

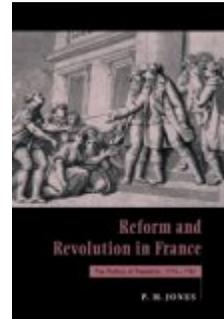
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

P. M. Jones. *Reform and Revolution in France: The Politics of Transition, 1774-1791*. Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 246 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-45322-6.

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French history publishing as a whole may be in crisis on both sides of the Atlantic, but textbooks and general histories seem immune to the general blight. In the last ten years alone, I can think of new general works (covering on average a century or so each, at different levels of sophistication) by Georges Duby, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (twice), Francois Furet, Maurice Agulhon, Jacques Revel and Andre Burguiere, Christian Jouhaud and Robert Descimon, Oliver Chaline, Lucien Bely, Joe Cornette, Daniel Roche, Peter Campbell, Colin Jones, Mark Greengrass, Jeremy Popkin, Henry Heller, and Mack Holt (I am sure I have missed a few, and this is not even counting histories of the French Revolution!). So P. M. Jones has entered a crowded list. Has he written a classic, destined for endless reprinting *a la* Alfred Cobban's 1965 *History of Modern France*, or will *Reform and Revolution* merely gather mildew on the library shelves, as is the rapidly reached fate of so many general histories?

Like Cobban before him, Jones has written a book that operates on several levels. For undergraduates, it aims to provide background on France in the last years of the old regime, and a concise account of events from the accession of Louis XVI to the start of the new constitutional regime in 1791. For graduate students, it judiciously sums up large segments of the tumorously swelling literature on this period of French history (for this service, as for his earlier synthesis on the peasantry in the Revolution, Jones deserves many thanks). For professional historians in general, it seeks to make a polemical argument about the origins and early course of the Revolution, and thus to reorient discussions on the subject.

It is this last aim that explains Jones's odd choice of dates, 1774-1791. To be sure, they have a certain evident logic to them, covering the reign of Louis the Hapless until the formal creation of a new, limited monarchy with the first revolutionary constitution. But then, almost any year from the late eighteenth century has a certain evident logic as a symbolic beginning or ending. Jones has chosen 1791 because he wishes to emphasize the continuities between the old regime and the Revolution, and to refute the notion that 1789 marked a rupture in the fabric of French history, as both Marxists and Francois Furet have insisted, albeit in very different registers.

Jones's argument here essentially concerns politics, and owes much both to Tocqueville and to the conservative school of French historiography (i.e., that of Marcel Marion and Michel Antoine). Like the first, he sees the monarchy as a dynamic force whose attempts to increase the power of the central state and eradicate obstacles to its smooth functioning (particularly those raised up by the "society of orders" and the notion of privilege) directly foreshadowed the centralizing agenda of later regimes. Like the second, he sees the monarchy of the later eighteenth century as a fertile source of enlightened, and potentially fruitful reforms. Yet Jones does not share the *partis pris* of these French authors. His monarchy is neither Tocqueville's somewhat monstrous and despotic force of nature nor the conservatives' bastion of virtue, needlessly destroyed by arrogant and misguided revolutionaries.

Jones has no illusions about the coherence of reform policies emanating from the musical chairs game that was the royal ministry under Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, and he admits that only the National Assem-

bly, deploying what he terms the powerful new ideology of the nation, had the capacity actually to effect needed reforms. He also deviates from the earlier interpretations in presenting the monarchy as a pioneer not just of the modern state, but of modern democracy. Some of his most interesting and original passages concern the Provincial Assemblies first set up on a limited basis under Jacques Necker, and throughout France on the eve of the Revolution. Here, he argues, the monarchy had already broken with the tradition of corporate representation present in provincial estates, and had already conceded its willingness effectively to share power (albeit on a very restricted basis) with elected deputies. In these ways, the policies of Louis XVI directly foreshadowed the establishment of the constitutional monarchy of 1791. Jones concludes that the National Assembly “inherited and very largely implemented the reform agenda of the old monarchy,” although of course going much farther (p. 244).

All this is presented in a cogent and persuasive manner. Of course, in good polemical fashion, Jones rather exaggerates the positions of his opponents. To the followers of Francois Furet he attributes the notion that “the Revolution was an immaculate conception, an event without a past, without antecedents” (p. 238). In fact, it was largely associates of Furet who in the 1980s began tracing the origins of revolutionary political culture back into the final decades of the old regime, publishing a first *bilan* of their work in the 1987 volume *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, edited by Keith Baker (on which Jones profitably draws).[1] Nor is it quite true that Furet and Mona Ozouf “picture the Assembly as a body fired with a totalising vision of the new order from the very beginning” (p. 244). To say that certain discursive choices made in 1789 generated certain political constraints which set France on the path to the Terror (itself a debatable assumption!) is not quite the same thing as saying that the deputies who made these choices already had a fully fleshed-out vision of what they expected to follow. To this extent, Jones’s emphases on continuity, and on the initial modesty of revolutionary aims, are in fact relatively unexceptional. At the same time, he never directly addresses the arguments put forth by Furet, Ozouf, Baker and Marcel Gauchet, among others, about the radical shift—a rupture, by any other name—in political language that occurred in 1789, for instance in the meanings of the terms sovereignty, representation, and indeed revolution itself.[2] At one point Jones tries to diminish the significance of 1789 by mentioning that the French were already using the word “revolution” to

describe events in 1787 (p. 176)—but Baker’s point is precisely that in 1787 the word had a much more limited meaning than it would later acquire.

Jones’s real contribution, to my mind, lies in his emphasis on the way the monarchy itself actively contributed to changes in French political culture. It is still not sufficiently appreciated that the radicalized climate of opinion in which root-and-branch reform, and ultimately Revolution, became conceivable, derived as much from the council chambers of Versailles as from the garrets of Grub Street, the salons of frondeur aristocrats, or the courtroom arenas of *causes celebres*. From the time of the “Maupéou coup” of 1770-71 onward, certain royal officials showed themselves ever more willing to break with perceived centuries of custom and practice in the name of “reason” and “utility”—one of the classic historical examples of people sawing off the branches they themselves were sitting on. Did not Edmund Burke recognize the true radicalism of this period when, in 1790, he labelled Louis XVI “a prince the acts of whose whole reign was a series of concessions to his subjects, who was willing to relax his authority, to remit his prerogatives, to call his people to a share of freedom not known, perhaps not desired, by their ancestors”? [3] In drawing renewed attention to these issues, bolstered by fresh and interesting archival evidence, and by stressing the links between pre- and post-1789 policies, *Reform and Revolution* offers a valuable contribution to the study of eighteenth-century French politics.

Jones’s argument, then, is well worth reading by specialists in the period—and yet, the book itself ultimately falls between stools so spectacularly as to render it quite unsatisfying. On the one hand, by setting his argument in the framework of a textbook, Jones precludes any really in-depth exploration of his themes or extensive presentation of evidence (for instance, on the Provincial Assemblies—can we hope for a monograph by Jones on the subject?). He ends up being suggestive where he might have been authoritative, while specialists reading for his argument will need to skim in much the way Carl Lewis jumps so as to avoid long stretches of the familiar. Yet Jones pursues the argument strongly enough so as virtually to destroy *Reform and Revolution*’s utility as an introductory textbook, at least for American students with little background in French history (British students with A-Level history may well be a different matter). It hardly needs stating that the choice of 1774 and 1791 as limiting dates, while suited to the book’s theme, makes it unsuitable for a university course on either the old regime or the Revolution, since students will need to sup-

plement it with other texts that duplicate much of the basic material. Moreover, while Jones offers thorough coverage of political reform (including in the Church), and also of his other speciality, the peasantry, the rest of the book is dangerously thin. What is one to make of a general history of 1774-1791 that never mentions Marie-Antoinette or the October Days, and consigns the fall of the Bastille to an oblique half-paragraph? That compresses the Enlightenment and all other cultural developments into about seven pages?

A perusal of Jones's index is particularly instructive. Sieyes gets one mention to Lamoignon's eight; the 1776 tract *Le Droit des cures* is in, but not the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen; we have physiocrat but not philosophe or Enlightenment, Monarchiens but not Jacobins, Lyon and Languedoc but not Paris (in general, the capital gets very short shrift indeed—revenge, perhaps, for textbooks that sin in the other direction, but no more justified). There is no listing for “Estates General,” but “Provincial Assemblies” gets forty-nine! General histories should be more user-friendly. Obviously, then, *Reform and Revolution* cannot serve as a true introduction to the period it covers. Jones may well argue that he had different aims, but the book jacket suggests otherwise: “This textbook has been written to help teachers and stu-

dents to pilot their way through the enormous and ever expanding literature on the French Revolution. The author [...] offers a synthesis which takes full account of current debates.” *Caveat emptor*.

Notes

[1]. Keith Michael Baker, ed., *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford, 1987). It should be stressed that the pages of this important volume were open to non-“Furetistes” as well.

[2]. The key works here are Francois Furet, *Penser la Revolution francaise* (Paris, 1978), Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf, *Dictionnaire critique de la Revolution francaise* (Paris, 1988), Marcel Gauchet, *La Revolution des droits de l'homme* (Paris, 1989), and Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990).

[3]. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (New York, 1987), p. 72.

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