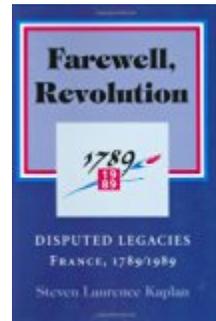


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Steven Laurence Kaplan. *Farewell, Revolution*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995. xiii + 234 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3145-6; \$73.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-2718-3.

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## The Revolutionary Bicentennial

In southern France, *adieu* means both *bonjour* and *au revoir*. Thus the original title of Steven Kaplan's book, *Adieu 89* (Editions Fayard, 1993), reflects the ambiguity of saying farewell to a past event that is ever present with us.

Kaplan's purpose is to examine the French Revolutionary bicentennial events from many perspectives using a rigorous historical and ethnographic inquiry approach. He wishes to refract the eighteenth century through the eyes of the twentieth century without bowdlerizing or minimizing either the complexity of the *Ancien Regime* or the rival claims, respective weaknesses, and multi-dimensional interpretations of twentieth-century parties, institutions, and historians.

Yet this two-volume "tour de France" does not pretend to be exhaustive. Kaplan limits his bicentennial coverage to events in France from 1989 to 1995, excluding how the rest of the world commemorated the Revolution. He focuses mainly on the historiographical debate that had a direct impact on public consciousness, not on the 1,000 books (besides articles and essays) produced by scholars for scholars. His sources represent a kaleidoscope of meetings, lectures, festivals, parades, and ephemeral literature such as programs, ads, brochures, interviews, and letters.

Nonetheless, Kaplan's *Farewell, Revolution* is a stunning tour de force of both popular and scholarly interpretations of the bicentennial experience in France organized into four "books." In Book One ("Framing the Bicentennial"), he examines the cultural-political climate

in which the bicentennial took form: the debate concerning what strategies, themes, and approaches to take (chap. 1); the powerful resurgence of counter-revolutionary forces (clergy, Rightists, Royalists) who saw only a "godless revolution" (chaps. 2-3); the Vendee as trope and idea-force of the anti-revolutionary campaign (chap. 4); the Church's "mixed signals," with most clergy wary of any 1789/1989 celebration while a few embraced the good in the past (chap. 5); Mitterand's attachment to the Revolutionary patrimony in his speeches (chap. 6); and the secular politics of commemoration played out in France's political parties, from the Parti communiste francais (PCF) on the Left to the Royalists on the Right (chap. 7). Book Two ("Producing the Bicentennial") focuses on the inertia, obstructions, dislocations, fiscal extravagances, still-born ideas, and the tragedies (such as Mission President Michel Baroin's death in an airplane crash)—all of which nearly derailed any commemoration (chap. 1); on Edgar Faure's (Mission President no. 2) future-oriented bicentennial with themes of universal fraternity and reconciliation and a focus on youth, Europe, science, and ethics—followed by his tragic death (chap. 2); how Jean-Noel Jeanneney (Mission President no. 3) embraced both the history and mythology of the Revolution to reinvigorate the campaign (chap. 3); the bicentennial events of 1989, from a New Year's flight of hot-air balloons, a spring-time planting of 36,000 Liberty Trees, and a re-enactment of the Estates-General in May to Jean-Paul Goude's July 14th extravaganza parade, the *Arche de la defense* Declaration of Man celebration in August, and the immortalization in December of Henri Gregoire, the marquis de Condorcet, and Gaspard Monge to

the Pantheon (chaps. 4-7).

Book Three (“The Bicentennial and the Nation”) takes the reader on a selected tour of France to sample the diversity of commemorative expressions in Nord, Riom, and Montpellier as directed by CLEF89–Comites Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite (chap. 1); the quarrels, tensions, and hesitations among various provincial groups (chap. 2); the attempt by the PCF to take over local festive activities with VIVE89, colorful videos, a 17-panel tableau, and labor union involvement (chap. 3); the tension in Paris between Mayor Jacques Chirac’s focus on the Eiffel Tower’s centennial and Mitterand’s bicentennial emphasis (chap. 4); and France’s love/hate relationship with Robespierre and the Terror (chap. 5).

In volume two, Book Four (“The Historians’ Feud”) takes up the historiographical battles over the French Revolution, focusing on three major protagonists—Pierre Chaunu, Francois Furet, and Michel Vovelle (chap. 1). Kaplan closely examines Chaunu’s counter-revolutionary rhetoric (chap. 2); shows his favoritism with a lengthy discussion of Furet’s “93 in 89” theme—that the seeds of the Terror were already present in 1789 (chaps. 3-6); and explains Vovelle’s pluralistic approach to the Revolution (chap. 7). In chapter 8, Kaplan compares and contrasts these three historians’ views against the backdrop of the international congress of scholars at the Sorbonne (which Furet pettishly boycotted).

Kaplan’s *Farewell, Revolution* stands alone: no other extant work attempts to explain the wide spectrum of bicentennial activities and viewpoints, although one can gain a more complete and objective view of French Revolution historiography by reading Jacques Sole’s *Questions of the French Revolution: A Historical Overview* (1989). Yet Kaplan’s purpose is not to examine scholars’ views of the Revolution, but the grass roots celebration of it. Like the American Revolutionary bicentennial thirteen years before, 1989 witnessed a wide range of unusual ways to commemorate the French Revolution: from the high brow (concerts, lectures, ballets, and films like “Danton”) to the low brow (rooster-crowing, cake baking, and herring eating contests); from the sublime (rewrites of the “Marseillaise,” reenactments of Louis XVI’s trial, tree plantings) to the ridiculous (a giant elephant of memory constructed, Marianne perfume, and tri-color soaps, soups, and condoms); from the morbid (poems and hymns to the guillotine, guillotines on parade, and guillotine board games) to the bizarre (600 fake heads tossed into the Seine River). It was commercialized in a theme park (Revoparc), a Tuileries 89 festival,

Revoscope, and a Rights of Man train. The Rightists spent a day in mourning for the king’s death; Leftists renamed streets and lycees after Robespierre; and everyone quaffed the bicentennial champagne from the Vineyard of Fraternity. In short, there was something for everybody!

However, despite its national and international successes, the bicentennial seemed constantly dogged by problems that threatened to derail it: lack of common ground among leaders; which “Revolution” to celebrate; vandalism; extravagance; a sometimes hostile press; lawsuits; the opposition of bishops, the PCF, Interior Minister Edouard Balladur, the Declinists, the Front National, and the anti-89 Cercle; and finally, committee absenteeism, illness, and the deaths of its first two directors. Hostile voices compared the Vendee to the Nazi holocaust and the Terror to a “genocide” of nobles. Far from being a Chamber of Commerce promo on the bicentennial, Kaplan’s account leaves one wondering how the French ever pulled together to celebrate the event at all.

Indeed, Kaplan’s examination of the multifaceted commemoration is so thorough that it appears as if he himself was ubiquitous in 1989, going everywhere, reading every newspaper and talking to every group. He is even aware of planned events that did *not* happen during the bicentennial: reconstruction of mini-Bastilles from bricks; repainting the base of the July column at the Place de la Bastille in blue, white, and red; erecting a colossal Chair of Uranus 150 meters high; making a giant wandering turtle; and building a 900-meter footbridge to connect the Pont Neuf to the Pont du Carrousel with eleven towers.

Unfortunately, Kaplan’s difficult writing style places these two volumes in the camp of the specialists and advanced graduate students, well above the heads of most undergraduates, who will be puzzled by words like aporias, imbrication, mimetic, exiguous, razzia, longiloquence, dybbuk, and cabalomonolithic which appear on almost every page. Kaplan’s penchant for over-using the slash—as in R/revolutionary, charge/shibboleth, national/regional/ethnic, past and present/future, and integrity/necessity/destiny of the R/revolutionary legacy—will annoy most traditionalists, who may see this attempt at nuancing deeper meanings as merely indecisiveness. Sometimes he also gets carried away with his use of parentheses—as in (post)Revolutionary Vendee (re)constructed, (very early) Revolution, research would (eventually? ) cause party (dis)harmony, possible (unintended? ) perverted? ) consequences, a (f)rigid didac-

tic lesson, and asked (re)fresh(ed) questions—to the point where on p. 22 he includes a six-line parenthetical aside.

Yet Kaplan also writes with wit and humor, noting that “Public opinion is a constructed rather than a natural phenomenon, elicited by polls that are rarely of immaculate conception” (p. 28), and that Robespierre “the Incorruptible remained Inco-optable” (p. 444) for some bicentennial celebrations. He particularly likes Mitterrand’s *bon mots*: “A republic that forgets its origins will not be long in repudiating them” (p. 135); calling Baroin’s conception of the bicentennial “a mishmash fit for pet food” (p. 193); and regarding Faure’s extravagances, “I take note that President Faure is not short of ambition” (p. 212). This latter point is well illustrated by Faure’s own statement: “There were two men who might have been able to avert the Revolution—Turgot, who died before it broke out, and myself, who was not yet born” (p. 240). He catches the ridiculous, for instance, when the top aide to the Uruguayan president at the G-7 Summit in Paris said, “Montesquieu, Moliere, they are nothing next to camembert” (p. 303), and the Bishop of Evreux’s statement that the French Revolution was “the most important [event] since Jesus Christ” (p. 129), as well as the silly commercial: “Louis XVI: Is it a revolt? Courtier: No, Sire, it’s a Volkswagen” (p. 240).

Francois Ewald, the Condorcet of 1989, once remarked, “As long as the Revolution is not over, as long as we are still in it, it would not be possible to undertake its history with objectivity, with the suitable detachment” (II: p. 130). Perhaps so, but in this reviewer’s mind, Kaplan has come close to a definitive evaluation of the multifaceted dimensions of a bicentennial that both divided and unified France in the last decade of our century.

Comments of Steven L. Kaplan, Cornell University, <slk8@cornell.edu>, 25 November 1996:

I am grateful for and flattered by Brian Strayer’s sympathetic review of *Farewell, Revolution*. It is not precisely the same book as *Adieu 89*. It contains some significant new material not available to me initially, and it is more frugal in its treatment of the grassroots commemoration. It was also infinitely less trying to deal with the American version than with the French. While many people in France welcomed the publication of *Adieu*, others resisted it, more or less aggressively—because they found it ideologically inhospitable, because they are allergic to criticism, because they resented a *gai-jin*’s intrusion, because it raised questions that they did not want to see addressed, because they found its sometimes mordant tone distasteful, and so on. A number of my antagonists ap-

pealed directly to my publisher to quash the book. My in-house editor pressed me to suppress certain sections and passages (“Ca se dit pas en France,” or “Il vaut mieux ne pas dire cela,” or “c’est trop risqué”). A panel of experts, including several of the protagonists in my book, who did not bother to recuse themselves, voted to refuse a subvention for the translation of *Adieu*, though they had generously accorded unctious and subsidy to one of my previous books within the same program of assistance. Some Parisian dailies and news magazines devoted substantial space and expressed critical enthusiasm for the project, while others boycotted the book entirely, following the principle that “taire” is always a better strategy than even a highly negative review which inexorably “en fait parler.”

My chief adversaries made it clear that they would not appear in the same forum to which I was invited, effectively denying me the right to defend my arguments at certain crucial times and places. The organizers of the colloquium marking the end of the *Institut d’histoire du temps present* (IHTP)’s multi-year investigation of the bicentennial paid for my trip from Ithaca, but denied me the right to reply after a direct assault upon me (“une attaque en règle” initiated with the colorful image of “le cowboy de Cornell,” a bittersweet insult for a boy from the macadam of Brooklyn). In a text submitted for one of the IHTP’s informal research reports on the bicentennial, a distinguished “contemporary” French historian, who professionally brandished the oriflamme of democratic pluralism, asserted nevertheless, in my regard, “qu’un Américain ne saurait jamais comprendre ce que c’est la République en France,” a bijou of ethnocentric narcissism and a somewhat sweeping JacoboGaullien disqualification. All this gives me a hint of what it must have been like in one of the *cellules* of the 5th arrdt. in the bad old days.

The good news is that I have been practically rehabilitated, at least by certain of my old French friends who were provisionally obliged to break with me because they had even deeper links to my adversaries. In a recent review of my latest book, *Le Meilleur pain du monde*, a very fine historian of the Old Regime writes indulgently of me—I have returned to my senses!—in a celebrated weekly: “Confondant les luttes de factions de la Convention avec les débats des historiens du XXe siècle finissant, il a écrit un brulot de sans-culotte plein de verve mais aussi d’injustes attaques contre nos amis Francois Furet et Mona Ozouf, soupçonnées de vouloir désespérer le Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Après cette erreur de parcours, il [Kaplan] revient à ses amours premières pour

nous donner son chef-d'oeuvre: chef d'oeuvre au sens premier du terme." Safe history, like safe sex, has very real merits.

Earlier this year I jokingly wrote to my French publisher that I was disinclined to write the "Adieu, Clovis" for which he ardently yearned. The Clovis commemoration took place on an infinitely more modest scale than the bicentennial of the French Revolution. But the rancorous quarrels surrounding it remind us again how difficult a task commemoration is and how thoroughly politics and ideology pollute (and probably also enrich, however perverse the process) historiography, even at a distance of a thousand years. Clovis crystallized deep anxieties about identity (Frenchness and French exceptionalism), about the role of religion, about national tradition, about belonging and community, about the putatively immutable rules of the game (*laïcité*), etc., in ways redolent of the debates of the late 1980s.

Those debates were acrimonious and, in my view, they were important. In *Farewell, Revolution*, I pay homage to the cunning that engendered the slogan "la Revolution est terminee," but I argue that on many planes the issues which constitute the Revolution remain far from resolved. They are still being fought out in French politics, even if the Republic is institutionally anchored in the center. They are still being fought out in historiography, even if many historians, mostly Americans, complaisantly assume that bicentennial revisionism is a done deal (let them peruse, inter alia, the recent studies of Margadant and Tackett—to the extent that empirical research framing robust conclusions still carries weight in these somewhat ethereal precincts).

This remark leads me to a final thought about the bicentennial (not directly the Revolutionary) legacy. Many questions seem to me to command our attention: the problem of managing memory; the density and geography of the "social demand" for commemoration; the rela-

tion between commemoration and history; the dynamics relating press and "opinion"; the extraordinary uneasiness of the politicians during the bicentennial season; the persistent malaise of the Church; the new grounds of legitimation of the counterrevolution, and the efflorescence of a larger, more diffuse antirevolution; the attitude of F. Mitterrand, especially in light of what we have learned about him in the past few years; the "identitarian" anguish; etc. Yet, at the risk of succumbing to parochial concerns—we are after all on H-Net—it seems to me that the question of "doing history" is not the least of the grand issues at stake in the bicentennial confrontations. I have in mind not primarily the glissando from history to politics and the displacement from past to present which lead to the forging of a usable past and the articulation of a moral catechism, though these matters are surely worth serious attention. Rather I mean more prosaically ways of practicing the historian's craft. The French revisionist offensive during the bicentennial period reminded us of a claim with which most historians of all stripes are uneasy, but which is perhaps worth addressing frankly in our graduate classes and in our colloquia: that certain genres and certain approaches to the study of history are manifestly and/or intrinsically better or stronger or more profitable or more prestigious than others. If we historicize the question, we learn that this hierarchy shifts significantly over time, at once the cause and the effect of historiographical renewal, that is of various kinds of more or less fruitful revisionism. Bicentennial revisionism was not content, however, to surf on the tide of a resurgent history of ideas. It set out to show that social history was a pernicious as well as a mindless and futile enterprise in all of its expressions. In my view this scapegoating and anathematization neither fortified the revisionist case nor advanced the task of critical inquiry.

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