

Ariane Viktoria Fichtl, La Radicalisation de l'idéal républicain. Modèles antiques et la Révolution française, Paris (Classiques Garnier) 2020, 476 p. (L'Europe des Lumières, 69), ISBN 978-2-406-10381-3, EUR 49,00.

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It remains a puzzle that the cult of classical antiquity in late-18th-century France, regarded as key to an understanding of the Revolution by such contrasted titans of 19th-century thought as Benjamin Constant and Karl Marx, should have attracted the relatively scant attention that it has from modern historians. It has been nearly two generations since the appearance of the last major French treatments of the subject, Jacques Bouineau's »Les toges du pouvoir, ou la Révolution de droit antique« (1986) and Claude Mossé's »L'Antiquité dans la Révolution française« (1989) – to which might be added two crucial chapters from Wilfried Nippel's »Antike oder moderne Freiheit?« (2008). Within this surprisingly uncrowded field, Ariane Viktoria Fichtl has now offered us what looks to be the first truly comprehensive survey since that of Harold Parker, »The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolution«, which goes all the way back to 1937. Fichtl has the advantage, of course, of the large volume of work, adjacent to the subject in one way or another, that has appeared since Bouineau and Mossé. Much of it comes from the Anglosphere. In her introduction, Fichtl appeals to the Cambridge-school reconstruction of the history of republicanism, but also to Keith Baker's essays on the career of its »classical« variant, David Bell's analysis of the old-regime legal profession and French national identity, and Marisa Linton's »The Politics of Virtue in Eighteenth-Century France«. Not that French scholars have been idle in the meantime. In addition to Chantal Grell's two-volume »Le Dix-huitième siècle et l'antiquité en France« (1995), Fichtl cites the essays collected in »Républicanisme du droit naturel. Des humanistes aux révolutions des droits de l'homme et du citoyen« (2009), as well as Raymonde Monnier's »Républicanisme, patriotisme, et la Révolution française« (2005). In addition, the last two decades have seen a continual enrichment of the biographical literature on the central figures in Fichtl's account, Robespierre above all.

However, perhaps most important of all, for its contribution to Fichtl's analysis, is the work of a Cambridge outlier, Eric Nelson's »The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought« (2004). It is much to Fichtl's credit that she has grasped the fundamental importance of Nelson's book, which draws a sharp distinction, within the wider history of republicanism, between »Greek« and »Roman« outlooks, defined by contrasting attitudes toward civic equality and private property. Re-branded as »neo-Stoic« vs. »neo-Roman«, the distinction structures Fichtl's account of the cult of antiquity



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in the 18th century and revolutionary France – in effect, a gripping narrative, which unfolds through five sections. Her starting point is with a close examination of the pedagogical formation that the future leading revolutionaries received as *collégiens*: an equally profound initiation in both the »neo-Stoic« and the »neo-Roman« traditions, with Plutarch far and away the leading representative of the first, Cicero, Livy and Tacitus of the second, and Montesquieu, Mably, and Rousseau the key modern mediators of both.

The same duality dominates the leading models of »virtuous magistracy« that the *collégiens* took away with them, to which Fichtl turns next – on the one hand, Aristides and ostracism, on the other, the commanding example of Cicero, scourge of Catiline and Antony alike. In the third section, Fichtl follows her subjects into the Revolution itself, charting, in unparalleled depth, the rhetorical uses to which Danton, Brissot, Desmoulins, and Robespierre put their learning, in the Constituent Assembly, at the Jacobin Club, in the Legislative Assembly. If the »neo-Roman« tradition looked dominant at the start of the Revolution – an obsessive focus on the two Brutuses, Lucius Junius and Marcus Junius, particularly as glimpsed through the eyes of Voltaire and Montesquieu – the »neo-Stoic« tradition wasn't far behind, its moralism and anti-imperialism activated by the return of France to the European battlefield and the final decay of the constitutional monarchy. Fichtl's fourth section is indeed all-Greek, a fascinating account of the role that the Spartan and Athenian models of Greek »democracy« played in the Girondin-Jacobin showdown. »La Radicalisation de l'idéal républicain« then concludes with a staccato account, across four short chapters, of the Jacobin First Republic – taking *salus populi suprema lex esto* as its motto, entering into mortal combat with a crowd of Catilines at home and conspirators abroad, its key figure, Robespierre, loyal to Montesquieu in his recourse to terror and to religious regeneration alike, making a fatal bid to play the roles of both a modern Demosthenes and a modern Pisistratus.

It is safe to say that »La Radicalisation de l'idéal républicain« will set the agenda for all subsequent discussion of the cult of classical antiquity in the political and cultural history of the Revolution. No scholar has ever made such a thorough inventory and classification of the available evidence. What, then, of the problematic indicated in Fichtl's title, that of »radicalization«? It is true that Fichtl's choice of a conventional Thermidorian end-point for her narrative means that she stops short of the most fateful of all radical swerves during the Revolution, the mutation of Babouvism out of Jacobinism – as if the latter's decisive refusal of anything like an »agrarian law« brought an end to the connubium between the two republican traditions, sending Nelson's »Greeks« permanently off on their own. But Jacobinism was certainly »radical« enough, by comparison with all earlier episodes in the history of the »Atlantic republican tradition«. What explains the French exception? Benjamin Constant regarded the effort to restore »ancient liberty« in a modern setting as an aberration, a destructive episode of ideological fever, from which France mercifully recovered. In a famous essay, Keith Baker has argued something similar about Marat, Robespierre, and Saint-



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Just, describing their classical republicanism in pathological terms: »metastasis«, »moralization«, »messianism«. Marx, on the other hand, approached the topic in a more classical fashion: »the first time as tragedy ... « The antique masks donned by the Jacobins were an illusion, he wrote in »The Eighteenth Brumaire«, but one necessary for accomplishing the tasks of the Revolution: »But unheroic as bourgeois society is, it nevertheless took heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war, and battle of peoples to bring it into being. And in the classically austere traditions of the Roman Republic its gladiators found the ideals and the art forms, the self-deception that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles and to keep their enthusiasm on the high plane of the great historical tragedy«. On the whole, Fichtl's account seems closer to the spirit of Marx – and to Marisa Linton's »Politics of Virtue and Choosing Terror« – than to that of Constant and Baker. But she is circumspect, perhaps leaving a grand explanatory scheme for another occasion. In any case, the instruction of »La Radicalisation de l'idéal républicain« does not end with Fichtl's narrative. It is followed by a nearly 200-page »Dictionnaire des références antiques, utilisées dans les débats parlementaires pendant la Révolution française«, its entries covering an astonishing range of figures and ideas – one more reason for welcoming this book as a precious resource for the study of the politics and culture of the French Revolution. The revolutionary cult of antiquity will never look quite the same again.

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