

## White on Perovic (2012)

Perovic, Sanja. *The Calendar in Revolutionary France: Perceptions of Time in Literature, Culture, Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xiv + 276. ISBN: 978-1-107-02595-0

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The conviction that the French Revolution initiated an entirely new era in the history of mankind was perhaps never so completely epitomized as in its creation of a new calendar. Retrospectively establishing 22 September 1792 as the first day of Year I (the month of *Vendémiaire*), the calendar testified to the Revolution's compelling faith in its institution of a new time that was, at the *same* time, a reassertion of the universal temporal cycles of nature that centuries of Ancien Régime oppression had obscured. The failure of that calendar to last much more than twelve years while key figures behind its creation joined the pile of dead bodies left in the Revolution's wake—the poet Fabre d'Églantine guillotined in 1794, the mathematician Romme a prison suicide in 1795—has often seemed emblematic of the larger failure of the Revolution as a whole to transform the world in harmony with its proclaimed ideals.

Sanja Perovic's brilliant study of the history of the calendar and its place within Revolutionary conceptions of time and history offers a reconsideration of that supposed failure and, more broadly, of the larger issues that inform what one might call the aesthetic ideology of time. *The Calendar in Revolutionary France* is an exhilarating book that invites one to think about the calendar and its history in ways that move between different time scales and that complicate the terms through which we imagine historical periodization altogether. It does this partly through its attention to Enlightenment thinking about the quasi-mythical origins of religion and the state even as it develops a more detailed account of the calendar as it was conceived and revised over the course of the Revolution. What is at stake is the history of how the Revolution historicized time in ways that still inform thinking about the Revolution. For that very reason, Perovic's project has a reflexive character, and the problems addressed by *The Calendar in Revolutionary France* are as much theoretical as they are historical.

Perovic is especially concerned with theoretical problems raised by the way in which calendars establish frameworks not only for unifying time across multiple, heterogeneous spaces, but for coordinating singular events within recurrent environmental cycles. Drawing on much recent historiographic work on the concept of time as well as on calendars per se—including studies by Maurice Halbwachs, Jennifer Hunt, and Reinhart Koselleck—she shows how calendars may serve to stabilize (the experience of) time. They enable historians to date and thus narrate a series of events, yet they also work to foreclose history's eventfulness altogether by subordinating the openness of time to the rhythms of nature. Perovic's analyses underline the importance of this naturalizing function within the revolutionary vortex of the 1790s when the experience of time often seemed to be accelerating beyond control.

The paradoxes posed by the history of the Revolutionary calendar reiterate a paradox crucial to the modern concept of revolution. The latter imposes its understanding of revolution as a break with the past onto an earlier understanding of revolution as a return to the past. The result is never entirely coherent: on the one hand, an originary moment of constituent power; on the other, a cyclical recurrence of political forms. Some version of this paradox informs all of the debates and discourses that Perovic addresses. Suturing the traumatic events of recent French history to the deep time of cosmic gyrations, the Revolutionary calendar naturalized history even as it historicized nature. But the balance of opposing terms in such paradoxical efforts varied greatly depending on the political and ideological contingencies of the moment. To take just one example: Gilbert Romme's initial plan for the new calendar left more traces of "innovation and novelty"—that is, more remembrances of the tumultuous events out of which the calendar arose—than the version finally adopted in which Fabre d'Églantine poeticized and pastoralized Romme's sometimes abstract language. D'Églantine's inventions included days dedicated to "fruits, vegetables, farming utensils" and the now familiar month names with their evocation of seasonal weathers (*Brumaire, Frimaire, Nivôse*): "Emphasiz[ing] natural time at the expense of any notion of historical progress, [D'Églantine's] calendar unabashedly promotes stasis, a return to a golden age" (121). Perovic traces analogous tensions throughout the calendar's history.

As the above suggests, the calendar's project was as much aesthetic as political. In exploring its aesthetic dimension, Perovic extends her discussion beyond the calendar itself, giving special attention to the Revolutionary propagandist Sylvain Maréchal whose 1788 *Almanach des honnêtes gens* had served as one of its models. Perovic reads Maréchal as an exemplary atheist of the late Enlightenment whose quasi-utopian pastoralism envisions revolution as a return to a more egalitarian, if still patriarchal, past. Yet she also argues that his refusal to compromise with changing Revolutionary regimes and his later support for Gracchus Babeuf's "Conspiracy of Equals" also makes him into a forerunner of the modern revolutionary. Disappointed

with the Revolution's failure to address social inequalities, Maréchal and his conspiratorial allies come to understand their investment in mythic prehistories as necessarily driving them towards an altogether open and unpredictable future. That is, their understanding of how calendar time balances history and nature shifts decidedly in favor of history—of unidirectional rather than cyclical time. In a crucial index of (revolutionary) modernity, they take their bearings from the future even if they still on occasion, to borrow Karl Marx's phrase, conjure the past.

The shift that Perovic uncovers in Maréchal and others may be described as primarily a matter of emphasis. It suggests a complex shuttling between past and future in the politics and aesthetics of the Revolution. In clarifying these shifts, Perovic sometimes makes overly schematic distinctions as if the paradoxes she teases out of her materials could be made into the linear narrative of fixed periodizations that they put into question and against which she elsewhere argues. That said, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France* only rarely loses sight of the complexity of its topic and the critical reflexivity that topic demands of all attempts to periodize history.

For Perovic the failure of the calendar to impose itself over the long term is less of a failure than it appears. She argues that the calendar left its imprint *both* on the subtly secularized version of the Gregorian calendar that Napoleon finally negotiated with the Catholic Church *and* on the political-aesthetic program of later revolutions. Even its afterlife is thus marked by the paradox of restoration and renewal. The Paris Commune of 1871 explicitly took up this paradoxical mantle when it dated itself "Year 79 of the Revolution" (236). Figurations of revolutionary time as different from the time of ordinary civic life, as having their own calendar, testify to the resilience of revolution's "resistance to linear time" (237)—a phrase redolent of a writer Perovic does not mention: Walter Benjamin. Such resistance, one may add, informs much contemporary political activism even when it has given up any claim on the word revolution. *The Calendar in Revolutionary France* is an important book not least because it illuminates a temporal predicament that we—the "we" of globalization and environmental disaster—cannot help but recognize as our own.

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