

**Dan Edelstein.** *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. xi + 337 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-18438-8.



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The past few years have seen a surge of books reconsidering and reconceptualizing aspects of the French Revolution. The intricacies of the thought processes of French revolutionaries and of the Jacobin Terror have been made somewhat clearer, as some of the recent work published on the French Revolution has eschewed the old Marxist and revisionist views about the contingency or necessity of the Terror, seeking to understand the inner logic of the Terror as part of the revolutionary process of the 1790s.

Edelstein's *The Terror of Natural Right* makes no small contribution to this debate. The book is remarkable for its ability to unscramble a very complex, morally and politically charged debate about natural right, justice, and the role of terror, presenting the argument of Jacobin political thought in a clear and systematic way. Edelstein does not offer new sources, but his reading of the sources, and the special attention he pays to the change in language and conceptualization of key terms of the Jacobin discourse in the period between 1792 and 1794 is nothing short of ground-

breaking. *The Terror of Natural Right* delivers what it promises, namely a new historical analysis of Jacobin political thought and the developments of one of the most exciting periods of French history.

Edelstein departs from the usual premise of those working on Jacobin political thought: he seeks to identify in the political discourse of that revolutionary group an accentuated focus on republicanism, and a respect for republican institutions. Because of the developments of the Terror and of the actions and rhetoric of the *Conventions*, historians and political theorists have found it difficult to ascribe a proper "republican" notion to the Jacobin discourse. Having fallen into despotism and tyranny, this discourse likewise fell out of grace for many historians, having come to signify the dark side of abuses of power and of the moral high-ground, unskilled politicians. Historians have seen the foundations of Jacobin political thought, namely the adherence to natural right, as something quite devoid of real significance, as

window-dressing designed to hide what was ultimately opportunism and power-thirst.

Edelstein claims that he will avoid making a distinction between political opportunism and the sincere endeavor on the part of the *Conventionnels* to establish, at some point, a republic of virtue in eighteenth-century France. This step is innovative in the historiography of French Revolutionary studies. By portraying the *Conventionnels* as “revolutionary Goldilocks” (p. 218) Edelstein demonstrates how the long-lasting Terror and the rhetoric that enveloped acts of political cruelty were, in fact, an attempt at adaptation based on the need for Jacobin political thought to follow a specific and logical course that led France from the legal practices of the Old Regime, to those established on the grounds of natural right.

This reconfiguration of the history of revolutionary political thought that Edelstein follows in his book makes *The Terror of Natural Right* an extremely important volume for students and scholars of French Revolutionary politics and political theory more generally. For decades, historians have contextualized ideas and concepts to understand their meaning and significance. It is therefore surprising that so many scholars of Jacobin political thought have missed the significant shift in the meanings of terror and justice in the period between 1792 and 1794. By looking at the speeches of Robespierre, Saint Just, Jacques Nicolas Billaud-Varenne, and François Chabot in their specific chronological contexts, Edelstein unravels the importance of the Jacobin project of republicanism and the inner contradictions of the discourse that ultimately pointed out—it can be argued—the impossibility of the concretization of the project of republicanism as the *Conventionnels* envisioned it.

Edelstein starts his analysis by investigating the natural law and natural rights discourses in political thought. His aim is to show how the natural law discourse, especially in eighteenth-century political thought, seemed to trump constitutional

and other positive law practices, thus lending authority to the events of 1792-94. Seeing nature and nation as the same thing, the logical conclusion of Jacobin political thought was to eliminate with capital punishment all the enemies of France. Edelstein systematically follows this aspect of Jacobin thought to the identification of enemies, the *hostis humani generis*, whose removal was paramount, both in a political-thought intellectual context and in the context of the Enlightenment. The first chapter, following from these introductory ones, examines the idea of republic and of republicanism in eighteenth-century Europe, drawing on parallels with models from antiquity and from fifteenth- and seventeenth-century political thought. The second chapter examines the role of nature in eighteenth-century intellectual history, setting the grounds for the use made by Jacobins of both nature and natural law. This chapter closes part 1, which offers the preamble to the understanding of Jacobin thought which Edelstein wants to investigate and forward to the readers.

Part 2 addresses the “Republic of Nature” of 1792-94, looking at the roles played by death, violence, and terror in the creation, grounded on the theoretical foundations which Edelstein explained in part 1, of the French republic as the *Conventionnels* envisioned it. One important and original consideration Edelstein forwards is the divide between Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s idea of general will and that espoused by the Jacobins, particularly by Saint Just. By focusing on natural right as the origin of all law, the political thought of the Jacobins implicitly rejected Rousseau’s social voluntarism of the general will; Rousseau’s influence on Jacobin political thought becomes, in Edelstein’s analysis, quite less significant than in previous analyses (that of François Furet, most importantly). Edelstein’s approach also highlights the originality of Jacobin political thought and persuasively shows how the legitimacy lent by the concepts of general will, and the will of all, was far less significant than previously imagined.

A final point of Edelstein's analysis, which demands attention, is his reconceptualization of the Jacobin political project, from the failed constitutional projects of the period between 1792 and 1794, to the creation of republican institutions, which, Edelstein argues, against many scholars, represented a sincere desire to establish republicanism (if not democracy) in France. The move, in 1794, from punitive law to the Cult of the Supreme Being as the panoptic fantasy and the revolutionary tribunal as the method of law enforcement should the Eye fail to prevent acts against the common good is one which, Edelstein convincingly argues, represents the move to republicanism and the attempt at fulfillment of the revolutionary project. Edelstein does not go as far as claiming that it was too little too late, but the reader is faced with the reality of the fact: the project simply did not work, and one must come to terms with the fact that republicanism in France took a very different turn than what was originally intended by groups of revolutionaries from the eighteenth century onwards.

*The Terror of Natural Right* has many virtues, and I believe it will become an essential part of readings lists on the French Revolution, on Revolutionary thought, and on political thought more generally, both because of the content of the book and the methodology Edelstein uses. But the merits of the book do not end there. Those interested in nineteenth-century history and political thought both in Europe and in the wider world would find this book an excellent contribution. By pointing out the actual origins of the unfulfilled Jacobin dream, Edelstein links the failed Jacobin political thought to later tendencies such as Marxism and the right-wing totalitarianism of the twentieth century. These may seem straightforward, and many scholars have outlined the genealogical relationship between these ideologies. But Edelstein is more persuasive than most, as he demonstrates that it was not the original foundations of Jacobin political thought, but rather its shortcomings, that influenced, say, Marxism, lend-

ing legitimacy to Marx's ideas about the withering of the state without actual explanation of how this would come about. Edelstein could have made an interesting parallel also with positivism, both in its French and Francophone varieties. The influence of Jacobin political thought was also global, rather than confined to Europe, and Edelstein's book does much to help illuminate the difficulties of combining a discourse on natural right with the political institutions of republicanism, a difficulty also found in the Haitian Revolution and the movements for independence in Latin America. Political thought and theory after the French Revolution was very much devoted to unraveling the mystery of the failure of the French Revolutionary project; Edelstein's book has certainly brought us a bit closer to solving this mystery and in turn, to understand the Revolutionary period as a whole.

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