Introduction

Into Charleston’s sun-drenched harbor on April 8, 1793 sailed the French warship *L’Embuscade*. Crowds gathered by the dock, anxious to hear news of whether the French Republic had declared war on the British monarchy. Before them appeared Edmond-Charles Genêt, younger brother of Marie-Antoinette’s best friend and prior French diplomat in Russia, who despite his upbringing had been expelled from the Court of St. Petersburg for revolutionary enthusiasm. Returning to Paris, Genêt spent the summer of 1792 imbibing the revolutionary atmosphere in the Jacobin Club, becoming friendly with the leaders of its Girondin faction. Taking appointment as French ambassador to the United States, Genêt’s ship had been blown 600 miles off course from Philadelphia to a news-starved city passionately invested in the outcome of European events.

Not leaving the grand announcement of war between France and Britain (that had begun in late January) to a subordinate, Genêt orated the affirmative to loud applause. Charleston, sufferers of British siege, occupation, and atrocities during America’s War of Independence, had become a hotbed of pro-French sentiment, boasting a French Patriotic Society by December 1792 becoming known as the “Amis de la Constitution,” corresponding with the Paris Jacobins and affiliated with Bordeaux’s Society of the Friends of Liberty and Equality.¹ Now, the port town extended Genêt the finest southern hospitality. The French ambassador spent eleven days participating in Charleston banquets, reviewing parades, arranging relief shipments for France’s Caribbean islands, and commissioning pirating expeditions against British shipping. A new Charleston Republican Society formed during his stay.²

¹ Archives nationales de France, AF ET B(I) 372 439.

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Rather than taking *L’Embuscade – The Ambush* – north to the American capital in Philadelphia, Genêt instead made a weeks-long journey overland, where he “every where received the most flattering marks of attention” from the populace. Genêt enthusiastically confirmed to the French government that Americans considered them “friends, allies, brothers” in the quest for freedom. The citizens of Georgetown, in the under-construction Federal District, fêted Genêt and his nation for enacting “a government founded on the bases of equality and happiness.” Camden, New Jersey, presented Genêt with an address proclaiming Americans’ “gratitude” for French aid in the War of Independence and celebrating the “noble example” France “now gives to the world, of hatred to tyrants and abhorrence of oppression.” The French Revolution, they asserted, would make “man happy, by making him free.” With partisans having prepared festivities for his arrival in the City of Brotherly Love, the bells of Christ Church rang as Genêt crossed the Delaware by ferry. A Francophillic crowd met Genêt with tricolor ribbons on their hats and hair, carrying him in triumph over the last four miles to the capital and festivities at City Tavern.

With Genêt embodying trans-Atlantic revolutionary possibilities, partisans capitalized on the effervescence to impact America’s political order. With the country still lacking a Jacobin-style network of allied political societies, some believed the time ripe to promote a national network. Philadelphia’s German Republican Society sought Genêt’s allegiance, presenting an address asserting their hope that “the French nation will give an example to the European world” by fixing “the Rights of Man upon an immovable basis” for all people. Genêt accepted their invitation to help plan a new political network. With “German Republican Society” too particular a name for the group’s universal ambitions, club members initially suggested readopting the “Sons of Liberty” moniker, hearkening back to the revolutionary era’s first integrated corresponding society network. Genêt, however, proposed a new name, reflecting the group’s principles: “the Democratic Club.”

Thus, the renegade revolutionary French ambassador Genêt helped inspire – and personally named – a new club network, which laid the groundwork for America’s Democratic Party. One in a chain of transnational inspirations that

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3 *General Advertiser*, May 17, 1793.
4 Archives des affaires étrangères, P4666 425.
5 NA FO 91/1 148.
6 *City Gazette*, May 4, 1793.
7 Turner, “Correspondence,” 284; *Federal Gazette*, May 16, 1793.
8 *Federal Gazette*, May 18, 1793.
created modern social movements across the second half of the eighteenth century, American political parties arose through inseparable links with international – in this case, French Revolutionary – exemplars. Across the Revolutionary Atlantic, the era’s most prominent social movements arose as part of an explicitly linked effort pursuing visions of liberty, as friends of freedom.

### The Atlantic Creation of Modern Social Movements

As eighteenth-century historians have made the “global turn,” portions of Atlantic history have received more attention than others. Studies of trade, empire, and state-building have proliferated, but the interconnected histories of resistance against that world’s greatest concentrations of power remain disproportionately overlooked. This book aims to be the first to demonstrate the rich web of interrelations between the increasingly inclusive and cosmopolitan social movements of the Age of Revolution. Liberty and rights, concepts previously restricted to certain nations and privileged groups, became potentially applicable to anyone, anywhere. Only low barriers existed between movements and countries: indeed, many activists desired the reduction of borders, boundaries, and old hatreds to right past abuses. Exuberant hopes spread that the political, economic, class, religious, racial, national, and other Old Regime barriers could be abolished – perhaps quickly.

In the creative destruction of eighteenth-century empires, radical new possibilities seemed at hand. Old cultures and practices became suddenly vulnerable before waves of increasingly inclusive movements for greater freedom. Political crises loosened the hold of old elites, while growing strata of literate, prosperous, and aware citizens combined their efforts to advocate significant changes. If the public could be sufficiently aroused and instructed, virtually any enlightened change appeared possible. Embracing distant examples, organizers readily borrowed new methods and causes for regional and national mobilization. Whereas previously most politicized protest had been local, episodic, and loosely organized, now affiliated organizations arose on nationwide scales – winning wide swaths of the populace unprecedented political voice.

Mobilizing large groups across great distances was not new but had usually been undertaken in prior eras for religious rather than primarily political purposes. Reformation-era congregational networks and the confraternities of their Catholic counterparts brought together passionate adherents for acts of piety, advocacy, and community strengthening.10 Especially when coordinating action across long distances – the Huguenots of sixteenth-century France

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developed a tiered synod network on local, provincial, and national levels that mobilized their civil wars against the Catholic government — such organizations in many respects anticipated their revolutionary successors. Yet, in these earlier contestations, civil politics remained subordinate to religious concerns, and such activism declined after the Wars of Religion. The first half of the eighteenth century largely lacked widespread, interconnected popular movements for political change.

Anglo-American political clubs developed from Reformation-era religious societies but expanded into sites for debate and learning that became the British Enlightenment’s most emblematic organization. Crossing into politics during the English Revolution of the 1640s, political clubs became generally tolerated by British authorities following the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689. Profiting from broader British tavern and coffeehouse culture, it would be difficult to underestimate clubs’ popularity across the eighteenth century. Aided in their “pub-assemblies” by “wine, beer, tea, pipes and tobacco,” those united by “conformity of tastes, schemes of life, and ways of thinking” engaged in wide-ranging discussions. Affection, fraternity, and common interests aided such groups’ development. Yet these clubs – usually composed exclusively of men – boasted of their independent and particular nature, limiting participation to those sharing their political, class, occupational, and local affiliations. Strangers without invitation were typically excluded.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the British developed clubs for an incredible variety of applications. Organizations spread from elite caucuses to local debating societies and a broad variety of other concerns at most only tangentially concerned with politics – from the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, to the Anti-Gallicans, Lunar Society, Poker Club, Hellfire Clubs, Medical Society, and the Society for the Discharge and Relief of Persons Imprisoned for Small Debts. As French philosophe Pierre-Jean Grosley wrote during his 1765 British tour, “public affairs generally furnish the subject of conversation; every Englishman gives as much attention to these matters, as if he were the prime minister: and this is the case even amongst the lowest class and country people.” These organizations profited from broader British free speech traditions, in which “Britons have a Right to complain as well as to be heard, whenever any Thing is in

Question,” as one pamphlet asserted.16 Historian Peter Clark has estimated more than twenty-five thousand varied clubs formed across the English-speaking world during the eighteenth century.17 In the American colonies, organizers like Benjamin Franklin founded a dizzying array of organizations, from artisan clubs to literary societies to political caucuses to scientific organizations to firefighting and other pragmatic civic concerns.18 Britons came to believe they had a rightful voice in politics and made their opinions known. Yet, their pride in reputedly being Europe’s freest people may have deterred them from combining their efforts against the elite coteries still controlling British politics. No integrated networks of political clubs arose before 1765.

Euro-Americans in the eighteenth century increasingly felt part of an interconnected world, and many of their social practices deeply influenced the forms revolutionary social networks took. Mercantile trade and colonial administrative networks already produced a dense Atlantic web of exchange and correspondence across five continents, while many colonists kept in regular contact with their European counterparts.19 Freemasons, though cloaking their actions in allegory, by mid-century constructed a formidable trans-Atlantic network of secret societies, while promoting egalitarianism among their members.20 In an era of falling postal rates and growing print circulation that inspired a communication revolution, scientific societies, literary correspondence networks, the growing newspaper trade, and broadly inclusive spirit of the “Republic of Letters” multiplied long-distance interactions and accustomed participants to socializing in virtual communities.21

16 The Right of British Subjects to Petition and Apply to Their Representatives, Asserted and Vindicated (London: Smith, 1733), 3, 6, 13.
Eighteenth-century literature furthered interest in foreign examples, making many increasingly receptive to new ideas, often from faraway places. Indeed, the Early Modern Atlantic world has been conceptualized as a “continuous interplay” between groups – from local to global in scale. All these processes influenced the forms revolutionary societies took.

The chief innovation of the Age of Revolutions’ social movements lay in connecting and radicalizing recognizable Anglo-American organizations to more effectively pressure authorities. American Sons of Liberty in 1765–1766 revolutionized movement organizing, affiliating hundreds of clubs across the colonies to enunciate their grievances, embolden local direct action, and develop a mutual defense network in case British authorities attempted to repress the budding Patriot movement. Though local meetings could resemble older clubs, the broader organization’s methods substantially diverged. Coordination through correspondence, deputations, and common activities created a powerful model surpassing what local, divided debating societies and social circles could accomplish. To be successful, the new organizations needed to minimize disagreements between members and differences across regions, while crafting common messages to inspire broad coalitions. Only by working together in unprecedented ways could they challenge entrenched political regimes.

Each of the social movements examined here took fundamental inspiration from their predecessors. The corresponding society model innovated by America’s Sons of Liberty and Committees of Correspondence from British origins over the decade preceding 1775 sparked a first wave of social movements. In Britain, the Wilkes and Liberty cause borrowed American tactics to pursue greater liberties and soon sympathizers organized petitioning movements for peace and reconciliation with the colonies. Amid the war’s reversals, activists redirected their efforts into the first organized push for British Parliamentary reform mobilized around American-style organizations. Concurrently, British imperial weakness encouraged Irish nationalists to develop a nationwide militia network similar to their American brethren that won Ireland parliamentary independence. Debates over American freedom’s meaning motivated the rise of organized abolitionist movements first in revolutionary America and then in postwar Britain. Minority churches’ agitation for religious freedom in America led British Protestant Dissenters into comparable campaigns.

The French Revolution – with its Jacobins taking explicit inspiration from recent Anglo-American movements – ignited a second wave of unprecedentedly dense, radical, and universalistic organizing both in their own country.

and around much of the Atlantic basin. The United Irishmen applied French universalism to overcome religious divides and pursue national independence. The “British Jacobins” sought Parliamentary reform to open their political system. Free-black and mixed race *Gens de couleur* in the French colony of Saint-Domingue organized to demand voting rights and helped spark the Haitian Revolution. The American Democratic Party developed as activists borrowed French models to more effectively oppose ruling Federalists. Each cause, recognizing their international origins, adapted preexisting examples for their national political purposes, bringing prior methods together in unprecedented and dynamic ways. Atlantic conversations led these movements to innovations they would likely not have discovered on their own. Through exploring such connections, we can better understand how—via precedent, impersonation, invention, adaptation, and evolution—the revolutionary era’s most influential movements functioned as a totality.

Corresponding societies benefited from both their simplicity of design and potential complexity in practice. As first developed by America’s Sons of Liberty in late 1765, the network model brought together autonomous local branches to develop common messaging, tactics, lobbying, and public protests. While some proved more influential (with larger city branches becoming regional centers for their hinterlands), no local was dependent on another, and could freely correspond across the network. Repressing such a hydra-like organization appeared nearly impossible. This New World mutation on older British club life shocked Europe: political organizing would never be limited to small, elite coteries again. While some Sons of Liberty successors tried to centralize power more than others, all depended on their local affiliates’ vitality. Though in some respects a family of movements—some revolutionary, some reformist, some special-interest and some (dialectically) conservative in scope, flexible in degree of inclusion across time, space, nationality, race, gender, and class—the model’s inclusivity allowed the Age of Revolutions’ grandest ambitions to be projected through and onto a common format. In so doing, organizers forged new standards for pursuing enlightenment through activism. As “friends of humanity” and “friends of freedom,” they commonly pledged to support their national and international brethren in sister movements against the era’s worst excesses and participated in multiple campaigns themselves. An activist like Anglican antislavery stalwart Granville Sharp built connections with both London and Philadelphia Quakers, advocated for American political rights in the 1770s, participated in British Parliamentary reform movements, campaigned for English Protestant Dissenter civil rights, encouraged American action against slavery, and only then helped craft the British abolitionist societies that became the era’s broadest and most inclusive cause. Soon, he also supported abolitionism and revolution in France. Frenchman Jacques-Pierre Brissot interacted with British abolitionists and reformers while living in London, and travelled across much...
of the United States (meeting revolutionary veterans and budding abolitionists), before founding France’s first abolition society, becoming a prominent Jacobin Club member, and leading its breakaway Girondin faction. Despite national pride, local particularity, and sometimes-selfish defense of their own interests, reformers and revolutionaries privileged models that stretched beyond their own causes, regularly cheering advancements elsewhere, pursuing distant interactions, and integrating useful international examples into their own movements.

While the product of a century of Enlightened liberal exchanges and reasoned discussion, the new societies’ effects would be more radical still, encouraging democratization and the diffusion of political power. In an era before elite theorists became comfortable with the subject of democracy, activists succeeded in implementing largely democratic society networks in practice: commonly featuring elected leaders, open debating, participation across social classes, and a willingness to challenge the status quo.24 By creating broadly based political forces more powerful than those governing elites possessed, revolutionary societies repeatedly captured political momentum to advocate for often-radical changes. As “democracy” advanced from an epithet, to an aspiration, to a governing system, activists modeled—and occasionally succeeded in enacting—their preferred modes of governance.

“Freedom” remained a contested concept throughout the era, as in our present day. The Sons of Liberty’s conception rested predominantly upon their rights as freeborn Britons for self-rule, yet by the American War of Independence natural rights ideals had raised the thorny question of what it really meant for all men to be created equal.25 Atlantic social movement networks would be founded for both abolitionism and the maintenance of slaveholder rights. Freedom in politics, however, became associated with collective action: few expected the elite cabals and intimate lobbying of prior eras to prevail indefinitely. As the extent and nature of freedom remained to be determined, the future seemed to belong to those who could shape associational politics for their ambitions. The social movements of the late-eighteenth century were experiments in democratization, attempting to shape a new science of participation.

The Potential of Atlantic History

Amazingly, given their rich respective historiographies, this is the first time these movements have been the subject of a single book. Famed historian-
sociologist Charles Tilly, in his magisterial *Social Movements, 1768–2004*, claimed Wilkes’ Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights invented the social movement – overlooking preceding American Sons of Liberty agitation that had mobilized a far larger campaign, ignoring successive movements in Ireland and Haiti, and asserting French Revolutionary examples remained too episodic for his model.26 Yet his core definition of a “social movement” – associated groups making a sustained public effort to convince authorities of their cause’s (and their own) worthiness to advocate for legal and policy changes – applies to each movement analyzed in this book.27 While William Warner has highlighted the innovations of American Revolutionary activism, David Brion Davis famously described an “Anti-Slavery International” among abolitionists, and scholars have broadly discussed French Revolutionary ideas’ reception in Britain, Ireland, and (to a lesser extent) the United States, the transnational inspirations motivating social movement creativity across the full era have been overlooked.28 Only by examining this broad range of cases together can we achieve an integrated understanding of the Age of Revolutions’ development and the extent to which the era’s most important movements functioned as an interconnected phenomenon.

As most historians are trained as specialists in a single national history, and much scholarly sociability and publishing remains organized around national distinctions, the Age of Revolutions’ international dimensions have remained underserved. The most prominent early exception to this norm was R. R. Palmer’s two-volume *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, published in 1959 and 1964. With “Atlantic” having become a favored shorthand for shared Anglo- and European-American cultural and democratic traditions during the two world wars, Palmer employed such rhetoric to describe a common eighteenth-century “Revolution of Western Civilization,” examining how Anglo-American and then French waves of democratic change swept across Europe and North America.29 Written amid the Cold War, his book was celebrated in the United States and pilloried by the European left as a NATO

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Yet Palmer considered the revolutions (despite their overlapping Enlightenment origins) more simultaneous than interrelated and showed little interest in examining interconnections. Beyond his North Atlantic focus, Palmer’s work now appears woefully incomplete for overlooking questions of colonialism and slavery — almost completely excluding the Haitian Revolution and subsequent Latin American independence movements. Nevertheless, Democratic Revolution has retained a gravitational pull for younger generations of scholars through its erudition and daringness to work across national and thematic boundaries that many scholars still fear to tread.

Palmer’s work inspired few followers until the 1990s, when “Atlantic” and “transnational” themes became among academic history’s hottest topics. Responding to growing interest in — and concern about — globalization, Atlantic connections no longer seemed outliers to national histories, but rather forerunners of an increasingly borderless world. Explaining modern capitalism and industrialization’s development came to require oceanic and global foci.

Early Atlantic World studies tended to focus on trade and colonialism across broad areas — and those, especially Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and diasporas of marginalized Europeans, they displaced. David Armitage, synthesizing the first decade of reinvigorated research in 2002, famously asserted, “We are all Atlanticists now,” heralding that the approach could “supplement and even replace” national histories.


31 Palmer’s rare Caribbean and Latin American missives were dismissive, including: “The hanging of numerous rebel slaves was regarded as a police action, of no political consequence; just as the desire of slaves for liberty, having nothing to do with American politics, was not even to be dignified by the epithet of Jacobinism. The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800. II: The Struggle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 518.

32 See, for example, Hunt, Writing History in the Global Era (New York: Norton, 2015).

