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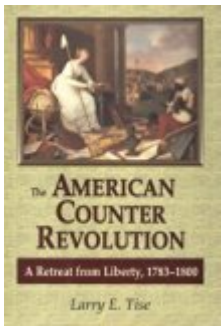

Larry E. Tise. *The American Counterrevolution: A Retreat From Liberty 1783-1800.* Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1999. 672 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8117-0100-6.

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Larry Tise's *The American Counterrevolution* argues a strong thesis, but it begins by begging a question that should be confronted at the outset. The thesis propounded, as the subtitle "A Retreat from Liberty, 1783-1800" suggests, is that concerns about order overwhelmed enthusiasm for liberty as "the age of democratic revolutions," to use R.R. Palmer's phrase, came to an end with the eighteenth century. The question that is begged is whether such a shift of emphasis should be talked about as an "American Counterrevolution" in the aftermath of the country^Òs successful War for Independence.

The very idea of a "counterrevolution" has a number of conceptual entailments that need to be sorted out if Tise's thesis can be appreciated and analyzed. We owe the formulation to Crane Brinton, whose *Anatomy of Revolution* advanced the French Revolution as a template for revolutions in general and tested his morphology with reference to both the American and Russian Revolutions. For Brinton, counterrevolutions were Thermidorian in character, involving a dramatic change in the structure of government as well as the replacement of the personnel and symbols animating the country^Òs politics. His example was France^Òs trajectory as the Reign of Terror yielded to the Directory and the Directory to the consulate and then to Napoleon's French Empire.

Of course long before Brinton developed his scheme of revolutions, Charles and Mary Beard had interpreted the revolutionary events in the United States in a way compatible with the idea of a counter revolution. In their account, the American Revolution had begun as a typical *ancien regime* struggle between elites, those of Great Britain arrayed against the colonial gentry on the North American continent. But, as with so many heated disputes, in the Beards' story, the fire got away and spread in the free air of America, scorching ordinary colonists with the flames of liberty. Heated, they became political participants themselves, demanding what their gentry had long withheld from them: the right to participate in public affairs.

Newly politicized, the colonial outsiders turned the conflict into a revolution by pushing to the fore the two issues that Beard's associate, Carl

Becker, neatly epitomized as "home rule and who should rule at home?" The Beards' counter revolution was the Constitutional convention and its triumphant coda the ratification process which pitted the Federalists against an outspent, outspoken group of Anti-Federalists. And American history for them had been driven ever since by the rekindling of freedom^Òs fire as successive groups of dispossessed, disinherited, and dismissed made their claim to the libertarian promise of the Revolution. This, despite the Beards' hard-nosed emphasis on economic motives and interest group politics.

Tise's counter revolution lacks such an analysis. The acrimony in Congress over whether or not to honor Benjamin Franklin at the time of his death in 1790 focuses Tise's curiosity, we are told, about the possibility of a counter revolution. "What could have caused so many people in America's seat of power in Franklin's hometown to act as if it would be wrong to honor the genius of science, philosophy, diplomacy and statecraft?," he asks. After reviewing possible explanations, Tise concludes that there was something else "of fundamental importance at work" -- to wit, Franklin's death had occurred "when the pendulum swing that had been impelling Americans in the direction of liberty, freedom, and equality had reached its limit." (pp. 10-11)

Over half of Tise's book deals with the zealotry for liberty unleashed just when the Beards had whiffed the winds of Thermidor in 1789. To cover "the sweet summer of liberty," Tise summons to his text a disparate group of French, British and American radicals who are joined by their advanced opinions about human progress and the contributions that governmental reform might contribute to it. Some of the men and women like Thomas Paine, Thomas Cooper, Mary Wollstonecraft, Gilbert Imlay, Lafayette, Richard Price, Joseph Priestley and John Daly Burk actually knew each other and moved from country to country as they formed threads of a radical network while others are included because of their principled stands or because their biographies offer an opportunity to inventory the range of new liberties demanded.

Just how generous Tise's concept of liberty is can be measured by the attention he bestows upon Sally Franklin, Benjamin Franklin's daughter who squandered her father's estate. Defying his expressed wishes about gifts bequeathed to her, Sally earns Tise's admiration as a woman long dominated by a powerful father finally asserting herself. Women^Òs participation in the revolutionary era gets a more flattering depiction when he moves on to the novelist Susanna Rowson, Catherine the Great, and Catharine Macauley, who bring to his mind the formidable Mercy Otis Warren.

As these associations might suggest, Tise's storyline resembles nothing so much as a billiard ball rolling about the register of the age's lesser and greater luminaries, lighting up when it hits someone critical to the story of liberty or the retreat from it. Cameo reconstructions of the lives of Phyllis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano prepare the ground for consideration of the African-Americans' revolutionary experience and the beginnings of the antislavery movement, both leading up to the Haitian Revolution which closes Part I of *The American Counterrevolution*'s five parts.

Part Two, "World Revolution," begins with the college days of the impressive Yale class of '78 and the subsequent formation of the Hartford Wits. Partial to Joel Barlow, as one would expect, Tise follows him to Paris where he fatefully introduces Gilbert Imlay to Mary Wollstonecraft. The events of France's Reign of Terror are played out against the tragic unfolding of their affair while both of them write novels, and Barlow and Imlay promote American real estate. In Paris Tise also takes up the thread of insurrectionary activity in the closing years of the tumultuous 1790s on the part of Irish insurgents soliciting French help to rid them of British rule.

The theme of American women's liberty appears again in a chapter entitled "Citizenesses in the Land of Liberty" in which Tise reviews the experiences of some exceptional women, including the jilting of Elizabeth Graeme by William Franklin which returns the storyline to Benjamin Franklin about whom Tise knows an amazing amount. Drawing on the biographies of African-Americans touched by the flame of liberty, Tise concludes Part Two with an exploration of manumission, colonization and the ravages of revolution in St. Domingue.

"Annus Mirabilis I, 1793" enables Tise to integrate events in the United States with those in France, bringing to a close his description of the waxing of liberty. Much like a literary cenotaph, he concludes the first half of his study devoted to liberty^Òs expansion with a five-page listing: "Endings of Friends of Liberty in America" (pp. 290-294) to be repeated at the end of Part V "The Victory of Order" with another listing of "Other Endings in the Land of Order." (pp. 528-533) With Parts IV and V, Tise moves into his description, if not actually an argument, for Counterrevolution beginning with the story of how Edmund Burke became "the world^Òs preeminent friend of order." (p. 308)

As Tise's theme would indicate, "Annus Mirabilis I" called forth an "Annus Mirabilis II, 1798." In America, the sedition trials of the Federalists and the harassing of George Logan appear as grounds for considering 1798 "America^Òs Reign of Terror." Even Yale professors and Hartford^Òs wits have begun looking for safe ports "from the storms of change." (p. 340) Here Tise follows the careers of Josiah Meigs, Timothy Dwight, and Noah Webster whose sensibilities he links to those of Chateaubriand.

Jefferson becomes the Janus-like figure at the moment of the pendulum swing. An early and ardent friend of liberty, Jefferson becomes for Tise a prominent player in America^Òs Counterrevolution because his *Notes on the State of Virginia* expressed doubts about the capacities of America^Òs enslaved men and women. Finally we come to "The Victory of Order," commencing with the death of Mary Wollstonecraft as she gave birth to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. A signature vignette, Wollstonecraft's death receives the evocative detail that marks *The American Counterrevolution* throughout.

To conclude that *The American Counterrevolution* is an idiosyncratic work is to both compliment and criticize the work. Tise's authorial presence is omnipresent. His footnotes describe his research as a kind of personal adventure story in which friends came along at critical moments to supply him with pertinent books. The structure, as well, makes no concession to conventional histories. Tise does not argue, analyze or interpret; he narrates, implying that the events he has chosen to present are the necessary links in an uncontestable account.

But before we slip into the idea that there was an American Counterrevolution it seems important to reflect on the absence of significant violence after 1783 (the Shays, Fries and the Whiskey Rebellions notwithstanding), and even more remarkable the institutional stability as Articles of Confederation yielded to the U.S. Constitution and the Federalist ascendancy to its Jeffersonian opponents. No other modern revolution found its founders routinely take their turns as chief executive through the first fifty years of self-government, to be succeeded by a son and revolutionary war veteran.

Liberty too would bear some scrutiny. A strong case could be made for the continued expansion of liberty in the United States after 1783. The problem of course is that the beneficiaries of that liberty -- ordinary white men -- were often misogynist, racist and willing to be ruthless in expelling the indigenous native peoples from the land they wanted. Their greater scope of liberty shrunk or at least compromised that of other

Americans. Order seems an inadequate counterpoise to liberty in these circumstances.

I would argue that, rather than a Counterrevolution, Americans have engaged in an Endless Revolution as successive groups have come to recognize just how powerful were the lines from the Declaration of Independence that explained the colonists^Ò resort to arms to a candid world. But of course how they became powerful involves yet another story about a people grasping for unifying values as they willed themselves into nationhood.

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