review article by G. Matthew Adkins


The recent historiography of the French Revolution has re-introduced with a vengeance the complexities of social and political dynamics to historical analysis. Particularly since Timothy Tackett’s landmark work, Becoming a Revolutionary (1996), we see a trend in favour of historical contingency, circumstance, and experience — a reaction against the perceived excesses of postmodern analysis that focuses on the logics of political culture, discourse, and ideology.¹ Both Bailey Stone’s Reinterpreting the French Revolution: A Global-Historical Perspective and Paul Hanson’s The Jacobin Republic Under Fire: The Federalist Revolt in the French Revolution participate in this new methodological trend, despite their diametrically opposed perspectives on the Revolution.

Stone seeks to understand the origins, course, and end of the Revolution from what he terms a “Global-Historical Perspective.” That is to say, he argues the Revolution best makes sense in the context of the geopolitical exigencies of eighteenth-century statecraft and warfare among the European Powers. Although he does not reject a “dynamic interaction between foreign and domestic affairs,” in Stone’s view (reprising Theda Skocpol’s, and ultimately Tocqueville’s, thesis), the Revolution was less a break with the past than a continuation by new means.

of French statist needs and ambitions. Hanson argues the opposite. While he is convinced that “local and national conflicts were very much intertwined,” he believes the course and radicalization of the Revolution on the national level can be understood as the culmination of a political struggle over sovereignty fought at the local, municipal level and revealing deep-seated social and political antagonisms. In fact, the federalist revolt, in Hanson’s view, brought together local and national politics because the local struggle for political power became a national issue between the radical Montagnards and moderate Girondins. In short, Stone takes a “top-down” and Hanson a “bottom-up” view of the Revolution.

Despite their different perspectives, both Hanson and Stone assert that concrete political and social experiences, not discursive formations or ideology, drive the decisions and actions of historical agents. This is not to say Hanson and Stone ignore or brush off three decades of research. Hanson examines the importance of rhetoric and ideology in the articulation of political positions. For example, he highlights the language of disease the Jacobins employed to justify “curing” the nation of federalism through terror and oppression. Stone, likewise, seeks to “enlist insights from both the ‘social-revisionists’ and ‘political-cultural analysts’” in order to complicate his argument that the Revolution was part of a structural process redefining and perfecting French state power. Nevertheless, both Hanson and Stone are critical of the linguistic turn. Hanson wants to “look beyond the rhetoric” and understand the Revolution, and ultimately the Terror, as something more than the “product of ideology” — in fact as the result of real political and social conflict. Similarly, Stone sees the Revolution, and ultimately the Terror, as driven by the vagaries of war and the exigencies of state, “implicit not so much in the rhetoric and ideology of the times as in the paramount need of this proud nation to prevail, by whatever desperate means, in the sullied, scarred European world of the late eighteenth century.” The assumption that one can look beyond rhetoric and ideology, however, should perhaps be tempered by recognition of the ways in which rhetoric is self-reinforcing and capable of defining politics and ideologies through its very articulation. Lynn Hunt exhorted us to abandon the “metaphor of levels” twenty years ago, after all, to avoid deducing Revolutionary culture and politics from underlying social structures, conflicts, and identities — and, I might add to Hunt’s injunction, from raw, objective experiences.

Both Hanson and Stone re-introduce a “metaphor of levels,” although I think they do so with skill and alacrity. Despite certain philosophical problems inher-

---

2 Stone, Reinterpreting, 260. Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China (Cambridge, 1979), and Alexis de Tocqueville, L’Ancien régime et la révolution française (1856).
3 Hanson, Jacobin Republic, p. 11.
4 Stone, Reinterpreting, p. 9.
5 Hanson, Jacobin Republic, pp. 11, 12.
6 Stone, Reinterpreting, p. 12.
ent in their method, both provide interpretations of the Revolution that are fascinating and important, not least because their narratives enable us to comprehend the sheer drama of the event. It is certainly possible for discussions of the Revolution to become a little too rarified, and Hanson and Stone remind us that the hope and terror of the years 1789 to 1799 involved real people making life and death decisions.

Stone’s chronological approach to the Revolution in the context of eighteenth-century European war and diplomacy nicely presents the tension and contingency of political events. In Chapter One, Stone examines both the French state’s loss of face in European geopolitics, especially after the Seven Years’ War, and the almost single-minded desire of the nation’s political elite to restore French prestige in the continental theater. The need for real social, political, and economic reform to accommodate statist ambitions, and the inability of the monarchy to effect such reform, argues Stone, meant that “absolutism in France had to retreat — had, in the end, to sign its own death warrant.” For Stone, the “descent into revolution,” considered in Chapter Two, resulted from the monarchy’s pivotal failure to make the sociopolitical concessions necessary to support France’s geostrategic requirements. Authority then passed from the discredited monarchy into the hands of the National Assembly. In Chapter Three, we see the National Assembly undertake revolutionary domestic reforms to restructure and centralize administrative authority and the army, and so make France competitive again in European geopolitics. The reversal of French military victories in 1793 ultimately brought about the radical phase of the Revolution, Stone argues in Chapter Four. In Stone’s view, the conflict between the Girondins and the Montagnards, the federalist revolt, and the Terror took shape as the revolutionary government, particularly in the hands of the radical Jacobins, further centralized administrative authority in order to preserve the massive war effort. As Stone contends, “even during the Terror, when revolutionary ‘idealism’ or ‘ideology’ was supposedly at its peak in foreign as in domestic affairs, raison d’état maintained its hold over politicians’ minds.” The Thermidorian Reaction against Jacobin Terror in summer 1794 and the establishment of the moderate Directory in autumn 1795 occurred as the fortunes of war turned once again to France’s favor, eroding support for Jacobin violent excesses: “Robespierre may have wanted the Terror to last until democracy was securely founded; but ‘most people considered its usefulness over when the Allies were defeated.’” The continuing necessity to assert grand French military ambitions in the world, however, undermined the Directory’s finances and public support, finally leading to its dissolution in the military dictatorship of Napoleon.

9 Stone, Reinterpreting, p. 57.
10 Stone, Reinterpreting, p. 173.
Stone’s interpretation is convincing in its tidiness, but it almost seems a commonplace to note that even Revolutionary France had to play a fierce game of geopolitics with the other European powers. Stone’s focus, moreover, on the continuity of statist ambitions should not disregard the extent to which Revolutionary politics unleashed something entirely new. The Revolutionary Wars were not like those of the earlier eighteenth century in scale, purpose, or outcome. Although he promises an innovative “global-historical” interpretation of the Revolution, such as that attempted recently by Jeremy Whiteman in Reform, Revolution and French Global Policy, 1787-1791 (2003), Stone does not really go beyond a standard political-diplomatic narrative. Finally, Stone’s reliance on secondary, mostly English, sources is at times frustrating. How can his synthesis of the recent, and not so recent, literature also provide the basis for a re-interpretation?

Hanson, alternatively, bases his interpretation of the Federalist Revolt on extensive primary sources, both archival and published. The resulting work is highly useful in revealing the nature of social and political conflict in the rebel cities of Caen, Bordeaux, Lyon, and Marseilles, as well as the interaction of local and national politics. Hanson creates an almost cinematic narrative that begins at the end of the story with the trial of the Girondins in Paris in 1793 (Chapter One). Hanson focuses on the final letters of the Girondin leader, Pierre Vergniaud, an orator of such skill the Jacobins never allowed him to speak during his “trial.” Hanson then returns to the beginning to trace in six chapters the origins of the Montagnard-Girondin conflict, the context and response of the rebel cities, and the outcome of their revolt. The dramatic climax of the story is, of course, the siege of Lyon and the beginning of the Terror. Throughout, Hanson argues that the revolts can be understood as a contest over the location and exercise of sovereignty at the local, as well as national, level. For example, we learn in Chapter One, the Bordelais claimed that the proscription of the Girondins in Paris represented the “usurpation of national sovereignty, which legitimately rested in the National Convention.” We learn in Chapter Five, however, that the “Bordelais” who made such an assertion were in reality the members of the dominant political club, the Amis de la Liberte et de l’Egalite. The Amis represented the interests of the Bordeaux elite, whose leaders were the Girondin representatives in Paris, who were in conflict with the local Club National and its growing commitment to popular sovereignty. The reaction of the Amis to the events in Paris demonstrated their determination to defend their local prerogatives: “The apparent gross disregard of the Parisian crowd (egged on by Jacobin radicals) for both law and elected officials (especially those officials whom they, the Bordelais, had elected!) represented a threat not only to the unity of the republic but to the placid stability of political life in Bordeaux.” Such local politics in one way or another determined the reaction of each rebel city, Hanson argues,

13 Hanson, Jacobin Republic, pp. 21-22.
14 Ibid., pp. 130.
and ultimately doomed the rebellion because of its inability to generate widespread support. In fact, the revolt collapsed almost everywhere with little opposition, except in Lyon, where the violent conflict between Lyonnais elites and local Jacobins made the return of Jacobin control unthinkable. The rebels therefore committed themselves to a desperate “war of attrition,” and afterwards faced punishment at the hands of their enemies — the local Jacobins now supported by a national army.

Hanson’s reading of the federalist revolt as a national issue grounded in the complexities of municipal politics is convincing and well contextualized. As such, this book is an important contribution to our understanding of the French Revolution. Hanson’s assertion that the revolt was essentially a contest over the location and definition of sovereignty, however, does not seem to square with what appears in his presentation to be something like a class struggle. Neither the Girondins nor the Montagnards were ever entirely consistent in their invocations of “sovereignty,” which often appears to be a rhetoric disguising naked class interests. Such an interpretation certainly agrees with Hanson’s desire to “look beyond the rhetoric,” but I wonder if the Girondin-Montagnard conflict can be broken down so easily to objective class experiences. The Girondins’ desire for a “republic that rested more on the law than on popular sovereignty” and the Montagnard vision of a republic founded “on the will of the people,” brings to mind nothing so much as Keith Michael Baker’s ideological analysis of the struggle between the “discourse of justice” and “discourse of will.”

In the end, I think both Hanson and Stone’s return to political narrative complements the “linguistic turn,” but neither offers an alternative to it. I, for one, prefer a presentation that captures the drama of historical contingency and experience but does not reject a discursive analysis of ideology and political culture. It is, after all, the articulation of the possible that defines and gives meaning to political action.

University of Dayton

15 Ibid., p. 11.