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In Search of the Girondins

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Keywords: *Bouche de fer*; *Cercle social*; Girondins; Montagnards; radicalism; slavery; women

Although the Girondins are one of the best-established categories in the history of the French Revolution, much of the research on them over the past half century has been devoted to arguing what they were not. Michael Sydenham, who first reopened this subject in 1961, demonstrated that they were in no sense a political party. Alison Patrick, eleven years later, showed that they did not constitute a majority in the Convention before they were purged on 2 June 1793; nor, she showed, were they the representatives of capitalism and thus economically distinguishable from more populist Montagnards. C.J. Mitchell in 1988 argued persuasively that they were never monarchists, even during the last weeks before the fall of the monarchy in 1792. Even in Bordeaux, in the department after which they were named, and where the only monument to them was erected at the turn of the last century, there was disagreement from the start about who it was meant to commemorate, and no names at all were placed on the monument until 1989. Those added then were exclusively deputies sent by the department of the Gironde to the Convention, and subsequently executed. They did not include others normally associated indissolubly with the group, and who died with them or around the same time, such

as Brissot, Buzot, Barbaroux, Pétion, or Mme Roland. The Girondins as a meaningful group, it would appear, had been a construct of their sans-culotte and Montagnard enemies, a construct too readily taken up and perpetuated in historiography by writers tracing their own ideological ancestry to the policies introduced after the purge of June 1793, and enforced by Terror. These policies were abandoned at the same time as the Convention, following the fall of Robespierre, readmitted deputies who had protested against the purge.

Yet it is unrealistic to wish the Girondins away, and simply to stop using so familiar a name because of the unsustainable historiographical freight which it carries. I have long felt, and hinted in print a number of times, that it is time to think more carefully about who the Girondins were, less by counting heads than by looking at what those given the name had in common intellectually. Paradoxically, I think that the place to begin is with one further thing that they were not: although it is one of the more conventional labels often attached to them, they were not moderates. Brissot's public political radicalism predated the Revolution, as did that of Condorcet. The most radical forum for public discussion in early Revolutionary Paris, the *Cercle Social*, and its newspaper the *Bouche de Fer*, were created by future Girondins like Fauchet. The very name sans-culotte was first used, and then approvingly, in the way that was to become classic by the Girondin journalist Gorsas. At the king's trial, all Girondins accepted that he was guilty, and their argument that the Convention's verdict on this momentous occasion should be endorsed by the Nation which had elected it seems impeccably democratic. Later, their reluctance to establish a price Maximum showed their commitment to the radical economic outlook which almost all revolutionaries had initially shared. They held out for all these things in the face of growing hostility from the sans-culottes of the capital, who spoke only for themselves rather than the Nation at large. It was the Montagnards who buckled under this sectional pressure, eventually sacrificing the integrity of the Convention itself by expelling colleagues targeted by this outside force. In this, the Montagnards were pragmatists, just as they were in their acceptance of a Maximum in which they did not believe, and in their acquiescence to attacks on press freedom when sans-culotte gangs smashed the workshops of Girondin printers. It was scarcely a coincidence that Thomas Paine, the greatest international revolutionary of the age, was a Girondin sympathiser. The Girondins were martyred

because, like him, they stood by first principles rather than forced principles.

It is surely also time to remember other aspects of Girondin radicalism. They were certainly far more open to the claims of women to a public role than the Montagnards. While the latter, appealing to the authority of Rousseau, closed down female political organisations, the Girondins had one of their centres of gravity in the salon of Mme Roland. The notorious Revolutionary ‘Amazons’ were Girondin supporters, including Olympe de Gouges, author of the Declaration of the Rights of Women. Condorcet had long been a campaigner for women’s political rights. Then there was the question of slavery. Brissot was one of the founders of the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, and Robespierre blamed the great slave uprising in Saint-Domingue on Girondin talk of emancipation. The two national commissioners sent in 1792 to deal with that rebellion, Sonthonax and Polverel, were nominees of Brissot. It was they who proclaimed the freedom of the slaves in Saint-Domingue – ironically after the Montagnard Convention, unknown to them, had decreed their recall as Girondin suspects. It seems unlikely that the Convention would have issued its general emancipation in February 1794 without this prior Girondin *fait accompli*.

As the ideological, not to say the emotional, commitment of historians to the Montagnards as ancestors of the modern Left continues to fade, it seems to me that the Girondins should be allowed to emerge, not as any sort of moderates, but as the truest of French Revolutionaries.

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