



Eighteenth-century Atlantic history old and new

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the contribution of Robert R. Palmer to the now booming Atlantic history is put into perspective. It describes the main features of the political and historiographical context that inspired the writing of his book, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* in the early 1950s (first volume published in 1959, second volume in 1964). It also argues that the war experience Palmer had in the historical section of the Army Ground Forces has been important in reviving the interest for the transatlantic dimension in modern history that was central in his PhD dissertation. This paper shows how the liberal-tocquevillian approach that Palmer adopted to explain the multiple revolutions that shook North America and Europe in the last quarter of the 18th century earned him the attacks of the Marxist historians. In its last part this paper makes use of private letters to claim that in the 1970s and 1980s the Italian historian Franco Venturi revived the scholarly interest in Palmer's perspective despite methodological differences between his *Settecento riformatore* and Palmer's analysis. *Settecento riformatore* and *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* have contributed to the interest in a transatlantic approach to 18th-century history that is now pursued under the heading of "entangled histories".

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Robert R. Palmer published *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* in two volumes. They came out in 1959 and 1964 respectively, and were the result of a long process of researching and writing which Palmer began when he was a PhD candidate at Cornell University in the 1930s and pursued in the early 1950s at Princeton University where he spent most of his teaching career. Conference papers and essays formulated Palmer's main arguments before the publication of the two volumes. In doing so he may have weakened and distorted the impact that his work had on the historical discussion on the late 18th century global dimension. In 2005 Bernard Bailyn suggested that *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* is to be seen as originating in the early highly politicized phases of the recent interest in the Atlantic history.¹ Bailyn is indeed right in stressing that political developments in the 1950s easily account for some features of Palmer's oeuvre. Palmer himself wrote while still in the process of completing the first volume that he intended to investigate "what is most in our minds, to find out what a world looked like that is divided by revolution and war".² But Palmer's book was more than the expression of the anxieties and curiosity all too common and legitimate in the Cold War age. Despite his

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¹ Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History. Concept and Contours* (Cambridge–London, Harvard University Press, 2005). See Ian K. Steele, 'Bernard Bailyn's American Atlantic,' *History and Theory* 46, n. 1 (2007), 48–58. Bernard Bailyn is the Director of the Atlantic History Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World at Harvard University (<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~atlantic/index.html>). According to Eliga H. Gould, 'Atlantic history as an scholarly field' emerged in 1967 with the first Atlantic Seminar at Johns Hopkins ('Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds,' *American Historical Review* 112, n. 3 (2007), 764–786, especially note 89, p. 784).

² Robert Rosewall Palmer, 'The World Revolution of the West: 1763–1801,' *Political Science Quarterly* 69, n. 1 (1954), 1–14, quote p. 14 (reprinted in *Revolutions in Modern European History*, ed. Heinz Lubasz (New York, MacMillan 1966), 62–74).

obvious admiration and respect, Bailyn seems to perpetuate old clichés that are less than fair to Palmer and his innovative if controversial research. It may be safe to say that *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* focused on a topic that ever since drew an increasing interest worldwide and has become crucial in making sense of the global dimension of 18th century. It definitely still deserves appreciation and analytical attention. It must be noted, nonetheless, that Palmer tackled his investigation with the conceptual tools typical of the history of the “big” politics and “big” sociology that originate from Gottschalk’s approach to the American–French relationship on the eve of 1789.³ Moreover, it should be remarked that the second volume of Palmer’s work lacks a clear outline. Events follow each other in the narrative without showing a logical development and the French expansion in Europe tends to become mere military history while local peculiarities are often treated as variants of the same pattern. Seen from the distance of almost 50 years, therefore, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* is a multi-faceted history book that invited reconsideration as well as a *prise de distance*. On the hand, it has been widely used as a reference book and a text book on the last quarter of the 18th century, based as it is on an excellent command of the sources, none of them unpublished, and on an extensive knowledge of the historical writings available in the 1950s. The wealth of information on the American and especially European developments is outstanding, especially on lesser well-known areas of 18th-century Europe such as Geneva, the United Provinces and Poland were in the 1950s. Subchapters bear imaginative titles, like “A Game of Ideological Football” when discussing the international reactions to the Polish Constitution of 1791 and “Two Men on Horseback”, with reference to Jefferson and Napoleon. It has therefore become, and deservedly so, a constant presence in the reading list of all survey courses on the international setting of the transition from the *ancien régime* to liberalism. On the other hand, it is possible to detect, especially in the first volume, interesting insights into a set of problems that went beyond the strictly national approach. Palmer probably overstated his position in 1954 when he wrote that American historians had the mission to be the synthesisers (a category he obviously considered himself to be part of), as opposed to the mere national approaches of the European historians.⁴ Still, exploring the possibility of a transnational perspective across the Atlantic Ocean, Palmer ended up reinterpreting Braudel’s vast views exemplified in his 1949 book on the Mediterranean and applying them to the Atlantic world from a strictly political point of view. The transition in the American politics from isolationism to the full commitment in the second world war may account for the change in Palmer’s research interests more than the Cold War experience. When examined close-up, the first steps of Palmer’s career show the uneasy balance between a national and quite traditional approach to French history in the 18th century and the attraction for the comparatively uncharted territory of transnational history. Palmer’s first book, *Catholics and Unbelievers in 18th-Century France* (1939) was a traditional inquiry into the political and intellectual history of the French Enlightenment, centring on the conflict between the *philosophes* and the Paris Parliament. In the early 1940s Palmer translated Georges Lefebvre’s *Quatre-vingt-neuf* (originally published in 1939, only a few copies survived the German occupation) and wrote a survey of the Terror period, *Twelve who ruled*, published for the first time in 1941 and reissued many times later on.⁵ Both works were inspired by his interest in the history of the French revolution and the non-dogmatic approach to it displayed by Lefebvre, whose scholarly achievements, broad perspectives and intellectual integrity Palmer highly praised.⁶ By the early 1950s Palmer had written a thoroughly researched book on 18th-century French history and a descriptive monograph on the 1793–1794 phase of the French revolution and had developed an interest in the recent French historiography. His scholarly interest in the relationships between America and France in the 18th century, suggested to him by Gottschalk as the topic for his PhD dissertation, seemed to be overshadowed by a Francocentric approach.⁷ During the war Palmer served in the historical section of the Army Ground Forces in Washington, DC, where he was involved in the training and equipment of the units that were sent to Europe and Asia.⁸ Like most of the academics of his generation he was personally involved in the war effort and improved his skills as a historian increasingly alert to complex issues of the past, like his mentor at the University of Chicago, Gottschalk, who was active from 1943 to 1945 in the secret “Committee of Historians to Analyze and Appraise Current Conditions and Prospective Developments in Germany”.⁹ It is likely that the war experience rekindled Palmer’s interest in the complexities intrinsic to the intellectual interactions among different cultures with the caveat that intricate issues should not be overly simplified for clarity’s sake and exclusively in terms of history of ideas. In 1950 in a review of *The Atlantic Civilization* by Michael Kraus Palmer agreed with the author in stressing “the place of the American revolution in the democratic movement of

³ See ‘Ideas in History’, in *Essays Presented to Louis Gottschalk by his Former Students*, ed. Richard Herr, Harold T. Parker (Durham (N.C.), Duke University Press, 1965).

⁴ Palmer, *The World Revolution of the West: 1763–1801*, 14.

⁵ Most recently Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*. Translated and with a Preface by Robert R. Palmer. With a new preface by Timothy Tackett (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005) and *Twelve who ruled: the year of the Terror in the French Revolution*. With a new foreword by Isser Woloch (Princeton–Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁶ Palmer, Georges Lefebvre, ‘The Peasants and the French Revolution,’ *The Journal of Modern History* 31, n. 4 (1959), 329–42.

⁷ His PhD thesis ‘The French Idea of American Independence on the Eve of the French Revolution’ (Cornell University, Ithaca 1934) was not published.

⁸ Palmer is recorded as the only civilian employed in a consultative capacity in *A Short History of The Army Ground Forces*, p. 50 footnote 69. Palmer contributed to the Army Ground Forces Studies with the following reports: *Origins of the Army Ground Forces: General Headquarters U.S. Army, 1940–1942*. Study No. 1 (with Lt. Col Kent Roberts Greenfield); *Ground Forces in the War Army. A Statistical Table*. Army Ground Forces. Study No. 3; *The Mobilization of the Ground Army*. The Army Ground Forces. Study No. 4. 1946; *The Procurement of Enlisted Personnel: The Problem of Quality; Organization and Training of New Ground Combat Elements*. All of them are typescripts. With the exception of the last two they have been posted full-text at <http://www.history.army.mil/collections/AGF.htm> (last accessed on February 21, 2008).

⁹ The Louis Gottschalk Papers, University of Chicago Library, include letters from Palmer to Gottschalk. Their investigation has not been a part of this research.

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