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Jill Maciak Walshaw, *A Show of Hands for the Republic: Opinion, Information and Repression in Eighteenth Century Rural France*. Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014. xiv + 308 pp. Figures, tables, notes, bibliography and index. \$99/£65 (cl). ISBN 978-1-58046-479-6.

Review by Noelle Plack, Newman University, United Kingdom.

What did rural people think about the changes wrought by the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799? How did they receive, interpret and react to the tremendous number of legislative acts passed by successive representative bodies over the decade? These questions have interested historians of the French countryside for generations. Countless books, articles and chapters have been written exploring the wide variety of rural reactions to the Revolution, the impact on the countryside, and changes to agricultural practices. Jill Maciak Walshaw's book builds on this heritage but offers a new angle on the lives of country dwellers during the late eighteenth century. She is interested in the interconnected nexus of oral culture, communication, political opinion, and repression. The book "seeks to uncover instances in which rural people voiced political opinions both in the Ancien Régime and during the French Revolution and to examine the changing perception of that political voice by different levels of authority from monarchy through the early nineteenth century" (p. 4). These verbal outbursts against the state are then used to unpack and illuminate the rural political experience of and reaction to the Revolution, giving resonance to "individuals who would otherwise remain voiceless" (p. 6). Walshaw chooses to refer to these people as "villagers," a category that excludes the rural elite, but includes peasant landowners, agricultural laborers, and rural artisans, as well as inn and tavern keepers.

The author has read extensively, and her grasp of a vast and wide-ranging literature is impressive. She cleverly juxtaposes the book against two significant historiographical debates. First, the "politicization" debate is explored. The timing and process by which people living the countryside became politicized is a long-standing question in French history, often beginning with Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen*, a work later challenged and revised by Maurice Agulhon, Ted Margadant, John Merriman and Peter McPhee.[1] It is original and bold of Walshaw to apply these questions surrounding politicization to the French Revolution, as they have been normally focused on the mid to late nineteenth century. The second debate with which the book engages is around the development of "the public sphere." The notion of a popular or plebian public sphere, which was largely absent in Habermas' original work, has been taken up by more recent scholars and proved an important concept for gauging popular political opinions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the "bourgeois" public sphere relied on the spread of print culture, the popular variant was shaped by oral transmission and visual culture. Although Walshaw's discussion of this topic is insightful and stimulating, it is surprising that she did not include the influential work of James Brophy on the Rhineland, which investigates the forms and sites of culture that facilitated political communication.[2] There is much overlap as songs, public spaces and festivals are all evidenced as indicative of popular political opinion.

Walshaw's own definition of what constituted rural political activity in eighteenth-century France is one of the areas where the book is most compelling. First, "local" must be included within any definition of "political." Villagers participated actively in communal self-government which both pre- and post-dated the 1790s. There is and always has been a symbiotic relationship between local and national affairs. The exposure of villagers to local politics provided them with the experience, language (and confidence?) to engage with national political issues. Second, popular politics must be

observed and analyzed on its own terms. Walshaw rightly notes that much of the scholarship on nineteenth-century rural politics identifies politicization with a vote for the Left. It may be a difficult thing for some historians of the Revolution to swallow, but support for the monarchy, religion or Bonaparte must no longer be seen as “backward” or “uniformed,” but as a viable political choice. Rural actors were no less political because their agenda may have been traditional or conservative. Finally, political acculturation was not abrupt and unidirectional from Paris outward, but gradual and reciprocal. The focus must be on rural communities themselves, not vis-à-vis the outside world. The author implores us to “return complexity and originality to the picture of rural political activity, (and thus) the point at which rural society becomes infused with urban politics becomes immaterial” (p. 13).

The organization of the book is logical and loosely chronological. Chapters one and two set the scene in the Ancien Régime covering well-worn themes in French rural history. These opening chapters are largely historiographical discussions of key issues such as literacy rates, local dialects, rural revolts and rebellions, the criminal justice system, official monitoring of political opinions, and elite views of the peasantry. The first substantial archival evidence is presented in chapter three. This chapter concerns the early years of the French Revolution and contains some of the most convincing analysis in the book. There is a particularly strong section on communication networks, where we learn that very few new roads were built during the revolutionary decade, but that real improvement to rural communication was the amelioration of the postal service with reduced delivery times. Walshaw underscores “the importance of reliable postal delivery to the success of the revolutionary endeavor” (p. 104) and writes cogently on the challenge of finding reliable personnel to distribute packets of legislative decrees in remote parts of the country. There is also a thought-provoking discussion of an idealized and somewhat paradoxical archetype of the country dweller that emerged during this period: *le bon cultivateur*. This model citizen was peaceful, virtuous, hardworking, and eager both to learn (for he was ignorant) and to be guided by his superiors. Revolutionary leaders passionately believed that the *bon cultivateur* wholeheartedly supported their work, but as Walshaw demonstrates, villagers proved to be far more multi-dimensional than this caricature allowed.

The heart of the book lies in chapters four and five, where the author analyzes the trials for seditious speech. An impressive sample of 148 cases for verbal sedition with villager defendants from 1789 to 1799 makes up the evidence base, and Walshaw convincingly unpacks what people were saying and how they defended themselves. In the early period from 1789 to 1792, taxes and seigneurial dues were the most common themes, as villagers were prosecuted for declaring their disgust at the rates or saying it was forbidden to pay or collect them. One half of the sample for seditious speech occurred during the Terror, and issues of military recruitment and requisitions were most prevalent. This is not very surprising, as state extractions were always detested and resisted. Of this sample, only sixty-nine cases went to trial with twenty convictions and six executions (p. 160). It seems that there was a distinction between words and actions, since local authorities and provincial criminal courts tended to mitigate crimes of a political nature and were unwilling to apply the death penalty for simple expressions of opinion. Chapter five turns to the excuses used in these cases by defendants to explain their utterances. Ranging from the simple “I didn’t mean it” or “I was drunk” to using elite prejudices against them by naming (more) educated accomplices who had led them astray, explanations revealed a savvy creativity, which exploited myths of the “stupid peasant” to avoid harsh punishment. It seems that it was common knowledge that admitting to drunkenness would almost always result in an acquittal and that “attenuating circumstances” in rural cases consistently meant intoxication. While the work of Thomas Brennan is cited, Walshaw could have analyzed in more detail elite attitudes to popular drinking, as there was a considerable anomaly to the idealized *bon cultivateur*.<sup>[3]</sup> Drunkenness was often linked to idleness, debauchery, violence and criminal behavior in the eighteenth century, as moralists, medical practitioners, economic theorists and judicial officials published tracts denouncing excessive drinking. It would have been worth exploring how these preconceptions meshed in the minds of judges and jury members when they acquitted individuals who claimed to be intoxicated.

Walshaw’s chief contribution is her contention that the French Revolution fundamentally altered rural political opinion. By the late 1790s the reality of villagers as political actors could no longer be

denied. The Revolution opened up a space and allowed *all* people, from urban elites to village peasants, to debate, discuss and compare different forms of government. A rural plebian public sphere existed, she argues, because authorities spent much time and resources trying to police and repress it. When they were brought to trial for utterances against the state, however, villagers were cunning and inventive in their deception of authorities and used the prejudices of the elite to accept any excuse for their outbursts. Walshaw's conclusions also reinforce some general trends in the larger historiography. Villagers broadly supported the social and political goals of the early Revolution, but perhaps became less patient with the extractions from the activist state in the years that followed. Her work also adds nuance to the view of the one-dimensional country dweller. Villagers were just as complex and multi-faceted in their political views and actions as any other citizens. While they largely supported tax reform, the abolition of seigneurial rights and dues, the principles of representative democracy, and the election of officials, the opinions of rural dwellers were more varied in terms of the king, church and collective agricultural practices. And given the opportunity, space and environment to make their views known, many seized the chance with gusto. Walshaw's observation regarding the nature of peasant politics from Ancien Régime to Revolution is also particularly salient. Under the monarchy, most villagers wanted to be left alone, because state extractions were so high and the returns minimal. After 1789, however, villagers considered themselves citizens with two fundamental rights: "that the state should listen to them and that it should act on their grievances" (p. 216).

It seems that much of Walshaw's evidence from seditious speech trials, however, was less treasonable, subversive and mutinous than the term "seditious" implies. Many of the outbursts were expressions of political opinion, to be sure, but they appear to be much more about disagreement and/or irritation with the policies and/or endless laws of the National Assembly than *real* counter-revolution. The mayor of the small village of Monbalen (Lot-et-Garonne) is a case in point. He was arrested in the Year II for saying "the National Assembly was composed of idiots who did know what they were doing, and that as far as he was concerned, they could wipe their arses with their decrees" (p. 56). There was a big difference, as Walshaw concedes, between a vaguely anti-revolutionary stance that was characterized by disappointment, demoralization and frustration and full-blown counter-revolution, in which participants actively sought to overturn the new regime. Most of the evidence in this book reflects the former. As valuable and rich as this source base is (and the author has done it justice), it does only depict *one* type of political engagement. Walshaw contends that "court testimonies provide our best insights into rural political opinion: no other documentation reveals rural ideology to the same degree" (p. 196).

There is no denying the importance of these archival sources. They provide a unique window onto how some rural people expressed themselves if they disagreed with or were frustrated by the course of the Revolution, but it is questionable whether they offer the "best insight into rural political opinion." Uncovering the voices of rural France is a difficult task, and Walshaw has lifted the veil on some of them, but the book contains no examples of villagers shouting "bring back the seigneurs, their dues and judges" or "don't reform the tax system to lessen our burden." Surely the massive waves of peasant insurrections and rebellions that swept across France in the early years of the Revolution, the movement to acquire a plot of privatized common land or *biens nationaux*, and the over 40,000 parish *cahiers de doléances*, methodological challenges aside, afford us the widest angle on rural ideologies and opinions.<sup>[4]</sup> Material, tangible and substantive actions from villagers certainly speak louder than isolated words.

No book is perfect and there are several things that would have made this one better. First, the regional emphasis could have been more developed. The southwestern departments of the Dordogne, Lot-et-Garonne, Haute-Pyrénées and the Ariège are the focus of the study, but the author offers no real justification as to why they were chosen other than "a sense of distance from Paris" (p. 28). If politics is local then a much more detailed discussion of the issues that mattered to the villagers in these regions would have been helpful. Secondly, it would also have been beneficial if Walshaw had provided more insight into her methodology. How, for example, was the overall sample of 195 cases of seditious speech taken? Was it random or bound by certain parameters? And was there any particular reason why the majority came from the Dordogne and Haute-Garonne

rather than the Pyrenean departments? Why were the five cases from the district of St. Gaudens (Haute-Garonne) included?

Finally, this is a long and multi-layered book with dense chapters that cover a variety of topics. It would have helped the reader to navigate if the chapters were better signposted with clearer introductions and conclusions. There are also wide-ranging historiographical discussions and summaries throughout the book that might have been edited, as they tend occasionally to submerge the author's key arguments. These points aside, this is a valuable book that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of how the Revolution was received and communicated in the countryside and how certain villagers expressed their political opinions in an enlarged public sphere. Walshaw should be congratulated for a fine and detailed study of rural politicization in the eighteenth century.

## NOTES

[1] Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), Maurice Agulhon, "Présentation," in *La politisation des campagnes au XIXe siècle: France, Italie, Espagne, Portugal. Actes du colloque international, Rome 20-22 février 1997* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2000), pp. 1-11; Ted Margadant, *French Peasants in Revolt: The Insurrection of 1851* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); John Merriman, *The Agony of the Republic: The Repression of the Left in Revolutionary France, 1848-1851* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), and "Review of *Peasants into Frenchmen*, by Eugen Weber," *Journal of Modern History* 50 (1978): 534-36; Peter McPhee, *The Politics of Rural Life: Political Mobilization in the French Countryside, 1846-1852* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[2] James M. Brophy, *Popular Culture and the Public Sphere in the Rhineland, 1800-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[3] Thomas Brennan, *Public Drinking and Popular Culture in Eighteenth Century Paris* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988). See as well, Mathieu Lecoutre, *Ivresse et Ivrognerie dans la France moderne* (Rennes & Tours: Presses universitaires de Rennes/Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2011).

[4] Anatoli Ado, *Paysans en Révolution: Terre, pouvoir et jacquerie, 1789-1794* (Paris: SÉR, 1996); John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); and Noelle Plack, "The Peasantry, Feudalism and the Environment, 1789-93" in Peter McPhee, ed., *A Companion to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 212-27.

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