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REVIEW ARTICLES

DO BOOKS MAKE REVOLUTIONS? REVISITED

The English republican tradition and eighteenth-century France: between the ancients and the moderns. By Rachel Hammersley. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010. Pp. xi+239. ISBN 9780719079320. £60.

Cultural transfers: France and Britain in the long eighteenth century. Edited by Ann Thomson, Simon Burrows, and Edmond Dziembowski. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010. Pp. xi+326. ISBN 9780729409933. £65.

Aristocracy and its enemies in the age of revolution. By William Doyle. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. viii+371. ISBN 0199559856. £30.

Overture to revolution: the 1787 Assembly of Notables and the crisis of France's old regime. By John Hardman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. vi+338. ISBN 9780199585779. £63.

In one of his best-known essays, whose title I have borrowed for this review, Roger Chartier quoted three famous predecessors of different political inclinations in support of the claim that 'If the French of the late eighteenth century fashioned the Revolution, it is because they had in turn been fashioned by books.'[1] Strikingly different in their approach, the four works reviewed here cover the same historical period, overlapping geographical terrains, and a good number of the same historical actors. The 'big question' for all historians of eighteenth-century France, and perhaps of eighteenth-century Europe as a whole, continues to be this: how is it that a policed, modern, wealthy nation, with a penchant for fashion and comfort, generated revolution and republic? Many of the authors of the monographs and essays under review approach Chartier's problem; though not all engage explicitly with it, the spectre of 1789 overshadows perhaps the majority of the studies. Three of the works under review are written by historians of political thought, literature, or ideas, the historical areas potentially most affected by the call for close attention to the circumstances of reading, publishing, and print circulation issued by Chartier. One might, in fact, see books as the middle ground between thought and action: given that the former is historically unrecoverable, on what should historians of political thought rely in making claims about the relationship between books and politics? This is where historians of knowledge have diverged in recent years. Quentin Skinner, figurehead of the history of political thought in Cambridge, explicitly retained intentionality as a key feature of the

[1] Roger Chartier, *The cultural origins of the French Revolution* (6th edn, Durham. NC, and London, 2004), p. 67.

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new intellectual history he helped to craft in the 1980s.[2] Radical theoreticians of reading, drawing upon postmodern philosophical discussions of language, had argued at about the same time that meaning is not inherent in texts, but is made by the reader. Intellectual history's faith in intentionality contrasts with the work of other historians who took up this theoretical challenge and banished intentionality from historical enquiry. For to argue for intentionality is to give credence to the view that meanings are somehow inherent in texts and that, therefore, their historical outcomes are constrained. At its furthest limit, the argument for intentionality lulls historians into a sense of false security with regard to their own interpretations of texts, which are assumed to mirror both authorial intentions and historical readings.[3] Given that most past reading did not result in explicit commentary, the issue of intentionality and the limits of justifiable historical interpretation ought to be central themes for historians exploring the link between what was read and what was said, or done, as a result. Rachel Hammersley's book attests to the problems and possibilities facing historians who wish to argue for the existence of a particular body of literature.

Hammersley's ostensible goal is to alert historians to the pitfalls of offering too local an explanation of the origins of the French Revolution, by tracing an extensive body of English republican literature, reprinted and reread from the late seventeenth century until the 1790s, in both England and France. In practice, this also involves her in making claims about the way in which reading and revolution might be related. She offers a simple solution to the question of how it could be that so many people read about republics in eighteenth-century France and Britain, and yet *the* French Revolution and *the* Republic only came into existence at the very end of the century. This solution is to divide republicanism into two distinct models, a classical model and an early modern one. The former is the stark, purist republicanism of the ancients, the republicanism of Sparta, for example; while the latter has more in common with the comfortable commercial, pragmatic republicanism of, say, the Dutch in the late seventeenth century. That second tradition, she argues, allowed a whole range of authors to write approvingly of republicanism while meaning something closer to constitutional monarchy. In effect, Harrington, Sidney, Milton, and others supplied authors across the long eighteenth century with a vocabulary for describing the ideal state as one in which monarchs, nobles, and the people were balanced against one another, by recourse to a constitution

[2] For a summary of the discussion over this issue, see William J. Bowsma, 'Intellectual history in the 1980s: from history of ideas to history of meaning', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12 (1981), pp. 279–90; John E. Toews, 'Review: intellectual history after the linguistic turn: the autonomy of meaning and the irreducibility of experience', *American Historical Review*, 92 (1987), pp. 879–907.

[3] Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, eds., *The reader in the text: essays on audience and interpretation* (Princeton, NJ, 1980); Stanley Fish, *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretative communities* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); taken up by, for example, Adrian Johns, *The nature of the book: print and knowledge in the making* (Chicago, IL, 1998).

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which set contrasting passions in play so cleverly as to make the body politic a perfectly harmonious machine. Hammersley's work is particularly strong in documenting the successive reprintings, new editions, translations, revisions, and quotations which made the writings of the English commonwealthmen available to generation after generation of British and French reformers. For that alone, the book is well worth reading; chapters are devoted to the English commonwealthmen, French Huguenots, the early eighteenth-century circle of French reformers surrounding the Dauphin, the mid-century writings of d'Argenson and his English contacts, the baron d'Holbach, the 1760s Wilkesite circle in Britain and its French adherents, Mably's republicanism, and finally the revival of English republicanism in the print culture of the French Revolution, with a handful of examples drawn from the writings of Mirabeau, Marat, and others.

Some caution should nevertheless be exercised in reading the book. For in answering the particular question of how there could be republicanism without a republic, Hammersley never explicitly engages with the issues raised by Chartier – what use do readers make of what they read, and why do books cause revolutions at some times and not at others? This creates an uneasy tension in the book, which veers from magnifying fleeting allusions to English republicanism in obscure manuscripts, to a broadly brushed canvas in which everything and anything that happened in eighteenth-century politics on both sides of the Channel seems, somehow, to originate in the English republican corpus. The problem with the latter approach is that it rests far too much upon far too little. Some of Hammersley's more detailed research clearly shows who actually read and cited which commonwealth authors. But her second tactic is less securely grounded in mapping the circulation of print. It works by identifying particular claims in a work by an English republican, locating a similar claim in a later author's writings, and then arguing that this commonality is evidence of the transmission of an 'idea'. An example here is Hammersley's assertion that key 'symptoms' of the English commonwealth tradition in later writings were an appeal to constitutionalism and a model of checks and balances within the body politic. Eighteenth-century Hungarians also appealed to these very attributes as desirable features of political reform in the Habsburg territories; yet their debts can be traced to German writings on natural law and cameralism, not to British resources at all.[4] It cannot thus be argued without adequate substantiation that all similar claims about the ideal type of government originated in a body of literature written by seventeenth-century English republicans. By the 1760s, it is probably safe to say that writing about republics, constitutions, and political reform more generally had become a fairly universal hobby among literate

[4] Teodora Shek Brnardić, 'Modalities of enlightened monarchical patriotism in the mid-eighteenth century Habsburg monarchy', in Balázs Trencsényi and Márton Zászkaliczky, eds., *Whose love of which country? composite states, national histories and patriotic discourses in early modern east central Europe* (Leiden, 2010), pp. 631–61.

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European publics, including the French and British.[5] It was in fact no longer necessary to appeal to any particular model of republicanism, be it Dutch, English, Roman, or Spartan, to discuss the advantages or disadvantages of republican rule. A similar shift was traced by Dale Van Kley in observing that although Jansenism had started out as a specifically religious movement in the late seventeenth century, it had, by mid-century, metamorphosed into a generalized reform movement of a political rather than religious character.[6] What Hammersley does not do is to show us the changing significance of the broader debate about forms of government in the public domain, so that its mutation from a moderate to a more radical debate may be traced. Presumably, her carefully crafted distinction between types of republicanism must have collapsed at a certain point, once Mably was being read by Robespierre and others as advocating radical revolution. Yet into the 1790s, Hammersley offers no account of the tensions between different accounts of republicanism or how these were resolved (or exacerbated) by the revolution.

An extract from Hammersley's book also figures in Thomson, Burrows, and Dziembowski's edited volume. The essays – many of which I wished had been longer – range widely over eighteenth-century themes and topics, covering issues as diverse as espionage (Burrows, in a reprise of his recent biography of Charles Théveneau de Morande), medical periodicals (Crignon-de-Oliveira), land scams (Dunyach), luxury (Malherbe), and Anglomania (the editorial introduction).[7] The collection is explicitly presented by its editors as a contribution to intellectual history. The contributions, written in French and English, are well worth reading, if the thread connecting them is sometimes obscure – the issue of diplomacy is confusingly split between two different sections of the book, and a chronological arrangement would have been a distinct advantage. Despite the diversity of actors and topics, there are common themes running through the volume which address the issues of print culture, knowledge, and politics raised at the start of this review. Several papers (Beaurepaire, Craigwood, Jettot, Levillain) address the issue of diplomacy and the neglected role of ambassadors as knowledge brokers between different cultures. More might perhaps have been said here regarding the status of the diplomatic elite of Europe in general as patrons and promoters of learning, but some fascinating issues are raised. Jettot's paper, which I found the most thought-provoking, highlights the difficult position of the translator in official exchanges between rulers and foreign ambassadors. The translator had in effect to impersonate the monarch, speaking on her or his behalf – a perilous situation indeed. Jettot pays close attention to the way demand for trained

[5] See Simon Burrows, 'The *Courier de l'Europe* as an agent of cultural transfer (1776–1791)', in Thomson et al., eds., *Cultural transfers*, pp. 189–202, at 199.

[6] Dale Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the expulsion of the Jesuits from France, 1757–1765* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1975).

[7] Simon Burrows, *A king's ransom: the life of Charles Thèveneau de Morande, blackmailer, scandalmonger and master-spy* (London, 2010).

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official translators changed during the seventeenth century as it became more important to grasp the subtleties of particular political relationships, such as that subsisting between Charles II and parliament.

A second main area of investigation, as the title suggests, is the question of the form in which knowledge could be transmitted, and the non-transparency of languages. The conclusions here are relevant beyond the Franco-British case. In some cases, the papers on this topic are somewhat pedestrian, setting out merely to evaluate the quality of translation in its fidelity to the original. Others, however, go much further. In a very useful study of the pan-European luxury literature, Michel Malherbe uses the translation of the English word 'commodity' into French to highlight the differences between particular French schools of economy in the mid-century. Thomson shows how the Dutch Huguenot Michel La Roche used his activities as a translator, journalist, and reviewer to craft a generalized tolerance, rather than defending a specific version of Protestantism.

The authors in general are alert to the more slippery issues of translation and transmission (or 'cultural transfer') of particular works. One of the finest examples of this is Dziembowski's essay on the translator Genet, who worked for Choiseul, the French minister of foreign affairs, during the Seven Years War. Although Genet was hired to translate English-language oppositional tracts protesting against the war and the British government, in the end his corpus of translations also brought to its French readership a good deal of Real Whig propaganda which privileged notions of personal liberty quite alien to the minister's goals of shoring up Bourbon absolutism. Minute explorations of the book trade and (sometimes exhaustive) accounts of translations, editions, and abbreviations of particular works are also represented in the collection, from Curran's useful and rich overview of the activities of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel, made famous by Robert Darnton, to Thomson's account of the translations of Collins's *Philosophical inquiry*.[8]

If the notion of 'cultural transfer' forms one organizing axis of this volume, another is the network. The editors, here, cite a rather narrow cross-section of the secondary literature both on the theme of correspondence and of that of networks, a topic which attracted much interest within the history of natural history in recent decades.[9] The one manifestation of the latter literature,

[8] Initially in Robert Darnton, 'The high enlightenment and the low-life of literature in pre-revolutionary France', *Past and Present*, 51 (1971), pp. 81–115; but see his more recent edited collection with Michael Schlup, *Le rayonnement d'une maison d'édition dans l'Europe des Lumières: la Société typographique de Neuchâtel, 1769–1789* (Neuchâtel and Hauterive, 2005).

[9] Standard works in this area include Jean-Louis Bonnat and Mireille Bossis, eds., *Ecrire, publier, lire: les correspondances* (Nantes, 1983); Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau, and Cécile Dauphin, eds., *Correspondence: models of letter-writing from the middle ages to the nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1997). In the history of science, a key publication was Bruno Latour, 'Visualization and cognition: thinking with eyes and hands', *Knowledge and Society*, 6 (1986), pp. 1–40, an approach taken up by, among others, David Philip Miller, 'Joseph Banks, empire, and "centres of calculation" in late Hanoverian London', in idem and Peter Hanns Reill, eds.,

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Livesey's essay, has some curious difficulties inherent in its approach. While the editorial introduction explicitly notes the form of networks as something to which historians still need to pay more attention, Livesey's approach to network history is somewhat selective and governed by an overriding concern with the relations between metropolis and province, 'the crushing weight' of Paris (p. 89) and the Languedoc. While there was indeed an imbalance of resources between the capital and Montpellier (partly, as Livesey rightly notes, redressed by the Montpellerain co-opting of the Linnaean classificatory system), he too often treats individuals such as the Nancy botanist Pierre-Rémi Willemet as primarily part of 'the' Montpellier network. Yet botanists like this could equally well be argued to be part of a Parisian network centred on the Jardin du Roi. Brokerage worked in multiple directions, not merely to introduce English visitors to Montpellier scientific circles as suggested here.[10] It would seem that there are some conclusions about the role of networks in knowledge transfer that can be safely drawn, and others which are less secure. The Internet model, on which much current information theory is based, lacks the top-down quality that Livesey tries to enforce; in that model, each individual becomes a node, and it is merely the case that some are better networked than others. These works thus suggest that the models and methods underpinning historical accounts of the relationship between knowledge and politics still require refinement, and that can only be accomplished through explicit debate.

Many of the essays in Thomson et al. concern heterodox actors: free-thinkers, radicals, traitors, religious, or philosophical dissenters, just the sort of individuals, in short, to whom Roger Chartier's predecessors were referring. The Voltaire Foundation has published some of the most important work on the role of Huguenot authors in various European countries in opposing Bourbon policies, and this volume continues and complicates that tradition.[11] The general impression conveyed by this collection and Hammersley's book is of a seething world of political opposition on both sides of the Channel. It is precisely this question of radicalization which William Doyle handles with beautiful fluency and deftness, but by resorting to a rather different rhetorical tack: not so much the tracing of radical pamphlets and pamphleteers from one

Visions of empire: voyages, botany, and representations of nature (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 21–37; Dirk Stemerding, *Plants, animals and formulae: natural history in the light of Latour's* Science in Action *and Foucault's* The Order of Things (Enschede, 1991). I summarize subsequent developments in E. C. Spary, 'Botanical networks revisited', in Regina Dauser, Stefan Hächler, and Michael Kempe, eds., *Wissen im Netz: Botanik und Pflanzentransfer in europäischen Korrespondenznetzen des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2008), pp. 1–18.

[10] See E. C. Spary, *Utopia's garden: French natural history from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago, IL, 2000), ch. 2.

[11] The Voltaire Foundation has specialized in such work. See, in particular, Élisabeth Labrousse, *Conscience et conviction: études sur le XVIIe siècle* (Paris and Oxford, 1996); Michelle Magdelaine, ed., *De l'humanisme aux lumières: Bayle et le Protestantisme: mélanges en l'honneur d'Élisabeth Labrousse* (Paris and Oxford, 1996).

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place to another, as a panoramic view of a single problem seen from one geographical standpoint.

From the very beginning of Doyle's book, the reader is alerted to the paradoxical and problematic nature of the attack against the aristocracy (which indeed might almost be termed the reinvention of aristocracy) that is one of the best-known features of the French Revolution. Generations of historians, parroting the revolutionaries' own picture of France as a society riddled with corruption and inequity, helped to construct the aristocracy as the evil stepmother to the tender Cinderella of the new nation. Doyle piquantly demonstrates the revolt against aristocracy, which appears with the benefit of hindsight to have been so inevitable, to have been anything but. Drawing together revisionist accounts of the French nobility in the old regime, such as the work of Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret and Jay M. Smith, Doyle has produced a fundamentally useful and eminently readable book, which will serve students as well as academics. In it, he traces the legal definition and titles of the nobility in France, as well as the historical origins, rights, function, and reforms of the order. He shows how in 1785, the ambition of the majority of well-to-do commoners was to buy, marry, or work their way into the nobility; while in 1790, it was nobles themselves who spearheaded the call for the abolition of noble privileges. Thus, there was no massive wave of opposition to the nobility before the Revolution, and nobles themselves, not commoners or radicals, were the prime movers in abolishing their own estate. The actual moment of abolition of noble privileges is explored in a couple of more narrowly focused chapters towards the end of the book, though, as Doyle also shows, the revival of nobility under Napoleon, let alone the Bourbon Restoration of 1815, restored the vast majority of old regime nobles to their titles and wealth.

Many of the reforming nobles of the French Revolution, notoriously, envisaged a particular model of constitutional government along the lines explored by Hammersley in her book. Perhaps it is their loss of power, rather than the monarch's, which with the misleading lens of hindsight seems the most surprising. Many were men who had devoted themselves to ideals of selfless patriotism, who took even venal posts as, often, opportunities to do good. So far from being the idle, leisured aristocrats of caricature, the most politically active nobles often had considerable experience in public service, and a commitment to a reform which many of them were frustrated to see coming so slowly. The *contrôleur général des finances* in the mid-1780s, Charles-Auguste de Calonne, was in essence one of these reformers, as John Hardman reveals in his account of the Assembly of Notables of 1787. Again, perhaps inevitably, the imminence of 1789 overshadows Hardman's account. Nevertheless, in keeping with the anti-teleological thrust of cultural histories of the revolution, both Hardman and Doyle make it plain that the revolution might have been averted; events might not have taken the course that they did. French revolutionary historiography at present is thronged with counterfactuals, largely as a way for historians to argue that France was not, in fact, so very different from other European countries at

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this time. The British, having recently lost the American war, were also heavily in debt. Other nations had a greater deficit, yet were not represented as being in such grave financial peril. Hardman usefully trawls through the secondary sources on the French deficit, tax reform, the resistance of the *parlements*, and other areas explored in the last few decades as alternatives to the model of France as a society which collapsed because of the luxury and greed of its elites.

He also marshals work on the various ministers and their regimes, following recent biographers in arguing that Calonne was neither responsible for precipitating the revolution, nor a corrupt speculator aiming to profit by the crown's misfortunes. The Calonne who emerges from Hardman's pages is spirited if a little rash, beaten down by the sheer extent of enmity, opposition, politicking, and endless bickering that greeted his innovative reform proposals to set the crown's finances on a more secure footing. Echoes of George Osborne and the British deficit, or of Obama struggling against the Republicans, are hard to avoid. And this is precisely the problem, in a way, with Hardman's book. He admirably lays out in exhaustive and sometimes exhausting detail the documentation: the meetings, correspondence, audiences, newspaper reports, and so on that covered the short period of time during which the Notables met occupy over half the book. At the same time, there is often a sense that the focus on Calonne-as-protagonist leads Hardman to downplay both structural and methodological considerations. For example, the question of national finances was, clearly, of overriding importance for Calonne, who is shown to be an adept financier, along with his aides. Hardman implies that the failure of the Notables to assent to his proposals is the result of ignorance and concealment: the royal finances were no one's business but the king's, so the Notables' request to view the accounts of the crown were turned down; the Notables were, unlike Calonne, not qualified to judge the effects of particular reforms on the crown's income as a whole. But the obvious point to be made here is that there was simply no precedent for representing the crown's resources in terms of money alone. There was no modern model of a national economy, no sense that the crown *should* necessarily be subject to the same laws of credit and debit as other bodies. This at once puts the question on a new footing. Why was it that Louis XIV could intervene in sometimes draconian ways to raise new finances, while Louis XVI could not? Why was it that – as Hardman himself notes, pp. 153–4 – although the clergy owed far more to the crown than the whole of the deficit which Calonne proposed to conquer by reforming the taxation system (to widespread resentment), this particular debt could not be recouped?

The questions at stake in Calonne's reform programme and the opposition to it occasionally need a broader canvas in order for their historical (rather than economic) significance to become clear. Hardman, at such moments, too often falls back on psychobiography: for example, Miromesnil's opposition to Calonne could only reflect politics, for he was too 'astute' (p. 45) to have considered Calonne to be lacking in principle. But there was more at stake here

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than personalities or patronage. For one thing, the charge that Calonne was attempting to pervert the ancient rights of the nation was not, in fact, unfounded. Taxation reform did indeed traditionally require the consent of the Estates General, and not to call them (as Calonne decided to do in convoking the Notables instead) was to make a bold, and for many, unwelcome, departure from precedent. Striking here, too, is the almost complete absence of engagement by Hardman with the sort of considerations which are foremost in the work of Hammersley and Thomson et al., and which still make an appearance in the pages of Doyle's work: how print culture and debates about the nation, patriotism and government shaped the actions of reformers. We learn little about how (or whether) Calonne represented himself as a reformer. Unlike Necker, who firmly positioned himself in salon circles and in print, Calonne eschewed self-fashioning in the public domain – but why? We also learn little of how his opponents and predecessors established themselves as defenders of *la patrie* in the press, something which Hammersley, looking at literary resources, and Doyle, at the debate over the uses of the noble estate, both manage rather more successfully.

The close attention Hardman gives to the minutiae of the Notables debate, day by day, allows him to trace the shifting allegiances between individuals in the patronage networks of the old regime, but at the same time, he thereby fails to commit to any model whatsoever of shared political meanings, and thus to account for the power of particular symbols, such as *la patrie* or 'public opinion', to generate agreement and action. In the end, his description of the Assembly of Notables shows it petering out in stalemate, and that failure is attributed to the indecisiveness of the monarch and the political jockeying of heedless elites. The implication is perhaps that Lafayette, Sièyes, and their ilk were thus enabled to impress themselves upon a political scene which was more or less a *tabula rasa*. Yet there is an odd absence of tension from the end of the book. One would not be surprised to learn that nothing further happened after 1787. The overall significance of the Assembly of Notables as a political experience for contemporaries somehow fails to come across, in the final analysis. Hardman's book will be most useful, I suggest, to those interested in the history of taxation and in the specific events of the Assembly of Notables, and on these areas in particular it is extremely thorough, a welcome addition to the secondary literature. It is also a very useful study of the key section of Calonne's life, the more so as the leading biographies of this minister are written in French.

At some level, one longs for more explicit debate among eighteenth-century Europeanists over the nature of their models of patronage, networking, and meaning, on the back of the new sensitivity towards the central importance of studies of material exchange that has emerged within the field. It is Hardman who makes, perhaps, the single most important remark along these lines in discussing, and critiquing, Keith Michael Baker.[12] Objecting to Baker's account

[12] Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 167–99.

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of public opinion, Hardman insists that it was not an external, previously existing force into which Calonne and others could tap: rather, public opinion was a construct which could be invoked differently for different purposes by different groups, and which was only rhetorically to be understood as a universal abstract court of appeal. In their various ways, all these books, and perhaps particularly Doyle's, point to the tensions within the public domain which can be masked by particular readings of individual works or even a corpus of works on the same theme. At bottom, as Hardman's remark shows, public opinion was not unitary, except when it was being invoked for particular political ends. The politics of knowledge were established through debates, contestations, and the multiple and variable readings which different individuals made of the printed and manuscript materials which passed through their hands. The finest example of this is in Dziembowski's essay, already mentioned. One of Genet's pamphlets was reviewed by Pierre Rousseau, editor of the *Journal encyclopédique*, a famously free-thinking periodical which was the subject of one of the earliest of the new style of book histories.[13] Rousseau had left France in order to be able to publish beyond the reach of royal censorship. In an ironic twist, this radical editor read Genet's ministerial propaganda as a work praising British liberty, when its ostensible goal had been to shore up French despotism. Perhaps, indeed, books might make revolutions in some very unexpected ways.

CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE E. C. SPARY

[13] Gustave Charlier and Roland Mortier, *Une suite de l'Encyclopédie: le Journal encyclopédique (1756–1793): notes, documents, et extraits réunis* (Paris, 1952). A facsimile edition of this journal followed: *Journal encyclopédique* (76 vols., Geneva, 1967), along with an index by Dante Lenardon, *Index du Journal encyclopédique, 1756–1793* (Geneva, 1976), making this one of the most accessible of eighteenth-century French-language journals.

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