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Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution batave entre la France et l'Amérique (1795-1806)*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008. 483 pp. Foreward, figures, and bibliography. € 22 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7535-0702-9.

Review by Janet Polasky, University of New Hampshire.

Annie Jourdan, a French historian who teaches at the University of Amsterdam, is perfectly placed to write a comparative history of the building of these three revolutionary nations at the turn of the nineteenth century. She sets the comparatively little known Batavian Revolution of 1795-1806 at the intersection of the American and the French Revolutions. In her thorough study of the politics and culture of this Dutch revolution, she challenges the view of the American Revolution as a moderate affair--"In sum, every revolution is radical and violent: it is the historians who are less so."--and of the French Revolution as THE radical revolution.(p. 454) The American and French revolutions are not just comparative foils for the Batavian Revolution, but the subject of the book.

Jourdan's weighty monograph, 455 pages of text, is organized thematically. That facilitates comparison between the three revolutionary struggles. Readers interested in American, Dutch, and French declarations of rights, constitutions, families and moral codes, social order, museums, public education, and nineteenth-century revolutionary histories will discover a wealth of detail in her carefully researched and meticulously documented volume. Jourdan is at home in the history of the French Revolution and she convincingly marshals tracts from the *philosophes* and revolutionary leaders and a wide range of secondary sources to support her comparisons between the Dutch and the French. Equally confident in her treatment of the American Revolution, she is strongly influenced by the American historian, Gordon Wood.

Richly illustrated, the book does suffer from the lack of an index. This is particularly problematic for readers who try to follow lesser-known Dutch revolutionaries and their ideas from one chapter to the next. Before diving into this "*étude pointilliste* of the upheavals experienced by the three nations during these tumultuous years," readers without background in Dutch history might want to consult a more narrative histories of the Dutch revolutions.(p. 435)[1]

This study of the Batavian Revolution is not limited to the nine revolutionary years, but ranges back to the Enlightenment and forward to Napoleon. The eighteenth was an uneasy century, Jourdan explains. She begins with the French *philosophes* and their optimistic challenge to the mid-century malaise that she identifies as a trans-Atlantic phenomenon. These philosophers attacked the false values cultivated in courts, especially Versailles, the symbol of frivolous spending and vanity. Ministerial despotism compounded the social and cultural crises in England as in France. Dutch moralists, rather than attacking the church as in France, looked for happiness in a world created by God. The Dutch found their inspiration more in the English and German thinkers than the French. Too, they found answers

in their republican past to the crisis of the eighteenth century and in the American Founding Fathers.

The United Provinces “entered the zone of turbulence” with the publication of a pamphlet in 1781 by a regent from Overijssel who had supported the American Revolution, Joan Derk Van der Capellen tot den Pol (p. 43). The second chapter of *La Révolution batave* sketches the history of the Dutch Patriot Revolt that drew the attention of Europe to the United Provinces in 1787. Part of the revolutionary contagion, one diplomat noted, cities and provinces, one after another, throughout the Dutch republic, proposed schemes of reforms that included real instead of virtual representation, citizen committees to oversee magistrates, militias to defend liberties, and individual suffrage. The Americans and the Swiss served as examples of federations that had taken up arms to defend their republic, but so too did the Dutch revolt of the sixteenth century. This was a revolution, not a restoration, Jourdan insists, pointing to the *Grondwettige Herstelling* that urged the Dutch in 1787 to: “Follow the example of the United States, that have followed in the steps of our ancestors” (p. 59). The Dutch Patriots, like the Americans, reformed based on past traditions.

The second section of the book, “Revolution and Politics,” compares the declarations of rights of the Americans, the French, and the Dutch in 1795, and then analyzes the constitutions of the three nations. From the perspective of 1810 when the French annexed the republic, Jourdan acknowledges, “the Batavian revolution was the most complete failure of all in the constellation of Sister Republics”(p. 100). Jourdan instead explores the “political imagination” of the Batavian revolutionaries who formulated projects for a representative democracy infused with ideas from America and France (p. 103). The French, the Americans, and the Dutch were all influenced by Locke and Rousseau in declaring fundamental rights the base of their new social contracts. Familiarity with other declarations encouraged emulation, not imitation as the Dutch put primary emphasis on equality as the source of liberty, security, property, and resistance to oppression.

In this “constitutional century,” Jourdan suggests, Europeans actually understood little of what was really happening in the United States. By the 1790s, the French example had eclipsed that of the Founding Fathers. The French had more to offer the Dutch who sought to replace their seven-headed provincial federation by a single, centralized state in their second revolution. The Dutch, however, did not just adopt French Jacobinism, rather they renewed it by adapting it to Dutch society. That the Dutch declaration of 1798 endured for three years, Jourdan asserts, demonstrates that this indigenous document drawing on American ideas, was not dictated to the Dutch by the French as historians often argue. It “was truly Batavian,” a clear example of the vision of the Dutch revolutionaries (p. 193). The Dutch had found a “juste milieu” between French centrism and American federalism.

Jourdan cautions in her discussion of constitutional borrowings between the three republics, “The points of resemblance between France, the United States, and the Low Countries should not hide the differences” (p. 194). Her nuanced balancing of the similarities and differences in the revolutionary projects highlights new approaches to each of the revolutions and proposes an Atlantic Revolution where revolutionaries on both sides of the ocean fought for the same goal: “to reconstruct government of more equitable and rational bases, and thereby to reconstitute their societies on foundations more in line with the spirit of the Enlightenment and the natural rights of man” (p 435). Her study of differences, though does not buttress either the Americans’ interpretation of a uniquely moderate, respectable revolution or the French turn towards violent universality. Her interpretation of the Batavian Revolution pulls the other two revolutions towards the Dutch center.

All three republican societies adapted to their new laws, Jourdan explains in her third section,

“Revolution and Codification: The Big National Family.” Private virtues that contributed to national prosperity in the Netherlands were displayed in images. Families were spaces of civility, domestic foyers were the hearts of society, little commonwealth inside the larger nation. In contrast to France where paternal authority was clearly asserted, the Dutch recognized women as equally responsible for children, even as they remained under their husbands’ tutelage. However, the revolutionaries’ desire to assure peace in households limited real innovation.

The fourth and final section of the book, entitled “National Education and Public Space,” examines how culture harmonized with a new order defined by constitutions, laws, and codes. Comparing the three different sets of educational reforms, Jourdan argues that although more modest at first glance, the Dutch system that focused on primary education was more radical than French or American reforms. She concludes, however, that the most significant differences did not divide nations. “Even if the primary objective differed, the secondary goals and methods were identical, a testament to the influence of the Enlightenment and sensualism in the West”(p. 300). Instead, disagreements over reforms split revolutionary factions within each republic. The supporters of a strong, centralized state were opposed by the spokesmen for individual, provincial, and religious liberties.

Revolutionaries in all three republics shared the goal of forging a nation through education, a common language, monuments, museums, festivals, architecture, national libraries, and histories. But only America identified founding fathers to immortalize. The French buried the philosophes, not their revolutionaries, in the Pantheon, while the Dutch identified revolutionary heroes from earlier centuries to immortalize.

Jourdan argues for the primacy of nationalism in the eighteenth-century revolutionary projects. The irony of constructing a comparative study of the formation of three independent nations that calls into question the three nationalist historiographies is not lost on Jourdan. She also acknowledges that “Nationalization and the formation of a political state does not equal popular nationalism”(p. 432). The attempt to mold “one people” in each of the three nations failed. The revolutions led not to national unification, but to “division and discord” (p. 437). Jourdan is more concerned with revolutionary projects than with their ultimate results. That “nationalization” was largely a failure, even though the revolutions invented and practiced a “republican culture of democracy,” suggests that other guiding principles, such as municipal identity (as she identifies in the United Provinces), or cosmopolitan internationalism might have been equally if not more important in the eighteenth century. Both can be found with abundance in contemporary documents of these three revolutions, not to mention in the other even lesser-known eighteenth-century revolutions.

Jourdan explains that “The State had difficulty imposing [the idea that all Dutch were one people] on all of the citizens”(p. 438). Who were these “citizens?” Was the definition consistent across borders? Were “the people” who entered the political stage of each revolutionary nation the same? Curiously, especially from an American and a French perspective, there is little mention either of race or colonialism in this exhaustive comparative volume, other than to acknowledge the Dutch debate over whether to mention slavery in the code of laws.

Jourdan takes on a historiography of the Batavian Revolution that she judges too ready to leave radical initiatives in the shadows. Jourdan strongly rejects the portrayals of the Batavian Revolution as a mere reflection of the French Revolution. She points out that the French, too, were influenced by foreign models, including that of the sixteenth century Dutch.^[2] This history of the three revolutions does what comparative history at its best strives to do, it illuminates the constitutions, legal codes, family

structures, narratives, prison and educational systems of the three revolutionary nations in ways we would not see if we studied them separately.

NOTES

[1] See among others: Wayne Ph. Te Brake, *Regents and Rebels. The Revolutionary World of an Eighteenth-Century Dutch City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Pieter Geyl, *La révolution batave* (Paris: Société des études Robespierres, 1977); Margaret C. Jacob and Wijnand W. Mihnhardt, *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century. Decline, Enlightenment, and Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Simon Schama, *Patriots and Liberators* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); and Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *The Dutch Republic and American Independence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

[2] See her history of the French Revolution in comparative perspective, Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution, une exception française?* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004).

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