Guyer on Murray-Miller, 'Revolutionary Europe: Politics, Community and Culture in Transnational Context, 1775-1922'

Review published on Saturday, May 1, 2021


Reviewed by Benjamin M. Guyer (University of Tennessee at Martin) Published on H-Socialisms (May, 2021) Commissioned by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55701

Revolutionary Europe in Comparison

“If the long nineteenth century was a century of revolution, it was also an age of multiple revolutionary traditions that ran parallel to or intertwined with one another at various moments” (p. 286). In this detailed analysis, Gavin Murray-Miller shows the many ways that diverse political events and movements intersected, drew upon one another, and parted ways. Murray-Miller’s Europe is not, however, narrowly circumscribed, but encompasses both the American and Russian revolutions, and touches briefly upon the Ottoman Empire and China. Imperial Europe is immediately recognized as global in scope. Revolutionary Europe should now be recognized as the same.

The book is organized into two halves. It begins with the American and French revolutions (chapter 1), although chapters 2-4 focus primarily on the latter, including France’s colonies. Chapter 5 then rounds out the first half by looking at Napoleonic Europe, including the Mediterranean. As Murray-Miller notes, “for the first half of the nineteenth century, the French Revolution indisputably furnished a model to which other revolutionaries looked” (p. 2). Consequently, the second half of the book surveys the various forms of radical politics that existed in Europe from mid-century through the Russian Revolution. Chapter 6 looks at the rise of socialism, chapter 7 at the revolution of 1848, and chapter 8 at the development of anarchism. Chapter 9 analyzes the rise and fall of constitutionalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the final chapter turns to the Russian Revolution.

While some of this will seem familiar and even quite standard, a major contribution of Revolutionary Europe is Murray-Miller’s recognition that the borders of Europe were, like its intellectual culture, fluid. A good example is the attention paid to the American Revolution. Throughout the book, Murray-Miller attends to shifting semantics, and in the first chapter he notes the development of new meanings associated with “revolution.” Originally synonymous with restoration, it came to denote a fundamental break with the past, and it was this latter meaning that was increasingly used by participants in the American and French revolutions. Perhaps the most important figure was Thomas Paine, who participated in both revolutions, and who claimed that, after 1776, “we see with other
eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts than those we formerly used” (p. 22). When Paine crossed the Atlantic, he brought his developing notion of revolution with him. But in ways that Paine later dissented from, Robespierre and his associates became the first self-consciously “revolutionary” government in history. Although not a strictly linguistic analysis of revolutionary keywords, Murray-Miller’s attention to such detail helps readers come to better understand the emergence of revolution as a distinct political goal with an attendant, and sometimes equally disruptive, vocabulary.

And yet, there is but one law of history: the law of unintended consequences. Despite its presence at the beginning of a long, revolutionary century, the United States soon grew wary of revolutions elsewhere. Not only did it increasingly look askance at France after 1789, but when Paine died on American soil, only six people attended his funeral, despite the fact that *Common Sense* (1776) sold 100,000 copies. Despite the impassioned endorsement of equality found in the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson feared a slave revolt in Haiti, and by the early nineteenth century, Europe’s intellectual borders—which had encompassed the American colonies—pulled far back, with the newly formed United States going its own way. A century later, another of Europe’s intellectual borders closed. The relationship of the French and Russian revolutions has been a topic of recurring interest and consistent debate since the writings of François Furet. Murray-Miller agrees that “the logics of Jacobinism and Bolshevism were comparable,” but also argues that “the Bolshevik revolution was not a continuation of its French antecedent” (p. 266). By 1917, too much else had happened, such as the developing concern with workers’ rights and the growth of anarchism. The Russian Revolution was influenced by intellectual and political currents that first developed in western Europe, and although Russia remained inextricably bound up with greater Europe during the Great War, the Bolsheviks forced it onto new paths. By the early twentieth century, the French Revolution had become merely one of many revolutionary streams that flowed well beyond Europe.

In chapter 3, Murray-Miller first broaches the topic of private property, which became a topic of concern and contention later in the century. In his unpublished writing about “republican institutes,” Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just argued that private property was the basis of inequality. During the French Revolution, there emerged a political and polemical *longue durée* more familiar in works commonly associated with communism. With the appearance of Karl Marx and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (chapters 6 and 7), such convictions saw further elaboration. A critique might be posed here. Murray-Miller does a fine job explicating the ideas of any number of figures, but what about something more detailed and fine-grained, like the print dissemination of, for example, Saint-Just’s “republican institutes”? It is commonly accepted that intellectual history involves studying the history of ideas but not necessarily studying the history of the texts in which those ideas are found. But if we really want to dig in and study the big political thoughts of any time period, we need to be able to explore such connections. This is not that kind of book—and it doesn’t need to be—but perhaps a future work will fill in these gaps.

In his concluding chapter, Murray-Miller notes the distance between 1917 and 1789, but the fact of the matter is that the French Revolution haunts his narrative. Socialist opponents of the Bolsheviks compared the latter with a “Jacobin Club”; the German Spartacus League, whom the Bolsheviks sought to arm in a failed bid to overthrow the German government, had a newspaper entitled the *Red Flag*. Perhaps, after the latter half of the nineteenth century, the French Revolution simply had become more fluid in popular perception (or, to use a trendy term, “memory”), with select elements...
more easily cherry-picked by revolutionaries in later, developing traditions? This question is not intended as a point of criticism. Rather, it is offered to emphasize the continued relevance of studying the relationship between 1789 and later (successor?) revolutions—a relationship that no one has ever teased out fully, and which, it is likely, no one ever will.

Before concluding, it should be noted that much about the book points to its being ideal for undergraduates. Although organized diachronically, many chapters cohere thematically. There are, furthermore, narrative details that point to how this book will be a good secondary source for students. For example, attentive to changes in meaning, Murray-Miller underscores the increasing radicalism of the French Revolution by noting the transformation of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” into “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, or Death” (p. 53). Chapter 8, which covers anarchism, contains examples that point earlier in the narrative to the Paris Commune’s creation of its own Committee of Public Safety, while also enabling students to see, by the time they reach chapter 10, the long-term influence of anarchist ideas. However, irrespective of intended audience, the twenty-one illustrations and thirteen maps will be helpful to every reader.

*Revolutionary Europe* persuasively vindicates its thesis that, although the revolutions of the late eighteenth century were the font of later revolutionary thought, nineteenth-century Europe saw multiple revolutionary streams converge and diverge. The international afterlife of such currents is, of course, a twentieth-century story.


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/).