Introduction

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Sixty years ago, R. R. Palmer published his two-volume *Age of the Democratic Revolution*, in which he described a "revolution of Western Civilization," that, he argued, had occurred in the years between 1760 and 1800. These decades, Palmer went on, saw numerous agitations, upheavals, and conspiracies on either side of the Atlantic, that arose out of specific or universal conditions, not simply as the result of the French Revolution. What Palmer outlined was what we now call the Age of (Atlantic) Revolutions, a theme that has been and continues to be the inspiration for high-quality publications, in part because this period in history supposedly laid the foundations for the countries shaped in the aftermath of these revolutions, and in part because of the need to explain the unusual political activity and social upheaval on display in this era. Virtually absent from the countless monographs, articles, and edited volumes is an overview of this important period in Atlantic history. Many specialists work within their own subfield, writing and conducting research on, for example, the American Revolution without closely following the newest trends in scholarship on the revolutions in France or Latin America. The aim of this book is to bring together current scholarship for the first reference work dedicated to the age of revolutions. Jointly, the chapters that make up this book will reveal the era in all its complexity. They will reflect the latest trends, discussing more than simply the causes, key events, and consequences of the revolutions by stressing political experimentation, contingency, and the survival of old regime practices and institutions. The time is ripe for analyzing these matters in a way that does justice to both the local nature of the revolts and their much wider Atlantic context.

Most scholars of the Age of Revolutions no longer share Palmer's geographic and temporal frameworks. They include the quarter-century (or more) after 1800 and look beyond western Europe and the United States to Haiti and Latin America. No general agreement exists, however, on the exact start and end dates, nor on its confinement to the Atlantic world. The

periodization advocated by C. A. Bayly, who has made a case for the time-frame 1760–1840, is about the same as that adopted in this *Cambridge History of the Age of Atlantic Revolutions*.[1] Like any time limits, these are somewhat arbitrary. One could push the outer boundary to 1848. By that year of revolution, however, so many new factors and forces had emerged on the various national political scenes – including full-fledged liberalism and nationalism, and capitalism's working class – that there is more reason to see them as elements of a new era.

Although the geographic scope of these three volumes is vast, it has been my choice not to include all instances of rebellion, but to focus on coherence. What ties the numerous rebellious movements on either side of the Atlantic basin together in the half-century between the shots fired at Lexington and Concord (1775) and the Spanish loss at the siege of Callao, Peru in 1826 is more than just the, often violent, transitions from old to new regimes. The common glue is what marked these transitions: the questioning of time-honored institutions in the name of liberty; the invention and spread of a politics of contestation at local and national levels; the unprecedented experimentation with new forms of democracy; the abolition of numerous forms of legal inequality; and last but not least the aspiration to universal rights. These were processes in which plebeians, elites, and members of middling groups all participated. These phenomena were not experienced wherever in the world riots and rebellions broke out. They were largely absent, for example, from the Ottoman empire, although it was in great turmoil during the age of revolutions, especially in the years 1806–1808, when two sultans were deposed and thousands of people killed.[2]

What the age of revolutions brought was hope for fundamental change, a scarce good in the early modern world. Any criticism of authorities had previously been forbidden and heavily punished. It was only during periods of unrest that peasants in Europe could express their dissatisfaction without fear of reprisal. In such times, there are also glimpses of the hidden transcript of enslaved men and women throughout the Americas, which reflected the

[1] C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); C. A. Bayly, "The Age of Revolutions in Global Context: An Afterword," in David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 209–17: 217.

[2] Ali Yaycioglu, *Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 158.

awakening of their hopes.[3] A historian of the Russian Revolution has written that "revolutions disrupt assumptions that the future can only appear along the straight tracks where the present seems to be heading, and so challenge how we understand time and history . . . Utopia is this open disruption of the now, for the sake of possibility, not a closed map of the future. It is the leap not yet the landing."[4] This leap was made time and again by the oppressed. On the eve of the French and Haitian Revolutions, writes **John Garrigus** (Volume II, Chapter 23), many enslaved residents of Saint-Domingue "believed change was possible, whether that came through applying new laws or actively confronting the master class." For the 1790s, no fewer than forty-seven slave revolts and conspiracies have been documented for the Greater Caribbean, a number much larger than ever before or afterwards. Similarly, the years 1789–1802 saw 150 mutinies on single ships and half a dozen fleet-wide mutinies in the British, French, and Dutch navies, which meant that between 67,000 and 100,000 mobilized men were involved in at least one mutiny.[5]

Hope in the American Revolution often took the form of millennial expectations, which were so intense "during the early years of the revolutionary war that numerous patriots foresaw the final destruction of Antichrist and the establishment of the Kingdom of God within the immediate future." One revolutionary on Long Island saw the millennium as "the happy period when tyranny, oppression, and wretchedness shall be banished from the earth; when universal love and liberty, peace and righteousness, shall prevail."[6] The French Revolution aroused hope, both at home and abroad, that tended to be secular in nature. After arriving in France in 1792 as the United States' Minister Plenipotentiary, Gouverneur Morris wrote in a letter that he was delighted to find "on this Side of the Atlantic a strong resemblance to what I left on the other – a Nation which exists in Hopes, Prospects, and Expectations. The reverence for ancient Establishments gone, existing Forms shaken to the very Foundation, and a new Order of Things about

[3] Martin Merki-Vollenwyder, *Unruhige Untertanen: Die Rebellion der Luzerner Bauern im Zweiten Villmergerkrieg (1712)* (Luzern: Rex Verlag, 1995), 121–2; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[4] Mark D. Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution 1905–1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 292–3.

[5] David Geggus, "Slave Rebellion during the Age of Revolution," in Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, eds., *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions, 1795–1800* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011), 23–56: 41–3; Nyklas Frykman, *The Bloody Flag: Mutiny in the Age of Atlantic Revolution* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 10.

[6] Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 79, 81.

to take Place in which even to the very names, all former Institutions will be disregarded."[7] The imagined new order caused tremendous optimism on the part of enthusiasts for the French Revolution. Norwegian-born Henrik Steffens recalled in his memoirs that when he was sixteen and living with his family in Copenhagen, his father came home one day, deeply impressed by the French Revolution, and told his three sons: "Children, you are to be envied, what a happy time lies ahead of you! If you don't succeed in gaining a free independent position, you have yourselves to blame. All restrictive conditions of status, of poverty will disappear, the least will begin the same struggle with the most powerful, with the same weapons, on the same ground. If only I were young like you!"[8] Steffens experienced the time that followed as not simply a French but a European revolution that was planted in millions of hearts: "The first moment of excitement in history . . . has something pure, even sacred, that must never be forgotten. A boundless hope took hold of me, my whole future, it seemed to me, was planted in a fresh, new soil . . . From then on my whole existence had taken on a new direction . . ."[9]

Rights

If revolutionaries were guided by ideas emanating from the Enlightenment, did the Enlightenment produce the revolutions? No, answers **Johnson Kent Wright** (Volume 1, Chapter 2), at least not in the case of France. "Had 'enlightened' criticism of the Bourbon monarchy been sufficient to have launched the Revolution, it ought to have occurred some two decades earlier than it did." And yet, Wright adds, the French Enlightenment was essential to the way the revolution unfolded. Likewise, enlightened ideas helped steer the revolutions in the Ibero-American world, but, as **Brian Hamnett** argues (Volume 1, Chapter 3), the Enlightenment did not lead inevitably or automatically to support for revolution. In New Spain, for example, the outbreak of insurrection in 1810 divided its proponents into hostile camps.

Rights were an essential element of the sometimes baffling transformations that took place during the age of Atlantic revolutions. Rights used to

[7] Cited in Philipp Ziesche, "Exporting American Revolutions: Gouverneur Morris, Thomas Jefferson, and the National Struggle for Universal Rights in Revolutionary France," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26:3 (2006), 419–47: 426.
[8] Henrich Steffens, *Was ich erlebte: Aus der Erinnerung niedergeschrieben* (Breslau: Josef Mar und Kompanie, 1840), vol. 1, 362–3.
[9] Steffens, *Was ich erlebte*, 364–5.

be privileges, granted to someone for the common good. Every male had rights commensurate with his station in life, which thereby confirmed the hierarchical organization of society. They were accompanied by obligations that forced the rights' holders to use their powers for the common good. The new notion that gradually took shape – and remained unfinished – was that humans' own moral power allowed them to stake their claims and relate their own rights to those of others. Rights transcended all structures of authority and were thus common to humankind. Human equality now trumped any differences in rank, nationality, or culture.[10] The US Declaration of Independence – the first revolutionary document to invoke rights – echoed this new idea by positing the existence of a supreme law against which positive law could be measured and, if needed, changed.[11] The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen served the same function, for which it was criticized by supporters of liberalism as metaphysical.

Once formulated, these catalogs of rights could inspire groups who had not been among the intended beneficiaries to claim parity. Just like Black people could argue that their humanity sufficed to negate their status as slaves, some women pressed for their equal rights. The authors of two Belgian pamphlets, who predicted that the current tide of revolutions would bring an end to "seventeen centuries of masculine abuse," called for a national assembly, half of whose members were to be women. If their demand was ignored by the nation's leaders, women would withdraw from society.[12] Adversaries of such rights, however, used the same language of natural rights to oppose these demands. Woman's nature, male French revolutionaries argued, made her unfit to exercise political power.[13]

The invocation of a higher law coexisted in the age of revolutions with the continued emphasis on ancient positive rights by men and women challenging the social order. In many places across the Atlantic world, as **Stephen**

[10] Knud Haakonssen, "From Natural Law to the Rights of Man: A European Perspective on American Debates," in Michael J. Lacy and Knud Haakonssen, eds., *A Culture of Rights: The Bill of Rights in Philosophy, Politics, and Law – 1791 and 1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19–61: 21, 32, 35–6; Simon Middleton, *From Privileges to Rights: Work and Politics in Colonial New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 5–6.

[11] Andrew J. Reck, "Natural Law in American Revolutionary Thought," *The Review of Metaphysics* 30:4 (1977), 686–714: 712.

[12] Janet L. Polasky, "Women in Revolutionary Belgium: From Stone Throwers to Hearth Tenders," *History Workshop* 21 (1986), 87–104: 93.

[13] Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 226.

Conway argues in Volume 1, Chapter 11, "the events associated with Palmer's 'democratic revolution' began as a conservative reaction to the reforming endeavors of rulers, not as a grassroots desire to extend popular participation." Ireland's Protestants, he shows, were looking backwards "in seeking to reclaim their autonomy." "Most of them were not interested in a democratic transformation of Ireland." **Janet Polasky** (Volume 11, Chapter 14) writes that one of the groups challenging Austrian rule in Belgium "wanted to restore the medieval constitutions and reestablish the rule of the three Estates. Instead of natural rights, they referred to 'the eternal rights of man,' meaning something quite different from the enlightenment ideal. Instead of the 'rights of the People,' they referred to the privileges of the 'nation belge.'" In the (Swiss) Helvetic Republic, a document presented to the authorities of Zurich in 1794 that has been labeled the *Stäfner Memorial* demanded both the restoration of old privileges and a constitution that defended individual human rights.[14]

The introduction of rights was no straightforward process, as can be illustrated by the uncertain status of the right to profess one's religious belief. The tone was set by the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which stipulated that "all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience."[15] Although it has been argued that religious freedom was achievable in Protestant places such as Virginia where tolerance had already been practiced, its adoption was usually a matter of controversy. In Pennsylvania's constitutional debate of 1776, one side – made up of Protestants – opposed religious leniency, which they feared would put them at the mercy of the alien creeds of Islam, Catholicism, and Judaism. Likewise, although Massachusetts' constitution may have guaranteed the exercise of religion in private, it contained an injunction to the legislature to support Protestant teachers.[16] Nor was such intolerance the exclusive domain of elite politicians in the age of revolutions. A series of Catholic relief bills proposed

[14] Urte Weeber, "New Wine in Old Wineskins: Republicanism in the Helvetic Republic," in Joris Oddens, Mart Rutjes, and Erik Jacobs, eds., *The Political Culture of the Sister Republics, 1794–1806: France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Italy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 57–64: 62.

[15] Daniel L. Dreisbach, "George Mason's Pursuit of Religious Liberty in Revolutionary Virginia," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 108:1 (2000), 5–44: 16.

[16] Charles D. Russell, "Islam as a Danger to Republican Virtue: Broadening Religious Liberty in Revolutionary Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 76:3 (2009), 250–75: 251; Eduardo Posada-Carbó, "Spanish America and US constitutionalism in the Age of Revolution," in Gabriel Paquette and Gonzalo M. Quintero Saravia, eds., *Spain and the American Revolution: New Approaches and Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2020), 210–23: 217.

by the British government threw into sharp relief the existence of a popular Protestantism that defined itself in opposition to French Catholicism and eventually led to the Gordon Riots (London, 1780).[17]

The antipluralist tendency was, however, stronger in the Catholic world, even in France, where the Catholic faith lost its status as state religion and where Protestants and Jews were emancipated. Political culture proved hard to change.[18] And so it could happen that a small town in Alsace decided in 1794 that the Jews had to shave their beards, and could no longer carry their Decalogues in public or show any other signs of their religion.[19] It was not different in the colonies. When the planters of Saint-Domingue sought protection from the British king in 1793, proposing some articles of government, they insisted on the exclusivity of the Catholic religion.[20] Soon, of course, French revolutionary intolerance went beyond the insistence on Catholicism, when the adoption of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy led to discrimination against the millions of people who clung to the old Church.

The influential constitution of Cádiz stated unambiguously that the religion of the Spanish nation was and would always be the only true Roman Catholic one. When the legislators gathered in Cádiz voted for press freedom in 1810, they followed it up by setting up boards of censorship that would make sure that published works did not threaten religion. Three years later, they went one step further by decreeing the death penalty for anyone suggesting the implementation of a policy of tolerance vis-à-vis non-Catholics.[21] At the same time, as **Roberto Breña** notes (Volume III, Chapter 3), the constitution "tried to control what up to that moment was an almost exclusive role of the Church in public education, publishing, and public discourse." Javier Fernández Sebastián has convincingly argued that "the overwhelming preponderance of Catholicism in the Hispanic world explains how difficult it was to conceive of religion and politics as separate spheres, and the correlative difficulty of regarding 'religion' as an abstract category of a general nature, capable of embracing several 'religions,' in the

[17] Brad A. Jones, "'In Favour of Popery': Patriotism, Protestantism, and the Gordon Riots in the Revolutionary British Atlantic," *Journal of British Studies* 52:1 (2013), 79–102.
[18] Bronislaw Baczko, *Politiques de la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 62–3.
[19] Claude Muller, "Religion et Révolution en Alsace," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 337 (2004), 63–83: 76.
[20] J. Marino Incháustegui, ed., *Documentos para estudio: Marco de la época y problemas del Tratado de Basilea de 1795, en la parte española de Santo Domingo* (Buenos Aires: Academia Dominicana de la Historia, 1957), 640.
[21] Juan Pablo Domínguez, "Intolerancia religiosa en las Cortes de Cádiz," *Hispania* 77:255 (2017), 155–83: 164, 178.

plural." Since Catholicism was the foundation of the nation's identity, tolerance meant "disunion, illegitimacy, even civil war."[22] This sentiment was shared by the priests of central Switzerland when the constitution of the Helvetic Republic was promulgated, which meant that irreligiosity and heresy were no longer punishable.[23]

Residents of the Catholic world would not have viewed religious exclusivity as a form of inequality. As members of the Christian community, every individual enjoyed an equal status by virtue of their baptism. Their ties were governed by brotherly love. At least, that was the case in theory. In practice, it remained an ideal, pursued by Hidalgo and other priests involved in the Mexican uprising of 1810. The early Church fathers rather than Enlightenment *philosophes* were the inspiration for Hidalgo, who stated that his goal was to build a society in which all were recognized as equal children of God.[24] Likewise, the 1797 republican conspiracy in Venezuela, writes **Cristina Soriano** in Volume II, Chapter 28, "argued in favor of social harmony between whites, *pardos*, Indians, and blacks, because all these racial groups were seen as 'brothers in Christ.'"

Not all Catholic leaders were bent on continuing the exclusivity of their religion. Some sought to introduce a measure of tolerance. The difference between tolerance and religious freedom was expressed by the "Jews, settled in France" in a petition to the National Assembly a few months after the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen had been adopted. "The word tolerance," they wrote, "which after so many centuries and so many *intolerant acts* seemed to be a word of humanity and reason, no longer suits a country that wishes to establish its rights on the eternal basis of justice . . . . To tolerate, indeed, is to suffer what one would have the right to prohibit." Under the new conditions, the dominant religion had no right to prohibit another religion from humbly placing itself by its side.[25] But religious inequality was not to vanish, while tolerance – that typically early modern phenomenon – was still a viable option in Europe and the Americas. The

[22] Javier Fernández Sebastián, "Toleration and Freedom of Expression in the Hispanic World between Enlightenment and Liberalism," *Past & Present* no. 211 (May 2011), 159–97: 162–3, 186, 188.

[23] Eric Godel, "La Constitution scandaleuse. La population de Suisse centrale face à la République helvétique," in Andreas Würgler, ed., *Grenzen des Zumutbaren: Erfahrungen mit der französischen Okkupation und der Helvetischen Republik (1798–1803)* (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2011), 29–44: 32.

[24] Laura Ibarra García, "El concepto de igualdad en México (1810–1824)," *Relaciones* 145 (2016), 279–314: 287.

[25] "Pétition des juifs établis en France, adressée à l'Assemblée Nationale," 28 January 1790, in *Adresses, mémoires et pétitions des juifs 1789–1794* (Paris: EDHIS, 1968), 17–18.

Polish constitution, writes **Richard Butterwick** (Volume 11, Chapter 20), began "with a stirring preamble and an article maintaining the prohibition against 'apostasy' from the Roman Catholic 'dominant and national religion,' while assuring freedom of worship and the protection of government to all creeds." Similarly, the Organic Law that saw the light in Pernambuco, Brazil in 1817 said that the state religion was Roman Catholicism, while the other Christian sects of any denomination were tolerated.[26] In early independent Colombia, a campaign for religious toleration failed to achieve its goal. Foreigners could still not hold Protestant services in public in spite of sustained criticism of the Catholic clergy, which was held responsible for blocking new ideas.[27] The most radical constitution adopted in a Catholic country was that issued by Jean-Jacques Dessalines in 1805. While Toussaint Louverture's constitution of 1801 had declared Catholicism the official state religion, that of Dessalines (although short-lived) introduced religious tolerance.[28]

Sovereignty and Public Opinion

Many historians have assumed that a form of self-government was already in place in Britain's North American colonies. These are considered to have thrived in a long era of "salutary neglect." When that era ended in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, a revolution became thinkable. In Volume 1, Chapter 6, **Holly Brewer** shows that "salutary neglect" was largely a myth: "The political, legal and economic situations in the colonies were constantly negotiated in a struggle for power that was occurring not only on the level of empire but in England itself . . . To the degree that such 'salutary neglect' existed . . . it was part of this negotiation and struggle over the meaning and terms of power. While some could escape the power of empire in the short term, it was constantly tugging at their sleeves. One could take up land in the 'wilderness,' for example, . . . but the only way one owned it was by getting a legal title – and that demanded negotiation with all the ligaments of colonial authority, from surveyor and courts to secretary of

[26] Leonardo Morais de Araújo Pinheiro, "Análise da Lei Orgânica da Revolução pernambucana de 1817 à luz dos direitos fundamentais," *Revista Brasileira de História do Direito* 4:2 (2018), 114–34: 130.
[27] David Bushnell, *The Santander Regime in Gran Colombia* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1970 [1954]), 210, 215.
[28] Lorelle D. Semley, "To Live and Die, Free and French: Toussaint Louverture's 1801 Constitution and the Original Challenge of Black Citizenship," *Radical History Review* 115 (2013), 65–90: 78.

the colony. How one could develop it, and what one could grow, how one could pass it on, were often regulated by laws that might emerge in the colonies but were subject to Royal veto. Other regulations were imposed directly by imperial authorities."

Revolutions are always a struggle for sovereignty. Despite the widely shared support for popular sovereignty, opinions were divided on the people's postrevolutionary political role. A prominent monarchist member of France's National Assembly opined that while all powers emanated from the people, their well-being depended on leaving the exercise of these powers to the king to prevent the chaos of anarchy.[29] In continental British America, **Max Edling** remarks (Volume 1, Chapter 17), the ideology of the American Revolution "introduced a nebulous concept of popular sovereignty, which somehow existed both at state and at national level." "Several of the new constitutions incorporated Congress's declaration of independence in whole or in part, thus illustrating how legitimate authority was based on popular sovereignty simultaneously expressed at national and local level." In Spanish America, it was unclear whether self-rule extended to a town's immediate vicinity or whether administrative centers could claim to govern vast areas. The assumption of sovereignty in Spanish America implied a return to nature. As Clément Thibaud has explained, that meant not a return to a Hobbesian world of lone individuals but *pueblos*, peoples in the sense of free communities. If indeed the *pueblo* was the repository of sovereignty, opinions differed on the *pueblo*'s identity, at least in New Granada. Was it the town, the province, or all of New Granada?[30] Federalists in many parts of the Atlantic world, often inspired by the United States and opposed to the horrors to which centralism had allegedly given rise in Jacobin Paris, usually found support outside traditional political centers. To legitimize the dispersion of political power, Dutch federalists used the climate argument – according to which each land had its own character and was therefore entitled to its own legislation – to plead for separate laws for each of the seven small provinces. Another argument was that the distance between the population and its rulers was much smaller on

[29] His name was Jean-Joseph Mounier. Nicolai von Eggers, "Popular Sovereignty, Republicanism, and the Political Logic of the Struggles of the French Revolution" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Aarhus, 2016), 216.

[30] Clément Thibaud, "Des républiques en armes à la République armée. Guerre révolutionnaire, fédéralisme et centralisme au Venezuela et en Nouvelle-Grenade, 1808–1830," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* no. 348 (2011), 57–86: 63; Isabel Restrepo Mejía, "La soberanía del 'pueblo' durante la época de la independencia, 1810–1815," *Historia Crítica* 29 (2005), 101–23: 102–5.