

H-France Review Vol. 22 (April 2022), No. 66

Jonathan Beecher, *Writers and Revolution: Intellectuals and the French Revolution of 1848*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xix + 474 pp. Figures, chronology, glossary and index. £29.99 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9781108842532.

Review by Maxime Goergen, University of Sheffield.

Scholarship on the French revolution of 1848 must grapple with a sizeable amount of uncertainty and tentativeness. First, it is faced with the major issue of how to assign a stable and coherent interpretation to a dizzying cavalcade of events: the toppling of the July Monarchy in February, the proclamation of a short-lived social republic, the closing of the national workshops followed by a civil war during the June days--the "first great battle between proletariat and bourgeoisie," according to Engels [1]--and finally the rise of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, soon to become Napoleon III. Second, it must fight against a certain amnesia surrounding the events: one of the most recent French monographs published on the revolution of 1848 is aptly entitled *La Révolution oubliée*. [2] It is hard to challenge the conclusion that 1848 has been all but erased from French collective memory. The sheer difficulty of making sense of this succession of hopes and defeats, and specifically of assigning this revolution a definite place in France's national narrative, might explain this. For a while in 1848 a civil war opposed two irreconcilable ideas of the republic, one based on social democracy, the other on moderate political representation; it opposed the urban proletariat of Paris to the provincial peasants; it pitted owners against workers. It opened wounds that were revived by the Paris Commune in 1871, to some extent by the events of May 1968, and, as Beecher implies in his book, are still fresh to this day. The year 1848 sits uncomfortably within a mainstream republican narrative.

Another reason why 1848 is such a thorny subject has to do with historiography: 1848 pales in comparison with the weight of scholarship devoted to the great revolution of 1789, traditionally consecrated as the pivotal moment of modern French identity. As Beecher shows throughout his study, references to 1789 were rife even as the 1848 revolution was in the making, and it was impossible for participants not to feel that they were repeating gestures that had been first performed by their glorious elders: this made 1848 a sort of second-hand revolution in the minds of many. For the most critical of them (Flaubert, Tocqueville, and Marx), it was little more than a parody or a farce: there is an underlying theatricality to 1848 that makes it an unstable object of knowledge, sitting halfway between reality and play.

This leads to a final reason as to why 1848 is hard to fully comprehend for a twenty-first-century audience. What characterizes it is indeed an unprecedented mixture of fiction and fact, of dreams and actions: February 1848 is in many ways a literary revolution and a romantic one. Its most

representative figure is a poet, Lamartine, whose rhetorical flourishes were an integral part of what defined the spirit of 1848. It is underpinned by a production of texts and speeches whose lyrical pomposity will be later derided in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (in the scene of the "Club de l'Intelligence"). This verbosity, the constant intermingling of literature and action, the significance given to words and speeches, are probably what makes 1848 most unfamiliar to us.

It is the tenor of this literary debate, and the thought and personal journey of the writers and intellectuals who animated it, that Beecher recreates in this fascinating book. Just like Gribaudi and Riot-Sarcey,^[2] Beecher advocates a kind of resurrection. We get to hear and feel, as if *in medias res*, what it was like to experience the revolution of 1848 as a woman or a man engaged in the world of ideas. Choosing the intellectual and political biographies of writers as vehicles of a general overview of 1848 goes a long way in giving modern readers a first-hand notion of the ideological and literary backdrop necessary to fathom the originality of 1848. The protagonists of Beecher's book are by trade observers as much as actors. They offer a privileged vantage point on the changing nature of the revolutionary process, and on the variable perception of the unsung and invisible heroes of 1848--the people and the Parisian insurgents. Some writers stand at the heart of the action (Lamartine, Proudhon or Hugo), others try to influence events with their work (Sand); some are benevolent or critical observers (d'Agoult, Tocqueville), others fascinated outsiders (Marx, Herzen); and one of them will just want to settle the score of revolutionary illusions (Flaubert). Whatever their own personal or ideological agenda, the diversity of their responses to the events of 1848 paints a vivid picture of the enthusiasm, fears, hopes and disenchantments that are integral to the revolutionary experience. This is as close to a living history of 1848 as can be.

The book consists of eleven chapters, nine of which can be read as self-contained intellectual biographies of selected writers and intellectuals whose work was influenced by 1848. But the book is best read as a coherent whole. The introduction consists of a detailed historical overview of the events leading up to the crisis of 1848, while the conclusion draws attention to the aftermath of the revolution, and weaves together the individual narratives of the preceding chapters. The structure of the book mirrors its broader ambition of situating writers within a network of intellectual sociability: most of them cross paths at some point or another; they have Paris in common, belong to the same literary milieu, and want to play a role in the new world of possibilities opened by the fall of Louis-Philippe. Affects come very much into play amongst them: as they go through the experience of the revolution together, they develop likes or dislikes for each other that are far more than just theoretical.

The introduction gives readers a panorama of the social, ideological and political background of the revolution. It comes with a handy chronology which helps situate events within a timeline; a glossary at the end of the book makes the sometimes arcane political vocabulary of the 1840s easily accessible to all: along with Beecher's highly readable style, this ensures this study is a reliable and accessible introduction to 1848 for a broad audience of specialists and non-specialists alike. But the originality of the study really lies in the articulation of the nine monographic chapters. They start with Lamartine, and end with Flaubert. This framing is meaningful. It can be interpreted as an implied summary of what the book has to say about the impact 1848 had on the relation between "writers and revolution." Lamartine embodies the lyricism and sometimes grandiloquence of the February revolution; he owes the fascination he exerted over a short few months to his qualities as an orator. In 1867, writing *Sentimental Education* as the novel of the generation of 1848, Flaubert ironically depicts the rhetorical prowess of the time as pure *flatus*

vocis. Between Lamartine's idea of a congruence between words and action and Flaubert's absolute dissociation, Sand, Tocqueville, Marie d'Agoult, Hugo, Proudhon and Herzen will assume intermediary positions.

The chapter on Lamartine places us in the midst of the February days and sets the scene for all others. Beecher insists on the important role played by Lamartine's *Histoire des Girondins*, published in 1847. A huge success on its publication, this book contributed to reviving the memory of the Revolution of 1789 and made it ubiquitous in French collective consciousness. From the outset, then, February 1848 appears as an unstable balance of the real and the imaginary, haunted as it was by overarching figures from the past. The idea that 1848 was an imitation of 1789 will come up in the work of many writers considered by Beecher, most notoriously in Marx ("the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce"), but also in Tocqueville, Flaubert, Proudhon—each of them denouncing the imitative or theatrical quality of February 1848 as a sign of parody or disingenuousness. The "Lamartine moment" (February to March-April), however, is one of suspension of disbelief: the power of the word is still congruent with the advance of the revolution, and reenacting the past is still seen as a step towards inventing the future. This precarious idealism won't last: by June 1848 Lamartine is disqualified, and his efforts at establishing a moderate republic discredited. Crucially, Lamartine fails to understand the growing chasm between his eloquence and the harsh realities of working-class life. This will be trenchantly picked on by Tocqueville, who blames him for being concerned with "the particular effect he wanted to produce" and for neglecting the truth (p. 230). Lamartine's self-deceptive performativity is, as it were, the original sin of 1848, which subsequent writers will have to factor into their thoughts and actions.

In March 1848, George Sand goes a step further than Lamartine when she writes to worker poet Charles Poncy that "poetry is in action now. Anything else is empty and dead" (p. 90): the hopes and illusions of the time could not be better expressed—it is that people and writers unite, and that the very substance of their activity become one and the same effort towards a universal and irenic republic. Yet Beecher's chapter on Sand also traces her difficulty in properly circumscribing what she refers to when she talks about the "people." She sees the June days as a confrontation of two fractions of the same entity (this will also be Hugo's case) and struggles to reconcile the conciliatory and evangelistic tone of her writing and the reality of class conflicts. In her later novels, as a result, 1848 will be seen as a failure and a turning point; and, in a change of heart that says a lot about her disenchantment with 1848, she will strongly object to the Paris Commune in 1871.

With Lamartine and Sand end the lyrical hopes of 1848: in a third chapter Beecher turns to Marie d'Agoult, whose *Histoire de la Révolution de 1848* (written under the pseudonym of Daniel Stern and first published in 1850) served as a source for Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* and is often rightly seen as one of the most balanced accounts of the events. Marie d'Agoult is an observer. She presents Lamartine as a flawed hero, and the June events as "the political revolution waged against the social revolution" (p. 150) in a concise formula that sums up the dilemma many other writers and actors will grapple with. D'Agoult also serves as a weathervane of the evolution of the language and style of 1848. Beecher points out that, in the second edition of her *Histoire* (1862), she tones down the religious imagery present in the first edition. That is a sign of the times: the Christian vocabulary that was so ubiquitous in the socialist and republican discourse on the 1830s and 1840s [3] has become inaudible during the Second Empire. Beecher also freely admits to his admiration for d'Agoult's literary style, and for the "dramatic form" (p. 154) of her

Histoire: “Having created a mood, d’Agoult then takes the reader inside the minds of the actors” (p. 155). In this respect, no doubt, Beecher is a disciple.

The chapter on Hugo is perhaps less informative than the ones that precede it, were it only for the sheer number of pages written on Hugo and 1848. But it stands out and deserves to be in at the center of the book: indeed, Hugo’s literary and political destiny is influenced by the events in a way that is unique. While Sand and Lamartine will enter a phase of political disaffection in the 1850s, 1848 will be a seismic moment of change for Hugo, a then-peer of France and supporter of the July Monarchy, who will reinvent himself as a republican, as an exile, and as the archenemy of Napoleon III. The failures of 1848 paradoxically reenergize Hugo’s career.

From two very different ideological standpoints, Tocqueville and Proudhon provide an equally scathing critique of the illusions of 1848. In his *Souvenirs*, Tocqueville writes of the necessity of crushing the insurrections of June in order to maintain an orderly representative system; Proudhon, in his *Confessions d’un révolutionnaire*, tells of how he became the main defender of the insurgents after June and criticizes the chimeras of representative governments. They sit on the opposite sides of the ideological divide: they both are fierce critics, however, of what they perceive of the theatricality or inauthenticity of 1848. Tocqueville berates the damaging effects of the “literary spirit in politics” (p. 230), spearheaded by Lamartine, while Proudhon emphasizes the discrepancy between the bloated eloquence of democrats and the very tangible despair of the urban poor: in his view 1848 is best interpreted as a “romantic imitation” of 1792 and 1793.

Chapters on Herzen and Marx tell of the lost illusions of two foreigners for whom the events of 1848 will determine a major shift in their personal and intellectual biographies. From these outsiders’ perspective, the *journées* of 1848 serve as reference point to take stock of the failures of the republican movement. Herzen, in time, will turn to native Russian socialism, while for Marx, making sense of 1848 will mean finding ways of understanding the victory of “force without phrases over the force of phrases” (p. 342). Like Tocqueville, Marx sees 1848 as a mock version of 1789, but his project, far from the Tocqueville’s conservative line, will be to move away from this model and to invent, as Beecher puts it, “a new drama in a new language,” preparing the advent of future successful revolutions. Incidentally, Marx’s texts on 1848 are also among the most stylistically bold, making ample use of oxymorons or chiasm, as if he meant to use a new and incisive form of rhetoric to counter the overblown romanticism of 1848.

This undermining of the style and language of 1848 is again at play in Flaubert, who fittingly closes this collection of monographs. *L’Education sentimentale* is perhaps the most definitive denunciation of the rhetorical and imitative nature of the events of 1848. Of particular interest in this chapter are Beecher’s interpretations of Flaubert’s vision of the people as an elemental force: this makes for a fascinating reading of the famous episode of Frédéric Moreau’s flight to Fontainebleau during the June days.

Reading Beecher’s book means delving into the complex articulation of revolution and discourse at a time when both were much more interconnected than they would perhaps ever be. It also means entering the lives, friendships, heartbreaks, and day-to-day struggles of nine exceptional actors and observers. At points, the reading is poignant, and it’s hard not to feel for some of these characters who were made and broken by 1848—the aging and purposeless Lamartine, the distressed Herzen, the disillusioned Sand. Beecher promises, at the outset of the book, to “adopt a literary approach, taking account of the narrative structure and formal contents” of the texts

(p. 17). Sometimes he does so very thoroughly, as with Flaubert; sometimes the stylistic approach is more cursory. The conclusion hints at stylistic and thematic patterns among the nine selected writers, and one cannot help but feel this aspect of his research could have been more systematically presented, as it is in Dolf Oehler's remarkable work on June 1848,[4] which can be read as a companion to this volume.

It was Beecher's aim to convey the experience of 1848 as it was lived; he achieves it brilliantly by recreating, within the 500 pages of the book, a world in movement in which Lamartine's, Hugo's, or Sand's thoughts and actions are presented as tentative, subject to revision, defined by the flux of history, the powers of chance, and the interactions with their literary peers. It is tempting to apply to Beecher's book what Alexandre Dumas once said of Lamartine's *Histoire des Girondins*: that it has "raised history to the dignity of the novel" (p. 52). Indeed, history here is incarnated, and private and public are articulated in the political and personal trajectories of these nine intellectuals. This makes this book of excellent and meticulous scholarship a surprising page-turner.

NOTES

[1] Friedrich Engels, "Preface to the English Edition of 1888" in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 199.

[2] Maurizio Gribaudi and Michèle Riot-Sarcey, *1848, la révolution oubliée* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).

[3] See Frank Paul Bowman, *Le Christ des barricades: 1789-1848* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1987).

[4] Dolf Oehler, *1848, le spleen contre l'oubli. Baudelaire, Flaubert, Heine, Herzen, Marx* (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 1996).

Maxime Goergen
University of Sheffield
maxime.goergen@sheffield.ac.uk

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