

BOOK REVIEW

Southern Europe in the Age of Revolutions

by Maurizio Isabella, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2023, 685 pp., \$39.95/£35 (hardback), ISBN 9780691181707

Elena Bacchin

Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy
Email: elena.bacchin@unive.it

(Received 15 March 2024; accepted 4 April 2024)

In 1864, a crowd of students attended the funeral of General Yannis Macriyannis, one of the military leaders of the 1821 revolution, who had become a symbol of continuity bridging the 1820s to the new constitutional monarchy of Georgios of the Hellenes. Following the Greek revolution, Macriyannis began writing his memoirs of the War of Independence and of the subsequent decades, which were posthumously published in 1903. Later regarded as a classic of Greek literature, these *Mémoires* expressed deep frustrations with the new state's inability to fulfil the demands of the Greek Revolution: to reintegrate veterans into society, recognise the autonomy and role of religion, implement constitutional guarantees, and allow for popular participation. Macriyannis's life and writings embodied the impact and legacies of the revolutions of the 1820s and the sense of instability that characterised Mediterranean countries until the 1860s and 1870s.

Analysing and comparing the revolutions of the 1820s, Maurizio Isabella's new book, *Southern Europe in the Age of Revolutions*, challenges existing interpretations of this revolutionary period and offers new ones, not only of the uprisings involving Portugal, Spain, Piedmont, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and Greece, but also of the age of revolutions and the significance and innovative drive of these events.

Often depicted as marginal, failed and elitist uprisings, the revolutions of the 1820s hold central importance in the history of southern Europe and beyond. These revolutions not only mobilised a significant portion of public opinion, but also developed ideas and political tools that became political reference points in subsequent decades, creating long-lasting revolutionary traditions. Isabella's book complicates the chronology and the Franco-centric reading of the age of revolutions and invites reconsideration. In particular, these southern revolutions were 'in marked contrast to the aggressive and destructive nature of the French Revolution' (p. 110) both in their characteristics and in how the actors portrayed them. Revolutions did not aim to 'overturn the existing social order' (p. 567) and thus were multifaceted: military, religious, monarchical, constitutional and popular. Military leaders played a crucial part in establishing the army's new political role in 'fulfilling national aspirations for freedom' (p. 99) and in transforming the *pronunciamiento* at the epicentre of the revolution, combining military leadership, popular support and guerrilla warfare. Religion was used to legitimise and explain upheavals and to cement the new order, thus limiting religious pluralism. Revolutions were declared in the

name of the king, whose support was vital for their success, and whose opposition contributed to their failure. Inspired by the Cádiz Constitution of 1812, a constitutional culture introduced individual political rights, such as almost universal male and indirect suffrage, while defending the idea of freedom as a privilege and the rights of territories and corporations.

This constitutional culture also contributed to the politicisation of new sectors of society. Political participation underwent significant changes in scale and nature and ‘fostered the discussion of novel ideas and experimentation with practices’ (p. 28). Manifestos, political catechisms, public readings and speeches, sermons, petitions, poems, songs, festivals, protests, *pronunciamentos*, public ceremonies, parliaments, rituals, monuments, elections and patriotic and secret societies were the means through which constitutions were experienced by the population. A ‘widespread political awareness’ (p. 28) emerged, as well as the vitality, complexity and plurality of political elaborations and mobilisation practices that were both spontaneous and encouraged, new and traditional. Propaganda and direct experience of civil wars prompted individuals and communities to choose sides. This fostered a politicisation that adapted and re-semanticised the political culture of the *ancien régime* with new rights and responded to diverse, often opposing demands and expectations (i.e. local rivalries, requests for military promotion or pay rise, autonomous tendencies, fiscal obligations and bonds of allegiance). At the core of this political participation was the notion of ‘popular sovereignty’ affirmed with Napoleon; as Spanish General Rafael Riego stated on 1 January 1820, the constitution was ‘a pact between [the] monarch and the people’ (p. 103).

However, in a context of change, counter-revolution also appealed to the population and recognised the need for popular support and legitimisation. Revolution and counter-revolution were essential parts of the same revolutionary phenomenon. They not only defined themselves against their enemies and influenced each other but also used similar rituals and strategies: ‘absolutism in the age of revolutions [was] a popular movement’ (p. 447).

Southern Europe in the Age of Revolutions spans from the Napoleonic Wars to the 1860s, encompassing different and complex geographical spaces, in a play of scales among empires, states, regions, communities and cities. Isabella’s book takes the reader to many places, including Segovia’s square to celebrate the proclamation of the constitution, to the island of Tinos during the apparitions of the Virgin Mary ‘Panagia’, to Palermo among the guerrilla groups led by Prince San Cataldo, to the region of Trás-os-Montes during the counter-revolutionary *pronunciamento* of Count Amarante, to the city of Logroño among the ‘women citizens’ who signed a petition to protect the constitution, to exile in London with Guglielmo Pepe, to Genoa when rumours of Austrian bribery to the governor spread, to the trans-imperial networks of the Greek Philikí Etaireía, and into the life of General Richard Church seeking professional opportunities in changing political scenarios between the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and Greece. The book integrates grand interpretation with precise details that challenge, or rather complicate, the interpretation itself.

With an elegant narrative, Isabella presents a brilliant and comprehensive lesson in global history, which, through extensive research, combines general frameworks, detailed closeups and biographical profiles and embraces and compares the various contexts that intersect among them. What emerges is the complexity of history. Thus, we find the military both fomenting and suppressing the uprising; religions legitimising and delegitimising the revolutions; the population as revolutionary and counter-revolutionary; individual rights in dialogue with communal and professional privileges; a public sphere to be guaranteed but also controlled; and demands for local autonomy and searches for centralisation. Each phenomenon found different readings, realisations and interpretations – in

different countries, in different localities within the same country, and in different social classes within the same locality. Modernities and traditions overlap in a constant interplay, showing how in this southern age of revolutions the experiences 'did not necessarily all conform to a linear trajectory moving from the *ancien régime* into the age of liberalism, or from the age of empires to that of nationalism' (p. 252).

This comparative approach to different revolutionary experiences exposes not only mutual influences – the Spanish model set an example – but also peculiar, national, local, urban and rural characteristics. At the base was a southern European political culture and revolutionary model – a 'revolutionary script' (p. 215) – with a determined plot consisting of military engagement with the people and constitutional monarchy, which finds in its development 'the plurality of possible interpretation' (p. 137). The specificity of the 1820s lies not only in its 'synchronicity' and the convergence of events, actors and aims linked to a sovereignty crisis that emerged after the post-Napoleonic period, but also in the awareness of the actors of being part of a single event. Moreover, these uprisings constituted a peculiar southern European phenomenon that left deep traces in the political culture of these countries for future decades and in the crystallisation of the liberal spectrum into progressive and conservative strands. Thus, Isabella's book offers an outstanding fresco of nineteenth-century Mediterranean Europe through the lens of the 1820s revolutions – a transformative political period.