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Francesco Benigno, *Mirrors of Revolution: Conflict and Political Identity in Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010). *Late Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, v. 16. For the most part, this volume is a translation of the 1999 book, *Specchi della rivoluzione: Conflitto e identità politica nell'Europa moderna*. 293 pp. \$102.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 9782503528977

Review by James Collins, Georgetown University.

This translation of the Italian historian Francesco Benigno's book, *Specchi della rivoluzione*, brings to fruition the wish expressed by Charles Tilly in his 2001 review of the Italian original: "An English translation would serve as a provocative text for many a course on early modern Europe." [1] The volume has an introduction and a short conclusion, in an effort to provide some coherence, but the first chapter in particular is more a stand-alone essay than part of an integrated argument. The "Acknowledgements" explain the origins of the chapters: 1) "Revisionism Compared," from a course on methodology at the University of Catania, offered in 1992-93 (shorter Italian original in *Storia*, 2, 1992); 2) "Rethinking the Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," a paper presented at the University of Pisa in 1996 (Italian original in *Storia*, 5, 1996); 3) "Winds of the Fronde: The Revolution before the Revolution," from several seminars, first at the University of Rome—La Sapienza, then at the University of Macerata, and finally at Coimbra; and 4) "The Mystery of Masaniello," whose "distant origin" lies with a paper given in 1994. Benigno writes that he has worked on this volume since 1994, but the disparate origins, in space and in time, of its constituent elements come through clearly in the chapters.

Benigno seeks to integrate our traditional historiographical investigations and discourses with developments in other disciplines. The Fronde chapter, for example, began life as a seminar paper given in a Department of Anthropology. He uses the citation techniques of social scientists, with their endless (and often quite useful) lists of titles. Footnote after footnote cites countervailing literature: the first reference provides the citation for the point made in the text; the second reference begins with "but see," implying a contradictory position in the second citation. We often find no resolution of such contradictions, or rather of the specific contradiction, because the cited works can largely agree in interpretation. Many pages consist primarily of footnotes, a technique some readers will find off-putting.

Be brave, dear readers, for Francesco Benigno has much to teach us. The "Revisionism Compared" essay offers two major benefits: a time capsule of how people thought about early modern history circa 1991; and a provocative presentation of the revisionisms of the French and English Revolutions. Benigno provides a solid, if perhaps overly political reading of the evolution of approaches to the two revolutions. Yet the historiographies (to say nothing of collective memories) of the two revolutions did (and do) reflect politics. The changed interpretation of the French Revolution between the 1960s and the 1980s had obvious connections to the French politics of those years, not simply in the personal evolution of someone like François Furet, but in the larger process of the de-legitimization of Marxism, both in political terms (the virtual collapse of the French Communist Party) and in intellectual ones.

This chapter can prove invaluable for graduate students seeking a quick summary of these parallel revisionist movements—the reassessment of the English events of the 1640s, primarily within a framework of "political and events-based history" (p. 88), and those leading up to and including the

French Revolution, through a “concentration on ideological and cultural history.” We get a clear sense of Benigno’s suspicions of this first approach in his critiques of Conrad Russell (the main villain of the piece) and Geoffrey Elton. In a paragraph on Russell (p. 85), Benigno begins: “These orientations [work published in the early 1990s on the history of ideas in seventeenth-century England], however promising, do not yet seem capable of overturning the hegemony of a historiographical culture imbued with a sort of old-fashioned positivist empiricism.” After a discussion of statements from Russell and Elton, the next paragraph continues: “This tendency to an ingenuous objectivization of narrative history, thought to be immune from the vices of teleology and anachronism that afflict every other form of interpretative or analytical history, is pushed to historiographical extremes.” This events-based history, in Benigno’s view, lacks sufficient rigor in *Quellenkritik*, and suffers from a willingness to avoid precise definition of terms: the footnote in question cites Humpty Dumpty.

This essay could be a wonderful springboard to a graduate seminar meeting organized around the question of where the two revisionisms have gone in the last twenty years. In our French case, the two historians highlighted by Benigno—Furet and Keith Baker—still provide essential touchstones for research questions, and the focus on ideological and cultural developments remains pre-eminent, but I think it is fair to say major shifts have also taken place. We read little about gender in Benigno—a reminder of how far the historiography has come since 1991-92—and he does not anticipate the fascinating juxtaposition of that (French Revolution) revisionism and an (English Revolution) revisionism relying on events-based history. British historians of the French Revolution, in particular, are combining the two approaches in fascinating and productive ways, as we can see in recent essays by Peter Campbell or in John Hardman’s new book on the Assembly of Notables, which tries to unravel the web of cultural and intellectual change tangled up with the actual political process.^[2] The newest work seeks to understand the connections of the social and political—precisely a course of action urged by Benigno in all his chapters^[3]—and to tie use of specific ideas—say “virtue”^[4]—to specific political situations. The actors, like a Calonne, had to choose from among a given range of actions, including political “speech” (verbal or non-verbal) and, within that speech, from a range of given rhetorical and “ideological” options. Benigno suggests that certain revolutionary moments expand exponentially the range of such options, both in terms of ideas (say the “radical visions of society like those put forth by a Gerrard Winstanley”, p. 87) and in terms of actions (the Terror). Recent works bear him out: one might cite, outside of France, Jeremy Popkin’s book on slavery in Saint-Domingue in the 1790s.^[5] The revolutionary moment dramatically altered what one could say about the concept of “slavery,” which had profound consequences on the practical implementation (and abolition) of it.

The second essay, on the “General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century,” took me back to my days as a graduate student, when that theme was a particularly hot topic. Benigno discusses the two paperback edited volumes, *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660*, edited by Trevor Aston (1965), and *Preconditions of Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Robert Forster and Jack Greene (1970), read by every early modernist graduate student in the innocent days of the 1970s. Ah, the simple life, of Roland Mousnier v. Boris Porshnev, of Annaliste gospel on French social structure, of Lawrence Stone and Christopher Hill. Benigno brings an interesting Italian perspective to this debate (a perspective followed up more fully in chapter four, see below). Benigno finds the old “general crisis” theory long discredited, or, perhaps more accurately, simply abandoned. He suggests we might have acted too rashly in so doing. He wants to know if we can find “shared aims” among Masaniello in Naples, Cromwell in England, Retz in France, and Jan de Witt in the Netherlands (p. 327). Benigno brings up the Iberian examples, mainly through his discussion of John Elliott’s work, but they are largely tangential to his analysis, as is, curiously, the Dutch case. Given that one of the articles in the *Preconditions* book, by J. M. W. Smit (my dissertation advisor, as it happens), focused precisely on the United Provinces of the Netherlands, and given that Benigno, in chapter four, emphasizes the importance of the Dutch example for the Neapolitans, the absence of any serious analysis of Dutch processes stands out as a glaring omission in Benigno’s overall presentation.

That criticism aside, Benigno makes a strong case that we need to rethink those mid seventeenth-century events precisely in a comparative framework, because only such a framework can allow us to bring ideas and practice into clear focus. Those unfamiliar with the genesis of the “general crisis” debate, and with its various strands in the 1960s and early 1970s, will find a splendid panoramic view and solid bibliographic references in the notes. Here and elsewhere Benigno reminds us that seventeenth-century observers very much tied together these events—that Henriette Marie advised her sister-in-law, Anne of Austria; that Masaniello quickly became a figure of European myth; that the Ormée of Bordeaux sought contacts with Cromwell; that political figures in the seventeenth century carried out massive propaganda campaigns, in part to put what we would call spin control on reports of events not simply domestic but international. The timing of this article (1990s) shows how much has changed in fifteen or twenty years: the Atlantic dimension, in particular, seems curiously absent, as does the world of the Holy Roman Empire, brought to life in this dimension by people like Robert von Friedeburg.[6] The timing of the article means the two volumes on European Republicanism, edited by Skinner and van Geldering, are also missing.[7] Benigno thus leaves to us the task of this broader integration, using scholarship that did not exist when he wrote.

The general crisis piece leads seamlessly into the final two chapters, case studies of the Fronde and of the contemporaneous Neapolitan events. For French historians, Benigno offers a superb outsider’s look at the historiography of the Fronde. Here, as in all four chapters, he provides a kind of archeology of knowledge on the question at hand. From the ridiculous, reactionary farce immortalized in song, and in Lavissee’s *Histoire de France*, the Fronde only slowly emerges as a subject of serious consideration. Benigno, unfairly I think, dismisses Orest Ranum’s 1993 *The Fronde. A French Revolution*, as a simple narrative of events, when its subtitle makes it clear that Ranum insists we take the Fronde as an actual revolution (if a failed one). That’s precisely Benigno’s argument. He makes extensive use of the superb articles by the EHESS early modern group—Robert Descimon, Christian Jouhaud, Alain Guéry, and Fanny Cosandey—as well as the magisterial work of Hubert Carrier, but he introduces as well many citations to works in Italian rarely used by historians of France. Dealing extensively with Jouhaud’s *Mazarinades: La Fronde des mots* (1985), he rightly, in my view, rejects the argument that, in one of Jouhaud’s famous lines, “this Fronde of words was not a Fronde of ideas.”[8] Benigno is surely right that ideas did not simply follow political action, and that the Frondeurs (above all the “men in black”) did have a coherent political agenda.

I would differ somewhat with Benigno on the nature of that agenda. Although I would agree that the Frondeurs wanted to protect the common weal (*bien public*), they rarely used that term; they used instead the phrase “le bien de l’Estat,” because the sixteenth-century discourse on republicanism (France as a monarchical republic, as in Bodin’s use of the term “république” in his title) had given way, by the 1620s, to a discourse of the State as the collective political entity. The Mazarinades overwhelmingly preferred the phrase “bien de l’Estat” to “bien public”; to those making the rebellion, the State’s interest, now coterminous with the common weal, came above the “intérêt particulier” (p. 230). I would also suggest that Benigno posits too great a conflict between the legal men and the State: they made the State and they shared its power from within, not without. They tended to be hostile to representatives bodies, dominated in most cases in France by the landed nobility; the legal men chose, in the days of Henry IV, the option of sharing State power from inside, and they, even more than the king, developed the vocabulary of the State.[9] Even the *intendants*, after all, came from the same restricted world of the legal men: by the time of Louis XIV, the rules for naming an *intendant* assured that virtually every one of them had previously served four years on a sovereign court.[10] Even in the eighteenth century, the two ministers who sought to destroy the Parlements in 1770-74—Maupeou and Terray—were former Parlementaires; indeed one would be hard put to find someone from a more distinguished and ancient Parlementaire family than Maupeou.

The Masaniello chapter takes us into the highways and byways of Neapolitan historiography. Given his short presence on the scene, the emphasis on Masaniello surely has far more to do with his suitability

for making a given point (political, rhetorical, historiographical, social, cultural—all overlapping categories, to be sure). Reading Benigno, all doubt on that point will be dispelled. He does similarly fine work with the legend of the “lazzari,” the barefoot revolutionaries of 1647-48, or, for that matter, of 1799. Benigno ties them to the Dutch “beggars” (the *gueux*) and to the complex term “Lazarus,” both the New Testament beggar of that name, and the brother of Mary and Martha, raised from the dead in one of the Christian Bible’s most famous passages. So, too, Benigno offers some interesting ideas earlier on about the use of the term “fronde” (slingshot), tying it directly to David (164ff) in the minds of French participants in 1648-50, if not beyond.

The conclusion makes reference to the contemporary world, discussing an Arab proverb with respect to the Gulf War of 1991. One of Benigno’s most important points does indeed get ample illustration in contemporary conflicts, such as that in Libya. We look today at the civil war in Libya, particularly on the side of the “insurgents,” and we see the complex motivations, the ever-shifting coalitions, the ideological and rhetorical universes within which they operate, and arguably must operate. The head of the Interim Council, Mahmoud Jibril, a Western-trained economist, and long a proponent of market economies, ran the main think tank of the Qaddafi regime as recently as January 2010, when he boasted to the US Department of Commerce team sent to meet him about his close ties to Saif al-Islam, Qaddafi’s son. Quoting here from WikiLeaks: “His confidence in his own ability to approach Saif al-Islam with a new idea, as well as to raise the Trade Mission with GOL ministers, indicates that he is well-connected within the regime. As the head of a think-tank that reports directly to the Prime Minister-equivalent (who called him during the meeting), without the burden of an official policymaking role, he may have a unique ability to influence decision-makers without challenging their authority.” General Younis, until January 2011 Qaddafi’s Minister of the Interior, is now one of the main insurgent commanders. These men speak the language of “democracy” and “human rights” today, but no such words fell from their lips in spring 2010. Side-by-side with such people, we see young Libyans who really do want democracy and human rights, defined in largely “Western” terms, yet also those who want a “return” to fundamentalist Islam, in their eyes, also in terms of human rights. The opposition to Qaddafi unites them all, yet they use terms like “democracy” with vastly divergent meanings.

So, too, the actors of the Fronde, or of the Neapolitan events of 1647, or of the English Revolution of 1647-49, or the French one of 1789, used a word like “liberty” to mean, in the immortal phrase of Humpty Dumpty, “...just what I choose it to mean, neither more, nor less.” (Benigno, p. 86, n. 246)

NOTES

[1] Charles Tilly, review of *Specchi della rivoluzione*, in *American Historical Review* 105, n. 3 (June 2000): 879-880.

[2] Peter Campbell, “The Language of Patriotism in France, 1750-1770,” *e-France*, 1 (2007): 1-43; Peter Campbell, Marissa Linton, and Thomas Kaiser, eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), introduction; Peter Campbell and Marissa Linton, eds., *The Origins of the French Revolution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), introduction; John Hardman *Overture to Revolution: The 1787 Assembly of Notables and the Crisis of France's Old Regime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Julian Swann, “Disgrace without dishonor: the political exile of French magistrates in the eighteenth century,” *Past and Present* 195, n. 1 (2007): 87-126; Patrice Gueniffey *La Politique de la Terreur. Essai sur la violence révolutionnaire, 1789-1794*, (Paris, Fayard, 2000); outside France, the approach of Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution batave entre la France et l'Amérique*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008) has much to offer.

[3] Benigno has also practiced social and economic history, with his work on Sicily. See, for example, his collection of articles *Ultra pharum. Famiglia, commerci e territori nel Meridioni moderna* (Rome:

Meridiana Libri—Donzelli, 2001) and his short monographs on commerce at Trapani and on the countryside near Paceco: *Il Porto di Trapani nel Settecento : Rotte, Traffici, Esport Azioni (1674 - 1800)* (Trapani, 1982); *Una Casa, Una Terra. Ricerche su Paceco, paese nuovo nella Sicilia del Sei e Settecento* (Catania : Cooperativa Universitaria Editrice Catanese di Magistero, 1985).

[4] Marissa Linton, “The Man of Virtue: The Role of Antiquity in the Political Trajectory of L.A. Saint-Just,” *French History*, 24, n. 3 (2010): 393-419.

[5] Jeremy Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[6] Robert von Friedeburg, *Self Defence and Religious Strife in Early Modern Europe: England and Germany, 1530-1680* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History. See also his article in the Skinner and van Gelderen volume (n. 7).

[7] Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen, *Republicanism: A Shared European Tradition*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Much to their credit Skinner and van Gelderen include articles on East Central Europe, which defended the tradition of republicanism far better than many Western European areas.

[8] Let it be noted that I accepted Jouhaud’s argument in my 1995 *State in Early Modern France*, after a closer reading of Ranum and research on the Mazarinades, I rejected this interpretation in the second edition. James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 2nd edition), 88ff.

[9] These points are more fully developed in James B. Collins, *Republicanism and the State in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[10] Annette Smedley-Weill, *Les intendants de Louis XIV* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), has short biographies of the *intendants*, virtually all of whom had been *maîtres des requêtes*, a position that itself required four years of service on a sovereign court: her biographies show Louis XIV virtually never overrode that clause.

James B. Collins
Georgetown University
collinja@georgetown.edu

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