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Jeremy Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic: A History of Political Thought in France since the Eighteenth Century*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. viii + 548 pp. Chronology and index. \$185.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-198-20313-1.

Review by Michael C. Behrent, Appalachian State University.

There is something about the history of political thought that inspires scholars to write vast, sweeping syntheses—books positing that a meticulous examination of the evolution of political ideas can reveal something essential about the very nature of politics. Some of these works follow a well-defined plot. For Leo Strauss, the history of political philosophy is that of the gradual, but never complete, eclipse of the idea of natural right.[1] For Eric Voegelin, the story is one of the unrelenting oscillation between order and disorder, in which the special kind of chaos that is political messianism plays an increasingly disruptive role with the onset of modernity.[2] More recently, Marcel Gauchet has recounted the advent of democracy as a succession of crises triggered by the never-ending process of “leaving religion.”[3] Other scholars have shied away from such overarching narratives, with all the teleological and reductionist pitfalls they entail. Thus while Quentin Skinner describes the main achievement of Renaissance and Reformation political thought as the development of the modern theory of the state, he presents it less as an inexorable fate than as a contingent tale in which, over several centuries, a host of writers crafted a critical mass of ideas that, in retrospect, can be seen as laying the groundwork for a new conception of sovereignty.[4] Pierre Rosanvallon, for his part, has theorized and practiced an approach that he calls a “conceptual history of the political” that is less concerned with the elaboration and implementation of pure doctrines than with “the fractures, tensions, limits, and denials” that political ideas unleash (as he has shown, for instance, in the case of the concepts of universal suffrage or popular sovereignty).[5]

Jeremy Jennings’s new book on French political thought since the eighteenth century is an impressive new member of this distinguished club. It shares all the genre’s most admirable traits: breadth, erudition, and a willingness to identify key narratives and grapple with big questions. The way that Jennings has chosen to analyze his extensive material is both original and surprising. In a nearly 550-page book intended as a comprehensive overview of the topic, Jennings’ approach is neither what he calls “crudely chronological” (p. 27) nor straightforwardly thematic. Rather, the book is organized around a string of conceptual triads: each title of its eleven chapters (including an afterword) consists of three terms, such as “Rights, Liberty, and Equality” or “Positivism, Science, and Philosophy.” The connection between these terms is frequently self-evident. We are not surprised, for instance, to find a chapter entitled “Religion, Enlightenment, and Reaction” addressing various attempts to come to terms with religion’s post-revolutionary fate, by considering, on the one hand, liberals such as Benjamin Constant and Germaine de Staël and, on the other, traditionalists like François-René de Chateaubriand and Joseph de Maistre.

Yet a number of Jennings’s triads are at once more evocative and less intuitive: chapter four, for instance, is entitled “Commerce, Usurpation, and Democracy,” and chapter five, “Universalism, the Nation, and Defeat.” In each case, however, the reader is likely to find that the chapter largely justifies Jennings’ conceptual triangulation of it. The former turns out to be an exploration of the place of Britain

in nineteenth-century French political thought (hence “commerce”), which serves as the backdrop to an examination of Constant’s views on ancient and modern liberty (with its critique of Napoleonic “usurpation” and assessment of different forms of “democracy”). “Universalism, the Nation, and Defeat” proves to be an exploration of liberal and republican nationalism, chronologically couched between the defeats of 1814–1815 and 1870 (but, oddly, not 1940), with particular emphasis given to the themes of enemies foreign and domestic, France’s role as a model for national self-determination, and abasement and humiliation as sources of nationalist sentiment.

It is in this somewhat oblique approach to relatively familiar (if expertly analyzed) material—thirty-three concepts strewn across eleven chapters—that the originality of Jennings’s book lays. This perspective distinguishes it from earlier works covering similar terrain, such as Roger Soltau’s classic study, *French Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, which is organized around “*le conflit des deux Frances*” [6], or Sudhir Hazareesingh’s *Political Traditions in Modern France*, which adopts a more straightforwardly thematic approach (with chapters devoted, for example, to “The Republican Tradition” or “Liberalism and the Elusive Search for Consensus”).[7]

What explains Jennings’s idiosyncratic method? He is not prone to over-theorizing, probably to his credit. In his introduction, Jennings makes a nod at Rosanvallon’s “conceptual history of the political,” concedes that his book’s “chapters are not ordered according to any strict unilinear sequence,” and declares that he seeks “to provide a broad conspectus of the French political tradition as it evolved over the past two hundred years and more” (p. 28). What interests Jennings are less words and concepts per se than the particular ways in which they become threaded together, forming clusters and affiliations that, over time, become constitutive of a political culture. He sees French thinking about politics as defined not by discrete cognitive acts, but rather, as it were, by neural pathways: intellectual habits and dispositions that have been reinforced by historical experience. When one clump of political neurons fire up, they predictably trigger the explosion of other clumps to which they are immediately connected. Thus there is a Rousseauan pathway that, beginning with the belief that political freedom depends on the uninterrupted exercise of popular sovereignty, leads to a radical but ultimately anti-modern defense of virtue, which itself becomes tied to a critical moral discourse about luxury (“Sovereignty, Social Contract, and Luxury”). Jennings’ intriguing chapter on socialism, “Insurrection, Utopianism, and Socialism,” identifies another pathway, one in which social reform is tied to insurrection. This trail rests on a dilemma, which operates as a kind of switch: does social change require a more or less violent seizure of the reins of power (this leads to the option represented by Blanqui or Guesde), or can it be brought about by transforming social relations independent of political authority (the path taken by Proudhon and syndicalism)? This question hinges, in turn, on competing assessments of the nature of the state (favorable, under the right conditions, in the case of the former; hostile, for the latter).

Jennings’ approach is at its most effective when it allows him to offer fresh and creative insights into French intellectual history. At times, however, one finds lurking beneath the appealing triadic chapter titles rather conventional treatments of well-known topics. His accounts of the historiography of the Terror (“History, Revolution, and Terror”) or the development of positivism (“Positivism, Science, and Philosophy”) break little new ground, though they are invariably told with great learning and clarity. Jennings can also, at times, be a little eccentric in the intellectuals he chooses to highlight or downplay: thus Armand Carrel, a journalist who played a crucial role in the 1830 revolution and the July Monarchy, yet who can hardly be considered a thinker of any striking originality, is discussed over nearly ten pages, while Jean Jaurès—a figure of an altogether different order of magnitude—is quickly dispatched in a mere four paragraphs.

Part of the reason for these imbalances is Jennings’ unapologetic—one is tempted to say uncritical—adoption of François Furet’s revisionist historiography as his theoretical and normative framework. As Jennings puts it, the “loose, but overarching, organizational principle” that structures his book is “that political thought in France can be read as a continuous and open-ended debate about the meaning of the

Revolution of 1789 and the form of republican government that it gave rise to” (pp. 27–28). Like Furet, Jennings gives particular weight to the revolution’s pathologies: the problem of the relationship between 1789 and 1793, the meaning of the Terror, and the nature of Jacobinism. To its credit, this perspective informs the book’s rich and complex analyses of the fate of democracy and liberalism in French political thought and its reflections on the conceptual and cultural obstacles that prevented them from taking root. Though his tone is usually judicious and even-handed, Jennings occasionally succumbs to Furet’s rhetorical tics and pet peeves: discussing the aftermath of the Congrès de Tours, Jennings opines that the “cold and iron-like grip of Bolshevism was about to seize hold of the French left” (p. 391) and he speaks approvingly of Furet’s view that intellectual philo-communism was “a form of bourgeois self-hatred” (p. 438).

The limitations that the revisionist framework imposes on Jennings’ project are both chronological and thematic. His book follows the narrative of Furet’s *La révolution française*, topped up by *Le passé d’une illusion*: the 1789 revolution spawned a “century of civil war and of calamity”—as Jennings puts it, quoting Robespierre (p. 12)—that finally came to an end with the stabilization of the Third Republic, until communism rekindled revolutionary passions after 1917.[8] Consequently, except as it relates to communism and the problem of intellectual *engagement*, the twentieth century is mostly absent from Jennings’ book. Moreover, this chronological foreshortening prevents Jennings from making the most of his intriguing triads and the discursive pathways they suggest. For instance, Jennings abruptly ends his fascinating account of “Rousseauan arguments against luxury (and by extension, of republican hostility to the commercial model embodied by England)” (p. 146) in the 1890s.

Yet this belief cluster surely has a much longer lifespan (as François Hollande’s recent imposition of a tax rate of 75 percent on France’s wealthiest citizens amply attests). To what extent (Jennings might well have asked) did these views carry over into the post-World War II debates about modernization and consumption? How did the United States take the place of Great Britain, before both were ultimately lumped together under the term “*le modèle anglo-saxon*”? Similarly, though Jennings offers an exceedingly thorough account of how the problem of representation plagued political thought during the revolution and in its immediate aftermath, he offers no hint that these issues have never quite lost their salience, to the point where even the Fifth Republic has been punctuated by periodic debates about this very question: to wit, the constitution of 1958, the election of the president by universal suffrage (1962), de Gaulle’s proposed reform of the Senate (1969), election of the National Assembly by proportional representation (1985–1986), and the shift to the *quinquennat* (2000). It may be unfair—and potentially ungenerous—to find fault in an already long book for not being quite long enough. But precisely because Jennings is so skilled at explaining the dense conceptual and discursive knots that constitute French political thinking, it is a shame that he does not explore how they have unraveled or grown further entangled in more recent periods.

It is also regrettable that Jennings’s analysis of twentieth-century political thought is framed almost entirely by the problem of “intellectuals.” The book’s organization (with the vast majority of his discussion of the twentieth century confined to the final chapter, “France, Intellectuals, and Engagement”) leaves one with the impression that before the Dreyfus Affair, France had “real” political thought—serious reflection on constitutions, rights, the foundation of sovereignty, the best form of representation, and history; but that since then, it has experienced little more than intellectuals pontificating about their political commitments. Jennings tells the story of the *intellectuel engagé* with his distinctive skill and knowledge. Yet to characterize (however implicitly) the long nineteenth century (the subject of at least four-fifths of the book) as an era when thinkers grappled with the substance of politics, while presenting the short twentieth century as one in which intellectuals were obsessed with the *nombriliste* question of their own political stances considerably oversimplifies both periods. Thus Jennings says little about the political positions of French writers and artists during the former period (such as the Romantics, with the exception of Chateaubriand), while passing over some of the more notable trends in twentieth-century political thought that cannot be reduced to intellectuals taking

stands. These include, to name but a few: fascism (which Jennings discusses solely in terms of *engagement*), conceptions of the *état providence* and social solidarity, technocracy, and the social and political thought of the French resistance. Jennings discusses at length the efforts of such intellectual-politicians as Benjamin Constant and François Guizot to make sense of the political reality of their times, but ignores their twentieth-century counterparts (Léon Blum, Pierre Mendès-France, or for that matter Charles de Gaulle, who are not or only barely mentioned) in order to focus on philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault. In this case, too, Jennings' revisionism would appear to limit his narrative unnecessarily.

These limitations are, needless to say, of Jennings's own choosing; in many ways, they are also responsible for the book's sharp focus and insight into the topics upon which it dwells at length. Despite its selectivity, *Revolution and the Republic* is the most comprehensive, astute, and readable volume on French political philosophy to appear in decades. Its interest ultimately lies less in its thoroughness than in the ways in which, over eleven free-flowing, intertwining essays, he traces the formation of the discursive concatenations that make up modern French political thought.

NOTES

[1] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1953).

[2] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, 5 vols. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1956-1987).

[3] Marcel Gauchet, *L'Avènement de la démocratie*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2007-2010). The planned fourth volume has yet to be published. See, too, Gauchet's brief overview of the project, *La Démocratie d'une crise à l'autre* (Nantes: Editions Cécile Defaut, 2007).

[4] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

[5] Pierre Rosanvallon, *Pour une histoire conceptuelle du politique* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), p. 30. See, too, Rosanvallon's three-part history of French democracy and democratic thought: *Le Sacre du citoyen: Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); *Le Peuple introuvable: Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); *La Démocratie inachevée: Histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

[6] Roger Henry Soltau, *French Political Thought in the 19th Century* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1959).

[7] Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Political Traditions in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[8] François Furet, *La révolution. De Turgot à Jules Ferry (1770-1880)* (Paris: Hachette, 1989); *Le passé d'une illusion. Essai sur l'idée communiste au XX^e siècle* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995).

Michael C. Behrent
Appalachian State University
behrentmc@appstate.edu

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