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Stephen W. Sawyer, *Demos Assembled: Democracy and the International Origins of the Modern State, 1840-1880*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018. ix + 233pp. Notes and index. \$45 U.S. (cl). ISBN 13: 978-0-226-54446-5; \$10 to \$45 U.S. (eb) ISBN 13: 978-0-226-54463-2.

Review by Robert Tombs, St John's College, Cambridge.

It is now some thirty years since those exciting days when the sudden rediscovery of the richness of France's liberal political tradition—one might say everything that lay between counter-revolution and socialism—was new and even controversial. Almost simultaneously in the mid-1980s senior scholars such as Louis Girard and André Jardin laid out the basic narrative and analysed the fundamental ideas, significantly assuming the same periodization.[1] For some, most explicitly François Furet, it was a way of breaking with Communism and with Marxist historiography, tainted by association with the USSR, and abandoning the vision of post-revolutionary French history as the long and never quite ending march towards socialism.[2] For others, notably Pierre Rosanvallon, it was—or so I presume—the discovery of a long neglected strand in the complex history of French democracy.[3]

Early writing about French liberalism not only assumed that it was an exceptional history, compared with the norms of Britain and the United States, but that it was a story of at least relative failure. Liberalism, it seemed, had been defeated politically and indeed intellectually, becoming a submerged ideology that dared not speak its name. Even Tocqueville was a relatively secondary figure in French historiography until a rush of works in the 1980s, notably the major scholarly biography by André Jardin.[4]

This pioneering interest in French liberalism was an ethical and political project, as well as a historiographical statement: it intended to show that the conflict between 'the two Frances' was not the only story, and that French history had a meaning and a political message even in the disillusioned era of Mitterrand and Chirac.

Those combative days seem long past. But Stephen Sawyer, in this original and important book, sees a new, very different and no less challenging contemporary significance as neo-liberalism upsets assumptions about the state and about democracy itself: 'As we look around the world at the state of our contemporary democracies, as we search for perspective on our current political, social, and economic state, finding resources for coming to grips with our democratic condition seems as urgent as ever' (p. vii). His aim is to 'look backward to look forward' by examining a period in which 'key problems inherent in the modern democratic state became apparent' (p. 1).

Sawyer does not claim that history, or historical thinkers, have the answers, and so his conclusion might seem a little deflating: 'this historical investigation ... provides few insights into the precise origins of today's democratic crisis' (p. 186). So what is his purpose then? Sawyer quotes John Dunn, who defines the wider project thus: a 'serious intellectual history' still has to be written of 'democracy's global ascent,' 'country by country, language by language, decade by decade ... to fathom just what has occurred within them.' A *vaste projet*, as de Gaulle might have said, and Sawyer has made in this work a searching and thought-provoking contribution.

His work is evidence that the study of French liberal democracy has now reached a further stage of maturity and has taken on a significance spreading beyond the closed borders of the hexagon and its characteristic struggles from the Restoration to the early Third Republic. Rather than being taken as an exception, and even as a separate and failed strand, French political ideas are shown clearly to have emerged as part of the world of Mill, Hobhouse, Dewey, and even Madison and Blackstone; and French democrats were fully aware of democratizing movements in Eastern and Southern Europe and South America too. Sawyer effectively points to the influence of United States politics on mid-century liberals, notably Prévost-Paradol, Laboulaye and even Thiers, who was explicit in his view that France (and other European countries) were moving in an American direction. The English model of conservative liberalism, which many in theory and in sentiment preferred, had proved impossible to emulate. France's post-1789 political saga, rather than being what Tennyson idealized as 'freedom broadening down from precedent to precedent', proceeded through a series of what Alain Corbin has called 'founding massacres,' those bloody assertions of authority that marked the consolidation of each new regime from 1789 to 1871. So France needed a model less based on tradition and deference, but which took account of discontinuity, violence and raw power.

Sawyer seeks, as John Dunn suggested, to 'recount the history of democracy from within the broader history of an international democratic turn' (p. 4), in which democracy came to be perceived as both the origin of and the solution to social and political problems. He focuses not simply on elucidating the development of a range of political theories, but on the combined intellectual and political response to a particular challenge: that of the need somehow to develop a political system—or a variety of systems—in which, irrespective of the type of regime (republic, monarchy, even empire) people would be governed in a democratic manner. The problem was succinctly posed by one of Sawyer's chosen thinkers, Prévost-Paradol: 'It cannot be repeated too often—the French Revolution has founded a society, but is still seeking a government.'

It was widely accepted that democracy was a fact of modern life, not necessarily desirable but inescapable in some form. But in which form? Sawyer's chosen period is that in which, following the 'profound discredit' of democracy after the French Revolution and Napoleonic Empire, it reemerged as 'a political ideal ... squarely in the heart of European politics' (p. 185). Democracy emerged under the long shadow of Terror ('the threat to be avoided at all costs'), war and dictatorship, and those engaging with it did so in this painfully French context. 'It was during this period,' Sawyer argues, 'that key problems in the modern democratic state became apparent' (p. 1).

In its intellectual approach, this book is in some ways—though only in some ways—a classic work in the history of ideas, which is the obvious way to tackle the vast project of the history of democracy. This approach is to analyse ideas as a particular sphere of human activity, with its

own dynamics and constraints. Thinkers read and responded to each other's ideas, if not directly then within an evolving and internally referential tradition. Sawyer thus devotes a chapter to each of several leading individual thinkers, among them the familiar, practically inevitable, figures of Alexis de Tocqueville, Lucien Prévost-Paradol, and Édouard Laboulaye. But he also takes a number of original directions. One is to treat with rigour and seriousness individuals and ideas that have previously been regarded as ephemeral and even as unworthy of intellectual analysis. Hence, he incorporates into his canon of significant thinkers one who would usually have been considered marginal, if not wholly excluded, Adolphe Thiers, a 'towering and troubling figure' as Sawyer calls him (p. 98), but also a hate figure for generations of French democrats, and for not a few historians. Also included are the less well known 'radical democrat' Jenny d'Héricourt and, unusually in a work mostly focused on liberalism, the 'socialist democrat' Louis Blanc.

All, to varying extents, were political actors as well as intellectuals. What brings them together, for Sawyer, is that each illuminates one of the 'problems' he identifies as inherent in the emergence of the democratic state, and which remain relevant to its problems today. In attempting to grapple with these problems, democracy emerged not as the answer, but as an imperfect means of addressing them, and hence as 'a historical practice.'

Each chapter thus focuses both on an individual and on a problem: Tocqueville and 'inequality'; Prévost-Paradol and 'equality'; Laboulaye and 'emergency'; Thiers and 'necessity'; d'Héricourt and 'exclusion'; Blanc and 'terror'. Jenny d'Héricourt, the least known of these writers, formulated 'a deeply original theory of the social individual and the political from the perspective of gender' (p. 139). Louis Blanc, best known as a socialist theorist of the 1840s, is here taken as the historian of the Revolution, the friend of John Stuart Mill during Blanc's long and transformative exile in England, a leading politician of the early third Republic (and tacit supporter of Thiers's suppression of the Paris Commune), and the originator of a 'social theory of democracy [which] contributed to later formulations of liberal socialism and new liberalism' (p. 164).

Sawyer treats Thiers—a politician who liked to see himself as a philosopher—in the same way as he treats Tocqueville—a philosopher who tried to be a politician. As a sometime biographer of this controversial figure, I am particularly interested in his being taken seriously as a political thinker. He certainly took himself seriously. But he was also, almost unceasingly, and far more than any of the others, an active politician, a wielder of power, and a shaper of events whose writings were invariably weapons in the political struggle, and whose ideas reached a mass audience, influencing their votes as well as their thoughts. Conventional intellectual history would consider them (often correctly) as trite, incoherent, superficial, dishonest—merely ingenious special pleading to justify actions taken for unavowed reasons. So his inclusion is intriguing, and points toward a significant divergence on Sawyer's part from a conventional 'history of ideas.' Thiers's role perfectly embodies his pursuit of 'a pragmatic history of the political' as a 'form of practice' (pp. 16-17).

This is surely right. Most historians have long regarded it as evident that ideas are not to be treated as spiritual essences, but as part of a broad and often polemical conversation. Nevertheless, in practice it still puts a certain strain on the political-thought genre, which in its formal structure this book adopts: there is a canon of thinkers and writings which are taken to be particularly significant. Hence, Tocqueville, Prévost-Paradol, Laboulaye, d'Héricourt and

Blanc. But it is one thing to treat systematic thinkers such as these within the political debates of their time. But how does one handle a Thiers, most of whose ideas are scattered across sixteen volumes of political speeches, as well as over thirty volumes of disparate historical and political writings? Thiers was self-confident enough (he was, after all, a journalist in origin) to pronounce uninhibitedly on any subject from economics to astronomy. His often-proclaimed intellectual ambition, never of course fulfilled, was to write a universal history of philosophy. But his natural media were ephemeral—the article and the speech. The real connecting thread is arguably not intellectual but political: the changing demands of the power game. Even Thiers's abiding interest (outside the scope of this book) in astronomy and his involvement in the controversies over evolution and spontaneous generation in the 1850s essentially came back to politics: the combat against what he saw as materialist radicalism. He put it most crudely in the historic debates over education during the Second Republic: 'inequality is the law of God'—a God in whom he showed little sign of believing.

Thiers's intellectual omnivorousness shows how extensive the ramifications of nineteenth-century liberalism could be. Sawyer has taken a broad view of his output and finds in it a perhaps surprisingly consistent core: the justification of the democratic state by a principle of 'necessity.' This is an interesting idea: Pierre Guiral subtitled his biography of Thiers 'de la nécessité en politique', though oddly he did not follow it through. [5] Sawyer does explore it thoroughly, and by thus bringing some order to Thiers's political ideas, in a sense both reduces and enhances him as a thinker.

This theme of 'necessity' marked Thiers's early *Histoire de la Révolution* (1823-27), which was identified as inaugurating a deterministic *fatalisme historique*. This, critics said, put 'necessity in the place of morality' because it neutralized (for political reasons) conservative accusations that the Revolution had been criminal, literally de-moralizing the debate by ascribing revolutionary violence to impersonal circumstances. 'Necessity' also permitted Thiers to defend the 1830 revolution in a remarkably Burkean manner as a revolution that was not revolutionary. It was also 'necessary' to compromise with the Second Empire, and 'necessary' to crush the Paris Commune. Was 'necessity' more than a cynical quibble, using an essentially vacuous concept to buttress opportunistic, and often unscrupulous, political positions? Does it matter?

Thiers's final acceptance of and indeed defence of the necessity of a democratic republic—arguably his most important contribution to French politics—was consciously counter-intuitive: that a democracy was the only viable *conservative* regime for France, because it was the only system that could muster legitimacy and authority. 'La république conservatrice' was Thiers's clever slogan, opportunistic and (so many of his contemporaries said) unprincipled. There could hardly be a better example of 'the pragmatic history of the political.' Thiers's experience of the failures of monarchy, republic, and empire had already led him to conclude in 1848 that a Republic was the form of government that divided the French least. He demanded what became the Third Republic because France had to have 'necessary institutions.'

Yet democracy was for Thiers a problem rather than an opportunity: something to be manipulated and neutered, and absolutely not used to transform society. His notorious 1850 denunciation of 'la vile multitude' had not been unsaid. But it had become outdated, and this could be seen as Sawyer's underlying theme. As he sums up the period covered by the book, 'Upstream ... was a fear of democracy and the state shrouded in the dark shadow of absolutism, terror and

Napoleonic centralization; downstream was the emergence of a new social progressivism rooted in democracy that placed the modern state at its heart' (p. 186).

Exploring crucial ideas woven into this profound change is Sawyers purpose. He is deeply read in the vast primary and now comparably vast secondary literature. His analysis is subtle, original and coherent. His language is precise and succinct. He has written a challenging, ambitious and consequently quite difficult book, which requires repeated reading and thought--and certainly more than one review.

NOTES

[1] Louis Girard, *Les Libéraux français, 1814-1875* (Paris: Aubier, 1985); André Jardin, *Histoire du libéralisme politique : de la crise de l'absolutisme à la constitution de 1875* (Paris: Hachette, 1985).

[2] Particularly relevant to the present topic is his *La Gauche et la révolution au milieu de XIX^e siècle : Edgar Quinet et la question du Jacobinisme 1865-1870* (Paris: Hachette, 1986).

[3] For example in his pioneering work *Le Moment Guizot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

[4] André Jardin, *Alexis de Tocqueville, 1805-1859* (Paris: Hachette, 1984).

[5] Pierre Guiral, *Adolphe Thiers, ou de la nécessité en politique* (Paris: Fayard, 1986)

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