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J. A. W. Gunn, *When the French Tried to be British: Party, Opposition, and the Quest for Civil Disagreement, 1814-1848*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. 498 pp. \$95.00 U.S. (cl) ISBN 9768-0-7735-3512-1.

Review by K. Steven Vincent, North Carolina State University.

Scholarship on modern French politics often begins with the observation that France has suffered from a statist tradition that relies on an extensive centralized administration and is supported by a political culture deeply suspicious of division and pluralistic politics. To account for this, historians have pointed to Old Regime legacies: the residues of the absolutist and patrimonial state; the pervasive cultural and institutional influence of Catholicism; the enduring power of Cartesian rationalism and Enlightenment radicalism. Moreover, all scholars seem to agree that these long-term forces were reinforced during the revolutionary era, when anxieties concerning plots, conspiracies, counter-revolution, and military defeat fostered a politics that emphasized national unity and characterized political disagreements as unpatriotic, even treasonous.

Often implicit in these analyses and critiques of French politics are assumptions that a stable political order requires a constitutional framework that provides for the peaceful alternation of power among opposing groups or parties, and that this in turn requires a political culture in which political legitimacy is accorded not only to those individuals who support one's own politics, but also to opponents who accept the rules of the game. The British parliamentary system, with its loyal opposition and relatively disciplined political parties, is frequently held up as normative.

This is the framework of J. A. W. Gunn's wonderful new book, an erudite, elegant, and enlightening analysis of the thought of early nineteenth century French writers who thought deeply about the issues of civil disagreement and constitutional politics, and who haltingly approached a pluralist conception of politics for France. Gunn argues persuasively that the Restoration "was remarkably rich in just the sort of political thought that has to do with the practicalities of day-to-day political life. . . . Labouring to fashion new institutions under the great shadow cast by the Revolution, the public men of the time thought and talked and wrote of the conditions of peaceful political competition with an intensity that the comparative calm of Britain rendered unnecessary" (pp. 4-5). These men were frequently enamored of the British parliamentary monarchy, or at least what they perceived to be the nature of the British political system. Their fascination with British institutions is the reason for Gunn's provocative title, *When the French Tried to Be British*—provocative because French intellectuals, even those who favored British parliamentary institutions and party politics, criticized many aspects of British culture and bridled at being perceived as overly sympathetic to France's recent enemy.

Gunn is particularly interested in how the issue of political disagreement was addressed following the restoration(s) of the Bourbon monarchy in 1814 and 1815, and especially how it

inflected interpretations of the Charter issued by Louis XVIII in 1814. It is a commonplace among historians of the era to note that there was a divide between those on the right-center who emphasized loyalty to the king and those on the left-center who stressed loyalty to the constitutional government. What Gunn emphasizes is how members of both groups confronted necessarily the central political issues of how much disagreement was to be allowed (or encouraged) in the new system, how groups that disagreed were to be characterized, and how dissent was to be organized. It was a spirited dialogue that often made reference to the party politics of Britain, not always positively. Some viewed with suspicion any emulation of British politicians, depicted as men devoted to their party with a sort of military discipline that would violate any respectable Frenchman's sense of honor. Others viewed British party organization as admirable, but worried that French *moeurs*, which emphasized individualism and independence, would hinder the adoption of such a system in their own country. Gunn makes a convincing case that appeals to individual conscience at the expense of organized politics were less prominent after the mid-1820s, though there were still frequent charges that there remained a lamentable lack of *esprit public* among French political figures, increasingly accused of being corrupted by money rather than honor or vanity. Gunn argues that:

Frenchmen of the Restoration did come, by degrees, to accept the necessity of organization and leadership in politics, difficult as the transition was. It was the decade of the 1820s that saw a new appreciation of these realities even as the political struggle pushed the parliamentary system toward revolution. The modes of organization that gained recognition did so in an order that reflected the emergence of party lines in the chambers and the gradual extension of partisan activity to the business of securing the election of representatives who belonged to one's side. (pp. 116-17)

Here, Gunn's intellectual history of the debate about the role of a political opposition and party politics coincides with Robert Alexander's recent account of the growth of party organization during this decade [1].

Gunn examines a wide cast of writers, to which a review can give only insufficient attention. There is judicious examination of relatively well-known writers such as Benjamin Constant (1767-1830), François-René, vicomte de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard (1763-1845), and François Guizot (1787-1874); less well-known figures like Joseph Fiévé (1767-1839); and, especially welcome, relative unknowns in recent scholarship, such as Vincent-Marie Viénot, comte de Vaublanc (1756-1845), Auguste-François, comte de Frénilly (1768-1848), and Eugène-François-Auguste, baron de Vitrolles (1774-1854). The filter of examination is always the degree to which these individuals embraced a politics that accepted organized opposition parties, parliamentary debate, and extra-parliamentary disagreement. Gunn is careful, however, to situate individuals and doctrines in the context of the political practices of the era. He discusses the political forces at play at any given time, the political conundrums individuals confronted as a consequence, and the divergent attempts to resolve these issues.

There is an excellent chapter on Vaublanc and Frénilly, for example, which analyzes their thinking about representative government during the early years of the Restoration. Both were ultra-royalists and, as such, were out of step with Louis XVIII's policy of accommodating some of the changes introduced during the Revolution. Vaublanc was a member of the government administration in 1816, but faced a dilemma: he favored an electoral bill supported by the ultra majority of the *chambre introuvable*, but that was opposed by the king, the upper chamber, and the majority of other ministers of the government. As a consequence, he was forced to resign from the ministry. This experience led him to confront issues central to any parliamentary regime: whether there should be solidarity within a ministry; whether the administration served at the pleasure of the king or should accede to the majority of the chamber. These, in

turn, raised for Vaublanc more general issues: should individual politicians who generally shared a similar point of view make concessions to sustain some form of party unity? More broadly, should one support the larger parliamentary system even when the system entailed the adoption of policies with which one disagreed? It is not surprising that the ultra-royalist Vaublanc favored legislative power over ministries when his faction was powerful in the chamber; nor is it surprising that he was tolerant of dissent when he found himself at odds with the king. What is more impressive is that he adopted a relatively consistent position concerning legislative authority and dissent. Gunn argues that Vaublanc believed the new parliamentary dispensation created by the Charter entailed the sharing of political space with individuals and groups with different political orientations. He came to recognize that this required that working arrangements among legislators — that is, “parties” — be established, and that the extreme individualism of legislators be transcended for the good of the party and the nation.

Frénilly, similarly, wrote of how the deep political divisions in France revealed by the Revolution meant that the new legislative bodies created by the Charter must reflect these divisions. Government ministers and the majority in the Assembly must have some agreement — “a community of sentiment” — but there must equally be acceptance of struggle between the opposing groups in the Assembly. For both Vaublanc and Frénilly, in short, the vaunted unity of king and people, or nation and people, must be fundamentally qualified to allow for peaceful civil disagreement within the new governmental structure of the constitutional monarchy. There were, however, limits to their adoption of what we would term political pluralism: they did not believe that republicans could play the role of a loyal opposition. In the words of Frénilly, democrats were not “a party in the state that aspires to direct it, but a party outside the state that aspires to destroy it” (p. 186). As Gunn sensibly points out, his “unwillingness even to award his enemies the relatively cold comfort of opposition made coping with the real divisions of the nation a matter of some difficulty” (p. 181).

Other ultras shared these concerns about the contours of the new parliamentary regime. Joseph Fiévé, for example, to whom Gunn devotes a chapter, insisted that the contest of interests, not opinions that were more fickle, should be at the center of politics, and he argued that parties should publicly express firm and fixed doctrines. He was disturbed when the discords between the government and lower chamber were not resolved, believing that effective parliamentary government required their accord. Fiévé argued that the vitality of the representative system was related to the honorable interplay of political parties that represented interests.

The most famous ultra of the era was Chateaubriand; unfortunately, in Gunn’s opinion, he was “not an especially gifted theorist” (p. 330). While noting that his political writings of 1814–16 received more attention than any others of the era, Gunn’s impatience with his theoretical “mincing back and forth” (p. 371) is palpable. Chateaubriand’s famous *De la monarchie selon la Charte*, published simultaneously with the 5 September 1816 dissolution of the *chambre introuvable*, was in Gunn’s estimation “one of those publications where the identity of the author is of far more consequence than are the contents” (p. 365). In comparison, Gunn is impressed with the constitutional writings of Vitrolles, whose *De ministère dans le gouvernement représentatif* (dated 1815, but in fact appearing in January 1816) is judged to be one of the most coherent works of the era. “Vitrolles had excelled at showing the logic that inhered in every part of representative government, properly understood, and so wrote a tract that extracted its principles, each of which tended to suggest the nature of the others” (p. 365).

Equally central to Gunn’s book are early French liberals like Benjamin Constant, Royer-Collard, and François Guizot. The Doctrinaires were at best ambivalent about the existence of parties, but Gunn sympathetically analyzes one of Guizot’s writings, *Des moyens de gouvernement et d’opposition* (1821), that accepted partisan struggle between parties. Because of this passing

acceptance of parliamentary opposition, Gunn is more complementary of Guizot than many. Nonetheless, he recognizes that Guizot's support of opposition parties was articulated only when he found himself not connected with the government. “[I]f Guizot the scholar and political theorist boasts an uneven record as a promoter of parliamentary government, Guizot the mature politician seemed not to benefit from his historical learning and theoretical powers. . . Both before and after his spell in office, Guizot's theory had been better than his practice” (pp. 456-62).

Constant fares better. “In the realm of political thought of a sort meaningful both to his own time and to posterity, Constant carries a strong presumption to be the dominant figure of the time” (p. 257). He assumes this role in Gunn’s book because he moved earlier than most to embrace a parliamentary politics with a role for a vocal opposition. Constant came tentatively to this position during his experience as a member of the Tribunat (1800-1802). In these years, Constant articulated an opposition to government initiatives while emphasizing that he was not attempting to subvert the political system as a whole. He argued that the appropriate role of members of the Tribunat was to voice criticisms and objections of the edicts issued and the legislation proposed by the government. Only after this experience, Gunn suggests, did Constant articulate a constitutional stance that emphasized the importance of the separation and balance of power, and begin to shed the hostility to “factions” and “parties” he had embraced during the Directory. Constant is faulted, however, for failing to embrace a model of parliamentary politics that included the presence of an organized opposition. According to Gunn, it was finally in the early years of the Restoration that Constant defended the presence of an opposition – variously referred to as *indépendant*, *liberal*, and *constitutionnel* -- that accepted the Charter but distanced itself from the government. Gunn’s assessment of Constant -- “the cold romantic, the liberal without optimism” (p. 325) -- is generally positive, but he also notes Constant’s reservations about the appropriateness of British assumption concerning ministerial responsibility and party politics for France, where traditions and conditions were different.

The limited space of a review precludes analysis beyond consideration of the book’s general structure. One of the great strengths of Gunn’s rich study is that it takes French political maneuverings of the period seriously into consideration. This leads to discerning appraisals. In his final assessment of Constant, for example, Gunn writes that Constant “could summon up no confidence that those in office would play fair, so his tributes to constitutional rule were less robust than they would otherwise have been” (p. 327). This is exactly right, I believe, both about Constant’s stance and the political world in which he inhabited. It also highlights why French politics were so different from British politics, where acceptance of the general rules of the parliamentary game could more readily be taken for granted. French political figures, for good reason, were less sure: ultras suspected that liberals wished to replace the monarchy with a republic; liberals feared that ultras would scuttle the constitution. And, of course, hanging over all was the prospect, arresting to all those desirous of a constitutional regime, of a return to either Neo-Jacobin or Bonapartist authoritarianism. It is amazing, given this context of anxiety and suspicion, that so many articulated as clearly as they did the goal of a pluralist parliamentary system.

Finally, a word is in order about style. This book not only provides illuminating detail about the thoughts and actions of individual protagonists of the Restoration, carefully situated in close context with political developments, but it also presents it all with wry humor and a light touch. This is a long book, but a pleasure to read. All those interested in the political thought of the Restoration, and more broadly the development of parliamentary politics in France, will find much of interest.

NOTES

[1] Robert Alexander, *Re-Writing the French Revolutionary Tradition: Liberal Opposition and the Fall of the Bourbon Monarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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