

Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 323. £67. ISBN 9780199576302.

The list of witnesses at Camille Desmoulins' wedding to Lucile Duplessis in December 1790 reads like a *Who's Who* of Parisian radicalism in the early Revolution. The groom's fellow journalists, Brissot and Mercier, were there along with Paris's future mayor, Pétion, and Desmoulins' old schoolmate, Maximilien Robespierre. By August 1794, there were all, bar Mercier, dead. Mercier was lucky. He survived, but then, as Madame Roland noted, he was 'a zero in the Convention'.

Being a politician was a dangerous business in Revolutionary France and Marisa Linton's *Choosing Terror* aims to explain why so many political careers ended in death at the hands of one-time allies and former friends in 1793-94. Tens of thousands of ordinary men and women died violent deaths that year, but this is not the Terror that interests Linton. Instead, her focus is fixed firmly, rather too firmly at times, on 'the politicians' terror' (2), the purges, show trials and *coups* that dispatched one faction after another, Girondins, Hébertistes, Dantonistes and Robespierristes, to the guillotine in 1793-94. The numbers involved are small, an appendix lists sixty-odd victims of this terror (291-2), but Linton argues that these men's deaths were especially significant because of their prominence and because 'this terror was at the heart of the revolutionary project' (12). Unlike most of the Terror's other victims, these men also left an obligingly enormous trail of published sources and Linton has mined these extensively to construct her narrative of the high politics of Terror. This narrative, like the book's steadily dwindling *dramatis personae*, is a familiar one, but Linton brings new arguments to bear on this well-rehearsed story and while these do not always convince they will generate debate.

The first of these, and the most persuasive, involves the importance Linton attaches to individual agency and choice. In place of contemporaries' self-serving demonization of Robespierre as the sole architect of Terror, Linton stresses instead the calculated, often crudely tactical, choices Revolutionaries made over time, both individually and collectively, that led to the Terror. Historians will doubtless debate the details here but the claim that Terror evolved gradually, as 'a collective choice', (188) still carries weight. As Carrier, the *conventionnel* who oversaw the notorious *noyades* at Nantes but a figure curiously absent here, later protested, the entire Convention was responsible for the Terror, right 'down to the president's bell', and Linton's analysis seems to support this classic Montagnard defence. This emphasis on agency is a commonsense corrective to the social or ideological determinism of so many Revolutionary histories but if Linton's politicians chose Terror over time, they also chose it for diverse reasons. Chief among these was their shared 'commitment to the ideology of political virtue' (7), their concern with being seen to be men of virtue and the tensions this obsession with authenticity gave rise to. Virtue was undoubtedly important for many Revolutionaries, but it is made to bear a very heavy explanatory burden here as every important debate, every critical decision, is ultimately explained as, even reduced to, an expression of the politics of virtue. Paradoxically perhaps, given her insistence on individual agency, Linton's politicians appear increasingly imprisoned by this ideal, incapable of acting independently of 'the relentless logic of political virtue' (289).

The final strand of Linton's argument involves the personal ties and emotional factors that influenced decision-making in the Convention. Fear, unsurprisingly, looms large here but so do affection, ambition and animosity, and Linton has carefully reconstructed the complex web of personal relationships and social networks that shaped many deputies' everyday experiences. This is useful, but the neo-Namierite reading of Revolutionary politics

sometimes risks reducing the substance of serious political debates to the stuff of individuals' antipathies and anxieties about their own authenticity. In this sense, Linton's politicians are not just insiders but appear implausibly inward-looking too. The world they wrote about and worked in was, she claims, 'relatively enclosed – a small group of people who knew one another, who liked or disliked one another, trusted or distrusted one another and who chose sides accordingly', but this seems questionable at best (130). Certainly, Robespierre gradually withdrew into this kind of world but his colleagues did not. On the contrary, they corresponded with their constituents constantly and went *en mission* to the provinces in their hundreds, an experience scarcely even considered here. Crucially, they lived and worked under the relentless gaze of the Parisians who packed the Convention's galleries, who petitioned and harangued them daily and sometimes arrived armed and *en masse* to tell them, in unmistakably threatening terms, what to do. Those Parisians were an ever-present element of these politicians' experiences but, like the provinces and the war and the counter-revolution, they are little more than noises off here. This is a pity because Linton's account has much to say about some of the men who made the choices that led to Terror but, ultimately, tells us too little about the wider context in which those choices were made.

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