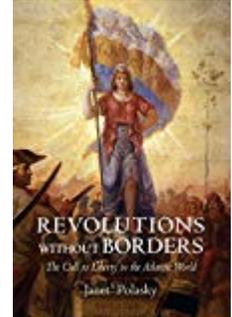


Janet L. Polasky. *Revolutions without Borders.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 392 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-20894-8.



Reviewed by Bryan Rindfleisch

Published on H-Empire (July, 2015)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

To say that Janet Polasky's new book about revolutions in the Atlantic world is important is quite an understatement. For Polasky, her work "marks the culmination of forty years of research and reflection on Atlantic revolution," and it revolves around the central premise that the series of upheavals in the Americas, Europe, and Africa during the late eighteenth century were in one way or another connected. But even more important to Polasky is the question of why historians have picked apart so many of these revolutions--such as the Genevan Revolution of 1782, the Dutch Patriot movement in 1787, the Belgian Revolution of 1787-89, the Wolfe Tone rebellion in Ireland (1798), and the Freetown Revolution of 1800--and isolated them from what Polasky calls a "transnational revolutionary movement." In other words, Polasky pushes back against the historiography that has turned the revolutionary struggles like those of the Genevans, Dutch, Belgians, Irish, and freedmen in West Africa into "self-contained national stories" rather than treat them as parts of a larger narrative of transatlantic revolution (p.

353). To put it simply, Polasky provides a grand synthesis of the many and disparate struggles and revolts against monarchical authority and aristocratic privilege that erupted during the late eighteenth century, all of which were interconnected and related to one another.

First of all, this book is a much-needed intervention in the debates over whether or not the Atlantic world paradigm remains a relevant--or even reliable--analytical tool for studying the past. For critics, Atlantic history represents our own globalized present in which historians have imposed this sense of global connectedness upon the past, as seen in the communications, commercial, and migratory chains and networks that extended between the various nations bordering the Atlantic Ocean. However, Polasky is quite unabashed in saying that the "transnational revolutionary movement" should help "remind us that the roots of internationalism are as old as the nation-states" themselves, and that the "struggles for human rights ... connected the Atlantic world for more than two hundred years," a full "two cen-

turies before the Arab Spring, without social media or even an international postal system” (pp. 3, 275). And over the course of nine chapters, Polasky shows us just that—struggles in which American, European, and African revolutionaries rallied around the cause of “liberty,” and even more importantly, moved *between* the many revolutions that consumed the Atlantic world. Out of this wave of revolutions emerged what Polasky calls “itinerant revolutionaries”—a large group of individuals, both men and women—who moved about on the Atlantic stage and gravitated toward the various upheavals of the late eighteenth century, thereby linking those revolutionary struggles together. Take for example the case of Gerrit Paape, an earthenware painter of humble origins in Amsterdam, who—infected with the republican ideals of the American Revolution—reinvented himself as a poet, novelist, and revolutionary in the Dutch provinces in 1787. Although Prussian forces ultimately crushed this Dutch Patriot movement, Paape fled to the nearby Belgian provinces where he joined a second revolutionary movement that sought to undermine Austrian control of Belgian territories and peoples. And for a brief time in 1789, Paape and his fellow revolutionaries succeeded in emulating their American counterparts, creating the “United States of Belgium” and successfully repelling Austrian invasions. But in 1790, the Belgian provinces were ultimately overrun by European empires and monarchies that desperately sought to stem the revolutionary tide. Yet again, Paape fled to another revolutionary scene, this time in France, where he fell in with like-minded radicals who created a French republic. Subsequently, in 1795, Paape returned home to the Dutch provinces, bringing up the rear of the French armies that liberated those territories from monarchical control, where Paape joined the “Batavian Revolution” that established a Dutch republic. Paape’s story—and hundreds of thousands more like it when one factors in the mass movement of revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries in the Americas, Europe, and

Africa—reveals the interconnectedness between these struggles, as people like Paape “saw themselves as part of [a] revolutionary movement cascading from one place to another and leading toward the creation of a [new] world” (pp. 9-10).

However, the importance of Polasky’s work does not end there, for her book “could [also] be read as an extended essay on sources” that “focuses on how historians use documents” which “involves following the thread of clues from one text to find another and another,” many of which themselves cross national and revolutionary borders (p. 283). In particular, Polasky divides her book according to specific sets of primary sources: each chapter revolves around one particular group of documents from which she derives insights into the transnational revolutionary movement. For instance, her first chapter considers political pamphlets, in the same vein as Bernard Bailyn’s *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), in which revolutionary thinkers, writers, and printers “incorporated and blended together others’ idea from near and far” (pp. 3-4). Unlike Bailyn, though, Polasky connects the authors of these pamphlets—and the ideas contained within—and extends their reach beyond the English world to include revolutions in Geneva, the Dutch and Belgian provinces, and France, all of which had profound repercussions for the republican struggles throughout the rest of Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Chapters 2 and 3 shift focus to the memoirs and narratives of those itinerant individuals like Gerrit Paape, who traversed national and revolutionary borders, recorded their experiences, and published them for the public. As Polasky demonstrates, these American, Genevan, Dutch, Belgian, French, and African authors not only provide a more intimate look into the transnational revolutionary movement, but also allow us to decipher the similarities and differences in how these disparate individuals understood republican ideas like liberty. Unsurprisingly, slavery emerged as the most pervasive ideological inconsistency and conflict for these au-

thors, with men and women such as Jacques Pierre Brissot (French), Filippo Mazzei (Tuscan), Helen Maria Williams (English), and both Olaudio Equiano and David George (African, African American) believing that the American Revolution had not gone far enough in the cause of “liberty,” and that subsequent revolutions in Europe, Africa, and the West Indies were simply picking up where the American Revolution had left off. More specifically, Polasky uses the experiences of Helen Maria Williams to illustrate how radicals and revolutionaries debated feminine roles within the transnational revolutionary movement, and from there she examines the narratives of Olaudio Equiano, David George, and other black revolutionaries to talk about the role of race and how Africans and African Americans articulated a brand of republicanism and liberty all their own.

But “if pamphlets opened revolutionary discussions, [then] newspapers amplified the political debate, often escalating the incendiary rhetoric of [political] clubs,” which is at the heart of Polasky’s fourth chapter as she analyzes the role of the press and voluntary associations in creating and facilitating the revolutionary wave (p. 111). According to Polasky, an international network of newspapers, editors, printers, and club members altogether exchanged and expedited revolutionary ideas throughout European and American societies—which led to a “public sociability unknown under the Old Regime”—that fueled the upheavals of the late eighteenth century. Even more powerful, though, was the relationship between “clubs and newspapers [which] reinforced each other, [by] acculturating subjects first as revolutionaries and then as citizens,” thereby creating a shared sense of revolutionary identity, cause, and belonging (p. 118). Within this context, Polasky observes that both the press and clubs were critical to inciting revolution within Poland in 1791 and 1794, although these mediums failed to do so in England as the British government moved quickly to suppress the perceived “Jacobin conspiracy” and stop the “contagion of revolu-

tion” (pp. 125, 128). In chapter 5, Polasky illustrates the ways in which rumors also enabled revolution, particularly on the islands of Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe, and Martinique. Polasky spends considerable time describing how these island communities were at the intersection of truth and untruth, in which slaves’ anticipation for emancipation was fueled by the rumors from France that the French republic intended to dismantle the institution of slavery. From plantation to plantation, then, black slaves spread the rumor of impending emancipation. Consequently, more and more slaves invested such rumors with truth and increasingly asserted themselves against white planters and masters, oftentimes espousing that “they wanted to enjoy the liberty [we] are entitled to by the Rights of Man!” (p. 156). And such dreams and hopes for emancipation became reality in 1793 when the French republic declared its slaves free, the consequences of which reverberated throughout the West Indies and the Americas.

Chapters 6 and 7 return to familiar themes such as gender as Polasky suggests that the profound changes in the ways that Western women thought of themselves and how Western societies perceived both female and familial responsibilities were both products of the late eighteenth-century upheavals. By examining novels and other forms of literature, as well as family correspondence, Polasky determines that American and European women evolved from dependent, irrational, and passionate creatures to fully realized, rational individuals who “could govern themselves and contribute to a community” as much as their male counterparts (pp. 192-193). In addition, Polasky offers a number of insights into the gendered nature of the revolutions, the reviewer’s favorite being how Polasky deploys the marriage between Nancy Shippen and Lt. Colonel Henry Beekman Livingston to invert the narrative of republican motherhood, as Shippen’s “life bore little resemblance to the images of post-revolutionary or republican American marriage” (p. 206). For it

is here in chapter 7, when talking about gender, family, and revolution near the turn of the nineteenth century, where Polasky begins the downward trajectory for the transnational revolutionary movement. And in her final two chapters, she exposes the growing disconnect between revolutionary ideals and realities, using the case of the French republic to do so. As Polasky proves, the French went from exporting the revolution and “bring[ing] liberty to peoples oppressed by despots and aristocrats” like those in Geneva and the Dutch and Belgian provinces, to seizing control of those territories and forcing the revolution down the throats of its people (pp. 232-233). By 1799, the new “republics bore little resemblance to the vision of earlier revolutionaries,” and for itinerant republicans like Thomas Paine, Jacques Pierre Brissot, Toussaint Louverture, and Thaddeus Kosciuszko, their revolutions and hopes for a new world order were over (p. 254). Instead, what replaced revolutionary enthusiasm and optimism was nationalism, which Polasky concludes as “marginaliz[-ing] many of these itinerants who had incorporated ideas and ideals from various nations and cultures” (p. 273).

While Polasky’s work is monumentally important, it is not without its controversies. In particular, some scholars may find a number of the events that Polasky defines as part of the transnational revolutionary movement problematic. For example, can the spread of Jacobin clubs in England, or the Freetown uprising in Sierra Leone in 1800, be qualified as revolutions in their own right? While it is indisputable that they are linked to the rhetoric and language of republicanism, liberty, and revolution that circulated in the late eighteenth century, can they truly be considered part of the same revolutionary continuum on par with the American, French, and Haitian revolutions? Also, historians of Central and South America will likely recoil at the lack of attention shown toward the Iberian Atlantic and its wars of independence during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For it has been long recog-

nized that these revolutionaries borrowed from the same ideologies of republicanism and liberty as their American, European, and African counterparts, as well as that itinerant revolutionaries from around the Western world converged upon Central and South America, which makes it seem only logical that the Iberian and Latin American worlds were also part of the transnational revolutionary movement. However, despite such questions and potential detractors, Polasky’s book is fundamentally significant for framing the many revolutions that swept the Americas, Europe, and Africa in the late eighteenth century as part of the same narrative, which in turn makes a very persuasive case for the continued worth of the Atlantic world paradigm.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-empire>

Citation: Bryan Rindfleisch. Review of Polasky, Janet L. *Revolutions without Borders*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. July, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44565>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.