

Jon Elster, France before 1789. The Unraveling of an Absolutist Regime, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 2020, XII–264 p., 4 fig., 2 tabl., 1 map, ISBN 978-0-691-14981-3, GBP 34,00.

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The phrase »before 1789« has a special resonance for French historians. That date continues to exercise a teleological pull, such that all manner of features of French life in the 18th century tend to get enlisted as contributory causes of the breakdown of the old regime. If the emergence of publics, government criticism, reform, economic crisis, technological advances, calls for press freedom, increasing luxury or social flux had alone sufficed to create the conditions for revolution, though, the presence of these factors should have caused revolutions in a great many 18th-century European countries. The fact that this did not occur throws the underlying unease of historians into sharper relief: what signs might herald such a societal collapse, such a sudden rupture of an older order? Which tensions might contemporaries have resolved to avert such an outcome? The counterfactual nature of Revolutionary historiography contributes to the unsettling open-endedness of the event itself; historians continue to debate it from multiple perspectives, even 230 years later. As François Furet famously stated, »l'histoire de la Révolution a pour fonction sociale d'entretenir ce récit des origines«¹. Jon Elster's new book comes from the vantagepoint of a political philosopher, one of several different groups of scholars who contend over the meaning of the Revolution of 1789. It is informed by transnational comparisons with the situation in America before 1787, although that is to be discussed in a companion work yet to appear.

From a historian's perspective, Elster's book offers at once interesting avenues for exploration, and also a framework and structuring assumptions that at once stand out as problematic. He asserts that his analysis is informed by a combination of history and psychology as the two »main pillars of the social sciences« (p. X). However, neither of these fields is approached from the standpoint of a disciplinary specialist, and this makes the structure of the book hard to follow, as each chapter shifts around between different themes that seem at times only superficially connected by »emotions«, including anger, contempt, shame, self-love and fear. Elster is also fond of schematic representations of the relationships between cause and effect, or schematic classifications of features of old regime society that usually divide them into dyadic oppositions, such as »top-down« versus »bottom-up«, or »horizontal« versus »vertical«. For the most part, historian



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¹ François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, Paris 1978, p. 3.

readers might allow these as methodological priorities stemming from the different disciplinary perspective Elster has, and to his credit, he has listened hard to leading historians and taken on board their comments. Still there are problems that arise from his method, which, rooted as they are in his distance from the field of history, mean that his political-scientific priorities create significant difficulties for his interpretations.

The most salient of these is Elster's selective use of both historical studies of the period and primary sources. He routinely treats English commentaries by such as John Locke, David Hume or Edmund Burke as transparent descriptions of France. He can be cavalier, too, when it comes to historians' obsession with dates: in spite of his definition of the old regime as the period from 1661 to 1789, a great many examples he invokes actually come from before these dates. At one point, to support an argument that old regime France was at war more years than it was at peace, he has to extend his timeline back to 1632 to make the claim fit the facts, as well as neglect the fact that France only entered the war of American independence in 1778, not in 1776 (p. 171). But far more striking for historians of this period today than these lesser idiosyncrasies is the effect upon Elster's interpretation of his decision to ignore the greater part of cultural history. Where a historian informed by the work of Adamson, Duindam and others on court culture might today read descriptions of the machinations of courtiers and the function of lavish display as accounts of »structures of power«, termed by Apostolidès the »king-machine«, Elster finds the play of individual personalities and the need of kings to bolster their »amour-propre« (e.g. p. 149)². He is fond of this expression, using it also to characterise the corporate behaviour of *parlements* and nobles, apparently not recognising how central corporatism was to social status, cohesion and financial self-protection in the old regime; the work of Gail Bossenga finds no place in his bibliography. Rather, to account for such self-protective measures, he appeals again to »emotions«. The examples he selects to explain the structure of old regime French society are too numerous to address here, but in all of them there is a similar element of misprision, driven by the focus on »psychology«, by which he often seems to mean »character«, and »emotion« as historical causes. Yet neither of these complex terms is treated as a historical construct in its own right. Nor does he examine how interlocutors or audiences might have interpreted the quotations he uses, or comment on the nature and audience of the sources used – issues that are fundamental to today's historical methodology.

² Jean-Marie Apostolidès, *Le Roi-machine: spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV*, Paris 1981; John Adamson, *The Princely Courts of Europe: Ritual, Politics and Culture under the Ancien Régime, 1500–1750*, London 2000; Jeroen Frans Jozef Duindam, *Dynasties: A Global History of Power, 1300–1800*, Cambridge 2016.



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One of the most noticeable differences between this political-scientific approach and where historians would nowadays pitch their explanatory tents is, then, that in political science both historicism and the anthropological turn have seemingly not been assimilated. There is no sense, throughout the volume, that it might not be advisable to bring 19th-century standards of government such as the emphasis on transparency, bureaucratic efficiency, and the critique of nepotism and venalism, to bear upon »politics« in the 18th century. Elster does describe these practices in considerable detail, but there is constantly a critical tone; their role as structural features of the business of politics in their own right is not fully grasped or explained. Tendencies for the argument to travel in this direction are usually cut short. This means that insofar as this book offers an account of the causes of »the unraveling of an absolutist regime«, it is one structured by hindsight and which, accordingly, does little to focus attention upon the changes apparent in French governance towards the end of the century. Louis XV and his successor differed over such issues as the place of the *parlements*, free trade, transparency, reform, government accountability and public opinion. Louis XVI is comparable in these respects to Frederick II of Prussia's self-description as »servant of the public« or Joseph II of Austria's quest to be viewed as a *philosophe*. Such changes, however, are invisible in Elster's account. The preoccupation with evaluating the success or failure of fiscal reform is likewise entirely couched in the terminology of 19th-century classical economic theory, even though there was no such thing as »the economy« before the 1830s. Elster is right that closer scrutiny of the cumbersome French taxation system and how revolutionary changes affected it is very much needed, not least as a comparison with the much nimbler and more effective system installed in Britain with the reform of customs and excise in the 18th century. To that end, Chapter 5 is the most useful in its fairly extensive discussion of types of taxation in the old regime. Throughout the volume as a whole, however, there is a lack of engagement even with economic history; for example, no study of physiocracy more recent than 1934 is cited in it. Writing on the »moral contract« by E. P. Thompson and Louise Tilly in the 1970s offers a model which would have explained the dynamic both of food riots and of royal interventions in the grain trade far more usefully than an appeal to emotions (p. 21–22, 67)³. Instead, to account for riot behaviour, Elster searches for »prime movers« who might be »saints, heroes, or just slightly mad«. In buying into Tocqueville's interpretation of rioters as irrational, he sides with an interpretation whose roots lay in liberal efforts to close down direct democracy of the sort favoured by those to their political left⁴.

³ Louise A. Tilly, *The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict in France*, in: *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971), p. 23–57; E. P. Thompson, *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*, in: *Past and Present* 50 (1971), p. 71–136.

⁴ Mary Ashburn Miller has shown how, for example, the Mountain integrated acts of public violence into an account of »the public« as a natural force that could cleanse corruption from the political sphere and



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In the end, it is difficult to see which readership might make best use of Elster's study. As an overview of old regime France, it does not supersede existing studies by Jones, Beik, Collins and others; their texts remain the ones to which, one would hope, even student political scientists might be directed to learn about the theory of absolutism in France⁵. As a contribution to studies on the old regime, it is unlikely to challenge existing overviews, such as William Doyle's edited volume⁶.

restore it to health (A Natural History of Revolution: Violence and Nature in the French Revolutionary Imagination, 1789–1794, Ithaca, NY 2011).

⁵ Colin Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon*, London 2003; William Beik, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France*, Cambridge 2009; James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 2nd edition, Cambridge 2009.

⁶ William Doyle (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ancien Régime*, Oxford 2014.



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