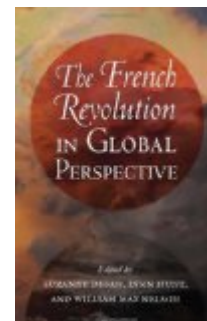


Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, William Max Nelson, eds. *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. vi + 236 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-7868-0.



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Global (French) Revolution

Pierre Serna ends this volume with the provocative claim that “[r]evolution never repeats itself, because it never ends” (p. 182). Recently, many parts of the world have been gripped (again? as always?) by popular revolt and revolution. With their reach extending from the Middle East, across North Africa, to South America, and beyond, it is indeed timely to investigate perhaps the prototypical revolution, the French one of 1789, in a global perspective.

This fine collection of essays—edited by Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson—was not necessarily inspired by current events. Instead, its authors seek to examine “the specifically French responses to the process of globalization” with the aim of explaining why the French Revolution, among so many others, had the most “far-reaching effects” (p. 4). They contend that the “causes, internal dynamics, and consequences of the French Revolution all grew out of France’s increasing participation in the process of

globalization” (p. 4). Such an approach and argument is not entirely surprisingly given, for example, the recent emphasis on Saint-Domingue in French Revolution studies but also a trend towards the global/international/transnational in the historical discipline more generally. Even more boldly, the editors assert that by examining “a global framework” it is possible to bring “back social and economic factors” to the study of the Revolution “[w]ithout abandoning the political and cultural emphasis” and thereby bridge the two main historiographical and methodological approaches that have bifurcated since the Bicentenary (p. 5). As Michael Kwass asserts in his own piece, reiterating this goal of bringing economic and political cultural analysis together, “[t]he stakes could not be higher” (p. 15).

These essays began as conference presentations at the 2011 meeting of the Consortium on the Revolutionary Era in Tallahassee and at times reflect their origins: some lack the depth of original

research that many readers may expect or wish to see; others are “safe” treatments of material that may not be novel or ground-breaking. Sometimes an essay’s link to the theme of globalization or global perspective is tenuous. Moreover, as anyone who has ever tried to organize or comment on a panel that brings together studies linked by such broad signifiers as “the French Revolution” and “globalization” knows, there is extremely wide purview here for subject matter and methodology. One consequence of this diversity is that the grouping of the essays into three sections (or panels?) can seem confusing if not arbitrary. That all said, some of the essays are, individually, absolutely first-rate pieces of scholarship and, taken as a group, the collection makes for stimulating and engaging reading.

The first part of the book looks at the origins or causes of the Revolution in a global context, which is the clearest of the three divisions. In chapter 1, Kwass describes how French participation in the global economy, and particularly the regulation of New World tobacco and Asian cloth, promoted smuggling and clandestine trade. He argues that this “underground economy” stimulated popular protest, thereby delegitimizing state institutions that proved in desperate need of reform (p. 16). His essay, which seemed to me a clever but not overwrought twist on Robert Darnton’s treatment of the “literary underground” (*The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, 1982) included some fascinating insights—for example, that tax rebellions linked to repression of contraband trade were the most common form of revolt in France between 1660 and 1789.

Hunt’s contribution in chapter 2, “The Global Financial Origins of 1789,” also contains moments of great perspicacity. Although the fiscal crisis of 1787-89 caused the Revolution, she claims that we do not yet know what really caused that fiscal crisis. In a wonderful reversal of received thinking, she argues that it was precisely *because* Jacques Necker and Charles-Alexandre de Calonne were so

successful at raising money in the early 1780s, “that helped bring on the fatal crisis” later (p. 34). Two global processes impacted French finances: in the eighteenth century, France sought to extend its global commercial empire and was depended on international capital markets for the funds to do so. However, the French government paid higher rates than other governments, for a variety of reasons, and (for some of the same reasons) it was particularly vulnerable to speculation. Thus, in a similar conclusion to that of Kwass, Hunt finds that the credibility more so than the balance sheet of the French state was in the greatest distress: the “combination of speculative excesses and the linking of them to the government ... played a greater role than the deficit itself in bringing down” the monarchy (p. 42).

Rounding out the “origins” section are essays by Charles Walton and Andrew Jainchill. Walton examines how the 1786 “Eden” Treaty, named for the chief British negotiator, which liberalized commerce between Britain and France was a “diplomatic and economic revolution” and thereby aims to rehabilitate it as a cause of France’s later political revolution (p. 44). He contends that liberal trade proved a “shock” to French industry and agriculture, helping to spur demands for political representation. Jainchill looks at the long-term effects of the 1685 revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which granted toleration to France protestant Huguenot population, for the 1789 revolution. He describes how after their loss of rights in 1685, refugee Huguenots undermined the absolutist French monarchy by advocating in political writings for a more balanced, British-style constitution; translating the works of like-minded philosophers into French; and generally being involved in the book trade.

All four of the first chapters therefore share a similar logic with respect to the origins of the Revolution. These essays do not displace or upset the current belief, grounded in political cultural analysis, that a variety of factors led to a gradual dele-

gitimization and discrediting of the monarchy and a concomitant rising demand for accountability if not representation. Instead, these essays merely, if at times brilliantly and convincingly, ask historians to look for such factors “beyond France’s borders” (p. 70).

The middle section has the most confusing title--“‘Internal’ Dynamics”--even if its essays are some of the best. In his tightly argued and widely supported chapter, Nelson encourages readers to think about the role of the “long history of colonialism” during the French Revolution (p. 74). He shows how revolutionary leaders such as *abbé* Grégoire seized on the idea of “regeneration” (p. 75)--which had an anthropological, ethnographic, and political history in the French colonial context--and applied it to revolutionary France and especially the French peasantry. Nelson goes beyond the colonies to link these ideas not only (and not surprisingly) to Enlightenment discourses, but also (and very impressively) the Catholic Counter-Reformation, early modern philosophy of education, and classical republicanism. How this dynamic is internal, and internal to what, I do not know--but it is great history.

In chapter 6, Desan’s equally excellent contribution, she investigates how the August 1792 granting of French citizenship and political rights to foreigners reflected the universal aspirations of the Republic, especially as they relate to the renunciation of offensive wars and conquests. She examines what France stood to gain by this action, wittily characterizing her analysis not as asking “what your country can do for foreigners” but rather “what foreigners can do for your country” (p. 87). I will not try to lay out her sophisticated analysis in a pithy sentence or two--not for lack of her own clarity, on the contrary, but instead because I doubt I would do it justice. I will, however, highlight her depiction of the “hybrid construction” of revolutionary universality through an interaction between local and specific peoples rather than simply on the level of high Enlighten-

ment philosophy, which is in my opinion the best conceptual gem for how to approach a global perspective in this book (p. 87).

Denise Z. Davidson’s essay “Feminism and Abolitionism: Transatlantic Trajectories” is the last chapter in part 2. She describes how the Declaration of the Rights of Men opened up questions about the application of rights to both women and slaves. She goes on to investigate the connections in language and culture between revolutionary-era feminism and abolitionism. Although this seemed to me a simple and perhaps obvious pairing, the more I thought about it the more I realized its simplicity is deceptive. I hope Davidson is pursuing the topic further, especially any effects of interaction between the two movements.

The book’s third section is called “Consequences” and yet again I found this moniker misleading and reckon it may have more appropriately, if blandly, been labeled “Case Studies.” Ian Collier begins with an analysis of the French invasion of Egypt that, although he does not directly contradict the Orientalist orthodoxy of Edward Saïd (*Orientalism*, 1978) aims to show the political and economic links between Egypt and France prior to conquest, and the similarities between Egypt and other French-conquered territories. Collier’s essay was the first where I really questioned some observations: he characterizes Egypt as important because it was Napoleon’s first experience of direct rule (p. 116), although the Corsican was very much in control in Italy; he also calls the Egyptian expedition the “high watermark of global territorial expansion” during the Revolution (p. 117). I would counter that Moscow is nearly as far and, overland, reached with more difficulty, and the campaign to retake Saint-Domingue led by Charles Leclerc in 1802 may not have been expansion per se but it was greater in both scope and distance. I also would like to see more robust evidence for his main assertion that we ought to view Egypt as analogous to the Italian and Swiss Sister Republics. The latter’s political systems; legal, diplomatic, and

military relationships with France; and ultimate fates were all very different from Egypt's. That said, Collier's overarching message—that Egypt proved that the idea of the Grande Nation along with its emancipatory aims could be global in reach—is a great one.

Miranda Spieler and Rafe Blaufarb provide two more global case studies, in South and North America, respectively. Spieler examines French Guiana, which she describes as both more legally integrated with the Hexagon and more economically and socially separated than most colonies. The attention to law is therefore in keeping with her excellent 2009 article, "The Legal Structure of Colonial Rule during the French Revolution" in *The William and Mary Quarterly*. Here, she argues that the war exaggerated these realities, and moreover "conferred a despotic character on revolutionary colonial regimes and hence undermined the freedom of emancipated slaves" (p. 147).

Blaufarb meanwhile argues against the traditional view that the French Revolutionary Wars exposed a weak and struggling new American republic to danger. He synthesizes various treaties negotiated during the 1790s, which ultimately benefited the United States, and argues that war led Great Britain and Spain "to abandon their restrictive policies [against the U.S.] thus opening the floodgates of America's westward expansion" (p. 149). Overall, I find his analysis compelling. However, his main piece of evidence, that news of the Battle of Fleurus reached the Foreign Office at the same time as word of rising tensions in America over the Ohio Valley forts, and that French military victory therefore compelled the British finally to come to a settlement with John Jay who arrived five days later, is susceptible to the adage that correlation does not imply causation, especially since most Americans at the time did not find the Jay Treaty much of an acquiescence by Britain.

For lack of expertise and audacity, I am not going to address the "Coda" by Pierre Serna in which he argues that "every revolution is a war of inde-

pendence"—except to remark that, having heard David Armitage argue at the Consortium in 2009 that "every revolution is a civil war," clearly this is a forum for big ideas!

Taken as a group this is a commendable collection, especially for its attempt to examine the French Revolution in the context of "globalization." However, I have three sets of queries around this project as it is both conceived and executed. First, although the editors in the introduction and some individual contributors make much of the historiographical stakes (remember, they could "not be higher") of a global perspective and how it can wed political cultural analysis with older social and economic approaches, they do not effectively prove why this global perspective is best or even ideally suited to this task. Yes, some of these essays make advances towards this goal, but no more than other current and exclusively "domestic" research, for example recent work on the culture and discourse of economic ideas like debt, property, and the like.

Second, the "global" frame of reference in this volume is clearly empire. The editors argue as much in the introduction, and it is telling that the first of only two maps is of "Empires and Colonies in 1785" (p. 12). Empire is indeed one rubric through which to examine global history, but it is surely not the only one. If historians of the French Revolution are truly to engage in conversation with and discover new insights from global history, they will have to use other prisms of analysis that are common in that field, such as non-imperial commodity flows; migration, either short-term as for religious pilgrimages or longer-term; religion more generally; natural history; and the environment.

Finally, despite its many strengths, this volume could be clearer about whether its authors aim to examine and derive insight from global causes, effects, and consequences; and whether "the global" is impacting France or vice versa in all instances. In the introduction, for example, it is implied that

we need to look outside France for the origins of the Revolution; later, that historians have only “just begun” to examine the “the impact” of “international movements in France” (p. 2). So, the story seems to be the impact of “the global” on France. However, it is not necessary that global causes also imply global effects; especially the last five chapters were as much about France impacting “the global” as the other way around. Moreover, as many of these fine essays show, there was clearly a global/domestic feedback loop—global factors helping cause the outbreak of the Revolution, which then went on to have global effects, which in turn re-impacted France—rather than a simple transmission one way or the other. The present day shows us as much, with the “revolutions” of the Arab Spring both causes and effects of one another (among many, many other causes and effects).

This may seem an obvious if nitpicky criticism and if so I mean it only as a “next step” in the journey this volume so admirably encourages us to take. Many of these essays are well worth reading on their own, and so many of them assembled in one place alone makes this book a worthwhile read. But what I appreciated the most about this work was the sense that historians of the French Revolution are stepping up to the eminently difficult task of teasing out the event’s complicated and complex origins and effects with a much more global perspective than ever before.

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