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Janet L. Polasky. *Revolutions without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 392 pp. \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN-10: 0300208944.

Review by Paul Cheney, University of Chicago.

Academic historians are encouraged to move beyond the nation state, but the metanarratives that provide structure for the international and even global histories that they are called upon to write have fallen upon hard times. *Revolutions without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* compasses movements of revolution and reform in Africa, Europe, Britain and its North American Colonies, and finally the Caribbean, from the 1770s to 1804. It does so even though it largely dispenses with the narratives of intellectual and political progress that organized earlier syntheses on the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution. Polasky's beautifully written, sensitively imagined book provokes reflection on the world historians and their readers have lost and what they have gained by renouncing the muscular interpretive paradigms that used to uphold, Atlas-like, global history in the Age of Revolutions.

The depiction of the Enlightenment that was fashionable for several decades in leftish academic circles has now come to seem exaggerated, perhaps even a bit paranoid. Two collections of essays published in 2001, *What's Left of Enlightenment?* and *Post-Modernism and Enlightenment*, made it clear that historians were no longer willing to let stand generalizations, often sloppily derived from Frankfurt School Marxism, about a monolithic, nefarious "Enlightenment Project." In a similar spirit, Sankar Muthu's *Enlightenment Against Empire* served notice that the *tiers mondiste* extension of this logic, which laid the horrors of European imperialism at the door of this same Project, depended upon a selective reading of the Enlightenment.[1] The Enlightenment that emerges out of these and other works is socially and culturally pluralist; epistemologically, it is dialogical rather than prescriptive; and its eighteenth-century proponents both collaborated with and criticized the state. If the unity and power once attributed to this movement have been relativized, one consequence is that the conditions enabling such grand, celebratory syntheses as Peter Gay's *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, have also passed.[2]

The memo evidently did not reach Jonathan Israel at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Since 2001, beginning with *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750*, Israel has published five books totaling around 4,000 pages devoted to the revolutionary consequences of a single strand of Enlightenment thought.[3] Critics have objected to Israel's caricatured depiction of a one and true Radical Enlightenment struggling against the perversions of the Moderate Enlightenment and to his implausible account of the relationship of ideas to social and political change. H-France published a Forum on the subject in November of 2014 that ran to an astonishing 63,000 words, and this was only the culmination of a number of scathing reviews written previously by established scholars.[4] All of these critics demonstrated the tendentiousness of Israel's reading in various ways, but I think that an unexpressed point of friction with most scholars of the Enlightenment was the way in which his *oeuvre* ignored (by not citing) and seemed to render irrelevant (by its ponderous mass) the pluralist scholarship on the Enlightenment of the post-Peter Gay era. Israel single-handedly revived a metanarrative of the progressive force of Enlightenment ideas that had been carefully qualified by a generation of scholars to

whom postmodern critique had imparted a sense of sensitivity—running from mild self-consciousness to violent allergy—to such claims.[5]

Another interpretive paradigm for global history in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution has gone more quietly into the night. R.R. Palmer's *Age of Democratic Revolution* (1959) recounted the overthrow, beginning in the 1760s, of an aristocratic social order all over what he termed alternately "Western" or "Atlantic" Civilization.[6] The political and cultural unity of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world depicted by Palmer was the artifact, as Bernard Bailyn pointed out, of a post-World War II geopolitical conjuncture that gave rise, among other things, to NATO.[7] Bailyn, institutionally the single most important proponent of the Atlantic world historical paradigm, affirmed the reality of an Atlantic world that preceded its incarnation as an object of historical study. Nevertheless, his own approach to the subject downplayed the role of states—and therefore of political revolution—so central to the Palmer thesis. The passing of the cold war context has sapped the "NATO interpretation" of the Atlantic revolutions of much of its urgency, as has the divergence, since 1981, of French and American political trajectories.[8] Whereas the Gallo-American political alliance and intellectual exchanges among French and American elites once stood at the center of the Palmerite Atlantic world, its present incarnation is a much more exclusively Anglo-American affair. In comparison, study of the French Atlantic world has come to look like a complementary, if rather marginal, subfield. Moreover, a narrative framework that draws upon high politics and the textual sources of intellectual history has not worn particularly well among historians concerned about subaltern populations and their experiences. The often-repeated (and factually accurate) charge against Palmer that his *Democratic Revolution* excluded the most destabilizing and radically new type of uprising in the Americas, the Haitian Revolution, reinforced the impression that Palmer's Atlantic Civilization was a rather exclusive club.

Palmer's *Democratic Revolution* is considerably subtler and more inclusive than those who criticize or ignore it allow. Much of it repays the effort of rereading, partly because there is still no more urbane guide than Palmer—more Stendhal than Hegel—to the interplay between revolutionary enthusiasm, *realpolitik*, and self-delusion that ensured continuous warfare and territorial reorganization in Europe throughout the 1790s. Nevertheless, historians have moved on from Palmer's vision of an Atlantic world united in a set of shared political aspirations. The nearest thing to scholarly consensus about the Age of Revolutions is the widely shared view that, starting with the Seven Years' War, the Spanish, British, and French all experienced crises of imperial sovereignty that ended in national liberation on some parts of the colonial periphery, with serious though varied political consequences in the metropolitan center.[9] The role of ideology is not entirely neglected after the imperial turn that the history of Atlantic revolutions has taken, but the pressures of inter-imperial competition leading to the outbreak of revolutions, and the unpredictability of warfare in determining their outcomes, occupies the foreground in these accounts.

Polasky, accordingly, begins by pushing the Palmerite view of the Atlantic Revolutions to the side: "No all-encompassing vision united all of the eighteenth-century revolutionaries from four continents into a common party" (p. 3). Although the "universal cry of liberty" that resounded so widely during this period was derived in a very general sense from the Enlightenment (p. 5), the accepted meaning of liberty and natural rights was so contingent and variable that arguments over these ideas do not furnish a framework, causal or otherwise, for Polasky's narrative. One is reminded here of Bailyn's assessment of the influence of classical republicanism on the ideology of the American Revolution: however pervasive the references to Cicero, Cato, or Brutus, "they contributed a vivid vocabulary but not the logic or grammar of thought." [10] Given all of the centrifugal tendencies, what holds these *Revolutions without Borders* together? Polasky's revolutionary Atlantic is a space that was knit together by flows of people and of the written word that constantly surpassed the limits of the nation state. Hers is a world of merchants, diplomats, freed slaves, and professional revolutionaries who travelled from one hot spot to another and who circulated letters, pamphlets, memoirs, books, and decrees. Without any fixed point of ideological reference, the meaning of the revolution in which these citizens of the world participated inheres in borderless universality itself. Tocqueville described a revolution that spread outward because of the

singular simplicity and power of the French conception of rights and citizenship. For Polasky's cosmopolitan revolutionaries, the lines of causation are completely reversed: whatever force their ill-assorted ideas achieved was an effect of the impression that they were taking part in a widespread movement.[11]

If Palmerite history, in its attempt historically to situate the political values common among the advanced capitalist democracies, corresponded to the geopolitics of the Cold War, Polasky's Atlantic *Revolutions without Borders* is well suited to the preoccupations of readers who inhabit the ideologically diffuse world of globalized late capitalism. If she finds any register of experience capable of spanning the immense space her history covers, it is the shared consciousness of expanded networks, of intensified flows of commodities, information, and people within them. For eighteenth-century observers, the simultaneity of all this movement furnished proof of its emancipatory potential. *Revolutions without Borders* is history for the postmodern age, in the sense that globality itself has now become a form of historical metanarrative; in this world, movement is meaning.[12]

Polasky seems torn between a rather forced optimism about the achievements of the transnational revolutionary movement she documents and a much more skeptical view of its "shortcomings, contradictions, and inconsistencies" (p. 12). Although she argues at points that the high idealism and the limitations of this revolution were of a piece, my own impression is that Polasky's material is better suited for the minor keys of historical irony, reversal, and disappointment than her major chord: the transformational power of revolutionary cosmopolitanism. Polasky offers a tour of revolutionary movements between 1776 and 1804, but her book is in fact split into two symmetrical cycles of revolutionary fervor, followed by political retrenchment, betrayal, and disillusion.

The first cycle begins with the *frisson* caused by the American Revolution in 1776. While pamphleteers in Geneva, Belgium, and the Netherlands advertised their links to this momentous event, "causing Revolutions to pile up, one upon another" (p. 45), each of these failed movements had to reckon with the internal forces of oligarchy and the external reality of great power politics. France served as a beacon of Enlightenment philosophy and allied itself with the fledgling United States against its colonial overlord during the 1770s, but by the 1780s it was cynically conspiring to roll up democratic forces in Geneva. A second cycle began again in 1789 with the Great Revolution in France and the wave of revolts it helped to set off in places as far distant as Ireland, Poland, and Saint-Domingue. Polasky pays sustained attention to the fate of weaker states that were drawn, intentionally or not, into the revolutionary vortex over these two cycles: "The Irish were not the only revolutionary neighbors," she writes, "to ask whether the cosmopolitan French Revolution of 1789, embraced and energized by revolutionaries from every corner of the Atlantic for a decade, had finally been overwhelmed by calculation of French national interest" (p. 253).

Polasky is hardly the first historian to chronicle the unedifying behavior of the French State—Ludovician, Republican, or Napoleonic—during the Age of Revolutions or to observe retrenchment after periods of revolutionary enthusiasm. But her narrative framework supports the most fascinating and original aspect of *Revolutions without Borders*, which is to explore how the diarists, letter writers, and novelists that populate her world of cosmopolitan revolutionaries experienced the hopes and disappointments of these decades. Her turn to intimate experience reminds readers of something that should be intuitively obvious but that frequently gets lost in political histories of revolution: The separation of powers or popular sovereignty were not the causes in themselves of widespread political enthusiasm. Rather, they activated the collective imagination because they held out the promise that political revolution might lead to the transfiguration of everyday life. Chapter six explores the response of a set of female novelists—Mary Wollstonecraft (author of the novel *Mary*), Betje Wolff (*Sara Burgerhart*) and Isabelle de Charrière (*Lettres écrites de Lausanne*), among others—who explored the possibility that political revolution in Europe might lay the basis for a sea change in domestic relationships, and hence the possibility for womens' emotional and intellectual fulfillment. What emerges from virtually all of these novels is the rather depressing

conclusion that decades of revolutionary ferment did very little to alter patterns of authority within the household, and that women would continue to be defined as self-sacrificing caregivers in need of men to direct them to higher purposes. These findings are not precisely surprising, but the value of this chapter is to show the intensity of the hopes that these writers pinned on the revolutions unfolding in their midst; the variety of their novelistic thought experiments on the possibility of domestic utopia; and therefore the depths of their shared disappointment. Chapter seven explores similar themes by mining correspondence between women and their husbands and suitors, leading Polasky to the conclusion that “The language of sensibility, whether expressed in English or in French, reflected transitional, not transformed societies” (p. 231).

Polasky’s concluding chapter offers a reflection on the dislocation that darkened the later years of cosmopolitan revolutionaries like Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, or Thaddeus Kościuszko after decades of political upheaval and of voluntary or forced peregrinations. Many of them, like Paine, came to be despised and mistreated in their adopted countries. Others, like Wollstonecraft, no longer understood their countrymen, who had so decisively rejected revolutionary internationalism in favor of reactionary chauvinism: “Nationalism marginalized many of these itinerants who had incorporated ideas and ideals from various nations and cultures” (p. 273).

Revolutions without Borders is an eloquent, accomplished book that shows how the global history of the Age of Revolutions can be written in the absence of the classic metanarratives that have sustained this historiography in the past. Cosmopolitanism is an independent subject matter that Polasky explores to great effect, and the author’s turn into the intimate sphere is an example of the places that global history can and should go when it is not conceived of simply as an aggregated, monumental version of national history. At the same time, I finished Polasky’s book wishing she had staged a more direct confrontation between the premises of her study and the outcomes of the stories she tells. As Polasky explains, hers is a book about “documents with legs” that helped to transmit ideas and to create alternative political spheres “beyond the official institutions of government” (pp. 13-14). The revolutionary expectations that were elevated in these spheres were frequently brought crashing back to earth by the *realpolitik* of nation states, even ostensibly revolutionary ones; the remarkably durable hierarchies of race, class, and status in the societies widely supposed to be transformed by revolution; and the virtually irresistible gravitational pull of traditional family structures. Polasky consistently acknowledges all of these limitations, but she does not avoid some of the perils of a widely shared, somewhat frothy celebration of globalization that underpins her analysis.

In her introduction, Polasky evokes the Arab Spring as a modern example of the transnational revolutionary movements that are the subject of her book. We now know how disappointing the results of the so-called “Twitter Revolution” in the Middle East have been, and how heavily demography, man-made climate change, religious fundamentalism, and the geopolitics of fossil fuel dependency have weighed on the possibility of social and political transformation in the region. The advertised role of instantaneous, global media in the Arab Spring might be considered a harmless conceit of techno-utopianism had it not conveyed to activists in Syria a completely false sense of the level of international solidarity with anti-Assad forces, leaving them cruelly exposed to a murderous backlash. The film *Silvered Water* (2014), co-directed by Ossama Mohammed and Wiam Bedirxan, documents the price paid by anti-Assad, pro-democracy activists during the 2012 siege of Homs. Roughly half of this film is composed of footage shot by Bedirxan inside of the city of Homs; but the other part consists of YouTube clips depicting acts of torture and murder committed by pro-Assad forces. These clips were posted to YouTube by the proud perpetrators themselves as a way of terrorizing Assad’s political opponents into submission. The forces of reaction, terror, and exploitation also use the virtual space of the internet to create a global civil society of a sort, but Polasky has chosen to adopt as her model an irenic version of the networked society in which contact, movement, and exchange all have positive valences. This is a philosophy of history—if only an implicit one—that sees globalization as a contest between the mobile, the cosmopolitan, and the enlightened against the inert, the provincial, and the unplugged. It is our own version of the eighteenth

century's theory of *doux commerce*. Like Polasky I see the *commerce*, but I am a little less tuned in than she is to all the *douceur*.

NOTES

[1] Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill, *What's Left of Enlightenment?: A Postmodern Question* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2001); Daniel Gordon, *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History* (London: Routledge, 2001). The understanding of a nefarious Enlightenment Project discussed here is not the sole property of the intellectual left. See John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (London: Routledge, 1995). Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[2] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1966-1969).

[3] Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (2001); *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750–1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014)

[4] See, among others, David A. Bell, "Where Do We Come From?," *New Republic*, February 7, 2012; Samuel Moyn, "Mind the Enlightenment," *The Nation* 290, no. 21 (May 31, 2010): 25–32; Jeffrey Collins, "'Spinoza's Machines', Review of Jonathan Israel's 'A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy'," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 26, 2010; Antoine Lilti, "Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières?," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 64, no. 1 (2009): 171–206.

[5] For the background to this sensitivity, including the problem of metanarrative, Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 37–41.

[6] R.R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), 1:4.

[7] Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), 8–17.

[8] On the present-day contexts shaping Atlantic history, see my comments in Paul Cheney et al., "La Révolution française à l'heure du global turn," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 374 (2013): 6–7.

[9] For the British and Spanish Empires, J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006); and Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006). For elements of this interpretation for France, Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), introduction, chs. 6–7; and Pierre Serna's contribution to Jean-Luc Chappey et al., *Pour quoi faire la révolution* (Marseille: Agone, 2012). Wim Klooster's synthesis on the Atlantic world also draws on this understanding. See *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[10] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1992), 26.

[11] Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien régime et la révolution* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), Book I, ch iii, pp. 68–72 in cited edition.

[12] See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) and Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London, New York: Verso, 1998).

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