different types of revolution on the development of states and their economies will be challenging for those unfamiliar with modern econometrics. Skillfully employing a mixed methods approach, Beissinger provides case studies of country histories that the statistical model makes either accurate or inaccurate predictions for. All the data and replication files have been made available online, in line with recent (welcome) trends towards transparency in the social sciences.

Although the analysis stands on its own as a major theoretical and empirical achievement in the study of revolution, it is the dataset that is the greatest contribution of the project. Over the past two decades, the range and comprehensiveness of datasets detailing political change, conflict and organised violence across the world has increased enormously. Beissinger’s dataset is a major contribution in this regard, complementing existing data on transitions between political systems (which need not be revolutionary) and maximalist resistance movements (which may not always succeed at initiating revolutions). Nonetheless, many of the findings are similar to those discovered by the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Project, detailed in Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan’s Why Civil Resistance Works: the Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict (2011).

Beissinger, however, identifies many revolutionary episodes that do not have an equivalent record in NAVCO. Future research might draw on both projects to investigate why some resistance movements spark revolutions, whilst others sputter out. Detail on the urban geography of different societies and how it might affect the dynamics of revolution could also be expanded on in future. There is also the question of ‘sub-revolutionary’ episodes: Occupy Wall Street and the 6 January ‘insurrection’ in Washington don’t meet the criteria for failed revolutions, yet surely events like these indicate turbulence and the potential for change.

This is a landmark study that is sure to generate a new wave of scholarship. But, if the nature of revolution is constantly evolving, then the era of the ‘revolutionary city’ may itself be a temporary phase in the unending history of political change.

Did Covid-19 transform the European Union into a ‘community of destiny’?

RICHARD MULLENDER

Pandemic: Saving Europe, by Luuk van Middelaar. Agenda Publishing. 199 + vii pp. £18.99

Luuk van Middelaar argues that the European Union’s initial response to the ‘life-and-death struggle’ that began when Covid-19 reached an ‘inattentive continent’ was ‘slow’ and ‘feeble’. He finds support for this argument in ‘military columns bearing Lombardy’s Covid coffins’ and in ‘lifeless Madrid care homes’ whose staff had abandoned the residents. He also notes that the former President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, sensed in the crisis a ‘deadly danger’ to the EU itself. These features of the crisis lead van Middelaar to identify Pandemonium, the capital city of Hell in John Milton’s Paradise Lost, as an apt reference point when explaining the impact Covid-19 has had on Europe. But while he argues that the pandemic threw Europe into a ‘hellish’ ‘state of emergency’, he urges proponents of integration to find in the EU’s response grounds for optimism. This is because the crisis has ‘brought Europeans … a deepened awareness of a … res publica’ (a ‘shared public realm’ in which democratic impulses find expression). As we will see later, this is a point that van Middelaar could have pressed further.

While van Middelaar’s exposition is optimistic in thrust, he states that the EU’s initial ‘public health’ response to the pandemic ‘fell short’. He finds support for this point in ‘face-mask and vaccine debacles’ that tell a story of ‘powerlessness and ineptitude’. While van Middelaar is sharply critical of the EU’s performance in these areas, he notes that public health is ‘not an EU competence’. However, he recognises that many citizens of the EU expected it to oversee the rapid delivery of a vaccine. Against these aspects of the EU’s response to the crisis, he sets the creation of a coronavirus recovery fund. He notes that within three months, the EU had embraced the principle of sizeable support for struggling economies’. He adds that this development saw the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel,
'cross ... monetary red lines that were still sacred during the euro crisis’. This is because she was ready to engage in a ‘joint debt issue’ (something that had been anathema to many of her compatriots during the euro crisis). This development prompts van Middelaar to argue that the pandemic—a ‘great revealer’—has made apparent a readiness on the part of Europeans to see in the EU a ‘community of destiny’ (Schicksalsgemeinschaft).

Van Middelaar develops his analysis of the EU’s response to the Covid-19 crisis by drawing a distinction between ‘rules-politics’ and ‘events-politics’. A commitment to rules-politics has featured prominently in the process of European integration since it began in the early 1950s. This form of governance places emphasis on readily applicable rules as a basis on which to depoliticise practical life. Rules-politics has, as van Middelaar notes, many attractions (most obviously, the order, predictability and impartiality that reflect strong commitment to the ideal of the rule of law or Rechtsstaat). However, he argues that it encouraged the EU to adopt an inflexible approach to the provision of a vaccine (that focused narrowly on ‘price’ and not ‘speed of delivery’).

When he turns to the EU’s coronavirus recovery fund, he finds an emphasis not on rules but, rather, on the need for an effective response to a pressing practical problem. Moreover, he argues that this response (which paid close attention to the concerns of EU citizens) was the work of the European Council (composed of the Union’s heads of state and government). In these features of the scene he surveys, he finds the stuff of events-politics and a European res publica. This is because the European Council exhibited a capacity to ‘improvise’ effectively. Moreover, it did so in a way that was attuned to one of the ‘root melodies’ of the integration process. This is the aim of establishing (in conformity with an egalitarian philosophy of government) a ‘space’ where all citizens can express their views on matters of public concern.

As these points make clear, van Middelaar forges a link between events-politics and democracy. However, some strands of argument in Pandemonium sound a technocratic note. This is apparent when he argues that successful practitioners of events-politics are able to fashion a ‘toolkit’ that equips them to respond effectively to the contingencies that confront them. The creation of the coronavirus recovery fund explains why van Middelaar talks in these terms. However, the ability to engage in events-politics depends ultimately on the disposition of those who fashion any such toolkit. People who possess this disposition exhibit vigilance. They are alive to what van Middelaar (following J. G. A. Pocock) calls ‘a stream of irrational events’ that may disrupt their environment. Moreover, in democratic contexts they must act in ways that are sensitive to the concerns of those in whose name they exercise power. This is a disposition that has affinities with the ‘sense of reality’ that Isaiah Berlin found in Franklin D. Roosevelt (I. Berlin, The Sense of Reality). Berlin identifies Roosevelt as having possessed the ability (in, for example, the Great Depression) to deploy the resources (political, legal, economic) at his disposal in ways attuned to prevailing circumstances. Van Middelaar traverses the same ground when he talks of an ability to ‘intuit the situation’ in which the exercise of power is necessary.

In van Middelaar and in Berlin’s reflections on Roosevelt we find a concern with what the ancient Greeks called kairos: the ability to take fitting action at an appropriate moment. In the context we are considering, this clearly means an ability—on the part of the European Council’s members—to relate means to ends that will serve the interests of EU citizens. But it also encompasses attentiveness to views that find expression in the ‘European public space’ that van Middelaar describes. This point brings us back to the disposition implicit in van Middelaar’s account of events-politics. Those who possess this disposition might be said to be alive to a data-stream on which not just they, but also those they seek to serve, reflect in ways that may yield practically useful results. Van Middelaar seems to have something of this sort in mind when he identifies the pandemic as having encouraged the formation of ‘a public space in the true sense’. In this context, those who wield power are attentive to and ready to act on the concerns and insights of a public whose vigilance van Middelaar likens to that of the all-seeing Argus.

This analysis supports the conclusion that van Middelaar has thrown light on a developing democratic context. It is a context in which both those who participate in high politics and citizens engage in processes of reflection that concern the deployment of power in response to socially disruptive contingencies.
Covid-19 crisis provides a clear instance of such a contingency. Rules-politics as van Middelaar describes it provides an unpromising (because inflexible) basis on which to make an effective response to such a source of disruption. Events-politics, leavened with commitment to an egalitarian philosophy of government, provides a more fitting mode of response. While an ideal (res publica) inflicts democracy on this model, it is, procedurally, a rather rough and ready affair. Whatever its shortcomings, it lends some plausibility to the view that we can find in the EU the outlines of a community of destiny.

University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Dreams and nightmares from Africa

VICTORIA BRITAIN

Chronicles From the Land of the Happiest People on Earth, by Wole Soyinka. Bloomsbury. 444 pp. £8.99

Afterlives, by Abdulrazak Gurnah. Bloomsbury. 275 pp. £8.99

Thomas Sankara, A Revolutionary in Cold War Africa, by Brian J. Peterson. Indiana University Press. 332 pp. £22

Born in Blackness, by Howard French. Little, Brown and Company. 499 pp. £25

These four outstanding books of fiction and ideas offer the richest of insights into African culture, society and history, past and present. The extraordinary and immersive novels by the continent’s two Nobel Prize in Literature winners are as different in style and content as Nigeria (birthplace of Soyinka) is from Zanzibar (birthplace of Gurnah). Brian Peterson, an American academic, has brought to vivid life the revolutionary times of the assassinated President Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, one of Africa’s smallest and poorest countries. Sankara is a reference point today for youth across Africa and in the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, and beyond. Howard French, now at the Columbia School of Journalism was for eighteen years a New York Times correspondent, has mined archives across three continents and his own family history for a deep and radical presentation of the roots of Europe’s Enlightenment and industrial revolution.

Wole Soyinka is a towering figure of world literature, best known for his twenty-five plays and half a dozen memoirs. This new epic novel, only his second, written in his eighties and weighing in at 440 pages, shows he remains a master of exuberant story-telling and a satirist without equal. The book, Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth, is dedicated to the memory of two revered assassinated Nigerians— investigative journalist, Dele Giwa, and lawyer, Attorney General and politician, Bola Ige, respectively murdered in 1986 and 2001. At the time, Soyinka denounced ‘the forces of corruption’ responsible, and this novel is set among those forces—in Nigeria’s political, business and religious elite. In his years of newspaper columns, essays and memoirs, Soyinka has written endless scorching critiques of this amoral leadership class and how it has mercilessly bled the poor, wrecked the country’s environment and enriched itself and its Western investors from the proceeds of Africa’s number one oil producer.

This novel is a violent mystery story of explosions, murder, grotesque money-making enterprises in the secretive sale of body parts, of a preposterous healing cult, Ekumentica, built by a former US jailbird called Papa Divina, ally of a government run by prime minister Sir Goddie, known as the People’s Steward. He heads an unchallengeable system of bribery and corruption. It is a picture with black humour at every turn. In this unhappy country, people are lulled into apathy or pointless hope, fed by unending campaigns for fake awards by a media mogul Chief Modu Udensi, and his band of toadies. In sharp contrast is the humanity of the book’s hero, an idealistic surgeon, Dr Kighare Menka, who dreams of setting up a clinic in the poor remote northern area he comes from. His college blood-brother, a dynamic engineer from a super-rich establishment family, Duyole Putan-Payne, is also in revolt against the rotten system, in which his family thrive, and is ready with plans for the clinic. Suddenly he is ordered to New York to a UN post he has no interest in, to get him out of the way of Sir Goddie’s schemes, which also involve his father. Then Duyole is murdered by a