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Robert Alexander, *Re-Writing the French Revolutionary Tradition: Liberal Opposition and the Fall of the Bourbon Monarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xi + 385 pp. Maps, tables, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 (hb). ISBN 0-521-80122-2.

Review by Philip Nord, Princeton University.

A quarter century ago, not many historians cared about the French liberal tradition. For nineteenth-century specialists, what counted was history from below, crowd behavior, and the revolutionary *journée*. William Sewall may be counted a partial exception. He reconstructed liberal debates about what constituted individual freedom in a post-revolutionary age, but the individualist liberalism he evoked was of interest to him, less in itself, than as a foil to the cooperative associationism of a nascent labor movement.[1] It was François Furet who began to turn matters around in the 1980s. He wanted to unburden French intellectual life of its Marxist load and, to him, in historiographical terms, this meant taking the Robespierist fire out of France's revolutionary past. He cast about for men who at once embraced 1789 but abhorred the revolution's terrorist episode and in the process came up with a pantheon of thinkers, from Antoine Barnave to Jules Ferry, who together made up a liberal alternative to the Jacobinism which he felt had made French intellectual life in the twentieth century so susceptible to communism.[2] Furet's pioneering efforts opened the way to a rash of successor studies. Much of this work was biographical in nature, resurrecting figures underappreciated in France: Benjamin Constant, François Guizot, even Alexis de Tocqueville (who, to be sure, has not been underappreciated in the U.S.). The first decades of the nineteenth century, it turns out, were liberalism's formative moment and sorting out the French revolution's legacy to humankind its defining problem. How the problem was resolved was in part a matter of theory but in the case of the Doctrinaires and of the Doctrinaires' star pupil Guizot (the July Monarchy's longest serving prime minister), it was also a matter of statecraft, a core point in Pierre Rosanvallon's work on the subject.[3] Biography, political theory, public policy analysis: such is the stuff of which the new historiography on liberalism was made.

This is where Robert Alexander's book comes in, a study of the liberal opposition in the Restoration era. From Alexander's perspective, the Doctrinaires, too well-disposed to royal power, don't quite qualify as liberals. State institutions do not interest Alexander, nor theory or even ideas over much. He zeroes in instead on self-styled liberal politicians, men who ran for office and who, between elections, agitated and organized, keeping up the pressure on a succession of Restoration governments throughout. This perspective provides a salutary reminder of the issues that mattered most in Restoration-era politics. Liberals, of course, touted themselves as constitutionalists who embraced the Charter of 1814, not as the king's gift, but as an expression of the national will to which the monarch himself was bound to submit. They were patriots who lit into Restoration foreign policy, above all the Spanish intervention of 1823, for its subservience to the reactionary internationalism of the Holy Alliance. And they were anticlericals who could not abide the unholy alliance between Throne and Altar, which was manifest already in Monseigneur Frayssinous's appointment to the Grand-Mastership of the University in 1820, but which reached its full flowering in the years after Charles X's accession.

The liberal program, if program is the right word for such a loose assemblage of beliefs, was capacious enough to encompass a range of sub-currents. Republicans like Constant and the marquis de Lafayette, were able to sign on, hoping to broaden the program to include a substantial widening of the franchise. Bonapartists, like General Jean-Maximilien Lamarque, also aligned themselves with the liberal opposition. Napoleon, during the Hundred Days, had positioned himself as a friend of constitutional government, a cynical move in light of his earlier authoritarianism, but one which worked well enough in the near term to break down barriers between liberals and Bonapartists. This proved useful on two counts, first by providing liberals a set of constituencies among serving officers and war veterans and, secondly, by furnishing them with a repertoire of symbols with a powerful political appeal, not least that of a triumphant tricolor marching across Europe.

This last observation brings us to the heart of Alexander's book and its greatest strength. Liberals had a message to convey, but what mattered just as much, if not more, was how they conveyed it. Alexander evokes in detail how

liberals practiced politics, and his discussion of the subject is enriched by substantial archival work in a variety of departmental settings. Liberals, it turns out, were inveterate organizers. Many have heard of Guizot's "Aide-toi et le ciel t'aidera", a political association formed on the eve of the 1827 elections to mobilize the liberal vote. But long before "Aide-toi", there was a Philhellenic Society, a Union, a Casino, and there were numerous informal groupings as well which confabulated in provincial salons and *cercles*, in cafes and reading rooms. Wherever liberals gathered, there was sure to be a newspaper at hand, but the printed media were far from the sole or even principal means of liberal expression. Serenades, charivaris, illuminations, banquets, by all such means, liberals made their presence felt. Did the government prosecute an over-zealous oppositional journalist for sedition or libel? The court proceedings provided liberals a venue to proselytize. Did the Church roil local life with a missionary campaign? A staging of *Tartuffe* afforded the occasion for a liberal riposte.[4]

Alexander has three points to make about all such efforts. Liberal organizing was ongoing and did not let up between elections. It began right from the beginning of the Restoration and with immediate consequences for the regime's political character. Liberals fared well in the elections of 1819, throwing a scare into the otherwise temperate Decazes administration, Decazes and his successors executed a sharp right turn which picked up speed in the wake of the duc de Berry's assassination the following year. Last of all, liberals proved themselves in the long run more energetic and effective organizers than their major political competitors. Canvassing and voter registration were particular strong suits. The Restoration electorate expanded from 70,000 in August 1827 to 95,000 in October 1829. This was the liberals' work, and it paid them hefty dividends in the elections of 1827 and 1830, and this despite the regime's best efforts to engineer results favorable to itself.

For Alexander, there is a moral to this story. So long as liberals stuck with what they did best, namely, reform-minded organizing and electioneering, they flourished. Yet, they did not always stay the reformist course. The regime moved to the right after 1819, and the rightward shift expressed itself through stepped-up administrative efforts to manipulate the electorate. The arrival of the Villèle ministry in 1821 turned such tinkering into a full-fledged system of administrative intimidation and fraud. A fringe of outraged liberals turned away from the electoral process in response, plunging into conspiracies of various forms, Carbonarist and otherwise. This frightened voters, and liberal electoral fortunes plunged, the result in part of administrative finagling but also of the liberals' own strategic miscalculations. Alexander's conclusion is straightforward enough: liberalism is all about consensus-building. Liberals who stray from the path court trouble; those who stay on it prosper.

There is a Whiggish cast to all this, of course, which raises a perennial question. Great Britain, like France, passed through a political crisis at the end of the 1820s. Britain emerged at the far end with the reform bill of 1832; the French, on the other hand, got a revolution. Why? The pig-headedness of French ultra-royalism explains in part why the situation polarized in France. In 1829-30, Charles X opted to stiffen in the face of liberal electoral gains, not to make concessions. Liberals, though, had no better response than talk of a tax strike. It was the intervention of the Parisian crowd which changed a stalemate into a revolutionary breakthrough. Now, Alexander has interesting points to make about the relations between liberals and the disenfranchised. Constant, Lafayette, et al. did not confine themselves to working the electorate but went beyond, inviting non-voters to sign petitions, tapping into yet wider audiences through public demonstrations, charivaris, and the like. The strategy paid off outside Paris. When news of the July days reached provincial towns, crowds turned out, but it was not difficult for local liberals to manage them and smooth the transition to a new political order.

Was this true in Paris, however? Alexander does not take up the possibility that the Parisian crowd might have had purposes of its own, out of tune with those of the liberals it leveraged into power. Sewell, in the work cited above, argued just this point, and the argument may be pressed a step further. Liberals, not all but many, feared what Adolphe Thiers (a July Monarchy stalwart) would later call the "vile multitude". The liberal July Monarchy that followed on the Restoration took steps to discipline the unreliable, to create a network of institutions for delinquents, asylums for the mad, lock-hospitals for the venereal which could impose a measure of order on unruly plebs. British liberals may have cast a doubtful eye on statist practices, but not their French (but also German and Italian) counterparts who had good reason to look to disciplinary institutions for help in dealing with populations not always amenable to liberal reasonableness. Nineteenth-century European liberalism had its dark side.

It is the positive face of liberalism, however, that is Alexander's propos. Reaction was well-entrenched in Metternichian Europe. Liberals, through persistent but gradualist-minded political effort, were rolling it back in the

name of enlightenment and liberty. How that effort was mounted is the heart of the matter for Alexander. In the process of mounting it, liberals created a particular style of politics which centered around newspapers and committees, the coffee-house and the reading room. The style had its roots in the revolution of 1789; it would survive well into the Third Republic until more modern forms of party organization began to take over the management of electorates. The liberal style had a century's long history, but as Alexander makes plain, its moment of greatest opportunity lay in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and it is this hopeful moment which Alexander's book succeeds so well in recreating.

NOTES

[1] William Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: the Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[2] See François Furet, *La Révolution française, 1770-1880, de Turgot à Ferry* (Paris: Hachette, 1988).

[3] Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Moment Guizot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

[4] See also Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater: the Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815-1830* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

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