Interview – Mike Rapport

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Mike Rapport is Reader in Modern European History at the University of Glasgow. He specialises in the French Revolution, particularly its international impact, ideas and practices of citizenship and the spatial dimension of revolutionary politics. He teaches modern European history, with a particular focus on France, as well as transnational and global approaches. He is a graduate of the University of Edinburgh (MA, 1991) and the University of Bristol (PhD, 1997). His publications include *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France: The Treatment of Foreigners, 1789-1799* (2000), *Nineteenth Century Europe, 1789-1914* (2005), *1848: Year of Revolution* (2008), *The Napoleonic Wars: A Very Short Introduction* (2013), *The Unruly City: Paris, London and New York in the Age of Revolution* (2017) and edited (with Ben Marsh), *Teaching and Understanding the Age of Revolution* (2017). He has a book forthcoming on Paris in the Belle Époque. His media appearances include radio (contributing three times to BBC Radio 4's In Our Time) and television (consultant on the French Revolution for Lucy Worsley's 'Royal History's Biggest Fibs', 2020). He has served as Secretary to the Society for the Study of French History and is an alumnus (2012) of the Highlands Forum, an informal, inter-disciplinary network aimed at encouraging international co-operation and peace. He is an Affiliated Researcher with the ongoing project led by Professor Peter Jackson on 'The Weight of the Past in Franco-British Relations since 1815'.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

There is a lot going on because my fields include the French Revolution, the 1848 Revolutions, and Nineteenth-Century Europe. I'd say that regarding the French Revolution, one of the most exciting research directions is how people from all backgrounds experienced the revolution on a day-to-day basis. This is rather more 'personal' than older sociological approaches in that it takes historians into the history of emotions, highlighting the revolutionary careers of less well-known participants. To this end, my work on revolutionary Paris explores the spatial dimension, especially how, where, and why the revolutionaries took over older buildings and converted them for their purposes.

About the 1848 Revolutions, the main developments are twofold. First, there is a lot of new research into their transnational dimension–how networks of radicals operated across borders or seas and how such networks often transcended national differences. Second, historians are looking increasingly into the global dimension of 1848, particularly its impact on colonial slavery and its other resonances within the European overseas empires, but also in the independent republics of Latin America and the United States.

More generally, historians are also 'de-centering' Europe or the study of particular European countries by looking at their histories from the point of view of the colonized peoples of Europe's overseas empires, or peoples on their so-called 'peripheries'. For example, my colleagues who work on the history of Russia and the Soviet Union have been debating how to approach this history from a less 'Russocentric' perspective and focus more on the points of view of those peoples who were conquered or otherwise brought into the Empire. Almost needless to say, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has provided a real spur to this thinking.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Probably my biggest change has been seeing the world and how it changes increasingly through a transnational lens:

how societies develop not only from their internal dynamics but also from external influences. In my research period, this has a strong imperial, global, and European dimension. The transnational level works not only on the movement of people, ideas, and technology but also in a more day-to-day way with the foods we consume or the clothes we wear. Many other historians have taken this path before, but for me, the shift in thinking began in the early 1990s as the European Union was being forged, when it felt apt that my thesis (and first book) should have been on foreigners in revolutionary France and the question of the limits of citizenship.

I remember that this was just a few years after the 1989 Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, which happened when I was an undergraduate at Edinburgh University: in my own, perhaps naïve way, it felt like Europe was somehow 'coming back together.' I've since tried to make my writing about European history as being about Europe as a whole, not just the sum of national experiences but also understanding national and regional differences. This continues to be the case as the longer-term effects of 1989 and EU enlargement are still being played out: Brexit, which I campaigned against, has reinforced rather than weakened this broadly European approach. Again, I'm not original in taking this approach, and it's up to others to judge my success in adopting it.

In *1848: Year of Revolution*, you investigated one of the most important historical moments of 19th-century Europe. What are the main reasons that led to the failure of the 1848 uprisings and the restoration of the monarchical order?

First of all, the revolutions in many places did not entail the complete takeover of the state by the liberals–there were exceptions, as in France in 1848 and Hungary in 1849–but in most places, the monarch remained in place and, though they were severely weakened by the crisis and were forced to make constitutional concessions, they retained control of ministries, the armed forces, the civil service, and so on. They had the instruments of reaction in their hands, which they used to devastating effect–and very quickly, too, once they had recovered from the initial shock.

Secondly, the revolutionaries did not necessarily enjoy widespread popular support: many people, particularly the peasantry, remained loyal to the monarchy, whom they regarded as their protector against their rapacious landlords. Also, where serfdom was abolished, as in many parts of the Austrian Empire, this impression was reinforced because the abolition was carried out in the emperor's name. The forces of the monarchy often had the moral and active support of much of the population.

Thirdly, the revolutionaries were fatally divided amongst themselves: there were national and ethnic groups who clashed over their conflicting claims for independence, rights, and territory. Also, there were struggles between moderates and radicals over the extent of democratic reform and measures for social justice. The political polarization allowed monarchs and their supporters to play on fears for social order and stability and to secure the support of one side against the other.

What are the legacies, if any, for the current political and social landscape?

The political and social landscape of Europe left behind by the 1848 Revolutions is a broken, jagged prospect. On the one hand, although defeated, they gave many Europeans their first experience of modern, liberal, parliamentary politics; they opened up–albeit briefly–space for a more democratic civil society to flourish, which in turn gave room for all kinds of people, especially women, to claim access to the full rights of citizenship. This left a legacy of political symbols, ideas, and historical memories upon which future generations could draw in pursuing democracy, particularly in the 20th century.

More practically, 1848 left three reforms that were essential to future developments. First, it left the kingdoms of Piedmont-Sardinia and of Prussia with working constitutions which, combined with their military power, would put them in a political position to credibly lead the Italian and German unification process, respectively. Second, the emancipation of serfs in parts of central and eastern Europe laid the foundations for the 20th-century politics of its nation-states, in which the peasantry made up the bulk of citizens. Third, the abolition of slavery in the French Empire was an important step and resonated across the Americas, including the United States, in the years before the Civil War.

On the other hand, the defeat of the 1848 Revolutions opened an authoritarian populist rupture in the landscape. For one, shrewder conservative politicians like Otto von Bismarck understood that the world had changed but also that the forces that had dynamised the liberal revolutions could also be harnessed for authoritarian purposes, including civil society and parliamentary politics. They understood that they could gather a lot of public support by playing on people's fears (of social revolution, in particular) and by appealing to traditional values (such as religion and monarchy). For another, the freedoms of civil society and the flourishing of liberal politics also inadvertently provided an opening through which sinister forces such as anti-semitism and xenophobia could find a stronger voice and organization. Populist authoritarianism and the mobilization of darker impulses in 1848 were ominous portents for the 20th and 21st centuries.

Are there any linkages between the French revolutions and today's protests in France?

I think less with any of the French Revolutions (1789, 1830, 1848, 1871) than with the massive trade union actions of the Third Republic, such as the great May Day protests in the 1890s and early 1900s. Like today's protests, these were often focused on a particular issue (today–raising the pension age; then–the 8-hour day), which garnered widespread support. However, behind this specific issue may also lie a deeper aim (today–expressing anger at the disjuncture between the rather remote, élite technocrats of the state and the wider country; then–a broader protest against difficult working conditions and the wealth inequalities, as well as an anarcho-syndicalist aspiration for workers' control of production). That's my current thinking, anyway. And now, with the riots after the police shooting of a young man of Maghrebian descent in Nanterre, other issues have come to the fore that have been simmering away for years and exploded in the past. These include, not least exclusion on the grounds of ethnic origin and the poverty and lack of opportunity in the *cités*, the suburban housing estates. This last point on social exclusion, too, has its distant antecedents in the old, poverty-stricken outer districts of Paris around 1900, like Belleville, Ménilmontant and La Villette.

What is your assessment of the state's response to the recent protests in France?

To adopt Zhou Enlai's bon mot when asked about the impact of the French Revolution of 1789 (or maybe the protests of 1968): 'It's too soon to tell'! Right now, though, on the pensions protests, I think the government is playing a long game: it has used the constitutional tools it has to pursue the reform while hoping that the protests gradually diminish in intensity (as seems to have happened earlier with the ***Gilets Jaunes***). Meanwhile, the policing has, at times, seemed very heavy-handed. From where I'm standing in Scotland, it's hard to tell when and against whom the tear gas and baton charges are aimed. I've witnessed other marches and demonstrations in Paris over the years, and those organised by the trade unions have invariably been good-natured, indeed carnivalesque, and this is almost certainly true for the bulk of demonstrators in the recent protests. The ***Gilets Jaunes*** attracted a fringe of ***casseurs***–people who seized on the protests to destroy street furniture (bus shelters, streetlights, and so on). However, while the recent protests' images show that this sort of behavior is far from absent, my impression is that, in proportion to the scale of the demonstrations, it's relatively small. The protests after the Nanterre shooting are, however, of a different order and while the political debate around the state's response is raging on all sides, the state's response must surely be to adopt a strategy that pursues greater social inclusion, including a more robust, targeted approach to the problems experienced by ethnic groups. This would be controversial, because it runs headlong into the 'colour-blind' republican values of the Fifth Republic, but I think the time has now come to grasp this thistle.

In *The Unruly City: London, Paris, and New York in the Age of Revolution*, you explored the role of public spaces and social networks in shaping revolutions. Can you explain this correlation and how these dynamics have changed with the growth of virtual spaces?

It's a truism, but revolutions occur in space and seize control of particular places and buildings. This has several implications. First, revolutions are not just about struggles between ideas and social interests but also involve action, often violence, for the physical control of space–the seizure of the seats of political authority, public spaces, and strategic points. Second, once taken over, these spaces are often transformed physically and symbolically by the revolutionaries for their purposes. Although the French revolutionaries of 1789 had plenty of plans to build great new

civic buildings for their new order, they had neither the time nor the resources to do so. Instead, they took over buildings associated with the old regime–royal palaces, aristocratic townhouses, monasteries and convents, churches–and converted them for their purposes, often embellishing them with revolutionary symbols (tricolores, slogans, banners, and so on).

Revolutions often transform the physical and visual landscape, particularly in cities. This is as much a part of the revolutionary process as any other. The growth of virtual spaces has not, in times of revolution, actually changed this: social media allows people to communicate, mobilise and organize, but in the end, to offer a serious challenge to the regime, you still need to take over physical spaces, for symbolic or strategic purposes: think about the Euromaidan in Ukraine in 2013-14 or Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011.

One of your research areas is on the so-called domino effect in revolutions, drawing comparisons between different uprisings as they arose from Europe in 1848 to the Arab Spring of 2011. Can you explain this phenomenon and tell us if you see any possible influence in contemporary society?

Revolutionary waves or cascades occur when various countries share similar challenges that act on their different local circumstances. In 1848, it was a devastating, European-wide economic crisis, along with anger at the conservative regimes' limited social and economic response to people's distress. In 1989, it was the effective withdrawal of the active moral and political support that the Soviet Union had once given the Communist regimes of central and eastern Europe, along with broad public demands for reform (if not the actual overthrow) of the old order. In 2011 it was the fallout from the global financial crisis combined with anger against the autocratic regimes, which, as in 1848, seemed unequal to mitigating the challenges facing their citizens. Combine this with an opposition that demands change (not always revolutionary change), and you have the build-up of pressure.

This is not enough to set off a revolutionary cascade often sparked by accident in this tense situation: shots fired by nervous soldiers policing protests, poor communication by the authorities of their intentions, and so on. The crucial point is that when the basic conditions, protests, and political tensions are broadly shared across a range of countries, the successful overthrow of the regime in one country can set off a wave of other revolutions elsewhere since, suddenly, such revolutionary change seems possible. The speed by which the news spreads–via steam power (trains and steamboats) in 1848, television and radio in 1989, and social media and mobile phones in 2011–can play an important part in the process. The significance of this is that it's still possible now–as the Colour Revolutions have shown–that a revolutionary cascade need not be confined to a dramatic, concentrated moment.

What else can we learn from comparing the Arab Spring of 2011 with the revolutions of 1848?

Perhaps the most important lesson is that while revolutionary cascades stir excitement because they seem to promise freedom to people in many different countries, the conservative or reactionary backlash can equally come in a wave. Thus, on the one hand, it is no accident that both 1848 and 2011 are spoken of in terms of 'spring'–'The Springtime of Peoples' and the 'Arab Spring.' On the other hand, one might also say that they also experienced counter-revolutionary autumns, in which, one by one and (as we continue to see in Syria), the forces of the old order strike back. This is because revolutions inspire hope but also fear of social chaos, class conflict, ethnic strife, and political division often among the revolutionaries as they differ over their ultimate goals.

The forces of reaction can exploit these fears and divisions to garner support and drive a wedge between different tendencies among the revolutionaries. We saw this happen both in 1848 and 2011. Moreover, unless there is a complete collapse or capitulation of the old regime (as in France in 1789 or Russia in 1917), the old order and its supporters will still have institutions they can rely upon and use, not least the armed forces or part of them. If the success of a revolution in one country might encourage the revolutionaries in the next, the same is true of the counter-revolution, where its victory in one country might encourage counter-revolutionaries in the next.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I think it's the other way around, especially these days: I can learn more from young scholars than I can teach them.

But since you asked, I'd say three things. First, keep calm: what I mean by this is that if you are researching an ongoing development or crisis, it's often hard not to be invested in one side or another. That's fine, but try not to let it blind you to the evidence and cloud your judgment. I made that mistake once when writing an over-excited piece about the Arab Spring: don't let that happen to you.

Second, remember that when dealing with actors in international relations, we are talking about people, institutions, and processes in at least two ways. On the one hand, never forget that, in all the arguments between Realists, Liberals, and Internationalists, choices made in international relations have very real effects–sometimes horrible–on people 'on the ground.' We are talking about people's lives, which is why I think writing about international relations carries a burden of responsibility to remember the impact that decisions can have. The implication–with which 'Realists' would probably disagree–is that international relations should have an ethical dimension. More pragmatically, on the other hand, the human dimension also applies to practitioners (or 'actors') in international relations, whether state actors or non-governmental ones: don't always assume that decisions taken are always rational and based on a calm assessment of all the information, or that the information upon which those choices are founded is itself reliable.

Third, consider the historical dimension in international relations, meaning how history, or rather particular understandings of history, have shaped the broader assumptions and political culture in which actors make their decisions in international relations. These are often, but not always, 'unspoken assumptions,' but investigating this deeper context can explain a lot about how and why some choices are made and others not. It might also encourage us to engage with our opponents and partners in a more informed way, enabling a more durable, peaceful solution to the challenges we face today.