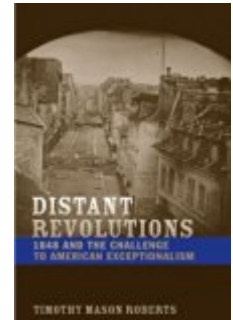


**Timothy Mason Roberts.** *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. xi + 256 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2799-2.



**Reviewed by** Rob Nelson

**Published on** H-SHEAR (May, 2010)

**Commissioned by** Caleb McDaniel (Rice University)

With Louis Kossuth's tour of the United States in 1851 and 1852, the American nation became a more hirsute place. Beards had been relatively uncommon in antebellum America; the visit of the romantic Hungarian revolutionary changed that as many men in the country stopped shaving in imitation of Kossuth. Americans' reactions to and perceptions of the European revolutions of 1848 are the subject of Timothy Mason Roberts's *Distant Revolutions*. Though he charts how the revolutions were invoked in American popular culture and religious thought, a weightier thread runs through this study: how the 1848 revolutions afforded different Americans--politicians, abolitionists, early secessionists, antislavery proponents--an opportunity to think, argue, dissemble, and strategize about the mounting domestic crisis regarding slavery and its extension into the Western territories. The politics of slavery, Roberts persuasively suggests, was tied to another issue at the heart of *Distant Revolutions*: Americans' changing sense of the differences and similarities between

the United States and Europe from the late 1840s through the 1850s.

The basic contours of Roberts's admirably clear narrative and argument are fairly straightforward to summarize. The outbreak of revolutionary movements in France, Germany, Hungary, northern Italy, and the Papal states in 1848 initially was, for the most part, applauded by Americans. Movements to overthrow monarchies and establish republics with extensive and even universal manhood suffrage testified to the exemplary power and effect of the American Republic in the larger world. However, that enthusiasm quickly waned. As radical socialist policies emerged and then violence erupted in France and as the forces of reaction triumphed in central Europe, more and more Americans questioned the capacity of Europeans to successfully emulate the American example. An attitude of American "exemplarism" was quickly supplanted by one of exceptionalism (p. 20). The American Revolution and the society and government it produced were everything that the European revolutions were

not: ideologically moderate or even conservative, comparatively peaceful, and successful. Yet, in the most interesting portion of his argument, Roberts suggests that this widespread attitude of exceptionalism among Americans was relatively short lived, too—at least among those involved in the growing antislavery movement. From their perspective, the existence of slavery (or at least the extension of slavery into the Western territories) put the lie to claims that, unlike European nations, the United States was a land of liberty. Far worse, the violence employed by proslavery forces in the Kansas territory in the mid-1850s suggested to antislavery Americans that the United States was not free from reactionary, oppressive "European-style violence" either (p. 174). Among antislavery Americans, Roberts argues, exceptionalism eroded and exemplarism returned, turned on its head. It was not Europeans who needed to emulate the American Revolution; it was instead northern, antislavery Americans who needed to emulate the European revolutionaries of 1848, particularly in employing violence in the fight for liberty against southern proslavery forces. Roberts argues that the revolutions of 1848 helped prepare Americans to accept the use of violence and war as a means of resolving the conflict over slavery. Those revolutions played an important role in "directing Americans' path to the Civil War," which Roberts characterizes as "America's ultimate response to the 1848 revolutions" (p. 20).

This is certainly Roberts's most provocative and ambitious claim—perhaps overly ambitious. This portion of Roberts's argument is preceded by half a dozen thoughtful chapters that analyze reactions to and invocations of the revolutions of 1848 in American popular culture, reform, Protestant and Catholic thought, and two presidential elections cycles. What is striking about these American reactions is how superficial and glancing they were. While much of recent transnationally oriented scholarship has explored the meaningful flow of ideas and ideologies across national

borders, in *Distant Revolutions*, the border of the United States, for the most part, truly mattered. There was little substantive engagement with either the ideas or politics of the revolutions of 1848 in the United States. (There were a few exceptions: Francis Bowen's nuanced critique of ethnic cleansing in the Hungarian revolution, which cost him his chair at Harvard, the evolution of Margaret Fuller's thought as she witnessed and participated in the revolution in Rome, and the radical ideologies that German "forty-eighters" brought to the United States after the failure of their revolutionary movement.) Perhaps not surprisingly, whether in the realm of popular culture or national politics, Americans invoked the revolutions in often superficial or even inaccurate terms. For instance, the revolutions were transformed into a marketing opportunity by haberdashers who produced hats evoking Italian or French or Hungarian revolutionaries. In the 1848 and 1852 presidential elections, Whigs and Democrats exchanged insults, labeling each other "Jacobins" or "red Republicans." Protestant leaders criticized the revolutions not based on the revolutionaries' aspirations or politics but because of their own diminishing authority over their congregations; theirs was a knee-jerk reaction against any popular, democratic challenges to authority and the status quo. For the most part, the European revolutions prompted, Roberts suggests, a look not outward but inward. Americans became even more determined to celebrate their own revolution. Few Americans made any effort to understand the European revolutions on their own terms. Instead, the 1848 revolutions provided Americans an occasion to honor their own successful and, they increasingly emphasized, peaceful, conservative, exceptional revolution. The European revolutions thus did not, in general, change political or religious ideas in the United States but were instead summoned as images and symbols to support pre-existing domestic agendas and celebrate the American nation.

With an important exception, Roberts suggests. With the outbreak of violence in Kansas in 1855, the antislavery movement took an important lesson from 1848: revolution--indeed, violent revolution--might be necessary to win and preserve political liberties and freedoms. As Missourian "border ruffians" overran antislavery settlers and as the Pierce administration supported the proslavery territorial government, antislavery Americans became increasingly convinced that the United States was not immune to the social conflict, violence, and authoritarian crackdown that they had just witnessed in Europe. European-like problems, they concluded, called for European-like solutions, namely, a revolutionary movement willing to resort to violence. This acceptance of violence, Roberts suggests, paved the way for the Civil War. While this is a provocative argument, the evidence Roberts musters to support it is not wholly convincing. That evidence--mostly brief comparisons between Kansas and Europe in half a dozen congressional speeches and a few newspaper articles--often seems just as glancing and superficial as other, earlier invocations of the revolutions. It seems possible that here, again, the revolutions were not significantly changing ideas--in this case about the proper role of violence--but simply provided convenient rhetorical analogies that were more offhanded and perfunctory than substantive and meaningful. In short, the evidence presented in *Distant Revolutions* seems a little thin to sustain Roberts's weighty argument that antislavery politicians and proponents had the 1848 revolutions in mind when they looked at events unfolding in Kansas.

Still, this is a provocative and novel interpretation, one that deserves to be carefully considered. There is much to recommend in *Distant Revolutions*. Roberts's study thoughtfully and for the most part persuasively traces how events happening across the Atlantic prompted Americans to reconceptualize their past and imagine very different potential futures.

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**Citation:** Rob Nelson. Review of Roberts, Timothy Mason. *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. May, 2010.

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