restores the immediate context of their creation of the new France to our vision, but he does not illuminate the heights and depths of the process in which they participated. Some issues, especially those concerning the frontiers of the lifeworld of the deputies, are not particularly well handled. The polarity between the social life of Old Regime towns and the culture of the Enlightenment is overstated, and few scholars working on the Enlightenment would recognize it simply as the writings of men of letters. Tackett does not need to argue that the deputies were mobilized for revolution either by their social experience or by their cultural formation. Also, the irruption of extra-parliamentary forces into the dynamic of the Assembly is precisely that in this account. The agency of groups outside the Assembly is presented as if it were external rather than internal to the revolutionary dynamic. A different conception of politics would have to include those forces as part of the dialectic of interaction that was the revolution, rather than as a series of *dei ex machina*.

Timothy Tackett's book is a critical intervention in the debate on the French revolution. It stands eloquent testimony to an emerging post-revisionist current, one that seeks to reveal the empirical inadequacy of the revisionist case. It also speaks of the necessity for any post-revisionist programme to avoid the danger of losing sight of the keen question that animated the Furet thesis, that of political modernity. Although the over-formal argument about the logic of democracy is not credible, the fact remains that modern European political culture was invented in the revolution and that that culture is problematic. The local and specific contexts of the revolution are not an alternative to grand interpretive strategies, but must be part of them. The revolution was a space in which people conducted factional politics, but it was also a time of cultural creativity, one in which the revolutionaries improvised new forms of culture, society, and politics. The revolutionaries were highly conscious of their world-historical position, and it is to them that we should look for the concepts and categories that best express the nature of the event. To achieve this we must learn to take them seriously as theorists as well as politicians, as men and women capable of the most penetrating reflection on their own experience and its meaning.

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