

*V. Politieke geschiedenis /  
Histoire politique*

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GERD-RAINER HORN  
«Western European Liberation Theology : The First  
Wave 1924-1959»  
Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008 x + 314 p.

Revolutionaries appear nowadays in the historiography of twentieth-century Europe in some surprising places. After the political changes of 1989, historians have become interested in uncovering alternative revolutionary traditions which had been overshadowed by the tendency to equate revolution with communism. This preoccupation lies at the root of Gerd-Rainer Horn's exploration of the various radical Catholic groups which emerged in Europe during and immediately after the Second World War. Concentrating primarily on France, northern and central Italy and francophone Belgium, Horn recovers from historical oblivion a variety of radical Catholic groups, locating them within broader currents in Catholic ideas and politics of the period as well as in the material context of these years of rapid social and political change. This is partisan history, and Horn writes with undisguised

sympathy for the intellectuals, priests and Catholic social activists who launched such movements in the 1940s. He is not, however, in the conventional sense a believer, and one of the major strengths of this book is exactly the fact that he does not write from within the Catholic tradition. Instead, Horn's sympathies are for the activists as putative social and political revolutionaries, seeking to create a personal and collective liberation, independent of the weight of Soviet Communism and the repressive hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

This essentially Trotskyist perspective has many benefits, not least the fact that it causes him to avoid the teleological approach adopted by many Catholic historians, eager to construct a narrative of progressive Catholic politics from the 1890s to the achievements of the Second Vatican Council. Horn's account has some points in common with such an approach, especially in his concern with emphasising the forward-looking momentum of his Catholic activists of the 1940s; but, for him, their importance lies not in their contribution to subsequent Catholicism but in the way in which the Catholic activists of the 1940s prefigured the social and political activism of the later 1960s. His, then, is an emphatically secular approach to Catholic politics of the mid-twentieth century, and it is arresting to realise that it is almost the first time that these movements have been written about from a non-Catholic perspective.

Approached in this way, mid-twentieth-century Catholic politics takes on a new and radical shape, according to which the gradual fruition of Catholic ideas and

actions from the inter-war years through the upheavals of the Second World War created a space and an energy after the liberation of Europe in which, until they were crushed by the combined weight of the Church authorities, the Cold War and Stalinist Communism, Catholic activists were able, however briefly, to articulate a new and revolutionary vision of social change and political organisation. His scope is broad, encompassing not only the inevitable Maritain and Mounier, but also theologians such as Yves Congar and even Joseph Cardijn of the JOC as the agents of a radical Catholic political and spiritual momentum which manifested itself in movements such as the *Mouvement populaire des familles* in France and francophone Belgium in the liberation period, as well as various radical Italian movements which sought to reconcile or synthesise Catholicism and Communism and, inevitably, the communitarian and worker-priest experiences in France during the later 1940s and 1950s. Horn's book is at its strongest when it is at its most empirical, as in his reconstruction of the short-lived Italian movements of the post-war years, such as the marvellously named *Convegno delle avanguardie cristiane* in Modena and Don Zeno Saltini's distinctly millenarian *Movimento della Fraternità Sociale*. Both disappeared almost as quickly as they had appeared, but more substantial was the *Mouvement populaire des familles*, which emerged in France out of the various self-help Catholic worker initiatives of the war years and which flourished in the immediate post-war years, establishing co-operatives, organising holiday homes for children and, in Marseille at least, carrying out squats in unused properties. As reconstituted by Horn, the MPF rightly

emerges for the first time as a movement of real scale and significance, which despite its subsequent demise, had a substantial impact on the lives of many working people and had real legacies for the new left in the 1960s and beyond.

Yet, for all of its strength, one cannot help feeling that Horn's account strains at times to make its case. This applies most obviously to its title which, as justified belatedly in a rather unconvincing conclusion, seeks to present the European Catholic movements of the 1940s as the precursors of the liberation theology which emerged in Latin America from the 1960s onwards. More importantly, however, his account risks distorting the scale and significance of the phenomena which he describes. Scale is his most obvious Achilles Heel. Try as he might, it is difficult to avoid the awkward fact that many of the groups that Horn analyses were either short-lived or small in number; or in some cases both. Given the considerable attention they have attracted, it is salutary to be reminded (p. 270) that there were no more than one hundred worker priests in the 1940s; while the MPF in Belgium never exceeded circa 5,000 participants (p. 216). To explain their small size, Horn has a number of ready but rather blunt explanations: notably the repressive weight of the Church authorities and the fact that, writing about Italy, the country "stood on the eve of an economic miracle rather than a millenarian revolt" (p. 172). No doubt these factors were indeed of importance, but they distract attention from the harder questions that need to be answered about why radical Catholicism did not succeed in attracting a durable mass audience, either within or beyond Catholic ranks.

For Horn, one senses however that size is not his principal concern. What matters more to him is the way in which the left Catholicism of the 1940s constituted a "progressive Catholicism" of "forward-looking experiments" (p. 1-2) which spawned "collective and independent pathways to liberation" (p. 51). This rather deterministic schema, by which movements possessed importance because of the way in which they contributed to the unfolding of a progressive trajectory risks, however, investing movements with a clearly-defined character which they did not always possess. In his early chapters, Horn ranges widely across the Catholic landscape of the late nineteenth century and the inter-war years, highlighting the radical potential constituted by figures such as Daens and Cardijn, as well as the "inner dynamic" (p. 43) towards progressive action which existed within movements such as Catholic Action, despite their subordination to the Church hierarchy. This is, however, an approach which rests necessarily on a rather selective account of such individuals and groups; and one which more especially tends to emphasise their radical rhetoric at the expense of their more cautious actions or political alliances. Thus, although Horn is right to emphasise that "the immediate post-liberation period experienced a distinct leftward shift within the Catholic camp" (p. 119), one might equally point to the way in which a few years previously many other Catholics (including some of those, such as Mounier, whom Horn is eager to claim as advocates of his radical Catholicism) had shown sympathy for the ideas and movements of the authoritarian right. As such evolutions demonstrate, the radical Catholicism of the 1930s and 1940s

was far from being associated exclusively with the political left. Indeed, many of the Catholic groups of the era were at pains to reject such political labels, regarding themselves as the advocates of a distinctly Catholic message of social reconciliation and political change. To describe these ideas as neither right nor left might be to take their own rhetoric too much at face value. But what is surely important to recognise is the political ambivalence which characterised many of the more innovative Catholic spiritual and social initiatives of the 1930s and 1940s. In some circumstances, as in France and Italy around 1945, some radicalised Catholic intellectuals and social activists did adopt the language of the radical left. But such trajectories did not on the whole endure; and, as circumstances changed, so left-wing sympathies tended to evolve into the anti-Communism of the Cold War era. This did not, as Horn tends to suggest, imply a betrayal of their previous beliefs, but more the fact that their opposition to the errors of communism and capitalism, as well as their distrust of the statist character of social democracy and fascism, gave Catholicism a political autonomy and flexibility which contributed to its durability. Thus, although Horn is right to remind us in this stimulating and important book that some Catholics of the 1940s did embrace the language of revolution, it is also necessary to remember that they did so above all in the name of a very Catholic definition of that revolution.

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