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Timothy Mason Roberts. *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. xi + 256 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2799-2.

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Too Close to Home? America and the Revolutions in Europe

As hard as it is to believe in our age of instant digital gratification, the art of panorama painting was once all the rage in American cities. Large-scale scenes of battles, crowds, and landscapes, accompanied by sound effects and occasionally disastrous pyrotechnics, attracted large audiences from all walks of life. In the late 1840s, recent news of troubles in Europe provided a welcome subject for owners and visitors of exhibition rooms. The same was the case for American theater managers, publishers, and even clothiers, all of whom specialized in turning experience into entertainment, suffering into drama.

In his captivating book, Timothy Mason Roberts addresses two main areas in which the European revolutions that sparked high hopes in early 1848 and ended in bloodshed shortly thereafter influenced American life, culturally and politically. The borders of these spheres, however, are not always sharply drawn.

Distant Revolutions refers to two kinds of distance, spatial and temporal. The revolutions in Europe, an ocean removed from the United States, reminded Americans of their own revolutionary past and its supposed imperatives. At the heart of Roberts's book lies the contention that Americans' responses to the European turmoil were paradoxical: On the one hand, Americans "are proud of [their] revolutionary heritage"; on the other, they "suspect foreign revolutions, especially if aspects of these revolutions seem to make them different from [their] own revolutionary heritage" (p. 3). Beliefs about the American Revolution and its legacy served as the standard by which foreign revolutions and revolutionaries were judged.

Both in their initial successes as well as in their subsequent failure, the revolutions in the Old World seemed to confirm American exceptionalism. At first, Americans tended to see their own history, society, and institutions as the shining example guiding European peoples in their quest for liberty; when the latter failed, many Americans claimed that only they knew how to reconcile democracy with order and prosperity, and liberty with domestic peace. However, this attitude, mixed with a good measure of smugness, changed during the sectional crisis of the early 1850s, and turned into its opposite with the bloody clashes between militant abolitionists and proponents of slavery in Kansas. Antislavery Americans now started to take the events in Europe personally: violence in the service of "law and order," a corruption of governmental authority they had thought endemic to Europe, increasingly became a feature of American life, and called for an "un-American," that is, violent, response. The European example, Roberts argues, ultimately influenced the timing, if not the coming, of the Civil War.

Roberts conveys the changing perceptions of American observers of European events, as well as the views of different groups comprising the American public. Some interpreted both the European revolutions and the war with Mexico as signs of America's "Manifest Destiny." Conservative Americans voiced suspicion and rejection of what they termed "Jacobinism," "socialism," and "Red Republicanism," shorthands fomenting the fear of mob rule. Yet others took the Europeans' fight for more liberty and justice as an occasion for soul-searching: had the ideals of American Revolution been translated into needed political and societal reforms? Some Americans were skeptical of the turmoil overseas to begin with, while the initial enthusiasm and solidarity of others soured when violent clashes in the new French Republic raised the specter of a "reign of terror" barely more than half a century after the guillotines had chopped off their last head. Infighting weakened the envisioned new societies in a way that emboldened the forces of reaction; consequently, many Americans, sometimes the same ones who had been complacent about the apparent adoption of American principles in Europe, lauded the reactionaries for restoring order and rule of law, and safeguarding pri-

vate property. What emerged was a consensus confirming the supposedly conservative nature of the American Revolution, characterized by minimal violence, religious faith, and respect for law, order, and private property.

In the introduction, Roberts summarizes the events in Italy, France, Germany, and Hungary in their interconnectedness and differences without overwhelming his readers. He skillfully provides the necessary background information to those who may not be entirely familiar with mid nineteenth-century European history. The first chapter, "The Ambivalence of Americans Abroad," takes a look at how Americans in Europe perceived the revolutions. Though France was "special" in that America and France shared common revolutionary pasts–France had assisted the American Patriots, after all–the volatility of the French example scared conservative Americans. Whereas Italians, as Catholics, were not really revolutionary material or fit to govern themselves in many Protestant Americans' eyes, and Hungary, as a virtual terra incognita, served merely to fire up romantic fantasies, the new German parliament was the only one to receive military aid from the American government. Based on diary entries, letters, and dispatches written by diplomats, tourists, journalists, and a financier, Roberts contends that most Americans who witnessed the uprisings in Europe lacked the courage of their republican convictions, returning more convinced of America's exceptional status than before.

The second chapter, "The Rise and Fall of the 1848 Revolutions in American Public Culture," is one of the most penetrating. It will remind some readers of today's sensationalistic coverage of struggles abroad, or of parallels between nineteenth-century Americans sporting a "liberty cap" and current frivolous political fashion statements. Roberts's remark that it was ignorance of eastern European history that "helps explain Americans' fascination with the Hungarian uprising against Austria" (p. 54) hints at the power of projection, rather than informed solidarity, in their pro-revolutionary enthusiasm. The outbreak of popular sentiment, happily catered to by businessmen, journalists, and entertainers, affected university campuses as well. Support for European liberty and academic freedom in America did not always coincide. The scholar Francis Bowen had to learn this the hard way, when his criticism of the Hungarian independence movement cost him his professorship at Harvard. The reason for all this enthusiasm, however, was not genuine interest in the realities of the European upheaval. Rather, "[w]hat Americans celebrated was that in the United State they had already experienced a revolution and had survived, in fact prospered, to tell about it" (p. 57).

Turning to politics, Roberts shows how political parties exploited the turmoil overseas to strengthen their respective causes in the American presidential campaign of 1848. With the controversy over the westward extension of slavery after the Mexican War preoccupying American voters, European events were interpreted under the aspect of worsening domestic sectionalism. The Free Soil Party saw the revolutionaries in France connected to the heritage of the American Revolution it thought itself to embody. The Democrats, adept in claiming to be the advocates of individual freedom and self-government, were at first enthusiastic about the upheavals. Portraying themselves as the paragons of a successful revolution whose example would save struggling Europeans, they celebrated the fall of dynastic rule in Europe as a sign of democratization. Terming the Democrats "Jacobins" and demagogues, the Whigs tried to sell their presidential candidate Zachary Taylor as a kind of George Washington *redivivus*. The Whigs' attitude to rebellions abroad was split, reflecting the party's own inner divisions. One wing rejected the idea that the events in Europe had anything to do with America, since only few peoples had the ability to govern themselves as wisely as did Americans, whereas the other hoped the promises of the American Revolution might be revived by the European example. The violent turn of the revolutions abroad, right in time for the elections, strengthened the isolationist Whigs' line and contributed to its triumph.

The fourth chapter deals with the involvement of various American reformers in European affairs and the inspiration they drew from the example of the revolutionaries. Roberts devotes special attention to feminists and abolitionists, such as Margaret Fuller and William Wells Brown, but also to the incipient American labor movement. Unlike many of their more conservative compatriots, some of those passionate souls were not repulsed by the violence committed by the rebels, but convinced themselves that liberty and equal rights–for slaves and women alike–had to be gained by radical means, if necessary.

In the fifth chapter, Roberts argues that American religious leaders, no less than politicians, used the news of European problems to underscore their own views of the spiritual state of American society and, significantly, to attack other Christian denominations. Some Protestants saw the events of 1848, especially the blow they dealt to European Catholicism, as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, a sign that the Apocalypse was near or, at least, that the Reformation had finally been completed.

This did not mean that they admired European revolutionaries, and, particularly, Southern religious spokesmen warned against the danger posed by "foreign" influence on America's Christian character: deploring abolitionism as a symptom of European unrest, they defended slavery as an institution safeguarding American exceptionalism. Some Catholics were quick to interpret the threat to European Catholicism as general mayhem, endangering pristine America through masses of subversive refugees. Archbishop John Hughes, keenly aware of the inspiration American reformers drew from the European example, condemned social reformers and nontraditional faiths alike as running counter to the ideals of the American Revolution. Despite their many disagreements, both Catholic and Protestant leaders agreed upon a common end: the preservation of a fundamentally conservative society, led by an authoritative professional clergy that was endangered by what Nathan Hatch has termed the "democratization of American Christianity."

In chapter 6, Roberts contends that Southern slaveholders were more sympathetic towards Germany and Hungary than France since they welcomed what they saw as German revolutionaries' conservatism and Hungary's laudable way of dealing with its Slav population. John C. Calhoun even wrote a letter of advice on political theory to the Prussian minister-resident at Washington. France, on the other hand, was guilty of a previous revolution gone awry, breeding utopian socialists and, most ominously, abolishing slavery in its colonies. When the German and Hungarian revolutions failed, Southerners who had previously formulated their desire for secession in revolutionary terms became more cautious, stressing instead what they insisted was its constitutionality.

The seventh chapter discusses the presidential campaign of 1852 in light of Louis Kossuth's fundraising tour of the soon-to-be-disunited States. Even though Kossuth spent much of the money he raised on hotels, restaurants, and the like, Americans' romantic fascination with him persisted because he seemed to embody their own, idealized revolutionary past. Towns were renamed and plays performed in his honor, and American men sprouted Kossuth-like facial hair. Abolitionists first claimed the dashing Hungarian for their own cause, but soon found out that he was more interested in the coffers of Southern planters than in freeing slaves. The South, however, remained rather reserved towards Kossuth, who found most of his supporters in the North and West. Receiving Kossuth at the White House, the American government took into account popular enthusiasm, but proved unwilling to officially support the Hungarian cause. So, ultimately, did the major party candidates in the 1852 campaign.

In the last chapter, "The Antislavery Movement as a Crisis of American Exceptionalism," Roberts stresses the role of the lingering impression of the European revolutions in the greater acceptance and finally, espousal of violence during the rapidly increasing divisions of the 1850s. While the domestic climate deteriorated as a result of controversial legislation, culminating in the bloodshed in Kansas, concern for America's unique historical role led many Americans, most of all abolitionists, to act in a way that turned their fears into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The political and the cultural converged–and crossed the Atlantic–in the form of a political leader, Kossuth, and an American bestseller, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). The epilogue elaborates on the indirect effects of European revolutionaries and their theories on the legacy of the exceptional character of the American Revolution. John Brown, who had visited Europe, was influenced by Giuseppe Mazzini's ideas about peasant uprisings, and Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" was in part inspired by Kossuth, who in turn had borrowed ideas from Mazzini.

Distant Revolutions has only few weaknesses. The book might have benefited from more attention to the responses of America's foreign-born population, but neither Roberts's choice to write mostly about native-born Americans nor some minor errors–it was Thomas Jefferson, not Washington, who advised against "entangling alliances"(p. 80)–diminish the otherwise high quality of Roberts's work. This well-written and carefully researched study fulfills its aims, and enhances our understanding of an often neglected aspect of nineteenth-century American history.

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