

Jonathan Smyth. *Robespierre and the festival of the Supreme Being. The search for a republican morality*. PP XV + 181 incl. 5 ills and 11 tables. Manchester University Press, 2016.

The question 'who or what is a republican?' is not an easy one to answer. Like the question 'who or what is a Catholic?', which opens Diarmaid MacCulloch's study of the Reformation, it requires historians who embark on research about republicanism to grapple with varied meanings attached to a term that people have wanted to own. Jonathan Smyth's book carries a sub-title 'the search for a republican morality', which gestures toward this complex task of definition for a particular civic ethos in the historical context of the French Revolution. The notion of a search is an interesting one. Were the revolutionaries in France of 1789–1799 looking for some new system of morality or were they seeking to rediscover a system rooted in the ancient past? To what extent did republicanism replace other longstanding traditions and structures, including church based ones, which provided a moral compass in the lives of women and men in late eighteenth-century France? In French politics at the national level the creation of the First Republic in 1792 was a major drama, not least because it paved the way to further drama in the executions of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette. Republicanism was stamped into the design of new national institutions and laws, the choice of street names, forms of clothing and song lyrics, the decoration of household crockery, and a revolutionary calendar. Such material manifestations were in part about people's desire to 'own' the term republican. In the local politics of villages and towns of rural France, however, the beliefs and sources of moral authority that informed people's behaviours remained varied and continued to operate in ways that were subtle and subconscious. Understandings of social hierarchy persisted amid the rhetoric of equality.

Commitments to monarchism and to the Catholic Church never disappeared in certain quarters and indeed galvanised a segment of the French population into armed struggle against republican forces during the civil war of the Vendée in 1793-1794. For this reason it is difficult to agree with Smyth's opening statement about the Festival of the Supreme Being on 8 June 1794 as an occasion where 'the whole of France was united'. A critical reader will find problematic the central argument of this book that all French people celebrated in a spirit of 'national euphoria'. Smyth's study is organised in seven chapters, beginning with the reactions to Robespierre's announcements about the cult of the Supreme Being and planning for a national festival. Chapters 3 and 4 allow for some comparisons to be made between 'The celebrations in the capital' and 'The celebrations outside Paris'. The later chapters are concerned with financing the festival, commentaries on the festival, and on the festival's aftermath. Smyth's findings in the departmental and municipal archives make for a book rich in detail; the documentation is used for a very thorough monographic description and analysis of the festival. On the role of Robespierre and his ideas about a Supreme Being, Smyth integrates findings from the most recent biographical studies and grapples with an issue which historians have not been able to resolve about why the idea of the festival did not lead to its continued practice beyond 1794. The conclusion of the book points to the rise of Napoleon, inauguration of the First Empire, and Concordat with the Pope. These developments and the history of nineteenth-century France are about long term fractures and competing beliefs in French society, in contrast with the book's portrait of a single day of national unity.

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