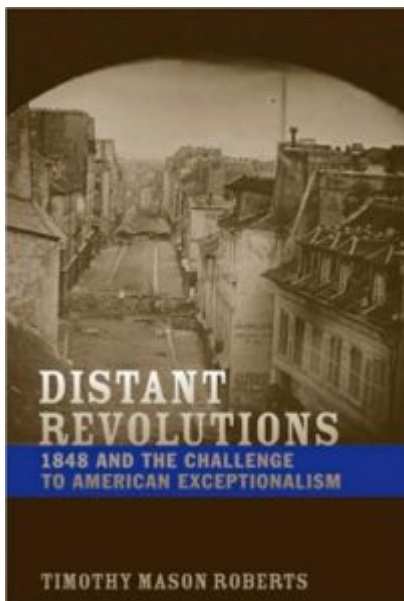


Think Globally, Reform Locally



When Philip Claiborne Gooch traveled to Paris in the late 1840s to study medicine, he likely did not expect that he would ever sit on the throne of King Louis Philippe. Yet soon after his arrival, French citizens rose up against their government. Subsequent uprisings occurred in the German and Italian states and in Hungary, spurred partly by crop failures and poor economic conditions. The last was led by Louis Kossuth, who became 1848's most famous revolutionary. In Paris, the king was deposed, and Gooch helped storm the Tuileries Palace. Although his fellow Americans did not share his experience, many shared his ardor. Back home, populations followed the revolutions' developments and honored their leaders by rechristening locales such as Kossuth County, Iowa; Lamartine, Arkansas; and Garibaldi, Oregon. Men grew Kossuth-esque beards. Americans learned the polka, a dance said to reject European high culture. And when Francis Bowen wrote critically of the Hungarians in the *North American Review*, his stridency cost him a professorship at Harvard.

In *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism*, Timothy Mason Roberts explores the reasons why Americans' reactions to these "distant" conflicts were so fervent. A few observers like Bowen saw them with some objectivity. But like other foreign conflicts, Americans viewed the events of 1848 through the lens of their own concerns, imbuing them with great importance.



Timothy Mason Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. 272 pp., cloth, \$40.00.

In 1848, for example, many Americans likened the uprisings to their own revolution. Most were unfamiliar with Eastern Europe, and the revolutions—several in number, and each with its own dynamics—made comprehension still more difficult to attain. But as Roberts explains, Americans sought “analogies in American history to help them understand overseas events” (7). Parallels were imperfect; one could not shoehorn 1848 into 1776 without distorting European developments. (Americans’ romanticized perception of their own revolution added yet another wrinkle.) But schoolchildren learned that Kossuth was akin to George Washington, and Italians imitated the Boston Tea Party when they boycotted Austrian tobacco. Suggestions that the revolutionaries were following America’s script magnified the conflicts’ importance in American eyes, because they became indicators of the United States’ global impact. It is difficult to overstate contemporary belief in this connection. When he visited the U.S., Kossuth was presented with a lock of Washington’s hair and bullets from the Battle of Bunker Hill.

The uprisings revived the debate as to what the U.S. role should be in such cases: Should America serve solely as a model republic for others to emulate, or should it involve itself directly in their struggles? The debate was as old as the French Revolution, and there were ardent partisans on both sides. James Monroe had pledged in 1823 that the U.S. would remain apart from European quarrels, and in 1849 Zachary Taylor invoked Washington’s warning against entangling alliances. Yet many, like James Buchanan, believed that Americans could not be “indifferent spectators to the progress of liberty” (23). Some U.S. officials recognized the new European governments before receiving permission to do so. This zeal led the Austrian minister to the U.S. to muse, Why do Americans concern themselves with Hungarian sovereignty, when their own nation has *slavery*?

The answer, of course, was that these inconsistent stances served their interests, and overwhelmingly, self-interest determined how Americans perceived and reacted to foreign events. For this reason, although *Distant Revolutions* addresses foreign-relations debates, its usefulness extends well beyond them. Some Americans, for example, saw the European struggles as advancing both republicanism and Protestant Christianity. The *Methodist Quarterly Review* suggested that revolutions occurred in locations where the Protestant Reformation had stalled. At a time when Know-Nothings were suggesting that Catholics could not be good republicans, the Pope himself was forced out of Rome. Others saw an even greater significance. A writer for the *Louisville Baptist Banner* saw the revolutions as “but preparatory to the millennial reign of Christ” (110).

The uprisings influenced the intensity and character of American reform. Many reformers believed that their goals and accomplishments paled in comparison to the work of European revolutionaries and consequently changed their approaches. In the *North Star*, Frederick Douglass noted that France’s new justice minister had addressed a nonwhite delegation as “Citizens, friends, brothers!” (86). Roberts makes a convincing case that the European revolutions emboldened

American reformers and moved them to cooperate with each other by seeing themselves as part of a community of reform. The dry lobby began to push for *complete* abstinence from alcohol—rather than mere temperance—and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott added women's suffrage to their goals. Margaret Fuller, an ardent feminist, embraced abolition, and Douglass took time from his abolitionist activities to attend Stanton and Mott's convention in Seneca Falls.

Because Americans' reactions to the revolutions jibed with their self-interest, their support for the agitators' goals and policies was not constant. Many who applauded the advent of universal male suffrage in parts of Europe opposed France's establishment of "public works" for the unemployed of Paris. Although Horace Greeley cheered the latter effort, others decried the advance of socialism and warned that its spread to America would lead to interracial marriage. The notion that foreign trends could migrate to America—for good or ill—was prevalent. Slave owners tended to be more enthusiastic about Germany's and Hungary's rebellions than France's, in part because the former groups had no enslaved populations that they might emancipate. Overall, Southern support for the revolutionaries was fleeting. The instability that resulted from the revolutions was bad for the international cotton market, and many recoiled from reminders that challenges to authority could succeed, at least for a time.

Europe's revolutionaries failed to bring about peaceful political change. This result disappointed some Americans, but others saw it as underscoring just how remarkable their own revolution had been and, therefore, as proof of American exceptionalism. George Bancroft, who was penning his *History of the United States*, contrasted American serenity with European chaos. William Stiles, the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Austria at the time, concluded that Europeans were "unfit for the light of freedom" (36). Kossuth was the most celebrated foreign visitor to the U.S. since Lafayette, but as Roberts notes, his actual experience more closely paralleled that of Citizen Genêt. He drew large crowds, but Americans' enthusiasm cooled as he pressed for tangible support for his cause. In 1852 the nation elected Franklin Pierce, who opposed U.S. involvement in European wars.

Problems with Roberts' work are minor. The introduction is a bit overwhelming, as he outlines the numerous revolutions, but this is perhaps unavoidable. The title is somewhat misleading; to an extent, Americans did regard the Europeans' actions as challenging American exceptionalism, but this is only part of the story. *Distant Revolutions'* importance lies in its demonstration of how Americans absorbed—one could say "spun"—foreign events. If the revolutions went well, they demonstrated the U.S.'s growing influence. If they failed, the U.S. was exceptional. If France emancipated West Indian slaves, American emancipation became more likely. This looking-glass approach permeates the work.

Distant Revolutions is an important addition to the canon of antebellum-American history. For scholars of foreign relations, it demonstrates the depth

and breadth of public interest in foreign events and the ways in which domestic concerns and culture shaped Americans' perceptions of the world. It also provides an interesting juxtaposition to the era's filibuster movements; as in those scenarios, many American officials found it difficult to remain neutral in thought, and sometimes in action. And the work reminds all historians of the era that American leaders often had foreign events in mind as they made decisions at home. For example, founders of the Republican Party saw the abolition of slavery as helping to make their nation a true "exemplar of liberal democracy" (185) and thus clearly distinguish it from European countries, in which aristocrats had prevented the founding of republics. *Distant Revolutions* is an intriguing work, well told and with an impressive use of sources. By demonstrating the degree to which domestic and foreign policies influenced each other, Roberts' work enhances understanding of both.

This article originally appeared in issue 10.2 (January, 2010).

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