

See attached comments,

Eric V. Snow HST 815 Dr. LoRomer October 9, 1992 Review of Lynn Hunt

Sometimes, books will turn out to be curious hybrids. Lynn Hunt's Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution certainly qualifies. The first half of it is ^{historical} an anthropological analysis of the symbols of the French Revolution, and the second is dominated by the statistical methods of the social sciences--in this case, political science--in order to analyze the election returns and the social backgrounds of the officials of the First Republic. As a result, this book has a number of fruitful insights ^{on} seemingly disparate aspects of the French Revolution through using two methods only fairly recently employed by historians in their work: historical anthropology and the statistical approach of the social sciences.

Hunt argues in the first part of her book that the French Revolutionaries, being politically inexperienced and not fully know what kind of new society they wanted, worked out only gradually what discourse (words and rhetoric) and political symbols would be correct for the newborn republic (p. 32-33, 26). In the process of so doing, the French revolutionaries invented much of modern politics, she maintains: the concept ^{of} ideology, politics being seen as an arena of competing ideologies, propaganda used to influenced the masses politically, the mass politics of the Jacobin clubs, which sought popular participation in the political process, and the creation of the first secular police state by Napoleon (p. 2-3). Although this is a valuable insight, it may go too far in ignoring the development of the two party systems of Britain, and (especially) the United States in this very time period (the 1790's). "Jacksonian Democracy", with its mass political participation, would have come to the U.S. without the French Revolution leading the way when all things are considered.

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What is being defined is not Politics.

A valuable insight of Hunt's concerns the educational or propagandistic, if you wish, effects of the revolutionary discourse and symbols (such as the Tricolor, the goddess of Liberty "Marianne," Hercules, Liberty trees, cockades, etc.) to help keep the idea of a republic alive during future periods of despotic or monarchical rule: "Without them, there would have been no collective memory

of republicanism and no tradition of revolution" (p. 86). With these symbols, the revolutionaries not only found a way to represent their political views, the found also a way to bring their social ideals actually into being, such as with clothing (p. 82-83; compare p. 53-54). (At least, so far as it was hoped). Such a view is critical of Marxism, insofar as she sees politics as not just reflecting class differences, power, or wealth, but the power of symbols and the ideologies they represent to transform the body politic itself (see p. 12), especially through various propagandistic methods (p. 69-70). As she sees it, in part the superstructure can transform the base. Her mistake may be to over-emphasize the influence symbols can have without the underlying social realities empowering, transforming, or impeding their use: "Political symbols and rituals were not metaphors of power; they were the (not a--EVS) means of ends and power itself" (p. 54).

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The second part of her book, much like the article on the failure of the directory she co-authored with David Lansky and Paul Hanson, is largely an excursion into political science and psephology. In the article, the authors argue the collapse of the Directory in 1799 was due to its refusal to accept the voice of mass, popular politics and its political parties, the refusal to establish its own centrist party due to its condemnation of faction in the name of the general will, and through the rise of inexperienced parliamentarians not fully loyal to the Republic (H.L.H., p. 736-737, 756-759). As for Hunt's book, she describes the differing make up socially of the French departments and how this affected the parties they voted for. Departments that tended to vote Royalist and/or rightist tended to be richer, more literate, more stable, and closer to Paris than the leftist, Jacobin departments (p. 137). Many times, the general political allegiances of a department of the 1790s has persisted deep into even the twentieth (!) century (p. 133-134).

Hence, by using methods taken from cultural anthropology and political science and applying them to historiography, Lynn Hunt's work has come up with some ingenious insights, even as it goes too far sometimes in some of its conclusions.