

FOREWORD¹

The late eighteenth century has long held a special place in narratives of the making of the modern world. Contemporaries from Bengal to Boston and in Paris and Patna were certain theirs was an age of revolutions. Empires collided and crumbled in the Americas and South Asia. A new order of the ages seemed to be rising from the wreckage of old regimes. And huge changes were afoot in commerce and manufactures, warfare and communications, government and finance. Whether these upheavals amounted to a single seismic shift was not so clear. Did the period's revolutions all point in the same direction? Or were they fundamentally distinct? The question of one revolution or many—an age of revolutions or a revolutionary age—would recur across the next two centuries.

R. R. Palmer's *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* (1959–64) is the pivotal scholarly contribution to that debate, a monument of anglophone historical writing, and the most coherent argument for the essential unity of the revolutionary era. The work was garlanded and assailed, revered and ignored, but it has never been out of print. *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* has striking omissions and bears signs of its times, but it is more widely discussed, and arguably more relevant, now than at any time since it first appeared half a century ago.

Robert Roswell Palmer was born in 1909 and won a scholarship to the University of Chicago, where he studied with Louis Gottschalk, one of the earliest professional historians of the French Revolution in the United States. Gottschalk urged Palmer to go to Cornell for graduate work under his own mentor, Carl Becker, an intellectual historian of both the American and French Revolutions. From Gottschalk, Palmer had acquired his interests in the age of revolutions and in the shaping force of ideas in history; with Becker, he would develop his focus on exchanges across the Atlantic, a skeptical liberalism, and a commitment to history as a critical discipline aimed at a broad reading public. After taking up a lectureship at Princeton in 1936, Palmer earned his academic

¹ Forthcoming in R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, Princeton Classics edn. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

spurs with two accomplished monographs: *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (1939) and *Twelve Who Ruled: The Committee of Public Safety during the Terror* (1941). Poor eyesight kept him from active combat in the Second World War and he worked in Washington, DC, as a historian in the Army Ground Forces Command, where he wrote most of two volumes on the recruitment and training of ground troops in the conflict. After his return to civilian life and his professorship at Princeton, he published *A History of the Modern World* (1950), one of the best-selling textbooks of its time. Still barely 40, with his reputation secure, Palmer decided that “it seemed wise, all told, to become involved in a large-scale and long-term project, on which there need be no hurry.”² His magnum opus on the “democratic revolution”—the term was the French revolutionary lawyer and historian, Antoine Barnave’s—would be the result.

Palmer’s masterpiece sprang from the conjunction of two revolutionary moments, past and present. The first was what he called the late eighteenth-century “Revolution of Western Civilization” in Europe and North America. The second was the great revolution of his own times in Asia, Africa, and Latin America: “Let us ... use the revolutionary era to investigate what is most on our minds, to find out what a world is like that is divided by revolution and war.”³ The two movements were continuous yet counterposed, because the revolution *of* the West had created the tools for the ongoing revolution *against* the West. Palmer argued that the goal of both was equality, a fundamental value that had first been widely elaborated between 1760 and 1800, with lasting legacies for succeeding centuries: “All revolutions since 1800, in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa,” he wrote at the very end of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, “have learned from the eighteenth-century Revolution of Western Civilization.” That judgment might seem guilty of almost every current scholarly sin—Eurocentrism, essentialism, teleology, diffusionism— but it captured the essence of Palmer’s endeavor: to understand the present through the past with the perspective of the *longue durée*.

² R. R. Palmer, “*The Age of the Democratic Revolution*,” in L. P. Curtis, Jr., ed., *The Historian’s Workshop: Original Essays by Sixteen Historians* (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 170.

³ R. R. Palmer, “The World Revolution of the West: 1763–1801,” *Political Science Quarterly* 69, 1 (1954), 14.

Most professional historians worship the archive, suspect synthesis, and shun presentism. Not so Palmer: he spent only a year in French collections when researching his first book, worked mostly from published sources, and was adamant that historians must use their knowledge to illuminate contemporary concerns. As he was embarking on his grand project, he told an interviewer, “Historians address themselves to the hard questions of policy as against what was narrative history. Today history is interpretative and critical.”⁴ This position was hardly the credo of the conservative cold warrior Palmer was sometimes taken to be: indeed, it reflected the pre-war legacy of Carl Becker, the historian of broad themes who punctured the pieties of right and left alike and who believed firmly in the historian’s social mission. Throughout *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, Palmer jostled against Marxism but he relied heavily on Eastern European historiography and used it to remind Americans that their own political culture, like that of the Communist bloc, had revolutionary roots. Palmer saved his real venom for “neo-conservative” American anti-communists who stressed the gulf between past and present and between the American and French Revolutions. “It has been said that history is best written with a little spite,” he later wrote, “and I fear that I share this uncharitable opinion.”⁵

Palmer also had little patience for methodological nationalism. *A History of the Modern World* had treated “the record of our troubled civilization” and subordinated national histories to the larger narratives of Eastern and Western “civilizations.”⁶ Soon after it appeared, Palmer collaborated with Jacques Godechot, an historian of the French Revolution, on a long paper comparing manifestations of a unified “Atlantic civilization” in the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. Palmer and Godechot’s overarching vision of circulation and communication within a single intercontinental community was more anti-nationalist than it was self-consciously cosmopolitan. Palmer disagreed strongly those historians who argued that the American and French Revolutions were each exceptional, politically opposed, and unconnected to any other political movements of the period. Moreover, he and Godechot noted that the world of the first revolutionary age

⁴ Harvey Breit, “Talk with R. R. Palmer,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 30 July 1950, 10.

⁵ Palmer, “*The Age of the Democratic Revolution*,” p. 172.

⁶ R. R. Palmer, *A History of the Modern World* (New York: Knopf, 1950), p. vii.

was *more* integrated than that of their own time.⁷ His history was not an apology for the burgeoning international institutions of his own time: it was in some ways an elegy for a world that had been lost but whose promises were still in the process of being fulfilled.

The focus of the first volume of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* is on the American Revolution; of the second, on the French Revolution and its aftermath. Two timely themes linked them: the Tocquevillian topic of ever-expanding equality and the more immediate questions of how revolution spread and how it was repelled. In *The Challenge*, Palmer showed how the insurgent force of egalitarian “democracy” encountered the resurgent energy of entrenched “aristocracy” in legislative bodies around the Atlantic world. The American Revolution was the opening act of this revolutionary age and the United States was the one successful beacon of “democracy” thereafter. In *The Struggle*, he narrated the proliferation of revolutionary movements across Europe both before and alongside the French Revolution. Most were endogenous, and independent of French interference, but they accelerated the radicalization of the Revolution itself after 1792 and left Europe divided between the forces of revolution and counter-revolution. Even as late as 1799, it was unclear which would triumph yet, within months, Napoleon’s victory at the battle of Marengo tipped the balance: “Democracy in Europe had not exactly succeeded, but the great conservative and aristocratic counter-offensive had utterly failed.” Thomas Jefferson’s election that year as President in the “Revolution of 1800” pointed in the same direction: towards the short-lived victory for “democratic” forces.

The chronological and geographical division of Palmer’s two volumes determined their quite different receptions. *The Challenge* (1959) won an unusual accolade for a historian primarily known for his work on France: the Bancroft Prize, the most prestigious award for a work of American history. Five years later, *The Struggle* (1964) earned no prizes, was not widely reviewed, and was almost entirely overlooked in Europe. Palmer’s account of the American Revolution had flattered local sensibilities by arguing for its world-historical importance, even as it rebuffed the reigning Progressive

⁷ Jacques Godechot and R. R. Palmer, “Le Problème de l’Atlantique du XVIII^{ème} au XX^{ème} siècle,” *Relazioni del X Congresso Internazionale di Scienze Storiche* (Florence: Sansoni, 1955), V, pp. 198–99.

consensus that the Revolution was relatively conservative, bloodless, and consensual. *The Struggle* met more resistance because it seemed to belittle the significance of the French Revolution by placing it amid a congeries of other minor and mostly failed revolutions: Genevan, Polish, Dutch, Batavian, Irish, Neapolitan, and Swiss among them. Why this diminished the French Revolution, Palmer was at a loss to imagine: the same theme, he noted, could be played in a flute solo or by a full orchestra, and it hardly minimized the orchestra if one listened to the flute.⁸ More controversial was his assimilation of the American and French Revolutions. Surely the American Revolution was less transformative, the French more genuinely radical and future-oriented? However, he argued, the similarities between the two great Atlantic revolutions were greater than the differences: indeed, the French borrowed political language from the Americans much as Americans adopted French ideas in “a grand intercontinental transvestism.”⁹ Such judgments were guaranteed to upset nationalist historians of all stripes and, for almost forty years, they condemned *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* to the status of a classic: a book more revered than read.

Trends in historical writing were turning against Palmer even as he completed the book. Constitutional history and the history of war were already embattled fields by 1964. In the gap between *The Challenge* and *The Struggle*, three works appeared that signposted alternative approaches to the age of revolutions. Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution* (1961) is still the strongest case for the radical separation of the American and French Revolutions, as respectively political and social, conservative and radical, successful and failed. Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789–1848* (1962) influentially proposed the “double crater” of England and France as the matrix of economic and political modernity, but entirely ignored the American Revolution and the larger Atlantic world. Meanwhile, E. P. Thompson’s social history of the Industrial

⁸ R. R. Palmer, “La ‘Révolution Atlantique’—Vingt ans après,” in Eberhard Schmitt and Rolf Reichardt, eds., *Die Französische Revolution—zufälliges oder notwendiges Ereignis? Akten des internationalen Symposiums an der Universität Bamberg vom 4.–7. Juni 1979*, 3 vols. (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1983), I, pp. 100–01.

⁹ R. R. Palmer, “The Great Inversion: America and Europe in the Eighteenth-Century Revolution,” in Richard Herr and Harold T. Parker, eds., *Ideas in History: Essays Presented to Louis Gottschalk by His Former Students* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1965), p. 8.

Revolution, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963)—published just in time to make the footnotes of *The Struggle*—inspired densely archival and intimately local narratives of reconstructed experiences, a history from below uninflected by such grand abstractions as “aristocracy” and “democracy”. To Palmer, that movement was ultimately a turn for the worse, away from civic engagement and “the effective management of public problems” into academic specialization and scholarly self-absorption.¹⁰ Nonetheless, it would become hegemonic and pushed old-fangled histories like Palmer’s, which treated constitutions and wars, into the shadows for two generations.

The response to *The Struggle* bruised its author. After a spell in academic administration, Palmer returned in his later works to the French Revolution—specifically, the history of education—and to studies of individual Frenchmen: the father and son historians of the Revolution, Hervé and Alexis de Tocqueville; the ex-Jacobin Marc-Antoine Jullien; the political economist Jean-Baptiste Say; and in a last, unfinished work, the revolutionary abolitionist, Abbé Grégoire.¹¹ He died in 2002 at the age of 93, more than a decade after the collapse of Communism which he saw through the lens of the first revolutionary age: “Perhaps the east Europeans, most of whom were Europeans for centuries, can now enjoy the benefits of the 18th-century democratic revolution in the west, in which so much violence and struggle were involved.”¹²

Palmer did not live long enough to see his larger conception of historical writing vindicated. In his own lifetime, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* was little imitated

¹⁰ R. R. Palmer, “A Century of French History in America,” *French Historical Studies* 14, 2 (1985), 174.

¹¹ *The School of the French Revolution: A Documentary History of the College of Louis-le-Grand and its Director, Jean-François Champagne, 1762–1814*, ed. and trans. R. R. Palmer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Palmer, *The Improvement of Humanity: Education and the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); *The Two Tocquevilles, Father and Son: Hervé and Alexis de Tocqueville on the Coming of the French Revolution*, ed. and trans. Palmer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); *From Jacobin to Liberal: Marc-Antoine Jullien, 1775–1848*, ed. and trans. Palmer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Jean-Baptiste Say, *An Economist in Troubled Times: Writings*, ed. and trans. Palmer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹² R. R. Palmer, speech on the award of the Premio Feltrinelli (1990), quoted in Eduardo Tortarolo, “Eighteenth-Century Atlantic History Old and New,” *History of European Ideas* 34, 4 (2012): 374.

and no school of “the Atlantic Revolution” emerged. His use of “Western civilization” as an overarching framework led historians of the Left to tar him as an apologist for NATO, while his attacks on American conservatism put him out of favor with historians on the Right. His consistent association of democracy with modernity, and his presentation of the late eighteenth-century world as ideologically riven between revolution and counter-revolution, encouraged readings of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* as subtle Cold War propaganda shaped by modernization theory. Its omission of the Haitian Revolution and of Iberian America—not to mention the absence of the enslaved, women, and much cultural history—implied that Palmer was afraid to acknowledge the truly radical elements of the age of revolution, that he was blind to its exclusions and complacent about its failed promises. The general flight of students of the French Revolution away from cosmopolitan contexts and political history into revisionism and cultural explanations also left Palmer as an outlier even in his own professional community.

Fifty years on, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* looks like a dawn mistaken for a sunset. The recent rise of Atlantic history, which treats the peoples of Europe, the Americas, Africa, and the Caribbean as members of a single dynamic oceanic “world,” has reinforced Palmer’s argument for integration. Both the American and the French Revolutions are increasingly seen as transnational, even global, events whose origins must be traced back to the crisis of empires after the Seven Years’ War, much as Palmer had done. Historians now speak of a “Eurasian Revolution” or a “World Crisis” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and pinpoint the decades on either side of 1800 as the hinge of a “Great Divergence” in which the West began to pull ahead of Asia for the first time in centuries—a short-lived victory which has only recently gone into reverse. And it is becoming clearer that this was also the moment that inaugurated the Anthropocene, the geological era in which humanity has collectively affected the environment through the accelerating consumption of fossil fuels and the emission of greenhouse gases.

The Age of the Democratic Revolution appeared long before climate change became a headline issue, before China became a global economic powerhouse, and before historians generally began to turn away from nation-based historiography. Inspired by Palmer’s example, historians in the last decade have revived the age of revolutions—

democratic and economic, nationalist and patriotic, imperial and anti-imperial—as a productive and ongoing paradigm for research, even on areas he did not consider: for example, the Caribbean, Scandinavia, Southern Europe, Mexico, the Portuguese empire, South Asia, and the worlds of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In light of this work, Palmer’s chronology seems as arbitrary as his geography. All books must end somewhere, but Palmer’s cutoff date of 1800 raises more questions than it answers and now seems the weakest element of his work. No current account of the age of revolution would now conclude any earlier than 1804 (with Haitian independence) or 1810–11 (and the first revolutions in Spanish America), or even the 1840s (with the Opium Wars or the European springtime of 1848). As Palmer expanded horizons in space, so now they need to be extended in time.

Almost as outmoded is Palmer’s narrow definition of equality as the erasure of customary and inherited distinctions within a largely white, male political community. To be sure, this notion encompassed a great deal under a large analytical umbrella: anti-colonialism, anti-monarchism, anti-nobility, religious toleration, freedom of the press, and support for public education, among other causes. But it also omitted struggles fundamental to the era. “For some few [equality] included greater equality between men and women. Equality for ex-slaves and between races was not overlooked”: that is the sum of Palmer’s account of perhaps the two most transformative legacies of the age, even though he clearly knew of work on slave resistance, most notably C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938). Indigenous insurrection—such as the Tupac Amaru rebellion in the Andes (1780–83), the most bloody uprising of the era before the Haitian Revolution—barely appears. And Palmer did not allow legacies of violence and inequality that scarred the Atlantic world, especially in the slave societies of the Americas, to cloud his progressivist narrative.

Yet he has not been alone in his blind spots. For example, there is still no history of how the movements against all the major heritable forms of domination and subordination—monarchy, aristocracy, slavery, and gender differences—intersected with or diverged from one another. There is no synoptic account of the late eighteenth century as the age of *anti-democratic counter-revolution*. And the conceptual history of equality remains almost entirely unwritten. Few historians have Palmer’s command of languages

or his narrative flair; fewer still share his commitment to history as a critical social science directed towards public enlightenment and political reform. Nonetheless, all can learn from his example of pursuing big themes across wide stretches of both time and space.

The prescience of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* has only become clearer since 1989 and its relevance has increased since the Arab Spring and the explosion of popular protest across the world since 2011. Little of the energy of these movements has been directed towards kings and lords, of course, even if more than a seventh of the world's countries do retain some form of hereditary aristocracy or monarchy. Nor do they often focus on actually existing forms of slavery, despite the fact that as many as 27 million people worldwide still live in some form of bondage. Much of the contemporary anger and desire for reform focuses instead on economic and social inequality, which has grown rapidly within most countries even as the inequalities between them have become less marked. The age of revolution is not over: its fruits are just unevenly distributed around the world.

In the closing pages of his book, Palmer approvingly quoted Tocqueville: “inequalities of wealth and income ... would be reduced by revolution or otherwise. Such has in fact proved to be the case.” Half a century later, in a more chastened, more rapacious, and more economically turbulent era, we can see how mistaken that prediction turned out to be. Still, we can learn from such hopes and from the histories written to sustain them. *Pace* Palmer (and indeed Hegel, Marx, or Tocqueville), history itself has no purpose, whether freedom, democracy, equality, or any similar consummation. Yet the discipline of history does have a purpose: to call the present to account at the bar of the past. In light of Palmer's ambitious, enduring, and fertile effort to do just that, it would be hard to think of a more apt accolade for *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* than the one given by the great Italian historian of the revolutionary era, Franco Venturi: “a masterpiece about the revolutions of the past born of an inspiring debate with the revolutions of our own time.”¹³

¹³ Franco Venturi, citation for the award of the Premio Feltrinelli to R. R. Palmer (1990), quoted in Tortarolo, “Eighteenth-Century Atlantic History Old and New,” 374.

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