

***Revolution and the Republic: A History of Political Thought in France since the Eighteenth Century*** by Jeremy Jennings. Oxford, 2011, 560 pages. ISBN: 978-0-19-820313-1, Hardback, £100.00

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Jeremy Jennings has written the history of modern French political thought in large measure as a history of disagreements over what the Revolution meant and might continue to mean. Cultivating the tone of commentary, Jennings eschews “resounding and forthright conclusions,” preferring that readers bring their full attention and active participation to what he characterizes as “a broad conspectus of the French political tradition as it has evolved over the past two hundred years and more” (p.28). To attempt a strictly chronological narrative of the conflicting traditions of French political thought on such a scale would mean either sharply reducing the complexity of each moment of contingent political crisis, or losing the continuity of ideas over time. Jennings wants to foreground both. He is able to thread the needle by dividing *Revolution in the Republic* into ten chapters, each of which is its own chronological narrative built around a cluster such as “Rights, Liberty, and Equality,” “Universalism, the Nation, and Defeat,” or “France, Intellectuals, and Engagement.” People and events recur, but there is nonetheless a progression in the temporal center of gravity of the chapters—although not a quick one, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century is only really left behind in the eighth chapter. As Jennings himself suggests, these chapters need not be read in the given order. The arguments of each, often implied in the triadic titles, stand on their own.

Yet this is a whole book, not a collection of essays, and if its scale precludes reduction to one or several slogans, a synthetic perspective does emerge. Perhaps most important is the demonstration that the tensions left unresolved by the Revolution, above all around the meaning of the Republic, have been productive rather than debilitating. Jennings emphasizes this characteristic of French political thought even in areas often regarded as having been sterilized by the Jacobin legacy. Particularly striking is the positive attention given to religion and attempts to manage religious diversity. *Revolution in the Republic* is in a sense a triumphal synthesis of the historiographic recovery of French political liberalism that has taken place since the early 1980s on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> Indeed *Revolution and the Republic* may be the first genuinely post-Jacobin—rather than pro- or anti-Jacobin—general history of French political thought. Jennings is optimistic about the adaptive capacity of the republican tradition even in the face of today’s European and global problems, ending the book with the declaration that “it still moves” (p.529)—although the echo of Galileo is not comforting. He is thus in company with other exciting historically-minded scholars such as Cécile Laborde in taking the history of political thought as a resource for the contemporary world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jennings is very much part of the wave of scholarship collected into a major recent edited volume, which includes essays from his own pen: E. Berenson, V. Duclert, and C. Prochasson, eds., *The French Republic : History, Values, Debates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> C. Laborde, *Critical republicanism : The Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Jennings builds his chapters out of well-crafted syntheses of original texts, debates, and philosophies. His range is wide, so that canonical figures such as the abbé Sieyès, Germaine de Staël, Alexis de Tocqueville, or Albert Camus share the page with uncommonly sensitive examinations of, for instance, the systematic monarchism of the Vicomte de Bonald or the romantic nationalism of Armand Carrel. Familiar figures and themes appear in new light: Camus through his early reading of Henri Bergson or committed literature as an interwar invention of Paul Nizan, to speak only of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Given the range and depth Jennings has achieved, one hesitates to complain about what is left out. Yet it is telling that the problematic of colonies and Empire really arrives only with Frantz Fanon. The Haitian revolution does not appear in this book. Despite occasional references to slavery or Algeria, Jennings implicitly rejects the perspective of a growing body of scholarship that assigns colonial and imperial experiences fundamental importance across the political spectrum within metropolitan France. This includes the bold claims of historians of the Haitian Revolution running from C.L.R. James to Laurent Dubois,<sup>3</sup> but also the less radical insistence of historians such as Alice Conklin on the powerful links between Empire and Republicanism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>4</sup> Jennings is sensitive to the significance of attitudes toward the “Anglo-Saxon” world—this is in fact a major theme of the book—and later on to the impact of the Russian Revolution (p.433ff), but otherwise Jennings’ France stands alone. Even in what is explicitly a national history, the absence of these transnational perspectives is to be regretted.

This is perhaps an effect of the way in which Jennings approaches texts. Although his opinion about those opinions he reconstructs is generally clear, the scale of the project undertaken in *Revolution and the Republic* does not permit its author to confront its various characters except with their own political enemies or descendents. Jennings can highlight the fact that a Kantian Republican like Charles Renouvier preferred to solve unemployment through colonization than through changed property relations in France because Renouvier wrote about it (p.60). But he has no space to confront a discourse from beyond the limits placed on it by its own context. *Revolution and the Republic* is a reminder that a real difference exists between the history of political thought and intellectual history focused on politics. The latter could not do without such contextualization and therefore cannot be written with the same sweep and inclusiveness as the former. Such limits in *Revolution and the Republic*, therefore, are often not faults but virtues consequent on a major achievement.

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<sup>3</sup> C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963). L. Dubois, 'An enslaved Enlightenment: rethinking the intellectual history of the French Atlantic', *Social History*, 31, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>4</sup> A. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).