H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mischa Honeck. *We Are the Revolutionists: German-Speaking Immigrants and American Abolitionists After 1848.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. 236 S. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3800-2; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3823-1.

Timothy Mason Roberts. *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. 256 S. ISBN 978-0-8139-2818-0.

Reviewed by James M. Bergquist
Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (April, 2013)

Sammelrez: M.Honeck: We Are the Revolutionists

The years 1848-1849 have been of constant interest to historians in both Europe and the United States. In Europe, the uprisings that occurred across the continent and the reactions that set in the following year posed many questions about motivation, ideology, and historical significance. While the events across the Atlantic were of interest to many in America, they observed them against a background of unprecedented economic expansion, the opening of new areas of the West, and the gold rush in California. For many the revolutions were a distraction, but not an inspiration.

The two works reviewed here examine quite different aspects of these intertwined events.

Timothy Mason Roberts's *Distant Revolutions* concentrates on Americans' perception of the revolutions as they unfolded. This is expanded by a series of essays examining American observers of the revolutions in varying contexts. In very ambitious researches Roberts uncovers opinions expressed by Americans in memoirs and diaries, newspaper accounts, political speeches and later histories of the revolutions. The opposite perceptions-how some Europeans regarded the American example as a model of republicanism and nationalism, have been dealt with elsewhere, and get little attention in Roberts's volume.

In a very diverse and mobile America, there could hardly be said to be a consensus in the American mind on what was occurring across the Atlantic. Despite the heritage of Manifest Destiny and the stirrings of "Young America" within the Democratic party, Americans tended to view the chaos in Europe through the lens of their own particular ideologies and political views. Roberts perhaps does not emphasize enough how Americans at the time were consumed by the conclusion of the Mexican War and its aftermath.

From optimistic beginnings arising from the hope that Europe was following in the path of the American Revolution, views began to change as events in Europe developed. The turn to radicalism in some of the revolutions alienated many in America who saw "freedom" in the light of widening opportunities in an expanding nation, and who showed no interest in a socialist regime. As counter-revolution set in and revolutionary movements began to fail, Americans turned away from the idea that the European upheavals were following in the model of the American Revolution.

Roberts follows in considerable detail the course of revolutions in France, Austria, Hungary, and the Papal States in Italy. Relatively lesser attention is given to the uprisings in the German states. Yet those are the revolutions Americans at the time were probably most aware of, especially because of the presence of the large numbers of German immigrants who were flocking to America at the time. Roberts recounts in great detail the efforts of the Hungarian revolutionary Louis Kossuth to solicit aid in America for a revival of the revolution in his country; however, he ultimately found little support. The German "forty-eighters" in America, however, were much more visible and, in the long run, obliged to give up their hopes for a united nation of German states. They had their own views of the connection between European and American revolutions, and began to spread their views through the German-language press, which they soon began to dominate. Thereby they began to broadcast their European liberal and radical views to the American public.

For all his prolific research, Roberts makes no use of the immigrant press in America, which often was focused on these events in Europe. This was also true of the

Irish journalists, who had witnessed the downfall of the abortive uprising in 1848 there. It was the immigrant editors who most held up the example of the United States as an example for Europeans-even though many of them would become disillusioned with the actual workings of American democracy, where partisanship and patronage, not ideology, seemed to form the political allegiances of so many. Roberts makes very little use of sources in languages other than English.

Mischa Honeck's *We Are the Revolutionists* follows an entirely different direction from the revolutions of 1848. Like Roberts's work it is a series of discrete essays. Honeck examines in one way or another confrontations between the German "Forty-eighters" and American abolitionists. The German refugees first arrived in the hope that they would soon return to Europe to renew the revolutions. That hope soon faded, and most of them eventually turned to the American political and social issues of the time, including the increasingly disruptive issue of slavery and abolitionism. While radical abolitionists clamored for an immediate end to slavery, the recent territorial acquisitions in the West raised the issue of "free soil" -whether slavery would be allowed to develop in the newly-acquired lands.

How the forty-eighters responded to these issues is told in narratives of encounters between specific German radicals and specific American advocates of slavery abolition. The journalist Frederick Law Olmsted on one of his trips through the South found the German settlements in west Texas and the radical forty-eighters Adolf Douai and Friedrich Kapp. In Cincinnati, the socialist editor August Willich made common cause against slavery with the Unitarian minister Moncure Daniel Conway. In Milwaukee, Matilda Anneke, feminist and wife of the Prussian revolutionary Fritz Anneke, established a close relationship with Mary Booth, wife of an abolitionist editor. Their close relationship, however, ultimately rested upon their common commitment to radical feminism, rather than their anti-slavery views. In Boston, Karl Heinzen, perhaps the most radical forty-eighter of them all, linked up with the fiery and unremitting abolitionist and reformer Wendell Phillips. Honeck's impressive research unfolds the stories of these and others in complex detail. He also follows the more general story of German immigrants and abolitionism forward through the Civil War, emancipation, and Reconstruction.

There were limits to the cooperation between these two groups of radicals. German immigrants in general who came to oppose slavery did so mainly from a free-soil point of view, concerned about its expansion into the new lands of the West. And even the most active forty-eighters differed from the American abolitionists over fundamental issues. The radical Germans were "revolutionists" in their advocacy of socialism and a necessary upheaval of society, and often linked their radicalism to atheism and anticlericalism. The American abolitionists saw themselves as moral reformers, rooted their opposition to slavery in religious arguments, and joined them to other reforms, such as temperance, nonviolence, and nativism, causes which the forty-eighters abhorred.

Honeck demonstrates an admirable command of resources, both in English and in German.

But in the effort to define the overall relationships between German radicals and American abolitionists, we are left only with a picture of great diversity-among abolitionists generally, among the German forty-eighters, and among the American public. And in Roberts's volume, we likewise see a great variety of American responses, and not a consistent perception of the European upheavals of 1848-1849. One can only conclude that turbulent times bring forth multiple and conflicting reactions.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: James M. Bergquist. Review of Honeck, Mischa, *We Are the Revolutionists: German-Speaking Immigrants and American Abolitionists After 1848* and Mason Roberts, Timothy, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism.* H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38808

Copyright © 2013 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.