
H-France Review Vol. 13 (November 2013), No. 185

Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013. vii + 236 pp. Notes, maps, figures, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-7868-0.

Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

The French Revolution was pivotal to the making of the modern world, but in which contexts should it be located? Like contemporaries, historians have long reflected on the intellectual and political similarities and differences between revolutions in France and North America and upheavals in Latin America, Ireland, Poland and elsewhere. Most famously, the concept of an “Atlantic” or “democratic” revolution was first articulated in the 1950s by Jacques Godechot and R.R. Palmer. It was quickly the object of powerful Marxist ripostes by Eric Hobsbawm and Albert Soboul in the 1960s. The transition, they argued, was fundamentally one of capitalism and ruling élites rather than of liberal democracy and individual rights.[1]

This vigorous debate has long since been seen as sterile because of its apparent reflection of Cold War politics. Since the 1980s, however, it has been revived by histories of women’s cultures and of slavery and slave rebellion (both ignored by Palmer and Godechot), and in particular now from our own perspective of the globalizing world of the twenty-first century. In an influential recent collection, David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam concluded that the theses of both Palmer and Hobsbawm were “strikingly Eurotropic” (p. xviii) and that the “Age of Revolutions” is best understood as “a complex, broad, interconnected, and even global phenomenon” (p. xxxii).[2] Where does that leave the French Revolution? Is it just one spectacular example of a global crisis of empires or, as in most “internalist” French Revolution historiography, a unique upheaval with global consequences?

In her contribution to the Armitage and Subrahmanyam collection, Lynn Hunt criticized the “conventional externalist” argument of Christopher Bayly that the French Revolution was only one dimension of an international crisis created by the imbalance between states’ perceived military and imperial needs on the one hand and their financial resources and expertise on the other.[3] Instead, she insisted on the interaction of local, national and global factors, and the need for interpretations to be social and cultural as well as economic and political, exemplified in the way she placed the issue of sovereign debt financing under Louis XVI within a cultural and ideological context. This insistence informs the outstanding collection she has now edited with Suzanne Desan and William Max Nelson, largely drawn from a 2011 conference.

The editors find the “Atlantic” thesis too constrained geographically and conceptually to explain the origins and repercussions of the French Revolution, but find the “global” thesis too diffuse to capture what was unique about France. Instead they prefer to describe the Revolution as “world-historical,” its origins and consequences to be understood as global as well as internal, a dramatic turning-point in world history as well as reactive to a world in change. Of course, French revolutionaries themselves understood their endeavors as “universal” in significance, and this collection suggests that they were correct. The editors conclude that there are “continuities from the Revolution’s origins in global competition and transnational Enlightenment ideas to the emergence of a revolutionary political culture that fused immense idealism with territorial ambition and combined the drive for human rights with various forms of exclusion” (p. 11). It was not about “one big thing.”

nor should be studied from one approach. "It was, after all, 'world-historical' precisely because it changed so many things in so many, often contradictory directions."

The eleven contributions are clustered under the traditional headings of the origins, "internal" dynamics and consequences of the Revolution. Their analyses are far from traditional, however, consistently teasing out transnational connections and contrasts, and it is unusual to have a collection of such uniformly high quality which has such tightly linked concerns. The chapters are all closely documented, and the notes will be a treasure-trove for researchers as much as the text will engage students and teachers alike.

The four chapters on the origins of the Revolution all explore the increasingly globalized commercial, financial and territorial competition of empires, particularly with Britain. After some insightful comments on the meaning of globalization, Michael Kwass provides a fascinating case-study of how the monarchy's attempts to regulate colonial trade in tobacco and Indian calicos generated massive smuggling (the "global underground"), some of it armed. The war against smuggling, as it was called, by the General Farm (the private company that collected indirect taxes for the monarchy) fuelled resentment at the state's heavy-handedness. Then, drawing on evidence from such disparate fields as the colonial trade, slave-trading and Indian Ocean commerce, Lynn Hunt argues in compelling fashion that the financial crisis of the monarchy was not so much the size of the deficit but the inability of the regime to control the costs of its borrowing. In the 1780s it was borrowing at up to 6.5 percent (compared with 3.5 percent for Britain). Her story of the speculator Étienne Clavière, who ended up as Finance Minister in 1792 before being among the Girondins arrested in 1793, is eye-opening. Frustration at the monarchy's perceived incompetence and penchant for repression could only be strengthened by the articulation of the benefits of Britain's mixed constitution, its republican experiment, and religious tolerance, highlighted by Andrew Jainchill's insights into the Huguenot *diaspora*, particularly in the Dutch Republic. Britain was again perceived as the beneficiary of the free-trade or Eden Treaty of 1786 studied by Charles Walton. This was an immediate source of dissatisfaction, as those who suffered from competition across the channel ranged from manufacturers and merchants to textile workers. By 1793, as he concludes insightfully, economic liberalism had lost out to *dirigisme*, and a treaty designed to keep the peace had collapsed into protracted warfare.

The chapters on the internal dynamics of the Revolution are linked to those on the origins by their attention to the transnational, especially Atlantic, discourse about regeneration, citizenship, identity, and women's rights. William Max Nelson's tracing of the links between colonial writings on subjects ranging from medicine to natural history and the metropolitan Enlightenment and subsequent revolutionary "regeneration" is a superb example of the premise on which the collection is based. His case-study of François de Neufchâteau—a magistrate in Saint-Domingue before entering the Legislative Assembly in 1791—illustrates the impact of colonial experience on his famous project, a statistical survey of France under the Directory. Regeneration, this time international, is also a theme in Suzanne Desan's sophisticated treatment of the famous decree of 26 August 1792 granting citizenship to a group of eighteen foreigners (including Madison, Paine, Cloots and Priestley) seen to embody the Revolution's universalist aspirations—a startling decision at a moment when the king was under arrest, Lafayette had defected, and the Prussians had invaded and seized the fortress of Longwy. In turn, like Nelson, Denise Davidson uses a colonial framework—in this case the parallels often drawn between battles over slavery and women's rights—to explore lucidly the urgency and durability of contests over both, in France and internationally.

The essays on the consequences of the Revolution provide three sparkling case-studies of Egypt, French Guiana and the United States. Ian Coller uses Napoleon's attempt in 1798 to combine revolutionary ideology and territorial expansion to highlight how its failure nevertheless sparked republican hopes among sections of Egyptians. Paradoxically, hundreds of Egyptian and Syrian republicans who immigrated to France in 1801 would encounter an unsympathetic exile. Assumptions about the reach and consistency of revolutionary legislation are exposed by Miranda Spieler's investigation of the extent to which they were applied on the outer reaches of the empire, in

French Guiana. When the 1794 abolition of slavery was reversed in 1802, the commissioner Hugues commented that “It is as though this colony had never been revolutionary,” but many former slaves took to the forests and Hugues was powerless to fulfill his mandate before capitulating to the British in 1809.[4] Just as the costs of European and Caribbean wars would undermine the capacity of Spain to control its vast Latin American empire, so Rafe Blaufarb examines an unexpected, fascinating rapprochement the wars caused in North America between Britain, Spain and the United States. This created the circumstances facilitating American hegemony over the continent and its Native Americans, surely one of the most dramatic repercussions of the Revolution.

The final essay, or Coda, by Pierre Serna, “Every Revolution Is a War of Independence,” is a wonderfully provocative conclusion to the collection. Here the Director of the Institut d’Histoire de la Révolution Française radically challenges his own nation’s history by “provincializing” it within “an infinite spiral” of colonial and provincial struggles against imperial centres and their capitals. “From the United Provinces in the sixteenth century to the banks of the Mediterranean in the twenty-first century,” he concludes, “history tirelessly narrates the never-ending story of the construction of freedom, which is never fully acquired, never fully conquered” (p. 182). The Revolution is never “over.”

So the Revolution should be inserted into a global narrative of imperial crises of commerce and territory, which in France escalated into an unprecedented political and social revolution, itself engendering new international conflicts. Nor were the imperial crises western alone, for they were also triggered by and further unleashed conjunctural conflicts in the Ottoman, Mughal and East Indies empires, as other histories have demonstrated.

The great strength of this outstanding collection is to restore the social and economic into analyses of political and cultural forms through the authors’ open-ended exploration of the links between global commercial and territorial competition and crises, new forms of collective political experience, and new cultural practices of individualism (including discourses on rights, the body, and consumerism). Familiar subjects such as the financial crisis, the Eden Treaty and the discourses on rights are re-examined with fresh eyes, and the specificities of non-European behaviours are illuminated in brilliant fashion. The authors avoid the temptation simply to add to the check-list of countries “affected by” the Revolution. Other readers may be dissatisfied that no primordial cause is identified: political and cultural changes are “influenced by,” “linked to” and “emerge from” financial, commercial and economic crises, but are not “caused” by them. The repercussions of the Revolution on other parts of the world—most of Latin America very obviously, but also India, the Dutch East Indies and even Australia—are not explored in this volume.[5] Nor is the Terror examined, and a revealing comparative study awaits on France in 1793-94, Poland in 1794-95 and Ireland in 1798. But this is just to regret that such a fine collection is not even richer.

The questions historians pose about the past have always been a function of their understanding of the contemporary world, and the current re-examination of the eighteenth-century crisis from a global perspective is a striking example of this. The global financial crisis of 2007-08 and the ongoing sovereign debt crisis in southern Europe have, however, shattered the optimism of globalization’s advocates as much as they have reinforced the vulnerability of national and regional economies to wider forces. In the process, the adaptability and resilience of local communities have re-emerged as of critical importance, and this outstanding collection reflects this imperative to understand the local face of global crisis. In the process, it offers fresh and enriching answers to those old questions: what were the causes of the Revolution? Why did it follow a particular course? And what were its consequences?

LIST OF ESSAYS

Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, “Introduction”

Part I. Origins

Michael Kwass, “The Global Underground: Smuggling, Rebellion, and the Origins of the French Revolution”

Lynn Hunt, “The Global Financial Origins of 1789”

Charles Walton, “The Fall from Eden: The Free-Trade Origins of the French Revolution”

Andrew Jainchill, “1685 and the French Revolution”

Part II. “Internal” Dynamics

William Max Nelson, “Colonizing France: Revolutionary Regeneration and the First French Empire”

Suzanne Desan, “Foreigners, Cosmopolitanism, and French Revolutionary Universalism”

Denise Z. Davidson, “Feminism and Abolitionism: Transatlantic Trajectories”

Part III. Consequences

Ian Coller, “Egypt in the French Revolution”

Miranda Spieler, “Abolition and Reenslavement in the Caribbean: The Revolution in French Guiana”

Rafe Blaufarb, “The French Revolutionary Wars and the Making of American Empire, 1783–1796”

Coda

Pierre Serna, translated by Alexis Pernsteiner, “Every Revolution Is a War of Independence”

NOTES

[1] The initial statements of the Godechot and Palmer thesis were in Jacques Godechot, *Histoire de l'Atlantique* (Paris: Bordas, 1947); R.R. Palmer, “The World Revolution of the West: 1763–1801”, *Political Science Quarterly* 69 (1954): 1–14; and their joint article, “Le problème de l'Atlantique du XVIII^{ème} au XXI^{ème} siècle”, *Comitato internazionale di scienze storiche. Congresso internazionale di Scienze storiche, Roma 4–11 Settembre 1955. Relazioni 5 (Storia contemporanea)* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1955), pp. 173–239. The classic Marxist rejoinders were Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), especially pp. xv–xvi, 17–73, and Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution, 1787–1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon*, translation of *Précis d'histoire de la Révolution française* (1962) translated by Alan Forrest and Colin Jones (London and Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), especially pp. 3–24.

[2] David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, 1760–1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[3] C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), p. 100; Hunt, “The French Revolution in Global Context,” in Armitage and Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context*, pp. 30, 35.

[4] Note, too, the recent books of Coller and Spieler and their contributions, with that of Michael Rapport, along similar themes in Peter McPhee, ed., *A Companion to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

[5] Latin America, India and the East Indies are examined in, among others, the work of Armitage and Subrahmanyam cited above; Joseph Klaitz and Michael H. Haltzel, eds., *The Global Ramifications of the French Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). On Australia see Edward Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière: A French Naturalist in New Holland and the South Pacific* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2003), and Nicole Starbuck, *Baudin, Napoleon and the Exploration of Australia* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013).

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ISSN 1553-9172