
First published: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1783
French revolutionary money is funny stuff. In my own collection I have a five-sous coin that is little short of a work of art, a handsome bronze disc with a veritable bas-relief of revolutionary symbolism – yet this was produced not by the state, but as a private token, a *medaille de confiance*, one of a proliferation of initiatives to relieve the shortage of small change, in this case by the Monneron Brothers bank. What is more, it was coined not in Paris, but Birmingham, at Matthew Boulton’s revolutionary steam-powered Soho mint. I have another coin that is very much the official product of the French state – marked ‘République française’ and the year, 1793, made in a yellowish metal quite possibly the product of melted church bells. Yet it bears the likeness of Louis XVI, probably already dead by the time it was struck, and shows other signs of having been worn as a medallion in his memory.

Both objects point to the central historical dilemma discussed directly by Rebecca Spang, and in a looser sense also by Timothy Tackett – how could people in revolutionary times know how to trust everyday social interactions, when the signs and symbols of the cultural landscape that inscribed meaning into such interactions were endlessly displaced? And how were they supposed to feel about this situation?

Tackett’s approach is to give us an essentially narrative history of the years running up to and into what is loosely regarded as ‘the Terror’. As its title indicates, Tackett’s book is much more concerned with how the dramatic events of 1793–4 became possible than with how, in detail, they played out. Thus Robespierre joins the Committee of Public Safety on p. 292 of Tackett’s account, and is executed, a year later, on p. 339, with events after that relegated to general conclusions. His approach is shaped by the choice of sources he developed with great success in his work, some 20 years ago, on the men who sat in the National Assembly of 1789–91.(1) The book thus leans heavily on personal accounts and observations captured from a wide array of correspondence and diaries. Although the collection of material is impressive, Tackett himself acknowledges that, for the most part, this confines his key witnesses to ‘that exclusive group’ of some one-to-two per cent of the population who were the products of a full secondary education, and made up the leadership cadre of politics (p. 16).

Spang’s work is very different, picking up and developing the close reading of different forms of evidence and innovative reflection on layers of social experience that characterised her earlier book on the history of the restaurant.(2) Much more a conventional monograph in conception than Tackett’s, it nonetheless also conveys a strong sense of the changing phases of revolutionary attitudes to money, and out of that key issue,
draws wide-ranging reflections on the nature of the revolutionaries’ culture – and thus, on what they were capable of understanding as ‘political’ and ‘economic’. Whereas Tackett’s book is full of previously-unknown individual observations on events well known to historians, Spang’s raises the lid on a whole array of revolutionary social relations and political dilemmas that have previously lacked their historian, and thus poses fascinating new questions about how to understand the wider processes of life in the 1790s.

We are taken on a journey that reminds us that trust is central to the very concept of money – that in the Old Regime the monarchy could change the value of supposedly ‘secure’ gold and silver coins by fiat, and often did; that small-change rarely had any ‘intrinsic’ value, and what was in circulation could be so worn as to be indistinguishable from the corroded flattened nail-heads that sometimes circulated alongside it. In a situation where people trusted the continuity of monetary value, these things did not really matter, as it did not really matter that the state rarely issued new coins, but private individuals could take silver and gold objects to a number of privileged local mints and have them turned into coins to order. Nor did it matter that accounts were kept in a system that had no one-to-one correlation with any existing unit of metallic currency, or that, for most people most of the time, business was done on a continuously-circulating system of credit, and most monetary instruments were private bills of exchange, bonds and promissory notes from a wide range of non-state and sub-state institutions.

Spang explores in detail how revolutionary politicians persuaded themselves that patriotic confidence ought to be able to substitute for the habits that had held old-regime monetary practices together, while developing their own peculiar ideas about what constituted the function of money. Since the whole premise of the revolution was the fiscal and financial incompetence of the state, and since the revolutionaries in late 1789 had taken an enormous political and social gamble in seizing control of the lands of the Catholic Church to put material collateral behind their plans for stabilisation, all this was of critical import.

As the revolutionary credit-notes issued on the basis of those lands, the assignats, journeyed from being something very like an asset-backed bond to something very like money, legislators stubbornly resisted any idea of making them exclusive legal tender, or of compelling their face-value acceptance. With coinage in drastic short supply and revolving credit no longer an option in chaotic times, privately- or locally-issued billets de confiance and, as above, metallic monnaie de confiance entered circulation in vast, unverifiable quantities, turning the monetary realm into one of ever-shifting boundaries of individual decision-making for people at every social level. Was this particular piece of paper, this specific coin, actually worth anything at all; what was the difference between a real assignat, a forged one (and I once saw one in the police archives that was hand-drawn), and a billet de confiance that was no more than a few words printed on paper, signed by a local mayor or councilman? Do you trust the person who has given it to you, and what do you do if you don’t? Money, that ought to have been the crucial
lubricant of socio-economic interaction, became instead a source of friction that locked basic everyday realities into the highest levels of political conflict. Belief amongst the elite that an economic free market ought to secure the value of their paper instruments coincided with arduous efforts to produce assignats that were physically worthy of confidence, and resistant to forgery. Alongside such efforts ran also the abiding conviction that lack of confidence – and assignats already traded at 10–20 per cent below their face-value on the Parisian streets in early 1791 – was a political situation, evidence of counter-revolutionary plotting and treasonous intention. Voices from the popular radical clubs demanded the simple solution of cours forcé – to make the assignats ‘fiat money’, traded at face-value under criminal sanction, but the legislators could never go this far, only banning private billets de confiance at the very end of 1792, and not until April 1793, after a year of wartime disasters, attempting to implement a cours forcé which never fully took hold. Printing ever-larger volumes of assignats took the place of failings in other means of public finance – and also required a massive workforce, beset with internal rivalries and political denunciations – but as Spang also intriguingly shows, the fall in their value was never understood as an ‘inflation’ in the modern sense, being always related back to essentially political and material questions of their substance, and citizens’ beliefs about them.

In the course of laying this out, and taking the story through to the supposed Napoleonic stabilisation, and continued battles over the physical nature of the currency into the 1840s, Spang also leads us repeatedly from the high-toned debates of legislators to the lives of citizens, afflicted in every town and village by radical disruptions to their economic life. One of the great virtues of the book is its persistent reminders that decisions taken at the political centre had real consequences for millions of individual lives, and that all of those individuals had their own concerns, alarms, and conclusions about the politics of money. When the last desperate gasp of independent Parisian popular radicalism played itself out in the doomed sans-culotte insurrections of the Spring of 1795, their demands for ‘bread’ embraced also the means to pay for it: bread existed, but the money to buy it with was evaporating before their eyes – older assignats ‘demonetized’ by decree, newer ones scorned by shopkeepers.

Pairing the hard materialism of a study of what money actually was as objects with a sensitive attunement to what people thought and felt about such objects, and the cultural implications they held, Spang convincingly denies any easy separation between ‘emotional’ and ‘rational’ realms of politics and economics. All are placed together in a social world that was at the time frequently chaotic, but which emerges from the pages of this book newly illuminated.

While Spang ventures onto the territory of the history of emotions in bringing her insights together, Tackett wishes to place an emotional understanding of revolutionary politics at the heart of his story. However, of the two he is less successful at making the case for this as an
innovative insight. Although in his introduction he claims to be going beyond a generalised account of ‘sentiment’, naming William Reddy and Sophie Wahnich (p. 7) as touchstones of what is to be surpassed, his central argument concerns fear and anxiety, understood in supposedly unproblematic terms. Furthermore, given the nature of his source-base, a great deal of the reflection on such emotions comes either in self-description or in the attribution of more or less ‘irrational’ sentiments to enemies, opponents, or the mob.

Two essential difficulties present themselves here. In the matter of self-description, one of the key aspects of Reddy’s work on sentimentalism in this period is that it is not discursively transparent, and that various forms of introspective and private communicative practices had in fact culturally-structured significance that was particular to the era.(3) People of that age did not understand the experience of strong feeling in the same way as is common now, attributing it to entirely different physiological and psychological mechanisms than our post-Freudian, post-traumatic age, with entirely different implications for the moral status of the ‘feeler’. Thus to move towards a reflection on what such accounts mean requires an attention to meta-cognition – to thinking about thinking about feeling – which Tackett does not enter into.(4) One cannot simply take expressions of interiority, translate them into contemporary English, and deploy them as effective windows into the soul of the 1790s.(5) We may be assured that of course people were afraid and anxious amidst political chaos and frequent bloody violence, but how they processed those ‘raw’ apprehensions into self-awareness, and what that meant when consciously recorded in journals or letters, is quite another matter.(6)

The second issue is that of the socio-cultural structure of Tackett’s source-base. It has led him into a situation where, from the earliest pages of the text, ‘popular’ activity, and ‘popular violence’ in particular, is viewed from outside. A three-and-a-half-page section of his first chapter discusses the identity of ‘the people’ (pp. 22–6), over a page of which is concerned with the ‘clear propensity for the use of violence that shocked and disconcerted the future Revolutionaries’ (p. 24), and half a page more records expressions of scorn for popular ignorance. Although Tackett works hard to avoid simply repeating such prejudices in his narrative, they inevitably colour it, as dramatic popular actions are juxtaposed to vivid expressions of bourgeois feeling about such actions. The choice to present a narratively-structured history, and to base it on the particular kinds of sources he has uncovered, leaves Tackett effectively forced to look at the great popular engagements of the revolutionary era – the writing of the cahiers de doléances, the Parisian mobilisation of July 1789, the ‘Great Fear’, endemic anti-seigneurial petitioning and local direct action on feudal dues and taxation, great energetic risings both for and against the Parisian agenda across the country – as all basically faceless and formless, something that happened to ‘Revolutionaries’, rather than being the expression of how far ordinary people were revolutionaries, or indeed, consciously and willingly counter-revolutionary.
Tackett’s book is a vividly-written narrative history of revolutionary politics as a process that is not one of colliding social blocs or ideological leading elements, but of colliding preconceptions and a muddle of good intentions, choking fears and outbursts of dreadful, destructive suspicions. If he cannot say as much as he hopes about the real meaning of his witnesses’ sentiments, he shows us very clearly how, in the minds of the educated elite, patterns of belief in conspiracy and betrayal were built up from a veritable mille-feuille of daily interactions, rumours, events and speculations. In focusing attention so much on the years running into what is generally called ‘the Terror’, he usefully reminds us of how much there is to understand beyond seeing that later period as an inescapable Black Hole, generating a predetermined gravitational acceleration of horror.

The book’s weakness, ironically, is its concern to be monographically original, and to use a particular kind of source that precludes taking more of a panoramic view of the whole landscape of political interactions. On several occasions I was struck with the thought that - on the 1789 National Assembly, on the 1791 Oath of the Clergy, on the origins of the 1793 War in the Vendée – Tackett has over his long and distinguished career written better social history of those events than he offers here. Nonetheless, for the general or student reader, I would certainly recommend The Coming of the Terror as a fount of useful chronological clarity on the Revolution’s political history.

For the more advanced or specialised reader, however, I give a wholehearted recommendation to read Stuff and Money at your earliest opportunity. Rebecca Spang has given us a work which appears to be much more narrowly focused than Tackett’s, but which in practice asks an even more penetrating set of questions about the general issue of how we should understand social experience and its political consequences in the French Revolution, and beyond.

Notes

5. For a general discussion of the history of emotions and its methodologies, see
the recent review here: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1752> [accessed 22 April 2015].


**Author's Response**

Timothy Tackett

The review by David Andress is somewhat curious. He provides a careful analysis of the fascinating new study by Rebecca Spang. But in the case of my work on *The Coming of the Terror*, he assumes a somewhat dismissive tone and chooses not even to present the book's principal arguments and conceptual structure. Of course, the history of the French Revolution is a very contentious field. Professor Andress, who has written several fine books on the subject, invariably holds strong opinions, some of which differ from my own.

My book is criticized for devoting insufficient space to the popular classes. Yet as the Introduction makes clear, the focus is specifically on the Revolutionary elites (‘all those individuals who were elected to national, regional, or local offices after 1789 or who joined political clubs’) and how, over time, they came to tolerate and even embrace a political culture of violence. While in recent decades a great deal has been written on the popular classes, including a study by Professor Andress himself, the psychology and emotional structure of the political elite as a group remain, in some respects, far more mysterious. In any case, the book does give substantial attention to ‘the people’ – far more than the ‘three-and-a-half pages’ measured out by Professor Andress – as it explores their impact on and interaction with the Revolutionary leadership. So too it develops substantial sections on women and on the nobility.

Professor Andress also takes me to task for my supposedly naive treatment of emotions. He himself is strongly attracted to the work of William Reddy and to literary theories about the influence of ‘sentiment’ in the Revolution. In his view I give inadequate attention to ‘meta-cognition’ and to ‘thinking about thinking about feeling’. I can only say that I find this to be an extraordinarily daunting task for any historian, short of his entering into pure theoretical speculation. I remain utterly unconvinced of the existence of a unified cultural meta-structure in the late 18th century, supposedly constructed through the reading of novels or plays or other texts, structures that somehow predetermined the
mental apparatus and perspectives of the whole generation of Revolutionaries. Most such conclusions are based on a very selective choice drawn from among the vast and extremely diverse corpus of 18th-century printed productions (post hoc, ergo propter hoc) and on a very simplistic understanding of the reading process (to read a text is not necessarily to understand it nor to believe it nor to internalize it). Indeed, as I note in the introduction, the Revolution was an extraordinarily innovative and protean period in which little if anything was scripted in advance. New perspectives and understandings were pieced together from a wide array of materials from the past or were entirely innovated. A great many leaders were themselves extraordinarily volatile, inconsistent, and vacillating in their positions from week to week and from month to month. Even social identities and the values on which those identities were based were frequently reexamined and sometimes reformed.

My own approach to elite emotions has been informed not by literary theory but above all by recent research in social psychology, political science, and sociology. It is critical for historians to explore the whole range of specific emotions experienced during the Revolution. They must take into account not only fear per se, but also joy, enthusiasm, and fraternity (a social manifestation of love); as well as anger, hatred, and shame: how such emotions were related to one another, how they were shaped by events and transformed by rumor and periods of panic, and how they played a role in generating the anxiety and mistrust that so characterized the mentalité of the Revolutionaries in the months leading up to the Terror. But in addition, it is essential to examine the sociology of emotions, the differing cultural rules and expectations within the relatively separate ‘emotional communities’ of the middle class elites, on the one hand, and the popular classes, on the other (to use Barbara Rosenwein’s helpful conceptualization). In the book I argue that during periods of great tension (such as July 1789, September 1792, or March 1793) there could be a certain merging of normally distinct emotional communities, entailing a greater impact of the values and attitudes toward violence of the popular classes.

Of course, any historical study that takes into account emotions invariably encounters a problem of sources. My approach in the study of the Revolutionary elites was to emphasize contemporary correspondence and diaries: testimonies written from day to day or week to week for friends, family, or oneself, in which individuals recounted the experience of the Revolution. Such documents, produced without foreknowledge of events to come, were particularly rich in insights into the doubts and uncertainties, the confusion and misunderstandings, the emotional reactions of individuals as they attempted to make sense of and react to the ongoing events of their day. It is obvious that no document – including the writings of Robespierre privileged by many authors – is ever ‘transparent’. But insofar as possible, I sought to read such letters ‘in series’: to compare and contrast accounts of specific experiences conveyed by as many different individuals as possible for whom I had
substantial sets of letters or diaries covering significant periods of time (a total of around 80). Professor Andress characterizes my book as being ‘essentially narrative history’ primarily of interest to ‘the general or student reader.’ I admit that one of my goals was to bring to life the drama and emotion of the Revolution and in this way to make the account more accessible, not only to the ‘advanced or specialized reader’ but also to a broader scholarly readership and, hopefully, to students as well. And clearly any study of the Revolution must take into account sequence and context – as Professor Andress himself implicitly recognizes in all of his recent books. Yet the reviewer might also have noted that The Coming of the Terror contains extensive analytical sections focusing on the multiple developments which, I would argue, contributed to the emergence of a political culture of violence. Successive chapters take up attitudes toward violence at the end of the Old Regime; the intensity and enthusiasm of Revolutionary commitment; the breakdown of authority and the emergence of a power vacuum; the impact of counterrevolution; the spread of a climate of fear and mistrust; the development of toxic factionalism; and the influence of the political and emotional culture of the Parisian working classes. There can be no doubt that the outbreak of war and of armed counterrevolution were pivotal moments in the Revolution. Yet ‘circumstances’ alone would have been insufficient without a prior transformation of the psychology and mentalité of the Revolutionaries, a transformation with a tragic inner logic that was integral to the process of the French Revolution – and that is perhaps, after all, integral to the phenomenon of revolution itself.

There can be no doubt that the book under review has its failings. Readers will judge whether I have written ‘better history’ in the past. But I do hope that those readers will be willing to take the book on its own terms and carefully consider its arguments and analysis before making their judgments.

Rebecca Spang

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to respond to Dave Andress’s insightful and generous review. Since I understand that Tim Tackett has written his own reply, I will confine my remarks here chiefly to my own work, but I do want to mention both that I am honored that Stuff and Money has now been paired with The Coming of the Terror on two occasions and that I hope single-book reviews are not being gradually withdrawn from circulation.(1a) While the pairing speaks to the continued vitality of French Revolution historiography, it also necessarily limits the reviewer’s scope for considering each book within other contexts more relevant to it alone. Stuff and Money is a history both of the Revolution and of money. Andress notes its significance for the first (and what author could quibble with a review that ends, ‘I give a wholehearted recommendation to read Stuff and Money at your earliest opportunity’?) but has little to say about the latter. Yet it was my commitment to this double task that made the book especially
challenging to conceptualize and write, since it effectively meant I had two variables (money, the French Revolution) and only a single equation (the book) with which to solve them!

Let me briefly comment on the book’s contributions to the history of money and then point to the effects these have for thinking about the Revolution. First, Stuff and Money rejects as ideological the very common model that narrates the development of money as a transition from substance to abstraction, from metals to Bitcoin. This way of thinking about money’s history is absolutely pervasive (it is shared by authors as otherwise dissimilar as Edmund Burke, Karl Marx, and Niall Ferguson) and it is appealing because it is an easy story to tell. This is how the fable goes: Once upon a time, there was only barter. Then some object (wheat, cattle, tobacco, beaver pelts, etc.) became the standard against which other values were measured. These perishable commodities eventually yielded to more durable metals which first circulated by weight and then, later, were minted into coins of uniform size and fineness. Then (the fable continues) some enterprising souls recognized they could lock the metals away and issue more easily transported paper money backed by gold and silver in the vault. After a time, inconvertible paper money (fiat currencies) became the norm and then, later, money became increasingly virtual. Historians over the past decades have become skeptical of unidirectional narratives, but this one – perhaps because it anchors extensive debate on whether these transitions show progress or decline – has proven extremely durable. Stuff and Money argues against it by showing that, in practice

monetary abstraction and physical coins had long co-existed (much as pennies and bills co-exist today with checkbooks, wire transfers, and debit cards). Their difference had (and has) more to do with social context than with historical change: a merchant in eighteenth-century Bordeaux conducted his transatlantic business with book debt and bills of exchange, while the working poor in the same city rarely saw any money other than copper coins. The faux-materialist framework structuring so many histories of money represses this social difference and marks it, wrongly, as change across time (pp. 10–11).

The book’s second major contribution to the history of money is hence to insist on social difference and to historicize class in terms not of relation to the means of production but to the means of exchange. Different people have different money. In Stuff and Money, we see this in recurrent debates about ‘the money of the poor’. Old Regime officials generally assumed that the very poor and vagrant needed to have some sort of cash (since they had no access to credit networks) and viewed a shortage of small change with nearly as much concern as a rise in bread prices. During the 1790s, many argued for enhancing the moral value of small change (such as the yellowish coin in David Andress’s collection) by embellishing it with patriotic slogans. At the same time, many revolutionaries opposed the issue of small-denomination assignats since paper had historically been used chiefly by the affluent. What would happen, the Jacobin Gabriel de Cussy asked, if ‘[we put] a written money
in the hands of people who cannot read, a fragile money in the hands of people who are careless, an easily dirtied money in the hands of people whose condition is inseparable from filth?’ (p. 151) Anxiety about the money of the poor did not end with Napoleon or even with the Restoration. Instead, 19th-century liberalism’s notional political and economic equality intensified concern. (See chapter seven, ‘Taking the Old Regime out of Circulation’).

Thinking about money in these ways has obvious consequences for how we write the history of the Revolution. As Andress notes, I take seriously the Constituent Assembly’s description of the assignats as ‘land in a form that can circulate’ and pay as much attention to the bills’ manufacture and destruction as I do to what is usually called ‘the history of economic thought’. Money has always been both concrete and symbolic (high-speed trading today depends on physical proximity to network cables, silver has no monetary use if others are not willing to accept it). In other words, distinctions drawn between the material and the immaterial, the lived and the ideological, are important for understanding the societies that draw them, but they should not be mistaken for absolute truths. Challenging the division of materiality from ideas has important consequences for how we think about both the history of money and that of the French Revolution.

Notes

1. For the other review that pairs these books, see Ruth Scurr in The Spectator (21 February 2015). My own review of The Coming of the Terror will appear in the Journal of Modern History later this year.