Étude critique — Review Essay

Harvey Chisick*

Jack R. Censer and Jeremy D. Popkin, eds. — *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. Pp. xiii, 247.

For a collective work, this one is unusually uniform, and its quality uniformly high. Jack Censer, Nina Rattner Gelbart, Carroll Joynes and Jeremy Popkin offer detailed analyses of three Old Regime papers, while an introductory essay by Censer and Popkin puts the project into perspective. Keith Michael Baker's concluding essay pulls together many of the themes in the preceding pieces and offers a careful analysis of the notion of public opinion and its political importance in the last decades of the Old Regime.

Gelbart's fascinating essay treats the *Journal des Dames*, its three female editors, their policies, ideas, collaborators and their relations with the authorities. The *Journal des Dames* was published in Paris from 1759, but did not receive a *privilège* until 1775, so that until that time, it was very much subjected to the discretion of the government and its censors. The paper's first female editor was Madame de Beaumer, a protestant with Dutch connections, likely a freemason, and an ardent spokesperson for women's rights. She is a figure who might well have stepped out of the pages of Margaret Jacob's *Radical Enlightenment*; a colourful personality who sometimes disguised herself as a man and carried a sword. Madame de Beaumer's distaste for war, her sympathy for the poor, her enthusiastic advocacy of women's rights and the wider social reforms she expected to follow resulted in the authorities closing her paper twice.

In 1763, she sold the paper to Madame de Maisonneuve, who, while wealthy and well connected, shared many of her predecessor's ideas, but expressed them with restraint. Madame de Maisonneuve worked closely with Mathon de la Cour, a lawyer from Lyons, who had failed to achieve literary success in Paris. After a period of collaboration, Mathon became and remained responsible for the paper until 1769, when Maupeou had it closed. It did not reappear until 1774, when the Baronne de Prinzen, later Madame de Montanclos, a *protégée* of Marie Antoinette, received permission to resume publication. Madame de Montanclos, who had a number of children, made a rousseauist view of motherhood, sympathy for the parlements and advocacy of women's rights key features of the journal. She collaborated with a number of male editors, most notably L.S. Mercier, to whom she eventually sold the paper for a nominal sum. Under Mercier, the *Journal des Dames* became "overtly *frondeur*" (72). Though the paper "did not succeed as a vehicle of feminist reform, it became a weapon in the more general journalistic protest against an intransigent, repressive regime" (74). Gelbart's account draws on an impressive array of archival sources, which she also uses to document the relations of the paper with the authorities.

* Department of General History, University of Haifa.

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The two other journals studied were published outside France, but admitted into the country under certain conditions. They were thus less subjected to immediate government control than periodicals published within the country, but were far from independent. Popkin examines the role of the *Gazette de Leyde* in French politics during the reign of Louis XVI, calling it "the major international newspaper of record" from the 1750's to the outbreak of the Revolution, and ascribing to it "an important role in French domestic politics" (77).

The editors of the paper during the period under consideration, Etienne Luzac and his nephew Jean, were Huguenots who had settled in Holland. They used the paper to support "movements for liberty, wherever they might appear" (79). Though progressive, the *Gazette de Leyde* opposed radicalism and popular violence. In France, the paper consistently supported the parlements against the Crown, but also lent support to certain ministers, such as Vergennes and Necker. During the pre-revolutionary crisis, the *Gazette de Leyde* called for the convocation of the Estate General, supported the Dauphiné program, abandoned the parlements when they refused to agree to the doubling of the Third, and ultimately supported the liberal nobles and the current of opinion that crystallized around the *monarchiens*. The paper's enthusiasm for liberty was exceeded only by its horror of popular violence (114, 116, 120, 122, 126). Popkin argues that the *Gazette de Leyde* contributed significantly to "undermining the absolutist institutions of the Bourbon monarchy" (128) and that "it had done much to expose the weaknesses of the old order and set the Revolution in motion" (76).

It is unclear why Carroll Joynes's contribution, which treats the same paper during the crisis arising from the refusal of sacraments from 1750 to 1757, follows rather than precedes Popkin's. In any case, Joynes carefully explains how coercive measure of the episcopacy directed against jansenists was politicized and became the focus of heated debate for half a decade. When the church hierarchy directed that receipts be issued to the faifthful on attending confession, and then required that these receipts be produced before the last rites were administered in order to deprive jansenists of this sacrament, the parlements, traditional allies of the jansenists, intervened. Joynes follows the course of the debate between these two parties, the unsuccessful attempt of the Crown to intervene in favour of the Church, and the resolution of the affair. The *Gazette de Leyde*'s reporting of this issue clearly favoured the magistrates, as one might have expected from a journal edited by Huguenots. For Joynes, the significance of this episode is largely independent of its content. It consists in helping extend the importance of public opinion and in changing the quality of journalism. He maintains that "the *Gazette*'s coverage of events signaled the appearance of a new kind of reporting — detailed, analytic and unabashedly partisan —, a prodrome of the kind of journalism that emerged fully during the Revolution" (141). He also sees in the way the paper presented "issues concerning the nature of sovereign authority as topics for public debate" the signs of "a transformation in accepted forms of political practice ... which posed a threat to the stability of the state" (158). Assuming that such changes indeed occured, they would have been generated as an unintented consequence of a confrontation over a religious issue.

Like the *Gazette de Leyde*, the *Courrier d'Avignon* was devoted primarily to current events and was situated outside the borders of France. Jack Censer points out that despite being located in the papal enclave of Avignon, the French government "dictated the terms of the paper's operation" (172). Yet, this did not mean that the government closely controlled the paper's content. On the one hand, "the administration's interest in appealing to public opinion tied its hands" (174). On the other, the paper was oriented to profit and sought to avoid offending either the authorities or its public.

Censer devotes the bulk of his article to an examination of the *Courrier*'s reporting of British politics during the American Revolution. This coverage, which originated with correspondents abroad, primarily in England, took the form of disjointed dispatches. Censer argues that, taken as a whole, these highly specific reports reflect a coherent set of assumptions. The principal elements of the English political structure were seen to be the king, his ministers, parliament and the people. The operation of this structure is explained in terms of a "confrontational model" (181-182). For the entire period covered, the *Courrier d'Avignon* carried very little direct criticism of the king, though it did criticize ministers. After supporting the king enthusiastically in 1773, the paper became more sympathetic to the opposition from 1774 to 1778, but then, shifted back to support government policy for the next two years. So open was the *Courrier d'Avignon* in its support to Britain against France's American ally that Censer explains its criticism in terms of "the indifference of the French administration towards shaping foreign news" (193). From 1780 to 1783, however, the paper shifted its ground to favour the opposition and oppose the ministry. But throughout the period 1773-1783, "the *Courrier d'Avignon* assumed that the conflict was central to the English system" (197). Censer also compares the *Courrier d'Avignon*'s coverage of British politics during this period with that of the *Gazette de France*, the *Gazette de Leyde* and the *Courrier du Bas Rhin*, and finds it broadly representative.

In the concluding essay of the collection, Keith Baker builds on the preceding papers and offers an argument for the importance of the public opinion in the politics of the last decades of the Old Regime. He is particularly concerned with "the process by which revolutionary political practices were invented within the context of an absolute monarchy" (204). The key to this process is what Baker calls a "politics of contestation", which, he maintains, "became an increasingly marked feature of French public life" after 1750 (208). The contemporary model of a politics of contestation was England, and Baker follows the debate on English politics in France through a wide range of writers (Forbonnais, Dubois de Launay, Prost de Royer, Linguet) to show their recognition of, and often reservations about, the element of contestation they discerned in British politics.

The politics of contestation posed a challenge to royal absolutism, and it did so in part by appealing to public opinion as a principle of authority (213). Baker regards the social composition of the public as unimportant and warns against treating it "simply in sociological terms" (212). It took shape and derived its importance "as a political or ideological construct rather than as a discrete sociological function" (213). Public opinion thus became a higher court of appeal, and the public "the abstract source of legitimacy in a transformed political culture" (231). Baker concludes his thought-provoking essay with an analysis of the two fullest contemporary treatments of public opinion, those of the financier and minister Necker and of the political theorist Jacques Peuchet. They argue, according to Baker, that public opinion was the key to an open politics, equidistant from the extremes of despotism and excessive liberty, and further, by offering the basis for consensus, a possible escape from the politics of contestation.

The unifying thesis of this collection is that during the last decades of the Old Regime, the periodical press helped create public opinion and by openly criticizing or contesting the policies, and even the authority of the absolute monarchy, contributed to destabilizing the Old Regime and preparing the way for the Revolution (x, 11-12, 117, 198, 204). These essays, then, follow Furet and other scholars in emphasizing political and ideological influences in accounting for the origin and character of the Revolution.

The research presented in this volume covers a wide range of sources and has been carefully and competently carried out. I wonder, however, whether it can bear the weight of interpretation placed on it. To a considerable degree, the answer to this question depends on whether we accept the use of a number of key terms such as "absolutism", "the Revolution" and "public opinion".

Royal absolutism is here taken as a powerful, implicity backward-looking and repressive force, hostile to liberty, free expression, constitutionalism and representative of independent legal institutions; it is treated rather abstractly. The theory of absolutism is said to have "depended on the view of the monarch as the only public person" (209). Was that extreme formulation ever taken seriously? Did anyone in the eighteenth century believe the pronouncements of parlements, provincial estates or the general assembly of the clergy to have a merely "private" significance?

The history of the French monarchy over the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries was one of the unremitting struggle, principally against the aristocracy and the sovereign courts. During the seventeenth century, despite the regency and the Fronde, it was ascendant. After 1715, its fortunes were compromised. But in the eighteenth century, no less than in the seventeenth, the Crown stood for movement and reform. To be sure, royal power lent its authority to a coercive church hierarchy and the parlements intervened on behalf of those threatened. But having gone into opposition, the parlements continued to oppose the most basic and necessary fiscal reforms. They were supported by a press that represented less the "public" than the magistrates of the sovereign courts, who sought to appeal to and to influence the public. Can their arguments be taken at face value? It is worth recalling that Voltaire saw the Crown as the chief agent of reform and portrayed French absolutism as constitutional rather than arbitrary (Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet As Realist*, Princeton, 1959, chaps. 2, 4). For other *philosophes*, too, their age was one of enlightened absolutism, and the Crown, the chief hope for rationalization and improvement. As for a politics of contestation being new to the last decades of the Old Regime, it is hard to conceive of any politics — distinct from administration — that does not involve contestation. The Fronde, though an extreme case, is one in which the Crown and its ministers overcame the threat to royal authority.

There is also a difficulty in speaking of the "French Revolution" without qualification. The degree to which one can justify the claim that the political journalism of the Old Regime contributed to precipitating "the Revolution" depends on just what one means by this term. The views of only one journal were examined during the pre-revolutionary crisis. This was the *Gazette de Leyde*, which, having supported the parlements, adopted the position of the liberal nobility (124), adhered to the program of the *monarchiens* and expressed admiration for their leader, Mounier (116, 119, 123, 127). The program of the *monarchiens* called for a constitutional monarchy and a regular bicameral assembly; it brings to mind the English settlement of 1688. Now, such an outcome would certainly have been a significant measure of reform or even a revolution. But if the French Revolution had been arrested and stabilized in 1789, it probably would not have aroused more interest and controversy than the Glorious Revolution. Both the *Gazette de Leyde* and the *Courrier d'Avignon* regarded the people with suspicion and popular violence with horror (114, 116, 120, 199). Take away the *sans-culottes*, their pikes, the *journées* they made and the alliance between *sections* and Assembly, the result is something other than what we know as the French Revolution. To say that the *Gazette de Leyde*, and by extension most of the political press of the Old Regime, helped bring about "the Revolution" may be acceptable. But

it is surely worth noting that it did not want or expect things to develop beyond the stage reached by the summer of 1789.

Implicit in most of the essays in the volume, but central to Keith Baker's, is the importance of public opinion as a new force in the politics of the years from mid-century to 1789 (130, 213, 231). One wonders, however, just how new public opinion was a political force in France. Richelieu had a stable of hired pamphleteers and he further saw the *Gazette de France* as a vehicle of government propaganda. It is unlikely that more than 5,000 pamphlets would have been produced during the Fronde if someone did not think that the opinion of the public — however defined — would not be influenced by them. And it is hardly likely that Louis XIV would have shown concern for Dutch gazettes if public opinion was not a functional category in the political vocabulary of the time. In short, it seems that public opinion had been a recognized, if ill-defined, force in French politics long before 1750.

There is also the function ascribed to public opinion as "the abstract source of legitimacy in a transformed political culture" (231). Did it have this function and this power? Baker gives a close and accurate reading of a wide range of thinkers, writers and administrators, and concludes that it did. But ought we to take the evaluation of the importance and significance of public opinion from intellectuals (or politicians appealing to the public through their writings) at face value? Is there not an element of self-importance — and self-delusion — in authors who explicitly regarded themselves as makers and masters of the public relations, asserting the power and importance of that opinion? In an age in which advertising is a major industry and political success primarily a matter of public relations, one looks upon public opinion as something to be manipulated. It may be sovereign, but the sovereign can be imposed upon. Indeed, this is precisely the function of opinion makers. Robert Darnton has shown that the Crown was using pensions amounting to more than 250,000 *livres* to reward and control writers while, at the same time, dispersing various sinecures and official positions to the same end (*The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, Harvard, 1982, pp. 7-11). The government by no means abdicated its sovereignty to the public. Rather, it lost the battle for public opinion. It seems, then, that public opinion was regarded as a new source of authority by writers and theoreticians who were themselves without power, but as a matter of administrative and police supervision by government.

There is, finally, the matter of the social basis of public opinion at the end of the Old Regime. In the introduction, we are told that "the audience for periodicals was essentially drawn from the educated bourgeoisie and the aristocracy" (21); that Raymond Birn has estimated the size of this reading public at between 30,000 and 50,000 (21-22) or about 0.2 percent of the total population of France during the 1780's. The readers of the *Gazette de Leyde* were from "a mixed elite of aristocrats and wealthy bourgeois" (88), while the subscribers to the *Courrier d'Avignon* were "well to do, whether noble or common" (172), and "probably similar to other elite readers" (175). Baker says of the "public" that "sociologically, the nature of this entity remained ill-defined" (231), but he shows little inclination to define it more precisely, his principal interest being its political function.

If one were interested in the social composition of the readership of the periodical press, studies are available that provide a closer analysis. Jeremy Popkin's treatment of the subject in chapter 3 of *The Right Wing Press in France, 1792-1800*, Chapel Hill, 1980, is probably the fullest and best to date, while Daniel Mornet's short article, "L'intérêt historique des journaux littéraires et la diffusion du *Mercure de France*" in the *Bulletin de la société d'histoire moderne*, n° 22, April 1910, is still relevant, as in Hugh Gough's

recent treatment of the *Journal de la Montagne* and its subscribers in *Actes du Colloque Girondins et Montagnards*, Paris, 1980. But the contributors to this collection do not care to pursue the subject. Nor did the many authors who wrote on public opinion at the end of the Old Regime.

It is unlikely that this omission was fortuitous. Baker is surely right in arguing that the intellectuals of the later eighteenth century saw public opinion as a new principle of authority. But the legitimacy of this principle depended in part on its universality. If the "public" was tacitly understood to mean the "people" or the "nation", then, its opinion would have had general validity. If, on the other hand, the public was recognized as consisting of the only certain social *strata* representing certain institutions or speaking for certain economic interests, then, the generality and validity of this new principle of authority would have been compromised. Politically, then, it was sound strategy for intellectuals without power to speak only in general and elevated terms of the public and its views. Certainly, they had no intention of canvassing the opinions of servants, peasants and artisans on matters of state, nor had they any intention of enfranchising them. *See* Harry Payne, *The Philosophes and the People*, New Haven, 1976.

Today, we are aware that the public to which serious periodicals and pamphlets were directed was a very small one. Whether it consisted of 0.2 percent, 2 percent or 20 percent of the population, it remains a small minority. Knowing more about the sociological composition, professional makeup and institutional affiliations of this minority — and active politics is almost always the affairs of minorities — seems desirable in order to better understand the politiccs of the last decades of the Old Regime and the early phase of the Revolution.

With this observation, we return to the point from which the contributors to *Press and Politics* began, namely, a dissatisfaction with the classic or social interpretation of the French Revolution. Personally, I have great respect for the work of Georges Lefebvre, Albert Soboul and others who have written in this tradition. However, I recognize that there are difficulties involved in the classical approach. But if we are to advance in our understanding of the past, it would be desirable to avoid a confrontational model of scholarship in which one school opposes the other, and for each to draw on the strengths and insights of the other. I do not think that the political interpretation of the Revolution gains by ignoring the links between society and politics.

Whether or not one finds the conceptual framework of *Press and Politics* useful, one cannot but respect the sound and careful scholarship of each of the contributions. Taken collectively, they contribute significantly to our knowledge of the press at the end of the Old Regime and raise important questions about the politics of the period.