

Victorian Political Thought on France and the French

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In this book Georgios Varouxakis analyses the Victorian perceptions and representations of France and the French by intellectuals or, more precisely, 'public moralists'. John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold and Walter Bagehot provide the major textual sources, supplemented by a handful of lesser-known authors. Varouxakis investigates whether this confrontation with France confirms or challenges the Victorian belief in British political superiority; the elements which contributed to the comparison of the two countries; how these public moralists employed stereotypical representations or tried to refute them; and how their own beliefs were partly reflected in their perceptions of France. Varouxakis links the answers to these questions to a number of broader themes, such as Victorian ethnocentrism, the widespread belief in the existence of national character, and the relationship with the 'Other' in the nineteenth century.

Victorian Political Thought on France and the French is a convincing and readable volume that will be invaluable for scholars and postgraduate students. The significant cogency of this monograph stems from two important theoretical premises. Firstly, Varouxakis does not slip into shallow, one-dimensional explanations: rather he succeeds in maintaining a subtle balancing act between a number of interesting antitheses throughout the entire narrative. Accordingly, he has an eye for relevant life experiences of the various writers, as well as for integrating crucial general factors, such as the British feeling of superiority (which was based upon the idea of moderate liberty above all else); and the intricate relationship between the Irish problem and the belief in the Celtic roots of French culture. In addition, he strikes a balance between short-term responses to actual political events, such as regime changes on the one hand, and the recording of more settled long-term visions regarding the national character of the French on the other.

Finally, Varouxakis refuses to attach static, monolithic representations of France to each public moralist. He rather argues for a dynamic representation that not only changes with time, but is emphasised differently, depending upon each public moralist's target group or readers. Accordingly, he notes that J.S. Mill was much more critical in respect of France with his French correspondents than with his English. *Vis-à-vis* the French, Mill displays more conditional reserves regarding the viability of the French political system. The representations are not forced into rigid, coherent structures, but are indeed often explained from the numerous internal contradictions. Obviously this reconstruction of such writers' intricate visions of France is essential to creating a meaningful framework for the analysis of Victorian stereotypical representations.

Varouxakis's second premise is that the Victorian belief in the existence of national character has deeper and wider roots than has been generally accepted. References to France merit an explanation surpassing a merely rhetorical argument or only trimmings:

In other words, the extensive 'Francology' – if I am allowed the expression – of Mill, Arnold, and other Victorian authors cannot be explained simply by assuming that they tried to make use of the evocation of a foreign country as a rhetorical and argumentative weapon, in their struggles for reforms, or 'culture', or whatever else, at home (p. 8).

The perceptions of France and the French cannot be explained sufficiently if they are disconnected from the Victorian *Zeitgeist* that emphasised the usefulness of comparisons between cultures, the belief in a far-reaching complementarity between various cultures and national spirits, and finally, which stressed *Vielseitigkeit* and the aversion to half-truths.

From these two premises, and with the emphasis on a nuanced presentation, Varouxakis combines the results of his research around four central themes: France's perceived status as most civilised country, French politics, the French national character and, finally, France's reputation in international relations. A number of the public moralists such as Arnold and especially Mill, are thoroughly investigated in every chapter, whereas others rarely feature in more than one chapter. It is clear that the subsections of the chapters that are dedicated to more people and texts benefit from this and are better defined. Subjects or periods for which little source material is available, depend largely on evidence drawn from the writings of one or two people. However, these probably inescapable shortcomings as regards representativeness, are limited to a number of smaller subsections.

Whether France was the most civilised country or not, was a direct challenge to Victorian feelings of superiority. In this regard, views diverged significantly and exposed underlying disputes over definitions. The popular narrow interpretation of civilisation focused, above all, on economic development. Accordingly, this 'commercial civilisation' can be expressed in tonnage and the extent of the railway network. Naturally, this balance obviously tilted in England's favour and France's claim to be the most civilised country could be refuted as mere French boasting. However, this was not a generally accepted view and, according to Varouxakis, public moralists such as Mill and Arnold took up the difficult and often thankless task to nuance definitions of civilisation:

Mill and Arnold were unwilling to offer the positive associations of the term 'civilisation' to their opponents, the philistine 'enemies of culture'. Rather, they challenged the common uses of the term, uses such as Macaulay's or Cobden's, and argued that 'civilisation' was more complex and comprehensive than its casual uses in England implied. (p. 33)

For example, the criteria upon which civilisation were judged were construed as too limited and as completely ignoring the spirit and soul of men.

Mill's opposition to the dominance of the commercial aspect was based on his more fundamental belief in the utility of *Vielseitigkeit* and his opposition to one-sided interpretations. In Mill's opinion, many ways led to civilisation. The English orientation towards practicality and prosperity could for example benefit from the French, who appreciated intellect much more (certainly in the middle and lower classes), and who were more broad-minded towards the general and the abstract, leaving more room to enjoy life. Arnold, too, opposes the overly one-sided 'business is civilisation' proposition. He admitted to admiring the sense of equality in all social classes, as well as the relative refinement of the French farmers and labourers, without ignoring the shortcomings on the French side. Both Mill and Arnold were devoted to effecting a more nuanced comparison between the two civilisations. According to them, the objective knowledge gained in this way could improve one's own sense of what civilisation is. Their opponents, however, saw a eulogy of France and reproaches of anti-patriotism quickly followed.

In the chapter 'French Politics Through British Glasses', Varouxakis analyses how British perceptions of the French political system changed over time. Once again, he pursues a balance between long-term and stable judgements on the one hand, and more spontaneous, prompt responses to actual political events on the other. The political context from which the British viewed French politics was one of relatively high stability, which was in sharp contrast to the concentration of upheavals in French politics. For the initial period (1830-48) Varouxakis mostly builds upon Mill's comments. The latter's assessment of the impact and consequences of the July revolution of 1830 changed markedly with the passage of time. Initially, Mill responded rather enthusiastically and with high hopes, chiefly because of the people's exemplary behaviour and the maturity of their list of demands. However, his disillusionment with the new regime was swift in coming:

Mill came to say that the July revolution (or rather, the events that led to it) had been a misfortune after all, because it stopped the progress the French 'national mind' was making towards developing the constitutional mores that France desperately lacked. By 1837 he had come to believe that the meagre fruits of the July revolution were not worth the price paid. (p. 60).

The February 1848 Revolution is viewed from a background of self-praise for Britain's own stability. Varouxakis can call on a considerably larger number of public moralists to support his analysis. However, there was definitely no unanimity in their judgements. The republic was received with mixed feelings. Every French faction knew its British champion. In analysing 1848, it was as if all possible perceptions of France converged on a micro-scale. Not only objective arguments or ideological persuasions, but also a certain emotional attraction played a significant part in the public moralists' judgements. In Varouxakis's opinion, French passivity regarding the *coup d'état* of December 1851, confirmed the convictions of most of the British that their neighbour nation was unfit for freedom. Even Mill waited until the 1860s before cherishing any hopes for the revival of the spirit of liberty and the power of opposition, and only then thanks to the gradual liberalisation of the regime. The outbreak of war with Prussia, for which contemporaries mainly blamed France, was again a disappointment. Once more freedom was sacrificed for the pernicious politics of national aggrandizement.

Walter Bagehot saw the empire first and foremost as a temporary emergency solution. In view of his own aversion to socialism and anarchy, he was still able to muster some sympathy for this guardian of order. When, in the 1860s, more and more voices were raised praising the French empire as a model because of its significant battle-readiness, Bagehot hardened his judgement. The empire was only a temporary solution and certainly no example or intrinsically good. Moreover, for him too, the politics of gain and glory entailed too many risks.

Varouxakis positions the Victorian attitude towards the French national character within a larger context. Accordingly, it is important to keep in mind that perceptions of national character partly depended upon a colonial perspective. Consequently, national characteristics were inextricably associated with race. In his exceptionally negative judgement of the French, Thomas Carlyle started from a kind of racial determinism.

A further element that coloured British judgement of the French national character was the contrasting presentation of 'Germany'. The so-called 'Teutomaniacs' were, in number, at an advantage over the Francophiles. Finally, the view of the relationship between the various components (Germanic, Celtic, and Norman) of the British national character also played a part in the assessment of France.

According to Varouxakis, Matthew Arnold's analysis of the French character is a narrative of decline. As far as Arnold was concerned, the French national character consisted of three significant elements – Gallic, Roman and Germanic: 'But the happy balance did not last ... the German construction of medieval old France was swept away completely with the French Revolution and its aftermath'. (p. 108) With the resulting imbalance, the most significant inspiration for seriousness and moral ideas fell away, giving the Gallo-Latin element free rein without any counter-balance. This view agrees fairly closely with Mill's belief in the desirability of combining various national characters. Mill was convinced that both the French and the English could learn from each other. Consequently, Mill certainly did not believe in racial determinism, but that a national character could change, that it is malleable.

In foreign affairs the French image was of a very doubtful quality. The French were perceived as warlike and easy to tempt with promises of foreign successes and glory. Conversely, the French saw the British as 'perfidious Albion', characterised by a selfish foreign policy. Varouxakis asserts that this connection between national character and foreign policy was something new to the nineteenth century, for which nascent democracy was a precondition. Previously, entry to foreign relations had after all been reserved for kings or the leaders of their governments, people whose personality traits had a greater impact on the international standing of a country than the national character of the people.

Even before 1848, Nassau William Senior amongst others, observed the excessive pride and inflated ego of the French: "Thus, while believing herself to be the object of general admiration, France was, at the same time "always watching to detect and punish an insult". (p. 135) Mill himself was often shocked by the recurring warlike talk of the French. On the other hand, the anti-gallican tone in the British press also disgusted him and he pointed out that French belligerence should be understood against the background of their national trauma, and not merely as a love of war itself. According to Varouxakis, here too, Mill typically tried to steer a middle course: 'Mill adopted a middle position between what he saw as French extremism and irrationality on the one hand and English failure to understand the French on the other. He saw himself in a dual role' (p. 147). The warlike image of the French deteriorated further after 1848, *inter alia* as a result of the promise of assistance to oppressed nationalities. Louis Napoleon was similarly unconvincing and most Britons saw his politics as a continuation of the pursuit of gain and glory. In 1870 most contemporaries once again blamed France for the outbreak of war. It was only after the war that the tide turned and the suffering French received some sympathy although the fate of Alsace divided opinions yet further.

Varouxakis consciously does not opt for a classic, summary conclusion synthesizing the four themes into a single general Victorian perception of French politics. This forces the reader to make a connection with a number of elements (for example, Victorian ethnocentrism), from the frame of reference presented in the introductory chapter. The author has opted for a comparison of the discourse of a few present-day authors with that of the Victorian writers he discusses. What is striking in this regard, according to Varouxakis, is what remains unchanged between Bonapartism and today's 'Imperial Republic'. The pursuit of glory still seems to be very important. Accordingly, Pierre Rosanvallon refers to a present-day Caesarism or a system of illiberal democracy: "It has been", Pierre Rosanvallon writes, "the kings of war and the kings of glory that [the French] admire". Their ideal has been only "to democratize absolutism", a secret aspiration given flesh in the "republican monarchism" of de Gaulle's fifth Republic' (p. 167). This present-day relevance lends further distinction to Varouxakis's capable presentation of the important role occupied by perceptions of France and the French in Victorian conceptions of Europe, nationalism and British identities.

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