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Patrick Griffin, *The Age of Atlantic Revolution: The Fall and Rise of a Connected World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023. viii + 376 pp. Notes, references, 27 b&w illustrations, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9783000206333.

Response by Patrick Griffin, University of Notre Dame.

When the Chief Editor of *H-France Review* asked me to respond to this review, I was reluctant. I did not think any good could come out of addressing a litany of criticisms, many of which I take issue with. Frankly, I also worried I would not be able to respond respectfully or that I could say anything that would be generative. You see, I do not think the review a fair one.

But I came around to the idea because responding gives me the opportunity to reflect a bit more on what I wrote. A response also gives me a chance to offer something the reviewer did not: a sense of what this book hopes to accomplish and how it tries to do so. I would, along the way, like to address just some of the points raised by the review. It would be tedious to go through all of them.

I will start by thanking the reviewer for conceding that I seem to get the first part of my story right. The book tries to chart how the nature of changes to the Atlantic over the course of the early-eighteenth century presented stiff challenges to states around the time of the Seven Years' War. Reform was a necessary answer for nearly all. The book examines in detail different reform measure undertaken by imperial actors throughout the broad Atlantic to try to manage and harness a developing system in an increasingly competitive world. The complexities eventuated by reform set off all sorts of provincial responses and also the first stirrings of revolution, something initially felt in the North American colonies of the British Empire. The review finds no fault with my treatment in this regard.

The book goes on to explore the nature of revolution in the Atlantic. Revolution was touched off in many places because of the nature of connection in the Atlantic and when, and if, states experienced shocks to authority. There were many variations, bound up in the distinctions of specific histories, as the book argues, but there are commonalities nonetheless. And on one of these points, I can see value in one of the reviewer's criticisms. He tells us that my examination of France relies on Anglo-American scholarship and not primarily on primary sources. He is, indeed, right on both counts. But this observation rests on something the review does not acknowledge: the scope and scale of this analysis. The book covers many countries and regions, in North America, West Africa, South America, and Europe—all the continents that border the ocean. It shows how far the tendrils of revolution stretched as well, in time, to places far beyond

the Atlantic. Even in the areas I am most conversant with—those of the British Atlantic—I do not rely on primary sources for my analysis. As for the secondary literature, each of these places I write about has a vast historiography. I made choices, in other words, as anyone writing a synthesis must. In most cases, I tended to gravitate to interpretations that accorded with what I saw across the whole of the Atlantic and to those studies that noted connections. Did these choices come with trade-offs and risks? Absolutely. And the reviewer is well within his rights to point out what he sees as the downsides of the choices I have made.

But the key is what you do with such observations. He suggests that my reliance on Anglo-American interpretations skews my understanding of the Terror in France, that it acted as a solvent. He then goes on to say that I would not dare to say such a thing for the American case. Dare is a pretty strong word. I am afraid he goes not get things quite right. The book is at pains to say that violence, fear, uncertainty, and terror were hallmarks of revolution in each society it touched. In fact, I showcase the Terror, and more importantly the ways we have used this imagery to discuss revolution, to highlight the violence that has been forgotten in the American Revolution. Revolution in America, as much of my previous work has shown and is now well understood in the literature, came with violence. Indeed, as I argue, Native Americans and Black Americans would experience a Terror, but one that has been whitewashed in memory. This goes a long way to explain how the French and how Americans have dealt differently with the process of revolution. For both, revolution was a violent, dreadful process. Even before Americans would define what they experienced as “the American Revolution,” something I have written on, they were struggling through a process of revolution. When societies fractured because of competition over sovereignty—what I define as revolution—the same attributes were evident. The emotions of hope, fear, and aggression became the stuff that defined all. Whether this was France or America. They only differed in their incidentals and how they were articulated. History and contingency determined how they played out in each society. This section, the central chapters of the book, explores these themes in France, Saint-Domingue, and Ireland. It also examines how they played out in the United States through on-going connections.

The book ends with a discussion of endings, and here our focus shifts to the last place to experience revolutionary upheaval: Latin America. Other places are interwoven into the account, as in other sections, but I use the splintering effects of trying to end revolution in this one region as a story of the Atlantic writ small. The reviewer faults me for placing Latin America in the book at all. We learn in the review that historians “often” consider what happened there to be independence movements. But does that mean I should have left Latin America out? I am not so sure. After all, some historians do indeed consider what occurred there revolutionary. A body of scholars argues that independence movements set off revolutionary situations. I would add that, by my lights, any book does not have to follow a certain line that others often proffer. It strikes me that the whole point of interpretation, in my case one that is focused on connection and comparison and that asks us to consider things in a new light, is to chart and then follow a course set by argument and evidence.

Endings, as I argue, depended on all sorts of unsavory and unjust trade-offs. Very often, the powerful overawed the powerless. The Atlantic might have been transformed by revolution—as the book illustrates—but unfortunately coercion and subjugation remained. In some places, unjust domination was intensified. On this note, the reviewer found one of my points troubling. He insinuates that somehow what I write might come off as an excuse for slavery. I don’t see things this way. Throughout the book, I consistently argue that elites struggled to come to terms with

systemic imperatives and with those they would overawe in their own societies. Before the age of revolution, the powerful would do what they could to control the powerless in their midst. In different societies, this took on distinctive configurations. In some places, religious persuasion determined access to power. Elsewhere it could be class. In America, it entailed race. After the age of revolution, as I suggest, the elites that took over also had to reconcile themselves to new sets of systemic imperatives. When it comes to political economy, this meant free trade. How did colonies premised on slavery function in a free trade world of nation-states? For many, the answer was by continued domination and slavery. But the story does not end there. The age also presented all with a new set of liberating ideas that spoke to the new possibilities opened up by the development of the system and by revolution. These would be used to push for reforming the settlement that emerged after revolution. Frederick Douglass, a moral heart of the book, would become a “founder” who would work to make an unjust revolution settlement just.

Slavery and the enslaved lay at the heart of the book’s analysis. Olaudah Equiano stands for the unrealized aspirations of the era. Saint-Domingue’s (then Haiti’s) is perhaps the most representative and tragic revolution of the age. Racism explains that tragedy. And slavery, when it comes to political economy, was the *primum mobile* of the system before revolutions began. It remained the bedrock of some societies afterward in certain places. I felt it incumbent on me to offer an interpretation why, one that accords with the argument of the book. That line that the reviewer fastened on in the review is thus nestled in a much more fulsome discussion of the tangled and complex relationship between slavery and revolution during the age.

Should I have entertained a counterfactual about slavery in the post-revolutionary American South? As the reviewer argues, “America’s empire of liberty could have taken on other forms (if less addicted to consumer capitalism and human exploitation) in the American South.” I think the answer to my question lies in his parentheses. Because of these addictions, the institution lived on “even if people seemed uncomfortable living with the galling hypocrisies it confronted all with,” as I put it (p. 217). That Americans did not take the enlightened path of other possibilities is the most painful and pitiful aspect of the revolution settlement in the United States.

By my lights, a review should acknowledge what an author hopes to achieve in a book, take the argument on its own terms, refrain from taking cheap shots, but not pull punches. It can and should be critical. A fair, critical reading suggests the reviewer grappled with the work. Ideally, it should open discussion up, not shut it down. After all, a book like this just offers an interpretation, not “the” interpretation, for a complex period of time over a vast space. There’s room enough for all of us. All this being said, I do owe the reviewer a note of thanks. His thoughts on my book have afforded me the opportunity of explaining to you what the book is really about. For that I am grateful. Does the book end with some loose threads, as he argues? Well, yes. But that was the point, something you will see if you have a chance to read the book. Endings, as I say, confounded all. They still do.

Patrick Griffin
University of Notre Dame
pgriffi4@nd.edu

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