The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought

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Work on the European revolutions of 1848 has rolled out at an accelerated rate since their 150th anniversary two decades ago. Much of this newer research has looked at previously unheralded social and cultural dimensions of the revolutionary conjuncture, but politics has remained, necessarily, at the centre of the literature. 21st-century scholarship has been particularly good at in raising fresh questions about the revolutions as a subject for historians of political ideas. So far, however, most of this work has remained confined within closely focused studies, and specific national contexts.

The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought argues that we need a more sweeping reassessment of the revolutions' place in the history of political thought. This major collection of essays, edited by Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones, has been a number of years in the making, and has a suitably expansive vision. The preposition in the title is crucial. The book is not, except incidentally, a study of the revolutions *in* European political thought. Few of the contributions deal at any length with arguments about the causes, courses, and consequences of the revolutions themselves. This is, instead, a volume which probes how the revolutions *affected* European political thought, in a much wider variety of senses: it deals with the ways in which revolutions set political agendas, and presented 'profound challenges and imperative tasks' (p. 2). The pursuit of this objective makes for a set of essays which is both highly ambitious, and unavoidably diffuse.

The editors' introduction makes a persuasive case for 'a fresh examination of the 1848 Revolutions as a turning point in the history of political thought'. This re-examination, it explains, will be conducted within the framework of the 'contextualist' history of political thought, emerging out of Cambridge and elsewhere since the 1960s, which the editors note has been applied less readily to the 19th century than to earlier periods. Addressing these gaps 'in comparative pan-European perspective', the volume sets out to consider how the revolutions were grasped by a constellation of revolutionaries, conservatives, scholars, and 'thinkers', in context with other currents of political thought. The book's first main aspiration is to provide a better contextualised account of debates, during and after 1848, about the prospects of democratic change held out by the revolutions. Its second objective is to identify the contributions of the 'thinkers of 1848' to

more timeless theoretical debates about the nature of politics. (pp. 3–6). Here five themes are identified: democratisation, nationalism, state and civil society, religion, and ‘new ideological patterns’ including the fragmentation of republicanism and the rise of new varieties of socialism. The editors suggest on this score that ‘1848’ers’ together heralded ‘the advent of democratic modernity’, and illuminatingly interrogated ‘its possibilities and its problems’. In this sense, they ‘set the agenda for the political programmes of the ensuing decades’ (p. 13). In practice, however, the book (including the editors’ own chapters) concentrates on a fairly loose reading of the first objective: context is vital, but democracy is by no means the be-all and end-all. None of the chapters discusses the significance of ‘1848’ ideas at any point later than the early 20th century, so the ‘enduring theoretical debates’ only endure so far.

The book is divided into uneven geographical chunks, roughly reflecting the general distribution of historiographical interest in the different revolutions (and non-revolutions) of 1848. There are five chapters on France; five on Germany; two on Britain; and one each on Belgium, the Habsburg monarchy, Piedmont, and the ‘Slav question’. Only two chapters adopt a comparative perspective – the first by Axel Körner looking at Bohemia and Lombardy, the second by Stedman Jones considering the languages of ‘class struggle’ between Britain and France – and even these two offer juxtaposed case studies rather than sustained comparative analysis. The larger part of the book deals with the articulate political ideas of writers touched directly by the revolutions, including a number of lesser-known intellectuals thrown into practical politics. Few of the individual essays are suitable for the uninitiated: knowledge of the events of 1848 is generally taken for granted, and there are concessions to orientation only when we come to the least well-known corners of Europe.

Individual contributions are almost without exception of high quality, unsurprisingly given the presence of so many eminent historians among the 18 authors. Specialists in any area of 19th-century European politics and political ideas will all find a chapter or two which they will need to consult. But the book does not set out to assert a shared, substantive vision. The pieces do not interlock to suggest a new general interpretation of the political thought of the revolutions: several chapters emphasise the relatively limited significance of ideas of nationality in the revolutions, but this is perhaps just a consequence of looking deliberately past the more nationally-minded revolutionaries who have been the subject of so much previous study. Kossuth and Mazzini appear here only in passing, while the most regularly cited individual thinker is probably Marx. Not coincidentally, socialisms of different varieties constitute a stronger thread throughout the volume than do nationalisms.

Instead of looking for a unified analysis that does not exist, then, it may be more valuable to ask what the book tells us about 19th-century European political thought as a field of inquiry. The volume, as noted earlier, introduces itself as applying a ‘Cambridge’ methodology to the 19th century. It recognises that historians who have sought to employ the method have had ‘divergent interests and clashing preoccupations’, but that they are united by a commitment to treating texts as ‘the intervention of an author within a particular historically situated discursive context, which it is the task of the historian to reconstruct’ (p. 3). What does *The 1848 Revolutions* suggest about the scope of this method as applied to the (relatively) unfamiliar territory of 19th-century Europe?

The majority of authors are clearly sympathetic to the philosophical and theoretical strands of ‘the history of political thought’, and concern themselves with the elaborated political schemes of specific political ‘thinkers’ and/or politicians.⁽¹⁾ Beyond Edward Castleton’s chapter on Proudhon, an exceptionally committed exercise in manuscript excavation, all of them are based mainly on published texts. A third of the chapters are tightly focused on single individuals. Norbert Waszek offers a dissection of David Strauss’s political speeches, a tight analysis of only a few dozen printed pages; Duncan Kelly takes us through Meinecke’s changing visions of 1848 from the vantage point of the early 20th century; while Jean-Christophe Angaut looks at Mikhail Bakunin’s attitudes towards the ‘Slav question’ in the era of the revolutions. Jonathan Beecher’s chapter on Lamartine is more stately and humane, relating the statesman’s historical writing to his public career, while Diana Siclovan builds towards Lorenz von Stein’s analysis of 1848 via wider developments in German socialism. Several more chapters cast their net only slightly wider, dealing

with a handful of connected or complementary figures. Douglas Moggach, stretching what he presents as the purpose of the volume, offers a dense commentary on Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx prior to 1848; Maurizio Isabella explores the political thought of two Piedmontese politicians and public intellectuals; and Axel Körner constructs one of the most thought-provoking chapters around the ideas of the Czech historian František Palacký and the Milanese writer Carlo Cattaneo.

These analyses of intellectually sophisticated individuals work from a series of different sets of assumptions about what it means to handle political thought 'in context'. Presumably this owes at least something to the impressive range of national scholarly traditions in which their authors have been trained. In some cases the primary context is the personal biography of the figure(s) under consideration; in others it is the intellectual traditions which informed their writing, usually as represented by greater names like those of Hegel, Herder, and Sismoni; in others it is lesser-known contemporary intellectual and political opponents, with whom they engaged directly. In very few cases are these distinct types of context taken equally seriously.

A second set of chapters aim to trace the fortunes of particular sets of political ideas across a larger segment of a given national political culture. Again, this project is approached in different ways by different contributors. Thomas C. Jones' wide-ranging survey of French republicanism between 1848 and the fall of the Second Empire captures a worldview with imposing authority; it is neatly complemented by Anne-Sophie Chambost's piece on French socialist ideas about direct democracy over the same period. Georgios Varouxakis critiques the idea that mid-century British commentators understood the revolutions through the prism of the idea of 'nationality', focusing mainly on prominent liberal commentators. Samuel Hayat's chapter is unique within the book in focusing not on the educated, articulate middle and upper classes, but instead on socialist ideas among the 'working classes', which is to say among organised workers. Stedman Jones' closing chapter interprets the place of 'class' language in mid-century Britain and France: it is a fascinating essay, but it operates at such a high level that the 'language' element sometimes gets lost. Finally here there is Jonathan Parry's superb chapter on mid-century British Christian Socialist thought, which tracks the mechanisms by which a particular set of ideas, shaped partly in response to 1848, came to inform the politics of a group of British Liberal politicians between the 1850s and the 1870s.

The remaining chapters in the book strain at the boundaries of what might ordinarily be considered the history of political thought, at least in the 'Cambridge' mode. They feel more like intellectually-inflected political or administrative history. Widukind De Ridder offers a high-level history of early-19th-century Belgian politics and of Belgian liberalism, dwelling more on events and personalities than ideas. Anna Ross's contribution examines the Prussian Ministry of State during and after the revolutions, focusing on bureaucratic politics and programmes of action. Alan Sked, finally, considers the attitudes of the Austrian 'official mind' towards the problem of nationality in the empire, offering a host of intriguing quotations, but prioritising the narration and explanation of material shifts in policy. All three chapters are excellent pieces of history. In each case, however, the context seems to have eaten the ideas. If this counts as 'Cambridge' work, then the label has become elastic indeed.

For the most part, however, the boundaries of 'European political thought', as understood by *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought*, are familiar enough. Also familiar is the fact that virtually none of the chapters is able convincingly to draw connections between the political ideas they anatomise, and the workings of politics 'proper'. They make arguments (or assertions) about the practical consequences of abstract thought, but these are rarely substantiated.⁽²⁾ 19th-century 'Cambridge' work in the history of political thought, on this evidence, does not appear naturally any closer to work on practical politics than counterpart scholarship on earlier periods, which is a shame for political historians.

This is a high-quality collection, and it has the potential to be a seminal one. It is striking, however, that the book is comparatively untouched by two major recent shifts in the historiography of modern European politics and political thought. The first – all the more conspicuous by its absence given that it is the subject of a 2011 collection edited by Stedman Jones – is the trend towards reasserting the significance of religion.⁽³⁾ The introduction here, indeed, insists on the salience of the theme, and makes tantalising points about it.

But only one chapter in the book, Parry's on Christian Socialism, places religion at the centre of its analysis. Few of the other contributors offers any sustained treatment of religious issues, either as an element in their protagonists' intellectual formation, or as a subject in the schemes of politics with which they were busy elaborating. Even Waszek's chapter on Strauss's 'Theologicopolitical speeches' treats the theological dimension only in passing. The index includes only two references for 'Protestantism' and three for 'Catholicism'; Church institutions come up a little more often, but in a desultory fashion. The result is that we end up with an overwhelmingly secular vision of how political thought worked in this era. Such a model is surely just as problematic for the modern period as for the early modern era, on which recent revisionist work emphasising the centrality of religious thinking has focused.

The second historiographical development which makes only a minimal impact on the book is the emergence of a huge literature on the intellectual histories of imperial and international issues. Ideas about colonial empires, existing or imagined, are treated only cursorily in relation to France; thinking about territorial empires is limited to the problem of 'nationality' in the Habsburg state; and there is little discussion of thought about the future of the international order (including on the status of the Catholic Church as a multinational political actor). Contemporary interrogation of the idea of 'Europe' as an interconnected political unit, also, gets no play here. The book is equally reticent about taking account of the closely connected, and now well-established, scholarship on transnational movements of ideas: there is very little on exchanges between revolutionary thinkers and commentators on revolution across the borders of different (proto-) nations. Few chapters, moreover, pay much attention to what thinkers made of *other* revolutions beyond those taking place in their own countries. Only Varouxakis makes this a central theme, and as a British historian he can do little else.

The enumeration of these 'overlooked' issues is more than just the standard complaint that the editors have not produced a different book. The essence of 1848 was its multinationalism. Revolutionary contagion spreading from France, and comparable events taking place across a number of different polities, spurred intensive analysis of foreign politics as well as new kinds of self-examination and abstract theorising. Ideas about and inspired by the revolutions were not cemented within specific national contexts: clearly, the revolutions could not have happened in the first place if that was how mid-19th-century political thought worked. So a series of studies nearly all of which remain enclosed within specific national borders can only take us so far in understanding the intellectual impact of 1848. The 'comparative pan-European perspective' we are promised in the introduction never arrives, or at least, the readers are expected to do the comparative heavy lifting themselves. Much 'Cambridge' work on early modern political thought has been exceptionally good at reaching across geographical borders in thinking about the circulation and influence of specific texts, and indeed it clearly lies, in part, behind work now being done in modern European history which applies similar interpretative structures. It seems a pity, given the range of approaches already encompassed by the volume, that it could not make any gestures in these crucial directions.

The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought identifies an unmet need in the current historiography, outlines a persuasive editorial vision, and drives its point home. It demonstrates with utmost clarity that 1848 was a catalytic moment for political thought across much of Europe. The variety of ways in which this point is pursued, and the uniformly high quality of the scholarship, makes for a satisfying collection. The further research which the book will inspire might benefit from taking closer account of wider historiographical trends bearing upon the subject, but this is a fine start.

Notes

1. On the ambiguous disciplinary identity of the field see the excellent recent essay by David Craig, 'Political ideas and languages', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800–2000*, eds David Brown, Gordon Pentland, and Robert Crowcroft (Oxford, 2018), pp. 13–31.
[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Only Parry's chapter provides any sustained exploration of the mechanisms by which influential politicians came into contact with ideas developed by more rarefied minds. But Parry is not a

‘historian of political thought’ in any straightforward sense.[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. *Religion and the Political Imagination*, eds Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones (Cambridge, 2010).[Back to \(3\)](#)
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