

Forum: The French Revolution is Not Over

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The French Revolution's Global Turn and Capitalism's Spatial Fixes

Abstract

This essay first explores two contexts that have transformed the way that the international history of the French Revolution has been written over the last thirty years and which have recently provoked so many historians to take a global turn in their research and teaching at the expense of strictly national historiography. First, political relations between France and the Anglo-American world in the 1980s made the older, regnant model of Franco-American sister revolutions, inherited from R. R. Palmer, less plausible; this development sent historians looking for other models that would make the Revolution seem more immediately relevant to students and readers. Second, transformations in the global economy since the 1970s have put globalization on the agenda in a particularly striking manner. These same forces have transformed the economies within academia in ways that have favored teaching and publishing global history. This essay closes with some reflections on the difference between critical and naively enthusiastic approaches to the subject of globalization, and some recommendations on paths for future research on the French Revolution.

Historians of the French Revolution have so enthusiastically taken the global turn that this tendency calls forth skeptical descriptive terms like *pendulum*, *wave*, *fashion*, or *bubble*—with their respective tendencies to swing back, recede, go stale, or burst.¹ Indeed, it may well be true, as David Bell has suggested, that historians who have so thoroughly invested in the globalization bubble have pumped up the value of their stock by systematically exaggerating the significance, for France, of events that unfolded on the peripheries of European empires; in this view, historians would do well to return to the hexagon if they want to understand the preponderant long-term significance of the Revolution as well as the dynamics that drove it.² It would be a pity if the efflorescence of work on the global dimensions of the French Revolution—indeed the global dimensions of French history *tout court*—crowded out history written in a more strictly national framework. The nation state is far from irrelevant to modern and contemporary history; comparative or transnational approaches should never be insisted on as ends in themselves; and the universe of worthwhile

historical questions should not be restricted by arbitrary impositions of scale. What follows therefore is not a manifesto for the global turn but rather a brief account of transformations within this paradigm over the last few decades, followed by a critical assessment of some of its interpretive tendencies.

Mutations in the way that the global history of the French Revolution has been written over the last few decades can be situated in two contexts. The first is an essentially political story about the decline and subsequent transformation of the Palmerite model, which has affected scholarship on the Revolution in the Franco-American context; this amounts to a basically internalist account of adaptations within a field.³ The second context is far broader in scope and, accordingly, is less easily managed by the simple alteration of research agendas. Fittingly, it has its origins in a new phase in economic globalization: the transformation, in the wake of the oil shocks of 1973, of the most advanced Western capitalist powers to a post-Fordist regime of accumulation. The post-Fordist model of highly flexible, geographically distributed production helped to compensate for a general decline of productivity growth and profitability in the industrialized West.⁴ This structural transformation has not only sharpened the generalized awareness of globalization and its effects but has also altered the conditions of employment and publication for academic historians in ways that favor the writing of transnational and global history among Europeanist historians. These two contexts were never entirely separate and, in fact, frequently interacted with one another.

First, the Palmerite model: R. R. Palmer's magisterial *Age of Democratic Revolutions* (1959) provided a kaleidoscopic view of the French Revolution and related uprisings against the forces of aristocracy as far away as British India, Java, Dutch South Africa, and the Ottoman Empire. But his view was basically Atlanticist, privileging, in particular, the two great democratic sister revolutions of 1776 and 1789. In this sense, the Palmerite model was less a methodological template for conducting Atlantic or global scholarship than a political consensus that assured the relevance of French history—what some commentators wagsily described as the “NATO” interpretation of Atlantic history.⁵ Most American historians of France could (and did) write about the French Revolution without adopting an explicitly comparative or global perspective, but the Franco-American couplet worked in the background: common eighteenth-century origins; a shared, aggressively universalizing nationalism; and, perhaps ironically the presumed exceptionalism on both sides of the Atlantic. The slow dissolution of these family ties began, I think, in 1980 and 1981 with the elections, respectively, of Ronald Reagan and François Mitterand. Politically speaking, these were diametrically opposed reactions to the structural crisis of capitalism that came to the surface in the mid-1970s: supply-side economics and retreat of the regulatory and welfare state on the one hand; and on the other, its consolidation and defense. The election of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister in 1979 completes the picture of a rift between the Anglo-American and French worlds, politically and economically speaking. Historians needn't have been sympathetic to Thatcherism—or, later, Clinton-Blairite “Third Way” policies—to have been profoundly affected by the special Anglo-American relationship. It was around this time, for instance, that Atlantic History, as a tendency within historical scholarship, became an almost completely Anglo-American affair: for quite some time, the Atlantic world was

synonymous with the British Atlantic; the complementary notion of a "French Atlantic" only began to crop up systematically beginning in the early 2000s.⁶

Without the firm, if implicit, anchoring of the French Revolution to its transatlantic sister revolution, the search was on in the 1980s and 1990s for new ways to recast the relevance of French history for American scholars and students. In the hands of revisionist historians like François Furet and Ran Halévy, the Franco-American relationship remained, but the dialectic between the American and French Revolutions became a purely negative one. Furet's portrait of an inherently illiberal and violent social revolution in France stood out against the backdrop of an American Revolution that eschewed radicalism in favor of a liberal, exclusively political sort of revolution.⁷ It is unsurprising, then, that Furet took a deep interest in Alexis de Tocqueville: for both Furet and Halévy, the possibility of adopting Anglo-American liberalism to the French context necessarily began with an exploration of the pathologies of French political culture. Given this flattering portrait of American liberalism, it is no wonder that Furet's revisionism found a more receptive audience in the United States than it ever did in France. Starting in 1985, Furet himself set up camp in the citadel of Straussianism. The University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought was, not incidentally, the massive beneficiary of largesse from the right-wing Olin Foundation. It was from this platform—and in conjunction with Keith Baker, then still teaching in the University of Chicago's department of history—that he helped to reorient the study of the Revolution from the social history that supported the Marxist "catechism" of the French Revolution toward the intellectual and cultural history that carried the field through the bicentenary of 1989 and well beyond.

Another response to the decline of the Palmerite consensus is far more congenial to the cultural and political preoccupations of America's predominantly center-left historical profession. Historians of the French Revolution have increasingly turned their attention to the gap between the proclamations found in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and their halting, incomplete, or temporary application among various groups and in different places—for instance, to women and religious minorities in France, and to people of color in the French Empire. These explorations, often carried out using the methods of the new cultural history and the "political culture" mold developed by Keith Baker, have illuminated the nature, and limits, of revolutionary ideology. In contrast to the now lost world of revolutionary class struggle that historians systematically saw reflected in the French Revolution before 1980, the themes of inclusion and exclusion relate much more visibly to the varieties of identity politics that have dominated political discussion in the United States for some time. The last mentioned of these revolutionary exclusions, race, brings us back to the global history of the French Revolution, since it was largely in France's Antillean colonies, and in conflict with other imperial powers, that these struggles played out.

The history of the Haitian Revolution has been the most notable beneficiary of this trend—far outstripping, for instance, the newfound interest in France's Indian Ocean colonies. The literature on the French Antilles in the eighteenth century—led of course, by research into France's most successful colony, Saint-Domingue—has become so rich that it has nearly become an independent subfield.⁸ Although French and Haitian scholars wrote the

foundational literature in this field and have obviously continued to contribute to it, American scholars, notably Laurent Dubois, led the revival of interest in this subject starting in the early 2000s. In so doing, they have entered into dialogue with a rich and sophisticated literature written about race and slavery in Britain's North American colonies, the United States of the early national period, and, more broadly, the British Atlantic world. American historians of the French Atlantic world have engaged in a highly profitable form of linguistic arbitrage by bringing a comparatively advanced English-language historiography to bear on this subject; but I think what principally drove American historians in this direction was a widespread consciousness of the legacies of slavery in their own country and a desire to connect the events of the French Revolution to a set of themes more obviously resonant in their own national context.

French scholars have not been far behind in taking the global and imperial turn, and in this sense, we can speak of the Americanization of the French historiography of the Revolution. In 2006, Cécile Vidal published a widely cited essay entitled "The Reluctance of France to Address Atlantic History."⁹ Although Vidal described institutional causes for what she regarded as France's comparative scholarly backwardness, the most central reason she gave was cultural: France sought to repress its colonial, slave-trading past; moreover, its republican political tradition prevented a frank recognition of its immigrant, multicultural past and present. Vidal proved to be an owl of Minerva of sorts: by the time her essay was published, the syndrome of repression she diagnosed was coming rapidly to an end. But French historians' turn to the imperial, global, and colonial aspects of the Revolution should not be thought of primarily as a game of scholarly catch up with American academia. In the first place, it is worth insisting that the French have their own scholarly traditions to draw upon in globalizing their accounts of the Revolution. More importantly, this new pattern of scholarly interest is determined by a broader set of forces. The real Americanization at work here was cultural and political: the last decade has witnessed the rapid convergence of French and American politics, now that questions of race and identity have taken on an unprecedented salience in contemporary France. If the Palmerite consensus described above rested upon a shared, if largely tacit triumphalism, the present global turn has a common origin in the soul-searching in two multicultural societies in the grips of deindustrialization, social polarization, and disorienting political realignments. This observation leads us back to the second context for the global turn in the historiography of the French Revolution: economic globalization.

The globalization of the economy in the post-Fordist world has led to an unprecedented intensification of financial, commodity, labor, and information flows across international borders. This is the origin of a widespread imaginary of a hyper-networked, boundary-shattering, and nimbly adaptive capitalist world economy. Just as surely as this spectacle has stimulated an interest in the unfolding of this process in earlier epochs among historians, it has also generated a rather naive enthusiasm among techno-utopians, free-traders, and the cosmopolitan elites who annually frequent the World Economic Forum Meeting in Davos, Switzerland. In Jeremy Adelman's amusing account, the history profession is peopled by its own "Davos men," preaching the gospel of global history as they cover merely national history in obloquy. These globe-trotting Davos-historians often see the process of globalization and its virtues in a manner

similar to Thomas Friedman—NYT columnist and author of *The World is Flat* (2005)—and his ilk. Through this “gauzy veil,” connectedness, movement, and cosmopolitanism are understood as inherently progressive forces, a celebration that relegates the unplugged, undereducated masses to the status of conservative provincials. We see this tendency at work in Janet Polasky’s widely reviewed *Revolutions Without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* (2015).¹⁰ The celebratory narrative of connectedness and cosmopolitanism has largely replaced the teleological narratives of progressive enlightenment and democratization that undergirded, for example, the Palmerite consensus. But the globalization narrative is surely as ideological as anything it replaced. Critical historical treatments of early modern globalization have long existed, but they have yet to be widely integrated into the history of the French Revolution; if it is to be written at all, the global history of the French Revolution must self-consciously adopt an entirely different set of assumptions about this process.

In order to illustrate what I am talking about, it is instructive to examine some of the economic forces that have helped to determine the rise of global history, including global histories of the French Revolution, as teaching and publishing fields. Academic publishers avidly seek out titles in transnational and global history in order to recoup or avoid altogether the losses they incur by publishing specialist monographs on individual nation-states that libraries can no longer afford to buy. An oligopoly of publishing firms has pushed the cost of scientific journals to stratospheric levels, which eats up a growing proportion of flat or even declining library acquisitions budgets.¹¹ The crisis of academic publishing is part of a broader trend. Most college and university students (72%) attend public institutions, which have been struggling to maintain their budgets as individual states have massively cut funding to higher education; these cuts deepened during Great Recession of 2007–12 and have not since been restored. This trend compounds the long-term damage to public higher education as the federal state has systematically retreated from social investments in the wake of the 1970s crisis: federal spending on higher education peaked at 1.2% of GDP in 1979, and has not since recovered, despite a slight uptick in the Obama era.¹² Elite public institutions maintained budgets to the extent that they have only by pushing tuition rates nearer to private university levels, which has driven rising inequality in access to first-rate education.

Another element of this story is of course the well-known decrease in the number of tenure-track positions in history, including European history. Some of this decline is tied to the wider academic job market for historians, but it is also related to the relative decline of European history compared to American, Latin American, Asian, and—notably—World history; in 2015, European history, as a proportion of advertised history jobs as a whole, reached a forty-year low of 32.2%. Remaining advertisements in European history increasingly ask for candidates who can teach in an extra-European field and therefore privilege candidates whose research focuses on imperialism and colonization—presumably on the theory that they will be qualified to teach Europe and the wider world.¹³ Whatever its intellectual appeal, the rise of global history can be interpreted in a purely economic fashion: as in any labor force faced with declining demand, historians of Europe are less able to reap the gains of specialization—either in the form of increased salaries or protection from competition. Historians of France do not compete on the job market simply with other historians of France

but also with historians of Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, or Russia to be one of the declining number of Europeanists in a given department. Once hired, they are increasingly asked to contribute to the teaching of world history curricula. The effects of despecialization on the historical profession can be usefully contrasted to the situation of economists. This field has also experienced its ups and downs, but the general trend has been one of greater specialization as the demand for academic and nonacademic economists has continued to rise. In 1991, there were thirty-nine advertisements for financial economists (one of eighteen recognized specialties) out of 2663 jobs, about 1% of openings; by 2016, out of 3,556 available jobs, 226 (or about 6%) were offered in the same specialty. The American Economic Association used to lump financial economics with business administration, accounting, and international business in its job statistics; but with the massive financialization of the global economy since the 1990s, more of these highly paid specialists are required in order to understand (and profit by) this trend.¹⁴ But there is more: leaving aside the divergent fortunes of historians and economists, over the last couple of decades we have seen an increasing polarization between the working conditions enjoyed by tenured academics from all disciplines who work in elite private and top-tier public institutions, and the vast majority of who work outside of this charmed circle. In this respect, academia only reflects wider trends in the world economy, in which a great sorting process—which is often expressed geographically—separates a skilled, urban, and cosmopolitan elite from those who are left to stagnate in economic and cultural backwaters.¹⁵

How does this relate to the writing of the global history of the French Revolution? We should resist modeling the Age of Revolutions in terms of the inherently progressive effects of intellectual, economic, or social connectivity caused by globalization. Call this the Davos or Facebook version of globalization—a sort of *doux commerce* thesis for the twenty-first century, in which the world is unified and enriched by the onward march of cosmopolitan capitalism. Instead, we should recognize that capitalist social relations actively produce a certain kind of space that is often highly differentiated and fragmented. As the Marxist geographer David Harvey has remarked, “capitalism has . . . always thrived on the production of difference.”¹⁶ Marx may have depicted a system of accumulation doomed by its own contradictions, but geographers like Harvey provide a way of understanding the long-term dynamism of the capitalist mode of production; after each new, seemingly terminal “crisis,” a new spatial configuration has restored (at least temporarily) capitalism’s conditions of profitability and stability. These periodic reorganizations are what Harvey terms capitalism’s “spatial fix.” It is not only the post-Fordist late capitalism of Ernst Mandel, Michel Aglietta, and Alain Lipietz that must be understood spatially but the early modern world economy depicted by Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Giovanni Arrighi. This is the proper analytical framework for understanding the French Revolution in global perspective.

The French Revolution has, increasingly, been placed into the wider chronological context of the post-Seven Years’ War era. The reforms initiated during this period by the major European imperial powers should be understood as part of a massive spatial reorganization of the capitalist world economy as the “archaic” or “primitive” phase of globalization started to run up against its inherent limits.¹⁷ These reforms included the reorganization of colonial

administrations and intra-imperial trading regimes, measures that entailed a shift in global commodity flows and at least a partial rethinking of political relations between colonists and their metropolitan masters. They also included attempts to ameliorate plantation economies in order to render them more stable and profitable for metropolitan and colonial interests alike. None of these initiatives were uncontroversial, and many of them had ideological and social effects that carried well into the revolutionary period. Our understanding of the Revolution in the Circum-Caribbean, for instance, is enriched by looking back at the long eighteenth century, a period when the human geography of this place changed continuously.¹⁸ Once the Revolution broke out, the pace of the “spatial fix” of the post-Seven Years’ War period greatly accelerated: national and imperial boundaries shifted suddenly and repeatedly; within and between these sovereign units, subjects were extended (or deprived of) economic and civil rights in erratic fashion. Planters and their imperial sponsors always had to seek out virgin territory to accommodate new investment capital and to compensate for environmental degradation, but the political upheavals of this period—notably, France’s loss of Saint-Domingue and the threat of universal emancipation—accelerated the expansion and intensification of the plantation system in places like Brazil, Cuba, and the Deep South of the United States.¹⁹ From this and other possible examples, we see that the global history of the French Revolution is inextricably linked with the global history of early modern capitalism.

I am far from suggesting that the global history of the French Revolution must be approached as a form of economic history to the exclusion of other methods—some of which are discussed by my colleagues in this forum. To the contrary, one need not simply imagine intellectual, cultural, and political histories of the Revolution written in a cosmopolitan key because we already have many examples of each to hand. Future work from all of these perspectives will be enriched and rescued from error by a proper understanding of what globalization is and what it is not. If, as I have suggested, historians seem increasingly compelled by market forces beyond their control to produce global histories of the French Revolution, it still lies within their power to offer critical accounts of these same forces, written in both the past and present tenses.

Endnotes

This essay, like the others in this forum, is a slightly expanded version of a talk given at the Consortium for Revolutionary Europe conference in February 2017. Thanks to Suzanne Desan and Sophie Rosenfeld for their stimulating conversation during and after this forum and especially to Jack Censer for organizing this event and the resulting publication. This essay draws, in part, on a plenary lecture, “The Enlightenment’s Spatial Turn: Globalization, Politics, Prosperity,” delivered at Oxford University in September 2016; I would like to thank Nicholas Cronk for his hospitality and for providing me with the opportunity to develop my ideas in such a congenial atmosphere. Finally, thanks are due to the anonymous readers at the *Journal of Social History*. Address correspondence to Paul Cheney, Department of History, University of Chicago, 1126 E. 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637. Email: cheney@uchicago.edu.

1. Let the recent appearance of a collection of essays under this heading stand for the hundreds of references that might be provided: Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*, Cornell Paperbacks (Ithaca, NY, 2013).

2. See “Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 37, no. 1 (February 1, 2014): 1–24. It should be stipulated that Bell does not accuse these historians of bad faith.

3. By “Palmerite,” I mean histories inspired by R. R. Palmer’s *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ, 1959). These volumes documented a globe-spanning (though mainly Euro-American) anti-aristocratic and democratic revolution. For an account, including the contributions of Jacques Godechot to this model, see Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

4. See Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (London, 2006).

5. See Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 9–11.

6. This discussion draws on my comments in Paul Cheney et al., “La Révolution française à l’heure du global turn,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 374 (December 1, 2013): 157–85.

7. For a devastating exploration of this theme in Furet’s work, including a discussion of the normativity of Anglo-American liberalism in revisionist scholarship as a whole, see Isser Woloch, “On the Latent Illiberalism of the French Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 95, no. 5 (1990): 1452–70.

8. The literature on the eighteenth-century French Antilles and the Haitian Revolution has become so vast that any indication even of its highlights is bound to lead to unfair and invidious exclusions. Four recent works in English provide up-to-date bibliographical indications on, respectively, the social, racial and gender, political, legal, and economic aspects of the field: John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York, 2006); Jennifer L. Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic* (Philadelphia, 2016); Jeremy Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge, UK, 2010); Malick Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, UK, 2012); and Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Slavery and Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue* (Chicago, 2017).

9. “The Reluctance of French Historians to Address Atlantic History,” *Southern Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2006).

10. See Jeremy Adelman, “Is Global History Still Possible, or Has It Had Its Moment?” *Aeon Essays*, March 2, 2017, <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment>. For a similar analysis and criticism of this trend, see my review of Polasky’s *Revolutions Without Borders*, *H-France Review* 16 no. 91 (2016). For a discussion of the deficiencies of globalization as an analytical framework, see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005), chap. 7. As Cooper writes: “There are two problems with the concept of globalization, first the ‘global,’ and second the ‘ization’” (91).

11. “Average Estimated Share of Library-Materials Budget Spent on Digital and Print at 4-Year Public and Private Nonprofit Colleges, 2010–16,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education 2017 Almanach*, August 13, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Share-of-Library-Materials/240618>; Proquest Corporation, “Academic Library Book Purchasing Trends,” January 2016.

12. “U.S. Government Education Spending History with Charts,” usgovernmentspending.com, accessed December 15, 2017, https://www.usgovernmentspending.com/education_spending, source: annual data culled from US federal budgets.

13. Robert Townshend, "The Rise and Decline of History Specializations over the Past 40 Years," *AHA Perspectives on History*, December 2015, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2015/the-rise-and-decline-of-history-specializations-over-the-past-40-years>.

14. Source: *American Economic Review*, "Job Openings for Economists," 1980–2017, included in the May issue for each year. Thanks to Katherine Burton for help in compiling these statistics. On the financialization of the global economy in response to the post-1970s profit and productivity squeeze, François Chesnais, *Finance Capital Today: Corporations and Banks in the Lasting Global Slump*, (Leiden, Netherlands, 2016).

15. It is worth remarking that in both cases, the division between center and periphery produces the inequalities it seems to justify. For instance, academics who find themselves in underfunded, teaching-intensive institutions at the beginning of their careers naturally publish less of the scholarship that would make them candidates for jobs in top-tier research institutions.

16. For quotation, David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (London, 2001), 121. On the production of space: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK, 1991), 85.

17. For archaic globalization and elements of this interpretation, see C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004), 27 and 92–96. See also C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian* (London, 1989) and Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1977), chap. 4.

18. The single most important source on this subject remains David Watts, *The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Culture, and Environmental Change Since 1492* (Cambridge, 1987).

19. For some recent scholarship on this expansion from an Atlantic or Circum-Caribbean perspective, see Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton, NJ, 2006); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).