

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jonathan Sperber. *Revolutionary Europe, 1780-1850*. Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000. 472 pp. \$24.67 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-29446-2.

Reviewed by Richard A. Oehling (Department of History, Assumption College)

Published on H-W-Civ (March, 2001)

If the time needed to write a review is the standard for difficulty, then this may be the most difficult book I have as yet reviewed; I have had it in my possession for five months and am still uncertain how I estimate the value of this book. The problem is the book itself – or rather what Sperber has attempted to do in it. On the one hand the book shows many of the marks of a standard textbook for a commonly offered history course; its years of coverage, 1780-1850, correspond closely with the common time period for courses on this era. And the book has many, if not all, of the commonly expected extras, such as illustrations, tables, and an excellent, up-to-date annotated bibliography.

In other ways, however, this is not a typical textbook and therein lies the problem. The book presents some sharp, strong interpretations, something one finds less often in a textbook, even of this era. The chapters sometimes, even often, conform to the normal divisions of texts in this period and are approximately of equal size. But sometimes they do not fit the standard mold. The instructor would be wise to put some time aside for the task of dividing assignments, not by chapters always, but by topics. The book is comprised of an introduction, eight chapters of approximately fifty pages each and a conclusion of sorts (ten pages).

The introduction, which is only six pages, alerts us immediately that this book will be somewhat different; the subtitle is “the Age of Revolution Seen from the 20th Century.” Sperber carefully suggests the dichotomy between a sense of distance and yet a sense of proximity in many of the more salient characteristics of the Revolutionary Age and our own age. After conceding that the same dichotomy exists in the study of many ages with our own, nonetheless he concludes: “For revolutionary Europe, it seems to me, that we can note a continuity in form, but something of a discontinuity in content.”

By way of illustration, he mentions the various political “isms” that came into being then and which, with different content, still exist in today’s world: radicalism,

liberalism, conservatism. Sperber goes on to make a similar point about social and economic matters. Thus we can see some of the traditionally emphasized aspects of the age which appear in most texts. Then, however, he discusses the pedagogical problem in writing a text for the period, namely: “What is there to keep all the material together? How can one prevent a history from turning into a succession of spectacular but unrelated events or processes... but how does one provide a thematic unity, analytic consistency, a narrative cohesion to these many, different, significant items [the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the Great Reform Bill, etc.] (pp. 2-3). Ah! Here is our clue to understanding the book. Sperber, by his own description, has picked four themes which provide the framework for this book: 1) the “Malthusian challenge;” 2) societal changes from “an old regime of orders to a civil society of property owners;” 3) the “expansion and transformation of the power of the state;” and 4) the development of and the conflict over political participation (democratization).”

I find this all so important to the successful use of the book that I would set aside special time in class to a careful discussion of this section. We do not have the time and space here for a close examination of the first, third and fourth of these pillars, but the second one is very important and somewhat unusual if not unique. In his chapter on the “Shapes of Public Life 1815-1850”, the author takes up in detail the idea of the emergence of the idea of “civil society”: “In place of the corporate society of the old regime, there was now a clear distinction between the state that made the laws, on the one hand, and the public realm of the economy and society where individuals acted freely and of their own accord, within the framework that the laws provided for them. Civil society was that realm of voluntary action, free from the restrictions of the society of orders.” He says further that: “There were three pillars of civil society, three foundations for its structure of debate, organization, and action: the periodical press, voluntary associations and public meetings.”

Sperber then considers the situation of the periodical press and concludes that the French Revolution years were a sudden high-water mark for the periodical press, followed not by a continuing growth of influence, but by an actual decline until mid-century. Of the second, voluntary associations, he asserts that these were “by far the largest and sturdiest; their significance is hard to overestimate. His exploration of this topic is thorough, convincing, and important. The third, associations for “explicitly political ends” [Young Italy, the Chartists, etc.] is fairly standard. We need to go back now to the first chapters and work our way through with some care. Everyone who writes about this period must start with some kind of sketch of the “ancien regime;” how else could we come to understand the enormous changes in the subsequent revolutionary era? On the other hand, how do we keep our eyes focused on the future revolution rather than on the period before? What is the proper amount of detail about the pre-revolutionary period? And how well does this material fit with Sperber’s four themes? How Sperber does it is one of the more interesting, but difficult, parts of the book.

This first content chapter has six sub-divisions, two of which are crucial to understanding Sperber’s interpretation. The first of these is called “a society of orders” by which the author means to suggest something quite special, different, unique, namely a society based on certain collectives, groups with legal and social status, arranged in hierarchical order, with each group having certain privileges and rights, particularly in relationship to others in the society. This group structure is what will separate this society from the future (pp.9-10).

The second chapter, on the French Revolution itself, begins with the question of the significance of the Revolution. Although some other textbooks have done that as well in practice, most have not said so clearly. The execution of it, however, again falls short of what we might desire. After only a page of interesting if thin commentary on the historiography of the Revolution, Sperber takes two paragraphs to tell us what he will take the rest of the chapter to do in detail. One is tempted to say “get on with it;” perhaps, however, textbooks have to do the obvious. The remainder of the chapter is a clear, solid, relatively brief account of the Revolution as a domestic event of French history start to finish, no great surprises, positive or negative.

The next chapter, the third, takes the same period – 1789-1799 – and examines the Revolution now as an international event. There is the usual awkwardness and repetitiveness inherent in such a structure as these two

chapters, but it tends to keep certain developments clear and distinct. Just as we are about to think that this is another standard account, Sperber surprises us with a thoughtful conclusion on “Revolutions in the 1790s: Domestic and Imported” and follows that with an equally thought-provoking section on revolutionary movements in Poland and Great Britain; these two sections by themselves are almost sufficient justification for reading the book.

Sperber leads off chapter four on Napoleon and Europe with an excellent discussion of Napoleon as administrator and reorganizer of Europe. Sperber presents a “characterization” of Napoleon’s rule and later finishes with a section on “thinking about the era of the French Revolution.” None of these reflective sections repeats any other either wholly or even in part.

If the heart of the evaluative problem presented by this book is deciding whether to judge it as a textbook or as an interpretative essay on the Age of Revolution, then the epitome of the issue is chapter five. At first glance one might think that this is an ordinary chapter on the Industrial Revolution, but the differences are greater than just that of a name. The information we expect to see is here but is presented very differently and is interpreted very differently from the textbooks I have seen. In fact, it is interpreted rather differently from many monographs on the subject of the social and economic changes of the hundred years between 1750 and 1850. Sperber explains himself thus: “The chapters on the French Revolution and Napoleonic era have shown us history at high speed:... Now we will turn to another history, proceeding at a decelerated pace, where changes occurred gradually over decades,...To be sure, even this history in the slow lane produced its share of dramatic events [steam engines, railways, Irish famine are mentioned] .... Considering all economic sectors, the entire seven decades and the whole European world, it is the slow and gradual pace of social and economic change that predominated....Indeed ...even slow and gradual change was less common than stasis, than little or no change at all. ... The dynamics of the age of revolution,... were a result of the combination of the accelerated history of politics in the years after 1789, and the decelerated history of society and economy over a course of decades.” (p.208) To understand how significant is the difference between Sperber’s account and other textbook accounts one simply needs to keep in mind that paragraph and that last sentence in particular; he hangs a great deal on that hook.

In chapter six, after a routine and largely uninteresting summary of international relations after Napoleon,

Sperber launches into some of the most interesting thoughts in the entire book, thoughts on the nature of the post-revolutionary state and on the new “civil society” which emerged after the collapse of the old “society of orders.” In the section on civil society he talks about the three pillars of this new civil society, the periodical press, voluntary associations, and public meetings - mentioned earlier in this review. I cannot say that everything in this section was entirely new to me, but I found what he had to say always interesting, even provocative occasionally. But Sperber’s next comments on conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism I found to be disappointingly the same as other textbook treatments - although, in fairness, I must admit that he will occasionally mention a new angle on something; for instance, when discussing Conservatism, he includes a very interesting paragraph on the differences which conservatives had among themselves. Just as I might have become discouraged, he provides the reader with fascinating, highly interpretative material on other ideologies such as romanticism, ultramontanism, nationalism, socialism, communism, and feminism. He begins with an excellent description of the differences between the three political ideologies (conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism) on the one hand and the other ideologies (romanticism, ultramontanism, etc.) which he calls “cultural dreams of totality.” But let us let Sperber himself describe what he is getting at: “There were political movements whose founders and adherents understood themselves as moving into another dimension, transcending the world of left and right. Important cultural movements also affected all political tendencies... giving them a distinct cast.... Common to all these developments was the search for totality, the desire to create... a unity of meaning and purpose in response to the perception of unsettling political and socio-economic change.”

In the next paragraph – and space and time only allow to quote a fragment – Sperber gives us this descriptive summary of contrasts to help us understand one of the

most important of these, romanticism: “It[romanticism] developed in contrast to its predecessor, classicism, and we can see the relationship between the two in terms of a series of dichotomies. Classicism emphasized elegance, restraint, and proportion; in romanticism, authenticity, desire, and dynamism had priority. Classicism was about universals and the universally valid; romanticism was about the individual; in classicism, a detached attitude was cultivated; romanticism was all about passions and ineffable longings and, more generally, the expressions of strong emotions. Classicism favored the human-shaped environment, romanticism the individuals communion with wild and untamed nature. Classicism looked to the pagan world of classical antiquity for intellectual and aesthetic models; romanticism to the Christian world of the Middle Ages.” (pp.306-307)

Frankly, after all that, I found the last two content chapters, “In the Shadow of the Past, 1815-1832” and “Old Certainties and New Vistas, 1830-1851” rather routine, anti-climactic accounts of political developments. I was surprised that the revolutions of 1848 come out sounding rather dull and uninteresting, almost like an afterthought. The last section, which is a kind of conclusion, somewhat reverses that disappointment; entitled “the Age of Revolution in European History”, it arouses the reader again with thoughts about the era as a whole and its place in European and world history.

Do I recommend this book for adoption? Do I strongly advise that the scholar of the period read this? I believe that Sperber raises many important questions about this crucial “revolutionary age.” One could not use this textbook as background to a set of documents, something that you give the weaker students to read to see the puzzle as a whole. If you use Sperber you must give the book sufficient time for serious discussion – perhaps even assigning other interpretations for comparison. But even if he might be wrong on certain emphases or gone too far, considering the evidence, he presents his case well and deserves our full attention.

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:** Richard A. Oehling. Review of Sperber, Jonathan, *Revolutionary Europe, 1780-1850*. H-W-Civ, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5026>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).