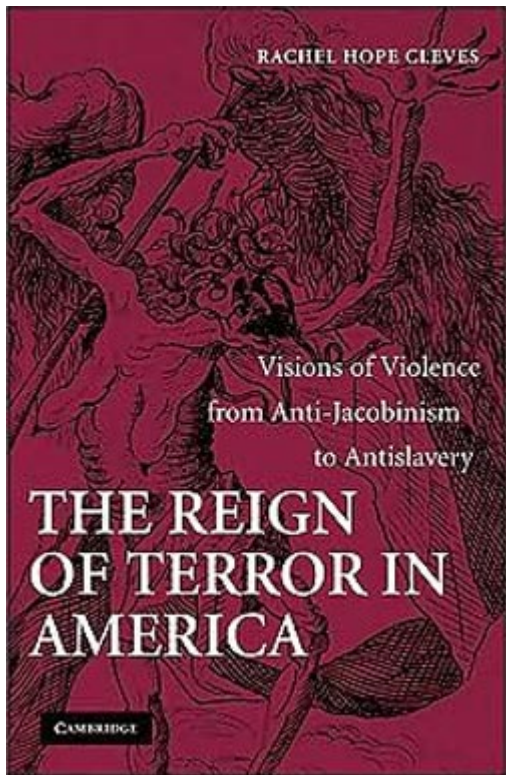


The French Origins of American Perceptions of Violence

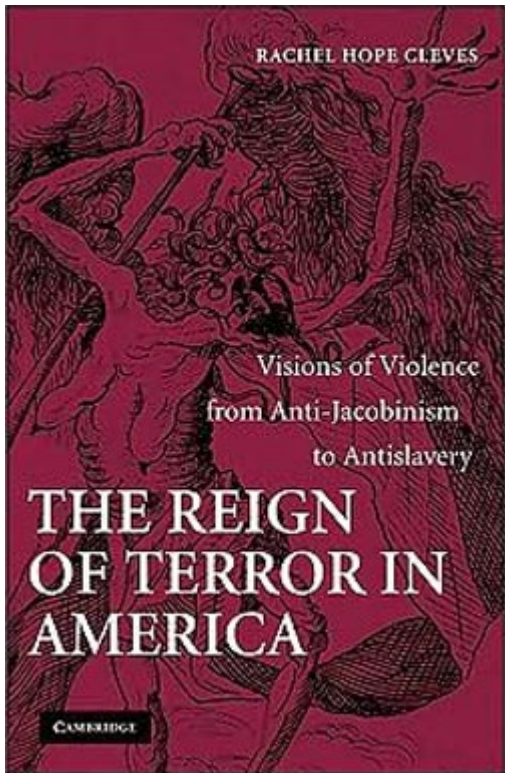


As a prototype for many subsequent American reactions to foreign liberation movements, Americans embraced the first, liberal phase of the French Revolution but recoiled in horror and condemnation when news of Jacobin bloodletting began to arrive in 1792. This story is familiar to historians of the early modern Atlantic world. Rachel Hope Cleves, however, takes the tale further, showing why notable Americans in the Northern states grew obsessed with French revolutionary violence, and how these obsessions surfaced in American society and politics from the 1790s through the Civil War.

Initially, Cleves observes, anti-Jacobinism circulated among Northern Federalists and Congregationalist and Presbyterian clerics who together doubted the orderly, Christian possibilities of popular sovereignty. Instead, they shared a Calvinist sense that strong rule—political authority as well as restraint of one’s own emotions and passions—was necessary to contain human depravity. We are familiar with John Adams’s fear of American Francophiles’ adoption of “the very stile and language of the French Jacobines” (67), and his administration’s adoption of the Alien and Sedition Acts as countermeasures to suppress potential red republican violence. Cleves links Adams’s opinion and policies with the preaching of such ministers as Elijah Parish, who warned against “parties and cabals” arising in America while in “the theatre of nations you see armies wallowing in their own blood” and predicted that “a shower of blood seems just ready to crimson our fields ... [and] corpses will

float [and] feed the wild beasts” (68, 69). Through graphic depiction of radical upheaval abroad Parish sought to shock his readers into opposing mob (that is, democratic) violence in America.

Cleves traces these sanguine sentiments across the Northern states, as inherited fear of revolutionary violence sparked literary works, social reform, and radical politics. She locates anti-Jacobinism in Gothic novels and pamphlets, which insisted that French revolutionary violence—cannibalism, infanticide, mass rape, beheadings of both the living and already dead—was “too disgusting to hear, too horrid to relate,” yet paradoxically called readers to “fix your eyes on this theatre of carnage!” (98, 97).



Rachel Hope Cleves, *Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). 312 pp., hardcover, \$80.00.

Reflecting how Americans’ discourse about controversial foreign events can often facilitate debate about important domestic issues, Cleves argues that this early Francophobic Gothic literature migrated towards condemnation of American slaveholding because “anti-Jacobinism and antislavery were connected by a common concern: unrestrained violence could destroy civil society” (107). The slave rebellion in the French colony of Saint Domingue, now Haiti, was essential to abolitionists’ adoption of “the violent language of anti-Jacobinism,” once white Haitian refugees spread accounts of “Dominguan bloodshed throughout the Atlantic” (146, 147). Such accounts, Cleves writes, “should have produced revulsion” among conservative anti-Jacobins. Instead, she argues, antislavery authors excused the Haitian slaves and blamed the uprising on slaveholder violence, focusing on “graphic descriptions of bloodshed,

tortures, murders and rapes” that paradoxically served to compel antislavery readers to react (146). By the turn of the nineteenth century, macabre literary descriptions appeared of American slaveholders’ use of slave corpses for crop fertilizer and of slaves’ skin for shoe leather. In this way, revolutions in France and Haiti, or at least antislavery writers’ use of them, hastened calls for immediate emancipation, the association of the South with violence and depravity, and the rise of American sectionalism.

Meanwhile social reforms meant to secure nonviolent American republicanism emerged. During the War of 1812 peace societies flourished. A “Friends of Peace” political coalition emerged in New England, which was rationalized as an ethical and constitutional opposition to a war provoked by bloodthirsty Southern war hawks, and eventually culminated in the quixotic Hartford Convention. Cleves detects an undercurrent that “ran through the network of opposition” to the war, a “violent language of resistance,” which “contained tendencies toward bloodshed that nearly led to civil war” (193, 191). Given her emphasis that American anti-Jacobins were committed to nonviolence at the time, it is not clear how fear of French revolutionary violence could “nearly” pave the way to civil war. Cleves is on firmer ground, however, in showing the anti-Jacobin roots of campaigns for state-supported education. Contrary to most interpretations, which associate it with Northern reformers’ encouragement of liberal democracy, Cleves argues that support for public education was a reaction against transatlantic radicalism, or what Horace Mann described as the tendency of the young and poor to embrace “barbarism” (229).

Ultimately, the location and fervor of anti-Jacobinism, Cleves argues, helps us understand why so many radical reformers before the Civil War, including William Lloyd Garrison, Joshua Leavitt, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Richard Hildreth, William Cullen Bryant, William Cooper Nell, and Lydia Maria Child—who differed in gender, race, and political partisanship—all came from conservative backgrounds. And Cleves shows how and why they often interpreted violence in America as a foreign element, alien and therefore particularly dangerous to a putative American tendency towards nonviolence. Anti-abolitionist assaults on Garrison, the murder of abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy, the gag rule adopted by Congress against antislavery petitions, proslavery violence against free soilers in “bleeding Kansas” and against Senator Charles Sumner in Congress—each was interpreted as evidence of a Jacobin “reign of terror” descending on the American republic. Through comparison of proslavery violence to Jacobinism, abolitionists “learned how violent language could become an outlet for fantasies of violent retribution,” thus “seducing readers with violent imagery” and “paving the path toward their support for the Civil War” (237, 274, 266). Surely fear of Jacobin revolutionary violence was not the only way that abolitionists could “voice violent desires” and abandon their commitment to nonviolence (275). But Cleves shows how anti-Jacobinism helped to justify support for righteous violence of the 1860s, violence committed not only by the slaves against their masters but by Northern citizens against the South and even against a federal government apparently tolerant of or even controlled by fanatical proslavery interests. (In an interesting appendix,

Cleves shows that the phrase “reign of terror,” among other keywords associated with French revolutionary violence, appeared some six thousand times in American newspapers, broadsides, and books through 1865 [283].)

Cleves occasionally acknowledges that anti-Jacobinism characterized the attitudes of groups other than the conservative, reforming Northerners on whom the book focuses. She notes, for example, how Southern whites began to embrace anti-Jacobinism, especially after the Haitian slave revolution, an enduring nightmare for Southern planters. And slaveholders and even anti-abolitionist Northerners could smear abolitionists as “Jacobins” (247). Newspapers reported John Brown’s murders of proslavery men in Kansas, not surprisingly, as “A Reign of Terror in Kansas” (273). Thus, although it is not her focus, proslavery anti-Jacobinism, North and South, may have been as pervasive as northeastern reformers’ anti-Jacobinism. Anti-Jacobinism, moreover, provided useful antirevolutionary language in American politics, with which national parties sought to tar opponents. Whigs labeled Democratic presidents as “Jacobin,” meaning that they abused executive power. Democrats called Whigs, and later Republicans, “Jacobin,” meaning that they opposed local majority rule—“popular sovereignty,” in the language of the day. After the Civil War, moreover, opponents of Reconstruction attacked land reform initiatives favoring the freedmen by characterizing such radical measures as “Jacobinism.” Cleves shows how opposition to the violence of the French Revolution galvanized antebellum Northern moral reform. But anti-Jacobinism loomed larger than that in American political culture: it influenced opposing sides of national conflicts through the Civil War era.