

Hervé Leuwers, *La Révolution française*, Paris (Presses universitaires de France) 2020, X–390 p. (Quadrige Manuels), ISBN 978-2-13-082509-8, EUR 16,00.

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Paul Hanson, Indianapolis, IN

Hervé Leuwers is an established historian of the French Revolution, having previously published a half dozen books on the period, including two focusing on revolutionary justice, three biographies, and an earlier interpretive history surveying the period from the Revolution through the Empire. This volume has a somewhat narrower focus, beginning in 1789 and ending with the Consulate (1804). By this choice, Leuwers breaks with the majority of historians who have defined the Revolution chronologically as extending from 1789 to 1799.

What else makes this volume distinctive? First, while the organization of the volume is essentially chronological, this is not a narrative history of events. The emphasis is instead on the structural and institutional reforms made by successive revolutionary regimes that fundamentally changed French society. Leuwers also wishes to broaden both the chronological scope, as already noted by extending his analysis up to 1804, and the geographical scope in which the Revolution is customarily considered, by including substantial sections that address revolution in this period in other countries of Europe and in the West Indies, particularly Saint-Domingue (Haiti). In this geographical broadening, Leuwers harkens back to the »Atlantic Revolution« argument of Jacques Godechot and Robert R. Palmer, first put forward more than a half century ago, and generally dismissed by French historians for decades. (p. 26) Leuwers goes beyond Godechot and Palmer, however, by arguing that the relationship between these Atlantic revolutions was reciprocal, not just a matter of France exporting revolutionary ideas, and that revolutionary movements in countries such as Ireland, Belgium and Poland featured characteristics that made them distinctive from the Revolution in France in significant ways.

Leuwers also emphasizes throughout the book that the perceptions or interpretations of historians about key events in the Revolution often differ from those of contemporaries, and he reminds us that there was a multiplicity of experiences of the Revolution among those who lived through it. In regard to the first point, I would offer three examples. Leuwers observes that whereas historians tend to emphasize the repressive policies of the Terror, contemporaries would have seen them as one among many public safety measures adopted during the Year II (p. 192). He also challenges the degree to which historians have seen 9 Thermidor as a dramatic turning point, observing that the Revolutionary Tribunal did not disappear for more than a year thereafter, and



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that those responsible for the drafting of the Constitution of Year III were not the same men who led the coup against Robespierre (p. 248–251). Finally, Leuwers observes that contemporaries had mixed views about the years of the Consulate, some seeing them as the last gasp of the Republic, while others viewed them as the first act of the Empire, in contrast to most historians who see the Consulate chiefly as a Napoleonic regime (p. 307). Similarly, Leuwers divides the Directory regime into two halves: a first half in which deputies strove to honor and extend the ideals of 1789; and a second half dominated more by those who, in seeking to secure political order and stability, took measures that violated the constitution.

In regard to the multiplicity of experience, Leuwers points out in his section on the Constituent Assembly that political life was not confined to the National Assembly. It was taking shape in cafes, theatres, political clubs, electoral assemblies, departmental councils and section meetings all over France (p. 84). He makes reference further on to the diversity of what he calls »ego-documents«, principally letters and memoirs, that reveal the variety and range of revolutionary experiences (p. 113). I was struck by his observation that only 25% of Old Regime judges found posts in the revolutionary courts (p. 125). One wonders how many of those who did not find posts joined the ranks of the counterrevolution out of a sense of personal resentment.

The text is compact and clearly organized, divided into ten chapters of roughly 35 pages apiece. The chapters themselves are further divided into sections in the Table of Contents: Chapter VI-2-a, for example, is entitled »Construire une société fraternelle«. Cross-references to these chapter and section numbers are sprinkled throughout the volume, which should prove useful to students trying to make sense of the complicated history of the Revolution. Leuwers' prose is direct and concise throughout, and his analysis is consistently measured and judicious. Reviewers are expected to find something to quibble with, and in this regard, I would make two points. It seems odd in a discussion of the situation in Saint-Domingue in 1789-90 to find only a passing reference to Vincent Ogé, who played a key role in that period. Similarly, in his discussion of debates over the constitution in the spring of 1793, no mention is made of the draft proposed by Condorcet in February of that year. In a relatively short text, of course, one cannot include everything.

What, in the end, is the main contribution of this new history of the French Revolution? Here I will let Hervé Leuwers speak for himself, in a passage drawn from his Conclusion: »Il s'agit de réinsérer la Révolution dans un temps long qui court du milieu du XVIII^e siècle aux années qui précèdent 1848, de manière à relever de discrètes mais durables mutations de l'économie, de la société, de la démographie ou des sensibilités, qui ont souvent connu une impulsion décisive dans les années 1790« (p. 341). In that ambition he has succeeded admirably.



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