

---

H-France Salon

Volume 13, Issue 19, #4

**Revolutionary France as Nation-State and as Imperial Formation:  
The Need to Make Distinctions**

**David A. Bell, Princeton University**

It's a pleasure to have the chance to comment on these thought-provoking essays by such a talented group of historians. The reconsideration of the French Revolution within global and imperial frameworks represents the most important shift in interpretation of the subject since the bicentennial of 1989, and the scholars in this special issue of *French Historical Studies* are building on it in important new ways. I was pleased to see them, in the process, engaging with my 2014 *FHS* essay "Questioning the Global Turn."<sup>1</sup> There are many points on which I would not expect them to agree with me – and they do not! – but I'm glad that the essay has found a place on their radar screens.

The single largest issue at stake in this special issue, as in the overall shift of interpretation, is nothing less than the place of the French Revolution in world history, and it is on this issue that I will concentrate. The authors roundly reject older "diffusionist" models in which the Revolution began and developed essentially within a metropolitan, national context and then had an "impact" on the rest of the world, France being the active agent, and the rest of the world (especially its non-European parts) mostly the passive objects of action.<sup>2</sup> In place of this model, the authors seek to apply a different one, drawn from the broader global turn in historical studies, in which key events in world history are shaped by a constant interplay between different regions, as people, news, ideas, goods, capital and armed force move constantly back and forth, undergoing change with each stop on their complex itineraries. While taking due notice of the tremendous inequalities of power that existed—and continue to exist—between different parts of the globe, this model also acknowledges the manifold, creative ways in which oppressed, subordinated groups have managed to resist, appropriate ideas and practices for themselves, and to exercise influence in their turn.

---

<sup>1</sup> David A. Bell, "Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2014), 1-24.

<sup>2</sup> For some examples which tend towards this model, see for instance in Joseph Klaitz and Michael H. Haltzel, eds., *The Global Ramifications of the French Revolution* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1994); Ferenc Fehér, ed., *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Geoffrey Best, ed., *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and its Legacy, 1789-1989* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Overall, this shift has been an illumination. It has given us a clearer view of the French Revolution and has implications for the way we understand the world we live in today. At the same time, though, as in the case of any broad movement of reinterpretation, there has been the danger of imposing a new model too sweepingly, in the process playing down crucial distinctions and nuances, and giving insufficient due to some specific, important motors of change. This was the issue to which I tried to call attention in my 2014 essay. To judge by some of the programmatic statements in this special issue—as opposed to the generally excellent substance of the articles themselves—it may still need reiteration. In what follows, I'd like to draw attention to three distinctions which need to be respected when considering the place of the French Revolution in world history. In many cases, the articles in the special issue substantiate these distinctions, but some of the authors' statements might lead readers to think otherwise.

First, in their introductory essay Manuel Covo and Megan Maruschke strongly suggest, summing up recent scholarship, that the French Revolution should no longer be considered the “benchmark” against which modern revolutions are measured (p. 379). Indeed, they write that “when extra-European actors and spaces are added to a long history of uprisings and turmoil, even the category of revolution begins to lose its exceptionality,” and the French Revolution becomes “no more than an episode in the struggle against all forms of imperial oppression” (p. 379). With statements of this sort, it is always crucial to ask: from what perspective are we speaking? From our own perspective in the twenty-first century, looking back at the eighteenth, it is entirely reasonable to say that the metropolitan French Revolution should be demoted at least somewhat from the exceptional place it so long held in historical writing. We have a clearer view of the many other important, tumultuous waves of change that erupted across the globe at the time—including, as Sujit Sivasundaram has recently and forcefully underlined, around the shores of the Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, we see all too clearly the limitations, contradictions, and indeed the hypocrisies of the metropolitan French Revolution. I agree entirely with the claim that Haitian universalism, in particular, “offered a powerful critique of the blind spots and denials of French universalism” (p. 379, citing the work of Chelsea Stieber and Marlene Daut).

But it also matters how people at the time of the Revolution, and between then and now, saw the importance of the metropolitan Revolution as opposed to that of other, contemporary revolutions. And here we have to reckon with Michel-Rolph Trouillot's powerful and convincing argument that for most of this period, the Haitian Revolution in particular was unintelligible to much if not most of the Western world and ended up being effectively erased from accounts of the age of revolution.<sup>4</sup> It was not erased for everyone—not for the Haitians themselves, of course, and not for many other people in the Americas, including the African Americans who looked to Haiti as

---

<sup>3</sup> Sujit Sivasundaram, *Waves Across the South: A New History of Revolution and Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 2020). See also his contribution to this issue of *H-France Salon*.

<sup>4</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

a beacon, and to at least some whites in the Americas and Europe.<sup>5</sup> I agree with Manuel Covo that “ideas of freedom and citizenship were redefined through the intervention of the enslaved, free people of color, and white abolitionists” (p. 402). But they were redefined principally *for* the enslaved, free people of color and white abolitionists. Were they redefined, at the time, for most people living in metropolitan France? In Europe? The fact remains that if the Haitian Revolution today has “taken center stage,” as Covo and Maruschke put (p. 379), it has taken center stage principally in our own evaluations. At the time, the Haitian Revolution did not have anywhere near the same degree of “global impact” as the metropolitan French Revolution, precisely because of the powerful forces of erasure to which Trouillot pointed. Especially in the years before the Russian Revolution of 1917, it was the metropolitan French Revolution which, around the world, represented by far the most visible and important beacon to progressive forces, from Philadelphia to La Guaira to Mysore.<sup>6</sup> This distinction needs to be recognized.

My second point follows from this first one. If the French Revolution did indeed function as a beacon for people around the world, it was not just because of the erasure of its Haitian counterpart, but because of the extraordinary, intense series of events that took place in metropolitan France itself during the years after 1789. During this period, as every reader of this comment knows, the French Revolutionaries proclaimed the rule of civic equality and dismantled a “feudal” social system that had maintained formal inequality in law, property relations, personal status, and political representation. They declared the rights of man and citizen, and in the process took apart the country’s long-standing systems of censorship, penal law, religious discrimination, and taxation. They disestablished and tried to marginalize or even eliminate the Catholic Church. They abolished the monarchy and founded a republic grounded in universal adult male suffrage. They dissolved the countries’ provinces and introduced a new system of administration. They developed far-reaching plans for the reform of education, public welfare, law, language, the military and much else. The most ambitious of them declared that they were revolutionizing human nature itself. And, by force of arms, they tried to extend these changes far beyond the country’s 1789 frontiers.

As the new scholarship on the global turn has made clear, these changes were not simply received, passively, by the world outside of France. The men and women who learned about them exposed the contradictions and hypocrisies that came along with them—above all, the fact that the French state proclaimed the Rights of Man even while keeping hundreds of thousands of human beings to bondage. They extended the promise of universal liberation to people of all races in a way that the French themselves had refused to do. They experimented in many different ways with the meaning of the “rights of man,” which they took very much for their

---

<sup>5</sup> See here for instance Matthew Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> See here also David A. Bell, “Global Conceptual Legacies,” in David Andress, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 642-658.

own.<sup>7</sup> But these truths hardly justify considering what happened in metropolitan France after 1789 as “no more than an episode in the struggle against all forms of imperial oppression.” What matters is not just the struggle, but what the people who struggled sought to build. The ambitions of the French Revolutionaries to accomplish a wholesale transformation of society, culture, religion, politics, and economics went beyond anything else seen in this period of world history, including in the Caribbean. As Covo and Maruschke themselves write, “With the partial exception of Saint-Domingue, the colonies appear more as fortresses of the Old Regime than as laboratories of modernity” (p. 388). The metropolitan revolution, by contrast, was the great laboratory of modernity par excellence, and this makes it exceptional, as its admirers around the world long recognized.

The final distinction I want to insist on pertains to the way in which these revolutionary ambitions played out in the metropole in the years after 1789. What drove revolutionary radicalization? Covo and Maruschke, like many authors working on the French Revolution from a global perspective, call attention to “the role of the colonies in the origins and dynamics of the Revolution” (p. 379). Most of the authors in this special issue likewise see colonies and empire as constituting in many ways a single field of action in which influences moved in both directions. Matthieu Ferradou, for instance, writes that “nation and empire were entangled as republican France in 1792 tried to build a sovereign nation while inheriting a colonial empire from the Old Regime” (p. 430). Megan Maruschke, for her part, states that “the project to departmentalize France’s domestic territory was connected to reorganizing the French Empire between 1789 and 1815” (p. 505).

But we need to distinguish, here, between the origins of the Revolution, and its subsequent radicalization after 1789. When it comes to the origins, I agree entirely that the global and imperial contexts were crucial. France’s efforts to compete with other imperial powers – especially Great Britain – pushed its antiquated, inefficient, and corrupt fiscal system to the breaking point. At the same time, as Lynn Hunt has cogently argued, France’s involvement in new types of international credit markets made it impossible for the monarchy to resolve the problem by the classic means of state bankruptcy.<sup>8</sup> The massive defeat by Britain in the Seven Years’ War, only very partially compensated for by French success in the War of American Independence, damaged the monarchy’s legitimacy. At the same time, the extraordinary wealth generated by France’s Caribbean colonies helped to fuel the social changes in the metropole that formed an additional part of the backdrop to 1789.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> One particularly influential work in this area is Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Hunt, “The Global Financial Origins of 1789,” in Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt and William Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 32-43.

<sup>9</sup> See on this issue William H. Sewell, Jr., *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

But in the white-hot crucible of French politics in the years *after* 1789, this global and imperial context mattered far less. One reason was simply that France had, in fact, lost so much of its overseas empire by this year, thanks to Britain's takeover of Canada, several important Caribbean colonies, and most of France's Indian possessions at the conclusion of the Seven Years' War of 1756-63. Even given the colonies' very large economic importance, colonial issues still had a much smaller claim on public attention than in the British or Spanish empires at the time. In 1789, fewer than one in twenty-five of all the people under French rule lived outside of Europe, as opposed, for example, to a majority of the people under Spanish rule. And the events of the metropolitan Revolution were so massively disruptive and absorbing to so many people that colonial issues simply had very little chance of exercising a significant influence on developments in Europe.

The articles by Manuel Covo and Megan Maruschke in fact both demonstrate this point. Covo's fine article traces with great skill the fortunes of concepts of federalism and federation in the French empire during the revolutionary decade. Covo also writes, however, that federalism became "a matter of violent struggle in Saint-Domingue that generated new agendas in the metropole" (p. 399). This statement is somewhat ambiguous. Federalism in Saint-Domingue certainly helped generate new agendas in *colonial* affairs. But did the extensive discussions of federalism and federation in the colonies influence debates about the structure of *metropolitan* French government, including what came to be called "federalism" during the so-called "federalist revolts" of 1793-94? If so, Covo doesn't present evidence to this effect. The fact is that even during the years 1795-99, when the First Republic explicitly "departmentalized" the colonies, treating them as integral parts of the nation, in practice the boundaries between metropolitan and colonial administration remained stark, and there is little evidence for the influence of colonial affairs on this aspect of internal metropolitan politics.

Megan Maruschke makes a similarly ambiguous statement in her own excellent article. "The project to departmentalize France's domestic territory," she writes, "was connected to reorganizing the French Empire between 1789 and 1815" (p. 505). What is meant here by "connected"? Clearly, the reorganization of metropolitan French territory into departments had crucial consequences for French overseas possessions, but did events in those possessions likewise influence metropolitan departmentalization? Like Covo, Maruschke doesn't present evidence to this effect. And this lack of colonial influence is perhaps not surprising. A book which Maruschke might have engaged with more deeply, Ted Margadant's *Urban Rivalries in the French Revolution*, shows just how deeply disruptive the process of departmentalization was in the metropole.<sup>10</sup> It swept away entrenched systems of administration, provisioning, policing, law, taxation and church governance, shifting government operations between towns, throwing thousands of officials out of work and forcing the state to create new institutions on the fly, even as it was implementing ambitious new laws that disrupted everything from marriage practices to inheritance. I agree with Maruschke that in a broad sense, practices of surveying and boundary-drawing outside of Europe may well have influenced the way Europeans conceived of space by

---

<sup>10</sup> Ted W. Margadant, *Urban Rivalries in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

the end of the eighteenth century, but it seems clear that in the area of departmentalization as well, colonial events had very little direct influence on metropolitan revolutionary politics.

Again, the relative weak colonial influence on the metropolitan Revolution should not be surprising. In 1789, travel between France and its overseas possessions was a long, expensive, and dangerous proposition. And those possessions did not compare in area or population to those of other European empires, or to what France's own overseas empire would become a century later. Historians working to reinterpret the French Revolution from global and imperial perspectives naturally draw heavily on studies of the early modern British and Iberian empires, as well as on studies of the nineteenth and twentieth-century French empire. In the process they have developed valuable insights. But it is important to keep the differences between empires in mind as well.

To my mind, the relatively small size and importance of France's overseas empire in 1789 in fact point to a different sort of argument about the French Revolution, one that has so far largely escaped historians' attention. This argument comes in response to a familiar question: Why did a radical Revolution take place in France at the end of the eighteenth century, and not in Britain or in other Western European countries? It is worth considering the possibility that ruling elites elsewhere were more closely bound together by shared commitments to burgeoning imperial enterprises, making it less likely that they would fall into violent internecine conflict the way their French counterparts did. Too much was at stake to risk metropolitan divisions that might allow colonies to break off from the metropole. British elites in particular had of course already been deeply scarred by the Revolution in America, and the loss of this first jewel in the crown of their empire. Can one imagine a British politician making the statement attributed to Robespierre in 1791: "Let our colonies perish"?<sup>11</sup>

Even more importantly, perhaps, the relative lack of imperial commitments made it easier for the French to imagine themselves living in a tightly bounded nation-state, in which a relatively homogenous population could be made even more homogenous and brought together into a deep spiritual unity. In Great Britain, as Linda Colley has demonstrated so well, forms of national identification in the eighteenth century were tightly bound up with the country's burgeoning imperial ambitions.<sup>12</sup> In France, by contrast, the invocations of the "nation" which became so absolutely central to French political culture during the revolutionary decade referred almost exclusively to metropolitan territory alone. In virtually none of the many revolutionary "nation-building" projects which I studied for my book *The Cult of the Nation in France* did the authors make reference to colonial possessions.<sup>13</sup> Few if any of the revolutionary leadership had greater involvement with and sympathy for people of color in the Caribbean than the *abbé* Henri Grégoire, and he reflected frequently on the effects of slavery and colonialism upon metropolitan

---

<sup>11</sup> On this alleged statement, see Jean-Daniel Piquet, "Nouvelles pièces sur Robespierre et les colonies en 1791," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française*, no. 371 (2013), 187-194.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

France. Yet even Grégoire, when he turned his energies towards an explicit nation-building project, essentially ignored the colonies and their inhabitants. In his extensive 1794 report on the need to “universalize the use of the French language” throughout the French “nation,” he devoted only a single sentence to “the blacks of our colonies, whom you have made men,”<sup>14</sup> He did not include the colonies in his extensive research on the subject. And when, in the report, he sketched out an elaborate plan for French-language teaching—but in the villages of metropolitan France alone.<sup>15</sup>

In this brief comment, I have not meant to argue that the importance of colonial history has been “overstated,” and contrary to what Covo and Maruschke suggest (p. 375), I did not mean to argue this in my 2014 essay either. The surge of attention to French imperial history over the past several decades has been enormously fruitful and welcome. But we have to recognize that generalizations about reciprocal forms of influence work better for some times and some empires than for others. Attempts to situate very different uprisings and revolutions within a single framework of “the struggle against all forms of imperial oppression” risk ironing out the historical differences and specificities which, among other things, made the metropolitan French Revolution such an enormously potent beacon of hope around the world for much of the past 230 years. We must also distinguish between the events we ourselves find most significant about the age of Revolution—in particular, the action of people in the Caribbean freeing themselves from the most horrible form of bondage the planet has known—and what people around the world at the time, and in subsequent years found most significant and moving about it.

Finally, we must consider the possibility that it was precisely the relative weakness of the French imperial formation in 1789 that allowed the Revolutionaries to forge an intensely powerful vision of the nation-state, one that would have genuinely world-historical consequences. France was most genuinely at the heart of a powerful imperial formation in a much later period, between roughly 1880 and 1965. And it was above all in the last twenty years of that period, as that imperial formation shuddered and then crumbled, that, as Frederick Cooper and Todd Shepard’s work suggests, alternatives to the tightly bounded metropolitan nation-state had the greatest hold on the French imagination and the greatest chance of success: for instance, a “French Union” or some sort of French-Algerian union.<sup>16</sup> Since then, it is again the notion of the homogenous nation-state that has emerged, for better or worse (usually for worse) a lodestar for French political actors. As it did at the end of the eighteenth century.

---

<sup>14</sup> Henri Grégoire, *Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d’anéantir les patois, et d’universaliser l’usage de la langue française* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1794), 3.

<sup>15</sup> See Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, *Une Politique de la langue: La Révolution française et les patois* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> See Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Todd Shepard, “Thinking Between Metropole and Colony: The French Republic, ‘Exceptional Promotion,’ and the ‘Integration’ of Algerians, 1955–1962,” in Martin Thomas, ed., *The French Colonial Mind*, vol. I: *Mental Maps of Empire and Colonial Encounters* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 298–323.

David A. Bell  
Princeton University

*H-France Salon*  
ISSN 2150-4873  
Copyright © 2021 by the H-France, all rights reserved.