

Rethinking the French Revolution and the ‘Global Crisis’ of the Late-Eighteenth Century

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In 1780 the lawyer Charles Dominique Vissery de Bois-Valé constructed a massive lightning conductor on his house in St-Omer in north-eastern France.¹ The contraption had alarmed neighbors to the point where they had obtained a court order to have it dismantled. When Vissery prevaricated, they resorted to throwing stones, singing and chanting. The court order was confirmed by the local Magistrate’s Court, but Vissery refused to be defeated. He appealed to the highest court in the province, the Council of Artois at Arras, and charged the lawyer François Buissart with presenting his defense. Buissart was a passionate amateur scientist, nicknamed “the barometer” by locals. He consulted eminent physicists and wrote a voluminous report to brief a young friend and new lawyer in town, Maximilien Robespierre. Robespierre, then aged 25, was able in 1783 to have the ruling overturned in a context of references to enlightenment triumphing over “obscurantism.” “Gentlemen,” he pleaded to the Council:

You must defend Science.... [T]he fact that the whole of Europe is watching this case will ensure that your decision will be as well-known as possible.... Paris, London, Berlin, Stockholm, Turin, St Petersburg will hear almost as soon as Arras of this mark of your wisdom and enthusiasm for scientific progress.²

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¹ Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago & London, 2002), ch. 5; Marie-Hélène Huet, *Mourning Glory: The Will of the French Revolution* (University Park, PA, 1997), 10-21.

² Maximilien Robespierre, *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, vol. 2 (Ivry, 2000-07), 129-35, 199-201.

The case of Visseray's lightning rod was resolved in June 1783. Robespierre's success emboldened him to send a copy of his court address to Benjamin Franklin, resident in Paris since 1776 as Commissioner for the new United States. In his accompanying letter of 1 October, Robespierre noted that it was Franklin's discovery he was defending:

The desire to assist in uprooting the prejudices which stood against its progress in our province inspired me to have the address printed that I made to the court in this case. I dare to hope, Sir, that you will kindly receive a copy of this work.... [I will be] happier still if I can join to this good fortune the honor of earning the approbation of a man, the least of whose virtues is of being the most famous man of science in the universe.³

Franklin was flushed with the success of signing the Peace of Paris one month earlier, on 3 September, formally ending the American War of Independence and recognizing the new United States of America. We do not know whether the great man responded to the young provincial lawyer's defense of a lightning conductor, but we do know that Robespierre was only one of many in France's social and intellectual elite who lionized Franklin before his departure in July 1785.⁴

We are all familiar with the narrative connecting France's involvement in the American War of Independence, the monarchy's subsequent financial crisis, and the calling of the Estates-General for 1789. The successful intervention on the side of Britain's North American colonies from 1779 may have reversed the humiliations of the Seven Years War in North America in 1763 and in India, but confronted the monarchy with the imperative of increasing taxes and cutting expenditure. The Third Estate could hardly be expected to pay more. From a wider perspective, Anglo-French rivalry in North America was a spectacular instance of a global competition for commercial empire by European powers – France, Britain, Spain, Portugal – and the mounting costs of the warfare to expand and protect it. For example, an average-sized navy vessel with 74 cannon required 2,800 century-old oak trees for its construction, and 47 such vessels (as well as 37 frigates) were built in France in the 1780s.⁵

Our understandings of the origins of the French Revolution have also long been based on an awareness of how educated contemporaries like Maximilien Robespierre understood themselves within a trans-Atlantic 'republic of letters'. Like contemporaries, historians have long reflected on the intellectual and political similarities and differences between revolutions in France and North America and upheavals in the Low Countries, Latin America, Ireland, Poland and elsewhere. Most famously, the concept of an 'Atlantic', 'western' or 'democratic' revolution was first articulated in the 1950s by Jacques Godechot and R.R. Palmer. It was quickly the object of powerful Marxist ripostes by Eric Hobsbawm and Albert Soboul in the 1960s. The transition, they argued, was fundamentally one to capitalism and in the

³ Robespierre, *Cœuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, vol. 3, 29; Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (London & New Haven, Mass., 2012), 34-35.

⁴ The significance of Franklin and the American experience has been strongly restated by Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution, une exception française?* (Paris, 2004), Part 2, ch. 4; David Andress, *1789: The Threshold of the Modern Age* (London, 2008), ch. 1.

⁵ Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004), ch. 3; Martine Acerra, "Marine militaire et bois de construction: Essai d'évaluation (1779-1789)," in *Révolution et espaces forestiers: Colloque des 3 & 4 juin 1987*, Denis Woronoff, ed. (Paris, 1988), 114.

nature of ruling élites rather than to liberal democracy and individual rights.⁶ This vigorous debate was subsequently seen as sterile because of its apparent reflection of Cold War politics. Since the 1980s, however, it has been revived by histories of women's cultures and of slavery and slave rebellion (both ignored by Palmer and Godechot), and in particular now from our own perspective of the globalizing world of the twenty-first century.

Transnational studies have been revived. Although I disagree with Jonathan Israel's recent and repeated insistence that the Age of Revolutions was fundamentally about the international Enlightenment, until killed off by Robespierre and the other "crypto-fascists," he has surveyed in astonishing breadth the global reach of Enlightenment ideas, not only across the Atlantic but also both into and from Latin America, east and south Asia, eastern Europe and Java.⁷ More broadly, scholars in France and elsewhere have surveyed and synthesized transnational practices of political culture and communication, and linked these with changing discourses about everything from privilege and commerce to animals, gardens and the human body.⁸

In an influential recent collection, David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam concluded that the contesting theses of Palmer and Hobsbawm were both "strikingly Eurotropic" and that the "Age of Revolutions" is best understood as "a complex, broad, interconnected, and even global phenomenon."⁹ Where does that leave the French Revolution? Was the revolutionary crisis one that spread out from the French epicenter or was France simply the biggest wave generated by a global tide of cultural and economic change? Was the French Revolution just one spectacular example of a global crisis of empires or, as in most "internalist" French Revolution historiography, a unique upheaval with global consequences?¹⁰ These questions require us to examine not only the transnational origins and consequences of the Revolution, but the ways in which its internal dynamics after 1789 were also powered by a new phase of the global clash of empires.

'Patriots' were well-aware that they were standing on the shoulders of great predecessors. On learning of Franklin's death in April 1790, the National Assembly

⁶ The initial statements of the Godechot and Palmer thesis were in Jacques Godechot, *Histoire de l'Atlantique* (Paris, 1947); Robert R. Palmer, "The World Revolution of the West: 1763–1801," *Political Science Quarterly* 69 (1954): 1-14; and their joint article, "Le problème de l'Atlantique du XVIIIème au XXIème siècle," *Comitato internazionale di scienze storiche: Congresso internazionale di Scienze storiche, Roma 4–11 Settembre 1955. Relazioni 5 (Storia contemporanea)* (Firenze, 1955), 173-239. The classic Marxist rejoinders were Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (London, 1962), especially xv-xvi, 17-73, and *Précis d'histoire de la Révolution française*, trans. Alan Forrest and Colin Jones, in *The French Revolution, 1787-1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon*, and Albert Soboul, *Précis d'histoire de la Révolution française*, trans. Alan Forrest and Colin Jones as *The French Revolution, 1787-1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon* (London and Boston, 1989), especially 3-24.

⁷ Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford, 2012).

⁸ See, for example, Pierre Serna, ed., *Républiques sœurs: le Directoire et la Révolution atlantique* (Rennes, 2009); Pierre Serna, Antonino De Francesco and Judith A. Miller, eds, *Republics at War, 1776-1840: Revolutions, Conflicts, and Geopolitics in Europe and the Atlantic World* (Basingstoke, 2013); and the recent special issues of *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, "Les Îles britanniques et la Révolution française" 342 (2005); "L'Amérique du Nord à l'époque de la Révolution française" 363 (2011); "Lumières et révolutions en Amérique latine" 365 (2011); and "Les Indes orientales au carrefour des empires" 375 (2014).

⁹ David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds, "Introduction," *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, 1760-1840* (Basingstoke, 2010), vxiii, xxxii.

¹⁰ See the recent reflections by David Bell, "Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 37 (2014): 1-24.

declared three days of mourning. Augustin and Charlotte Robespierre wrote from Arras to their brother Maximilien in Paris that they had donned mourning clothes.¹¹ The same month the Assembly welcomed the Corsican Pasquale Paoli, a living symbol of liberty and self-government. From 1755 until its conquest by the armies of Louis XV in 1768, Corsica had had a popularly elected constitutional republic, albeit under Paoli's tutelage. He had since lived in exile in England. The National Assembly had passed a decree incorporating Corsica into the new France in November 1789, but now granted amnesty to exiles, and Paoli embarked immediately for his island.

There were many other upheavals in Europe which the French Revolution accentuated rather than caused, particularly in the Low Countries. This has induced Christopher Bayly to argue that the French Revolution was only one facet of an international crisis created by the imbalance between states' perceived military and imperial needs on the one hand and their financial resources and expertise on the other. Lynn Hunt has criticized Bayly's argument, instead insisting on the interaction of local, national and global factors, and the need for our interpretations to be social and cultural as well as military, economic and political, exemplified in the way she placed the issue of sovereign debt financing under Louis XVI within a cultural and ideological context.¹²

My own argument is that the 'Atlantic' thesis is too constrained geographically and conceptually to explain the origins and repercussions of the French Revolution, but that the 'global' thesis of Bayly and others is too diffuse to capture what was unique about France. Of course, French revolutionaries themselves understood their endeavors as 'universal' in significance: one thinks of the famous decree of 26 August 1792 granting citizenship to a group of eighteen foreigners (including Madison, Paine, Cloots and Priestley) seen to embody the Revolution's universalist aspirations – a startling decision at a moment when the king was under arrest, Lafayette had defected, and the Prussians had invaded and seized the fortress of Longwy.¹³

Considering that, if it is not possible to hope that men will one day form one sole family, one sole association, before law as before nature, the friends of liberty and of universal brotherhood should not be any the less dear to a nation that has proclaimed its renunciation of any conquest, and its desire to fraternize with all people;

Considering finally, that at the moment when a national convention is arranging the destinies of France, and preparing, perhaps, that of humankind, it is up to a generous and free people to call on all sources of knowledge, and to confer the right to work towards this great goal of reason on men who, through their feelings, their writings and their courage, have shown themselves to be so eminently worthy of it¹⁴

But Europeans, like French revolutionaries, always assumed that France was the epicenter, "arranging the destinies of France, and preparing, perhaps, that of

¹¹ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 102.

¹² Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 100; Lynn Hunt, "The French Revolution in Global Context," in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context*, Armitage and Subrahmanyam, eds, 30, 35.

¹³ See Suzanne Desan, "Foreigners, Cosmopolitanism, and French Revolutionary Universalism," in *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*, Desan, Lynn Hunt and William Max Nelson, eds (Ithaca, NY and London, 2013), 86-100.

¹⁴ *Gazette Nationale ou le Moniteur Universel*, no. 241, 23 August 1792, vol. 13, 540-41.

humankind.” At some point in 1792, Goethe painted a watercolor of the French border and its liberty pole with the inscription “Passans. Cette terre est libre.” One month after the eighteen foreigners were made French citizens, he was in the Prussian army at the battle of Valmy with his patron, Duke Karl August of Saxe-Weimar, on its campaign against revolutionary France. After the first great victory of French troops, coinciding with the proclamation of the Republic in Paris on 22 September, he reflected that “From this place and from this day dates a new epoch in the history of the world.”¹⁵

Similarly, the experience of “the Revolution armed” would reinforce the importance of national spirit for the Prussian army reformer, August von Gneisenau, who first encountered it while serving in a British “Hessian” regiment during the American War of Independence. He insisted that “Within the breasts of thousands there lives a great genius, but their lowly condition prevents its flowering.” Now the French Revolution had “set in action the national energy of the entire French people, putting the equal classes on an equal social and fiscal basis.... If the other states wish to establish the former balance of power, they must open up and use these same resources.”¹⁶

The authors of another recent collection of essays on the French Revolution in global perspective, Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt and William Max Nelson, have argued compellingly that the Revolution is best described as a turning-point in world history or “world-historical,” its origins and consequences to be understood as global as well as internal, an unprecedented European upheaval as well as reactive to a world in change. There are “continuities from the Revolution’s origins in global competition and transnational Enlightenment ideas to the emergence of a revolutionary political culture that fused immense idealism with territorial ambition and combined the drive for human rights with various forms of exclusion.” It was not about “one big thing”; nor should be studied from one approach. “It was, after all, ‘world-historical’ precisely because it changed so many things in so many, often contradictory directions.”¹⁷

As the cauldron in which modern nationalism and nationalist wars emerged, the French Revolution is also understood as the antithesis of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, the result of international warfare and a coalition of monarchies which sought to overthrow the Revolution for the threat it represented across Europe.¹⁸ One of the most important consequences of the French Revolution was the hostile European reaction after 1792, which linked suspicion of radicalism with the strengthening of support for established forms of government and religion. If in France the 1790s was the decade of revolution, in many parts of Europe this was a time of counterrevolution. The two were sides of the same coin, for the experience of most areas conquered as ‘sister republics’ after 1795 was smoldering resentment, and often overt resistance. In occupied territories, most of the population resented or openly opposed French rule, which quickly took the form of military occupation rather than revolutionary emancipation, and which relied on isolated minorities of pro-French reformers. The reaction to resistance to French occupation was often

¹⁵ William Doyle. *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2002), 193.

¹⁶ Robert R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 4th edn (New York, 1971), 448.

¹⁷ Desan, Hunt and Nelson, eds, “Introduction,” *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*, 11.

¹⁸ Daniele Conversi, “Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism,” in *Encyclopaedia of Nationalism*, Athena Leoussi and Anthony D. Smith, eds (Oxford, 2000), 34-39. A fine recent overview is Mary Helen McMurrin, “The New Cosmopolitanism and the Eighteenth Century,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47 (2013): 19-38.

xenophobic in stark contrast to the universalism of the early Revolution. The administrator of the department of Forêts (Luxembourg) in 1798 described the locals as “vile slaves ... [g]rovelling when they are weaker, relentless, brazen, and unbridled when they are – or believe themselves to be – the stronger.... [T]hese people will not be able to appreciate the benefits of our revolution until several generations have passed....”¹⁹ The nationalism and xenophobia generated through war was often the same on both sides, even if the emotional and religious patriotism was often more local than national: Mantuan or Catalan as opposed to Italian or Spanish.

The outbreak of Revolution had been welcomed by reformers as a harbinger of liberal reform across the continent. In Hamburg, a wealthy merchant organized a meeting of tricolor-cockade wearing enthusiasts who celebrated the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, and heard the poet Friedrich Klopstock recite an ode:

Had I a hundred voices, they would not suffice to sing
The freedom of Gaul ...
Alas, my Fatherland, it was not thou who scaled
The peaks of Freedom and gave to all the peoples round
The shining example! It was France.²⁰

Similarly, in 1805, William Wordsworth recalled how he felt at the age of 19 in 1789:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!—Oh! times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights, ...
Not favoured spots alone, but the whole earth,
The beauty wore of promise ...²¹

By 1805, however, Wordsworth had long ceased to be sympathetic to France and its Revolution because of what he saw as its departure from founding principles after 1793. The hostile political environment in England meant that publication of the poem – now seen as his greatest – was delayed until his death in 1850.²²

European attitudes to France changed dramatically in 1792-93 because of war, the proclamation of the republic and the execution of Louis XVI. In Britain and elsewhere, there was widespread repression of democrats and the unleashing of war propaganda depicting French revolutionaries as bloodthirsty dictators and cannibalistic mobs. A cluster of brilliant young writers – including Samuel Coleridge, Helen Maria Williams, William Godwin, William Drennan and Wordsworth himself – had their careers blighted or had to make significant political compromises in the

¹⁹ Timothy C.W. Blanning, *The French Revolution in Germany: Occupation and Resistance in the Rhineland, 1792-1802* (Oxford, 1983), especially 326-29. In general, see Michael Rapport, “The International Repercussions of the French Revolution,” in *A Companion to the French Revolution*, Peter McPhee, ed. (Oxford, 2013), 381-96.

²⁰ Jacques Godechot, *France and the Atlantic Revolution of the Eighteenth Century, 1770-1799*, trans. Herbert H. Rowen (New York, 1965), 131.

²¹ “The Prelude”, in William Wordsworth. *The Complete Poetical Works*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1888.

²² See the discussion of Wordsworth’s politics in Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York, 1998).

context of Prime Minister William Pitt's "reign of alarm."²³ The experience of the Terror led Americans to believe that, despite the extent of emigration by loyalists and killing during the War of Independence, theirs was the peaceful, benign and successful revolution. The 1798 Alien and Sedition Act was aimed at those with lingering affection for the French Revolution.²⁴

In Wales, where 90 per cent of the population of 590,000 spoke only Welsh, there had been support for the messages of self-determination and religious freedom in the Revolution of 1789, particularly among the educated. As elsewhere in Britain, however, support had waned after the outbreak of war. In London, the Welsh draper's assistant Siamas Wynedd (Edward Charles) defended the 1794 trial for treason of members of the London Corresponding Society, assuring the "vipers" that "in Hell you may burn for all eternity with the dark Devil." The failure of a small and poorly planned French landing near Fishguard on the west coast of Wales in 1797 caused something of a panic, and the Welsh militia who participated in the repression of the rising in Ireland the next year would become notorious.²⁵

In Ireland, however, sympathy for France remained strong among the United Irishmen, a clandestine organization of Protestants and Catholics founded in 1791 and united in opposition to direct rule from England and the dominance of the Anglican Church over both the Irish Catholics and the large number of Scottish Presbyterians in the north. In 1798, there were risings against English rule, in particular in Wexford, where a republic was proclaimed, slogans of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' were painted on walls and the revolutionary calendar was adopted. The killing of 90 pro-English Protestants held as hostages, then the failure after initial success of a French fleet sent to the west of Ireland, allowed a fierce repression of Irish rebels. There would be as many executions of Irish nationalists in six weeks as of counter-revolutionaries in the year of the Terror in France.

On the Balkan Peninsula, the Greek patriot Rigas Velestinlis translated clandestinely the Jacobin Constitution of 1793 into Greek in 1797 to support the movement for liberation from the Ottoman Empire. Rigas was subsequently arrested by Austrian police in Trieste with three boxes of a poster headed 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' in Greek, and was tortured and murdered before his trial in 1798.²⁶

But we need to avoid the temptation to simply add to the check-list of countries 'affected by' the Revolution. While undertaking research in Vannes recently on the French Revolution in Brittany, I came across the case of the Breton Balthesar Haquet, who in June 1794 was working as a doctor in the mines at Malužiná in the Kingdom of Hungary (today Slovakia), and teaching anatomy and surgery in Lemburg (Lviv) in the western Ukraine. He was a remarkable polymath, having published multi-volume studies of geology, botany and ethnography in the Carpathians. Austrian officials arrested him for a revolutionary address at a political banquet, lauding the French war effort, the temples of Reason, and Maximilien

²³ See, for example, Kenneth R. Johnston, *Unusual Suspects: Pitt's Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s* (Oxford, 2013).

²⁴ Philip Ziesche, *Cosmopolitan Patriots: Americans in Paris in the Age of Revolution* (Charlottesville and London, 2010), chpts 5, 6 and Epilogue.

²⁵ On Wales, see the recent scholarship in Mary-Anne Constantine and Dafydd Johnston, eds, *Footsteps of Liberty and Revolt: Essays on Wales and the French Revolution* (Cardiff, 2013); Marion Löffler, *Welsh Responses to the French Revolution: Press and Public Discourse, 1789-1802* (Cardiff, 2012); Cathryn Charnell-White, *Welsh Poetry of the French Revolution 1789-1805* (Cardiff, 2012); Elizabeth Edwards, *English Language Poetry from Wales, 1789-1806* (Cardiff, 2013).

²⁶ Alexandra Sfini, "Langages de la Révolution et transferts conceptuels: La Constitution montagnarde en grec," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 347 (2007): 83-92.

Robespierre. Fortunately for Haquet, none of his audience was prepared to testify and he was simply told to go home.²⁷ Fascinating as the story may be, we need to avoid the temptation to add Slovakia and Ukraine to our lists and maps of countries touched by the Revolution.

Adding places to the list of towns and regions ‘touched’ or ‘affected’ in some way by the Revolution not only risks exaggerating such influence but, more importantly, assumes a unilinear impact. Closer analysis demonstrates how, in every situation, news or experience of the Revolution was absorbed into local dynamics and adapted to particular uses rather than having an unambiguous impact. Maps which purport to show parts of the world touched by revolutionary influences may be helpful prompts to reflection, but tell us little about the way diverse societies and their politics made use of or resisted such influences. In fact, the history of international networks and influences is extremely difficult to write.²⁸

The French Revolution was born in the heat of the world’s first global crisis. This was a clash of great empires – the British, French and Spanish in particular, but also the Ottoman and Mughal – for territory and commercial advantage, and the military power necessary to defend them. The costs of the warfare necessary to defend a sprawling North American empire had proved too great for the French monarchy after 1756; the temptation to intervene on the side of Britain’s North American colonists after 1779 had been too great to resist, and while deliciously successful, came at an enormous cost.

But France was the epicenter of the world’s first global revolutionary crisis as well. The shock-waves of radical revolution and armed counter-revolution reverberated across the Atlantic to the Americas, especially the Caribbean. They were felt not only throughout Europe, but along the shores of the Mediterranean, reaching as far as South Asia and even South Africa and the South Pacific.²⁹ There were twenty-five new constitutions elsewhere in Europe after 1789, and twenty-two of them were imposed after French invasion.

Just as the origins of the Revolution lay in a global context of battles over imperial reach and its financial costs, particularly with Britain, so its final significance lies in the unresolved transformations it fuelled. Everywhere the revolutionary challenge encountered societies themselves in a state of flux, as in India, and local circumstances determined how the challenge would be absorbed, adapted or rejected. Napoleon’s failed attempt in 1798 to combine revolutionary ideology and territorial expansion nevertheless sparked republican hopes among sections of Egyptians.

²⁷ Antoine Vantuch, “Un savant Breton prêche la Révolution dans les Carpates,” *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l’ouest* 96 (1989): 485-89.

²⁸ Note here the comments of Annie Jourdan, “Review of *Napoleon’s Atlantic: The Impact of Napoleonic Empire in the Atlantic World*,” *H-France Review* 11 (2011): 1-5, www.h-france.net/vol11reviews/vol11no223Jourdan.pdf.

²⁹ Latin America, India and the East Indies are examined in, among others, Armitage and Subrahmanyam, eds, *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context*; Pierre Serna, Antonino De Francesco and Judith A. Miller, eds, *Republics at War, 1776-1840: Revolutions, Conflicts, and Geopolitics in Europe and the Atlantic World* (Basingstoke, 2013); Joseph Klaitz and Michael H. Haltzel, eds, *The Global Ramifications of the French Revolution* (New York, 1994); Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (New York, 2009). On Australia see Edward Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière: A French Naturalist in New Holland and the South Pacific* (Melbourne, 2003), and Nicole Starbuck, *Baudin, Napoleon and the Exploration of Australia* (London, 2013).

Paradoxically, hundreds of Egyptian and Syrian republicans who immigrated to France in 1801 would encounter an unsympathetic exile.³⁰

The origins and impact of the French Revolution can only be understood within an international, even global perspective, that of the long history of the struggles within Europe and its colonies for self-determination, representative government and individual liberties against entrenched hierarchies of social ‘orders’, corporate privilege and autocracy. From that perspective, “French exceptionalism” is a myth, in Annie Jourdan’s formulation, and the Revolution only the most spectacular and bloody path to change.³¹ But it was also unique. Only in France were the fullest consequences of Revolution carried through: the full abolition of seigneurialism, the abolition of slavery and equality of inheritance. Others were enacted, and then repudiated: universal manhood suffrage, the separation of church and state, and the right to divorce, among others.³² Only in France was a democratic republic able to mobilize its forces to defeat a European coalition intent on its destruction. That is why this ‘Age of Revolutions’ was first and foremost the French Revolution in the minds of contemporaries.

The Revolution was therefore more than just one spectacular example of a global crisis of empires, but nor can it be reduced, as in most ‘internalist’ French Revolution historiography, to a unique upheaval with global consequences. My argument is that the Revolution should be inserted into a global narrative of imperial crises of commerce and territory, which in France escalated into an unprecedented political and social revolution for ‘internal’ reasons, itself engendering new international conflicts. Just as there had been revolutionary precedents before 1789 – most notably in North America, Corsica and the United Provinces (Netherlands) – so the French Revolution encouraged revolutionaries across the continent. In Poland, after partition in 1793 (between Russia, Prussia and Austria), nationalist rebellion in 1794 temporarily succeeded under the leadership of Kosciusko. The collapse of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 and the consequences for a German Confederation was to have profound effects for European history until our own times. The reception of news of the French Revolution was profound but varied around the Mediterranean, and in parts of South Asia.

There were repercussions in the South Pacific as Britain and France explored, mapped and seized territory. Bruny d’Entrecasteaux’s expedition had been sent to Australia in 1791 in search of the missing explorer La Pérouse. Its leader dead, the malnourished and homesick expedition straggled into Java in October 1793 to learn of events earlier in the year. A violent division emerged between the expedition’s new leader, the royalist d’Auribeau, and the naturalist Labillardière, who in the 1760s was a class-mate in Alençon of Jacques Hébert, now a prominent Enragé. At the same time in 1793, leaders of Scottish nationalism were on their way to Botany Bay as convicts.³³ The Napoleonic wars were also played out in the Pacific, where Nicolas Baudin’s claims to southern Australia, expressed by naming natural features after the

³⁰ Ian Coller, “Egypt in the French Revolution,” in *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*, Desan, Hunt, and Nelson, eds, 115-31.

³¹ Jourdan puts the argument against the “French exception” most powerfully in *Exception française*, part 2.

³² For David Bell, the distinctiveness of the Revolution lies rather in its “chiliastic fervour”: “Questioning the Global Turn.”

³³ Rapport, “International Repercussions of the French Revolution,” 391.

Emperor, could not be contested for years while his English rival Matthew Flinders was detained at Île-de-France (Mauritius) as an enemy naval officer.³⁴

Nor were the imperial crises western alone, for they were also triggered by and further unleashed 'conjunctural' conflicts in the Ottoman, Mughal and Javanese empires. Most importantly in the longer term the strains placed on the Spanish and Portuguese empires by the costs of war with France, combined with the revolutionary message of national self-determination and rights, would further foment independence movements in Latin America in 1810-21 (Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Columbia, Brazil and Argentina).

In terms of methodology, the lesson of recent scholarship is that we need to bring the social and economic back into analyses of political and cultural forms through open-ended exploration of the links between global commercial and territorial competition and crises, new forms of collective political experience and new cultural practices of individualism (including discourses on human rights, the body and consumerism). The study of the 'Age of Revolutions' has never been so complex or so rich in possibilities.

The questions historians pose of the past have always been a function of their understanding of the contemporary world, and the current re-examination of the eighteenth-century crisis from a global perspective is a striking example of this. The global financial crisis of 2007-08 and the ongoing sovereign debt crisis in southern Europe have, however, shattered the optimism of globalization's advocates as much as they have reinforced the vulnerability of national and regional economies to wider forces. In the process, the adaptability and resilience of local communities have re-emerged as of critical importance. It is imperative to understand the local face of global crisis, during the French Revolution as in our own times. In the process, we may find fresh and enriching answers to those old questions: what were the causes of the Revolution? Why did it follow a particular course? And what were its consequences?

³⁴ Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière; Starbuck, Baudin, Napoleon and the Exploration of Australia*.