
Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

Sent to crush rebellion in Toulon in 1793, the *conventionnel* Joseph Fouché urged the Committee of Public Safety to “exercise justice as per nature’s example,” that is, to destroy the city totally. “Let us strike like lightning so that even the ashes of our enemies disappear from the soil of liberty.” This was not mere rhetorical embellishment, argues Mary Ashburn Miller in her sparkling and controversial book, but indeed the way Fouché (and Jacobins in general) had wedded the imagery of the natural world to the need to legitimize violence. Language was not only shaped by history but shaped political action itself: “revolutionary actors self-consciously engineered political language” (p. 3).

Miller’s book is in part a skillful investigation of why the use of imagery from the natural world should have been so common during the French Revolution. There are few surprises here, but her investigations of the impact of scientific understandings of the natural world on self-consciously enlightened bourgeois are insightful and instructive. The vocabulary of a natural world oscillating between chaos and calm drew its potency from the broader intellectual context of the Enlightenment, in particular scientific breakthroughs and renewed interest in natural features such as the volcanoes of the Auvergne, and memories of recent catastrophes such as the earthquakes in Lisbon in 1755 and in Messina and Calabria in 1783.

Miller has pieced together a mass of fascinating, often surprising material, including some striking iconography, to support her argument that the revolutionary language of nature was highly charged and changed across time. Whereas the Abbé Fauchet had commemorated the victims of the Bastille in August 1789 by recalling that “[despotism] menaced us unremittingly with its lightning bolts,” in August 1792, Marie-Joseph Chénier delivered an eulogy to new revolutionary martyrs who had in turn “crushed [royalty] by lightning” (p. 83). Nature had changed sides and by 1794 was being summoned by Robespierre to rain down its thunderbolts on the guilty. The awesome power of volcanoes and earthquakes, of thunder and lightning, the capacity of the natural world to create a new equilibrium by its own internal regeneration, all this was seductive to men equally struck by their own capacity to recreate the world. As a writer for the Committee of Public Safety mouthpiece the *Feuille du Salut Public* expressed it in September 1793, “Everything moves, clashes, collides in nature; it is in this movement that life, equilibrium, harmony are born. The political world resembles the material world in this regard.”

The use of the dramatic language of the natural world was not just one of the methods chosen to express the violence being experienced; for Miller, the violence was legitimized, even encouraged by the inherently violent language of nature chosen by the revolutionaries. “And nature provided a way of exonerating or even encouraging revolutionary violence, of limiting opposition to ‘natural’ acts” (p. 18). This is the most provocative element of Miller’s thesis. She concentrates in particular on a few horrific acts of collective violence which were “excused” by revolutionary leaders, notably the massacre of La Glacière in Avignon in October 1791 and the
September 1792 prison massacres in Paris. There are also particularly powerful discussions of
the imagery of the Mountain (the source of enlightenment, purity and courage) with the Marais
or Swamp (the fetid home of reptilian slipperiness). Somewhat strangely, she argues that all the
Jacobins’ enemies were described as being from the swamp. Others will insist on the equally
hostile but quite distinct attitude to the Girondins.

The argument is original and controversial and should enliven graduate seminars and scholarly
debate for years to come. Like so much recent American scholarship on the French Revolution,
Miller assumes that mass violence is the result of warped ideologies rather than conflicts over
vested interests. We have moved from William Doyle’s conclusion that “It was resistance that
made the Revolution violent” to a view that it was the Jacobins’ choice of words that did so.¹ The
issue goes to the heart of contemporary debates about historical understanding: is language
a means of expressing our understandings of the world we experience, or does it also shape,
even determine, our understanding of that experience? Is the whole world a text? Or are
language and the world it describes in constant interaction?

Miller seems shocked by the widespread acceptance that violence was “a necessary and natural
part of the Revolution” (p. 4) and that Robespierre could have confronted his opponents in the
Convention with the question “Did you want a revolution without revolution?” (This was at a
time when his opponents were seeking to assign the responsibility for the September massacres
to him and to have him exiled or killed when in fact, as Miller herself notes, Girondins
themselves had initially accepted, even encouraged, the massacres.) But the difficulty for the
French revolutionaries—as for all successful revolutionaries—is that their power was ultimately
the result of popular violence, on 14 July 1789 and 10 August 1792. Like other revolutionaries
before and since, the Jacobins would grapple with how to circumscribe “legitimate” insurrection.
It was not simply a matter of excusing violence, as Miller argues, but rather of deciding which
“popular” acts could genuinely be seen as “of the people.” The polarized responses of political
leaders to the killing of the Étampes mayor Jacques Simonneau in 1792 are an example of this
difficulty (one of many examples where revolutionary authorities punished violent acts).

So language, not threats to survival, explains the violence of 1792-94. Miller makes few
references to the extent of counterrevolution or to the scale of the external military threat, the
usual contextual reasons given for the reluctant decisions of the Convention to put in place
draconian measures it would decide as a policy of “terror until the peace.” She employs the
common use of natural imagery of gunpowder as “revolutionary thunder” to explain why the
Convention would encourage ordinary people to collect saltpeter “instead of planting Victory
Gardens, as Americans would during the Second World War” (p. 94). The parallel seems a
forced one.

An intriguing passage in the book concerns the Convention’s debates on the draining of swamps
(étangs) used by nobles to stock fish, skillfully linked by Miller to the hostility in Jacobin
imagery toward pestilential political swamps. Here is one example of where Miller is able to link
the study of political language to actual social conditions. It is not entirely convincing since
Robespierre actually prepared two contradictory speeches to be delivered according to the
direction of the political wind (or water).² Elsewhere, it would have been fascinating had
Miller reflected on the agitated language of nature and popular upheaval and its possible links
with the impassioned reports from provincial administrators about the environmental impact of
large-scale illegal tree-felling and clearing of “wastelands,” particularly in the south.³

Miller’s research relies heavily not only on an evidently close reading of a range of
revolutionary material—from plays to speeches—but also on a major digital archive capable of
being word-searched. Of course, this can raise methodological uncertainties, that such searches
simply identify word uses without a sense of their importance compared with others: a word
search for Christ would also have resulted in a disconcerting number of positive responses,
especially in imagery of Mount Sinai. Here, the case of Maximilien Robespierre is revealing.
Once again, the young man has to carry a heavy load. While Miller notes (p. 202) that he
referred to popular violence as “volcanic” only four times, he is repeatedly cited for his
metaphors of lightning striking the heads of the guilty. In particular, three of his major speeches
from 1794—that on revolutionary government (5 February/17 Pluviôse Year II), the Festival
of the Supreme Being (7 May/18 Floréal) and his final speech to the Convention (26 July/8
Thermidor) constitute core evidence for Miller’s argument. But what does a fuller consideration
of these three speeches in fact suggest about the sources of Robespierre’s understandings of a
chaotic world?

In his speech of 5 February, Robespierre did refer several times to the “stormy” circumstances in
which the Republic found itself, but that was the limit of his natural allegories. Instead, the
speech was studded with classical references, from Agis and Lycurgus of Sparta to Philip of
Macedon and Miltiades and Aristides of Athens. In particular, he drew directly on Cicero’s
account of the Catiline conspiracy, when Cicero had acted decisively and uncompromisingly
against a conspiracy in first-century BC Rome by Lucius Sergius Catilina’s aristocratic
faction.[4] This was a juxtaposition of the vices and virtues, the latter under conspiratorial
threat, which seems to have become embedded in Maximilien’s subconscious when a boy at the
Lycée Louis-le-Grand. His speech on the Supreme Being on 7 May included a hymn of praise to
economic and intellectual progress. The mastery of lightning ranked with La Pérouse’s voyages
and David’s canvases: “everything has changed in the physical world; everything must change in
the moral and political world.” But the speech had many more references to the perfidy of
Albion, the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and, again, the lessons of antiquity. Similarly, in
his meandering, fatal last speech to the Convention on 8 Thermidor (26 July), he noted that his
enemies had claimed that France was “marching over volcanoes,” but otherwise the speech was a
diatribe against conspiracies past and present, enlivened with many classical references. It is
therefore not surprising that earlier generations of historians were as interested in the classical
roots of revolutionary discourse as is Miller in those from the natural world.[5]

Perhaps the strongest evidence for Miller’s thesis is the alacrity with which Thermidorians
abandoned the “natural” language of violent revolution. Just as the image of “the Terror” and of
Robespierre as its Cromwell or Catilina was invented within days of the executions of 9-10
Thermidor, so the language of volcanic popular eruptions and thunderbolts of punishment was
dropped. The Jacobin Club itself was soon described as “a volcano whose crater is extinct.”

This is a finely produced book, distinguished too by Mary Ashburn Miller’s lucid and engaging
prose. Readers will be divided over whether her thoroughly fresh and original approach to
understanding revolutionary violence is compelling, or indeed whether the natural world was
even the most important of the wells from which Jacobins drew their understandings of the
times of triumph, destruction and uncertainty in which they lived. But everyone who reads this
book will think better about the complex and distinct languages of the French Revolution.

NOTES


des étangs du 14 frimaire an II* (Paris : Fayard, 2006), p. 164; *Papiers inédits trouvés chez Robespierre,*

[3] She cites, but does not discuss, the work on environmental history of Andrée Corvol and this reviewer, and does not refer to successive assemblies’ deep concerns about the effects of hillside clearings.


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**Review.** "A Natural History of Revolution is a bold and strikingly original study of revolutionary political culture. Mary Ashburn Miller argues that the French revolutionaries of 1789–1794 turned new 'enlightened' understandings of natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, lightning, and volcanoes into powerful verbal and visual metaphors that made revolutionary violence appear not only natural but also necessary, even providential.  

-- Howard G. Brown, Binghamton University-SUNY, author of Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon. **About the Author.** Mary Ashburn Miller is an ACLS New Faculty Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor of History and Humanities at Reed College. Read more. Mary Ashburn Miller argues that the French revolutionaries of 1789-1794 turned new 'enlightened' understandings of natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, lightning, and volcanoes into powerful verbal and visual metaphors that made revolutionary violence appear not only natural but also necessary, even providential. Graceful prose and fascinating analysis make this book a pleasure to read and a provocation to discuss."--Howard G. Brown, Binghamton University, SUNY, author of Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon, "A Natu... The French Revolution was a watershed event in modern European history that began in 1789 and ended in the late 1790s with the ascent of Napoleon Bonaparte.  

As the 18th century drew to a close, France’s costly involvement in the American Revolution, and extravagant spending by King Louis XVI and his predecessor, had left the country on the brink of bankruptcy. Not only were the royal coffers depleted, but two decades of poor harvests, drought, cattle disease and skyrocketing bread prices had kindled unrest among peasants and the urban poor.  
