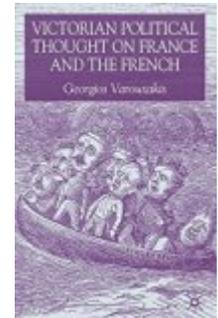**Georgios Varouxakis.** *Victorian Political Thought on France and the French.* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xii + 232 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-333-80389-9.

**Reviewed by** Detlev Mares

This is a book about England as much as (or even more than) about France. When Varouxakis analyzes the debates of Victorian thinkers regarding France, we learn a lot not only about their perception of Britain's closest geographical neighbor, but also about their representation of France as a foil or mirror for projects of reform or cultural criticism inside Britain (often more narrowly England). Varouxakis traces the different twists and turns of the debates among British thinkers from about 1830 to the 1870s.

The study focuses on "unusually articulate individuals," which--despite fundamental differences in outlook--might be classified under Stefan Collini's concept of "public moralists" (p. 2). Only some of these were "political" thinkers in any narrow sense of the word; most were writers dealing with cultural and social issues of the day, contributing to the widely read literary and political reviews or producing books on social and literary criticism. Varouxakis's set of authors does not exclude thinkers who were highly critical of France and French politics, such as James Fitzjames Stephen and Thomas Carlyle. However, it is

thinkers with much sympathy for France and an excellent, often first-hand knowledge of French affairs who form the center of attention, for example the journalist Walter Bagehot or the English Comtist Frederic Harrison. Two writers in particular predominate throughout the book--Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill. Both showed an interest in French affairs from their early years, and both offered sophisticated analyses of French events to English readers.

The openness of Victorian thinkers for French influences marked a fundamental shift from earlier approaches to French politics in British debate. When, most famously, Edmund Burke reflected on the revolution in France in 1790, his most pressing concern was to prevent revolutionary ideas from crossing the channel into Britain. Victorian thinkers, by contrast, were willing to see French politics and French political thinking as an inspiration for politics and social life in their own country. This did not mean that they were uncritical admirers of all things French, which becomes clear right from the start of Varouxakis's book. His introduction summarizes the intellectual pre-

conditions for British thinkers' openness towards France. It was very much based on the belief that nations differ fundamentally in their respective "characters." The notion of "national character" might seem to preclude understanding and mutual influence between nations. But it was frequently complemented by the thought that each nation followed a different course to perfection and progress. By combining the best elements from the development of different nations, each nation might learn how to speed up her own path of progress. Thus, France might hold many a lesson for England, even while French politics as a whole might cause critical comment.

The idea of complementarity between nations becomes clear in the second chapter. The question of whether France was the most civilized of nations caused Mill and Arnold to reflect on the respective characters of British and French civilization. John Stuart Mill adopted his very definition of the term "civilization" from the writings of the French historian and politician Guizot. His differentiation between "material" and "moral-intellectual" civilization (p. 41) made Mill argue that England merely had reached the stage of "commercial" civilization while still lacking in the requirements of "moral-intellectual" civilization. In this area, he saw France in the lead. Matthew Arnold argued in a similar vein. In his famous attacks on the "philistinism" of the British middle classes, he praised the "power of social life and manners" in France (p. 51). To him, it seemed obvious that the British needed a dose of French "intelligence" and "equality" in intellectual discussion to become a more civilized nation (p. 56). In both cases, it was not French civilization in general that was held up to the British as a role model; rather, Mill and Arnold picked out those elements of French "civilization" which their own countrymen seemed to be lacking on their way towards greater social perfection.

As Varouxakis repeatedly stresses, not only was Britain to learn from France, but the French

also were meant to take some advice from their neighbor. This is one result of chapter 3 which analyzes British reactions to the shifts in nineteenth-century French politics. Again, Mill and Arnold feature prominently. When Mill expressed his views on the French revolution of 1830, he was enthusiastic at first, but he singled out a crucial defect of the French: their lack of respect for the law and law-founded government. For his liking, French politics was far too quick in resorting to insurrectionary means. Against these tendencies, Mill advised the French to follow British precedent in founding a stable political system. After 1848, reactions in Britain remained ambivalent. Hardly anyone regretted the fall of Louis Philippe, but doubts grew about the abilities of the French to erect a stable political system which would guarantee freedom and property. These ambiguities towards the French, which emerged again in 1851 at the coup d'etat of Louis Napoleon or after the 1871 Paris Commune, point to deep-seated reservations about the "national character" of the French.

Consequently, Varouxakis continues with a chapter on the different uses of the all-pervading concept of "national character" (and associated terms, such as "race" or "nation") among British thinkers. While for some writers "national character" seemed to be predetermined by history or biology, Mill and Bagehot again followed a more sophisticated line. Despite employing the concept of "national character" in their writings, they eschewed any "racial determinism." For them, nations were able--within certain limits--to change their received ways of behavior. Still, the experiences with French politics after 1848 had one striking result: despite many differences between individual thinkers' treatment of "national character," both determinists and non-determinists doubted that the French would be able to mold their national character in a way favorable to freedom and stable politics. The French were seen as capricious and immoderate, eager for change and impatient, even as too clever and theory-ob-

sessed to found a stable parliamentary government along the lines of their intellectually duller British neighbors.

If the French were seen as lacking in attachment to the ideas of liberty and parliamentary government, what set of values was their "national character" supposed to support? As Varouxakis shows in a chapter on foreign policy, most Victorian political thinkers (except the Comtists) came to agree that the answer to this question was national "grandeur," the search for national glory and a desire for territorial expansion. The priority given to these aims seemed to make the French prefer the rule of a despot to the struggle for freedom. Even John Stuart Mill, ever the staunch defender of France, who tried to make the considerations of French politics understandable to a British audience, grew increasingly tired of the French tendency to direct foreign policy according to pride, ambition, and thirst for admiration. Although not without sympathy for the desire "to shine in the eyes of foreigners," he doubted that the French were prepared to accept the true preconditions of national strength, namely "the industry, instruction, morality, and good government of a country" (quoted from a letter by Mill to Tocqueville, 1842, p. 144). By 1859, Mill, positively detesting the rule of Napoleon III, had come to believe that their national character made the French want to impose their rule on other peoples. Thus, it was "national character" that seemed to thwart French chances to reach a higher stage of perfection among the family of nations.

With this result, Varouxakis has moved his book beyond a mere exercise of the "how-did-British-thinkers-perceive-the-French"-sort. By moving the concept of "national character" in Victorian thought to center-stage and by describing political thought as emerging from this starting-point, he has probed deeply into the structures of political argument in Britain. Here lies the most obvious achievement of this study in the tradition of intellectual history, while the chapters merely

tracing Victorian commentary on events in France provide solid information, but are less inspiring to read. For example, Bagehot's views on the empire of Napoleon III are traced in great detail from his journalistic works, and they are certainly interesting in themselves; but one might have hoped for more systematic exploration into the question of how Bagehot's views on the constitution of England colored his perspective on France.

Varouxakis's book shares one defect with much intellectual history: he mainly concentrates on a set of "great" political thinkers, while reactions to French events from a popular perspective (for example, the many radical and democratic societies commenting on the French revolutions in the course of the century) get hardly any notice. This is a pity, since it might have expanded the analysis in significant ways. Radical activities very often caused fears about stability in Britain--which in turn had an influence on British perspectives on French revolutionary experiences.

But Varouxakis avoids other drawbacks of some intellectual history, such as treating private letters as equally valid expression of the ideas of political thinkers as their published works. Especially in the case of John Stuart Mill (on whom he has published expertly before), he gives much attention to the strategies implicit in writing to particular people. Throughout the book, Varouxakis takes Mill's desire to act as a mediator between the British and the French into account, thus grounding Mill's statements firmly in the political and "strategical" contexts of writing. In this way, he avoids the trap of treating the views of "great thinkers" as verities detached from time and place. With its clear exposition of argument and lucid language, Varouxakis's study meets the highest standards of intellectual history (although he leaves his readers to wonder why for him "Victorian political thought" seems to come to an end in the 1870s). The results of the book not only contribute to our knowledge of English thinking

about France; the even greater achievement is a deepened understanding of the underlying concepts with which British political thinkers approached other countries. For this reason, this book deserves the attention of readers with interests well beyond the thematic focus on France and the French.

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