

# Unfulfilled promises

R. R. Palmer's 'The Age of the Democratic Revolution' fifty years on

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Most professional historians now worship the archive, suspect synthesis and shun presentism. Not so Robert Roswell 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, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* (1959–64), which became one of the enduring monuments of twentieth-century anglophone historiography, Palmer told an interviewer: "Historians address themselves to the hard questions of policy as against what was narrative history. Today history is interpretative and critical". This position was hardly the credo of the conservative cold warrior Palmer was sometimes taken to be: indeed, it reflected the legacy of his mentor Carl Becker, a historian of broad themes who punctured the pieties of Right and Left alike and who believed firmly in the historian's social mission. "Let us use the revolutionary era to investigate what is most on our minds", Palmer wrote, "to find out what a world is like that is divided by revolution and war."

R. R. Palmer had particularly little patience for methodological nationalism. He disagreed strongly with 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 noted that the world of the first revolutionary age was *more* integrated than that of their own time. His history was no 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 first volume of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* focused on the American Revolution; 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 question of how revolution spread and was resisted. In his first volume, *The Challenge* (1959), 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 second, *The Struggle* (1964), 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,



"Triomphe de l'armée parisienne réunis au peuple à son retour de Versailles à Paris le 6 octobre 1789", a contemporary etching

within months, Napoleon's victory at the Battle of Marengo tipped the balance: "Democracy in Europe had not exactly succeeded," Palmer wrote, "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: toward the short-lived victory for "democratic" forces.

The chronological and geographical division of Palmer's two volumes determined their quite different receptions. *The Challenge* 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. By contrast, *The Struggle* 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 view 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 musical 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.

Even as Palmer was completing his work, trends in historical writing were turning

against him. Constitutional history and the history of war were already embattled fields by 1964. In the five-year gap between *The Challenge* and *The Struggle*, three major 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. A year later, 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. The next year, E. P. Thompson's social history of the Industrial Revolution, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), inspired densely archival and intimate narratives of reconstructed experiences, a history from below uninflected by such grand abstractions as "aristocracy" and "democracy", and more concerned with locales like West Yorkshire than with the fortunes of Western civilization.

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. Nonetheless, it 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 brief spell in academic administration, Palmer returned in his later works to the French Revolu-

tion and to studies of individual Frenchmen, but never again attempted grand synthesis.

Palmer died in 2002 at the age of ninety-three. He had witnessed the collapse of Communism, which he viewed 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". However, he did not live long enough to see his conception of historical writing vindicated. In his own lifetime, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* was little imitated, and no school of "the Atlantic Revolution" emerged.

Palmer's 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 favour 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.

Palmer's omission of the Haitian Revolution and of Iberian America – not to mention the absence of the enslaved, women and much cultural history – implied that he 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 among French historians: shockingly, there is still no French translation of his masterpiece.

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 described them. 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 that has only recently gone into reverse.

Inspired by *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, the age of revolutions – democratic and economic, nationalist and patriotic, imperial and anti-imperial – has revived in the last decade as a productive and ongoing paradigm for research. This is true even for areas Palmer 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 the light of this ongoing work, Palmer's chronology seems as arbitrary as his geography. All books must end somewhere, but Palmer's cut-off 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 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).

Almost as outmoded is Palmer's narrow definition of equality as the expunging of customary and inherited distinctions within a largely white, male political community. To be sure, this notion encompassed a great deal under a broad analytical umbrella: anticolonialism, anti-monarchism, opposition to aristocracy, 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 Túpac Amaru rebellion in the Andes (1780–83), the most bloody uprising of the era before the Haitian Revolu-

tion – barely appears. And the legacies of violence and inequality that scarred the Atlantic world, especially in the slave societies of the Americas, did not cloud Palmer's progressivist narrative.

There is still no history of how the movements against all the main 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.

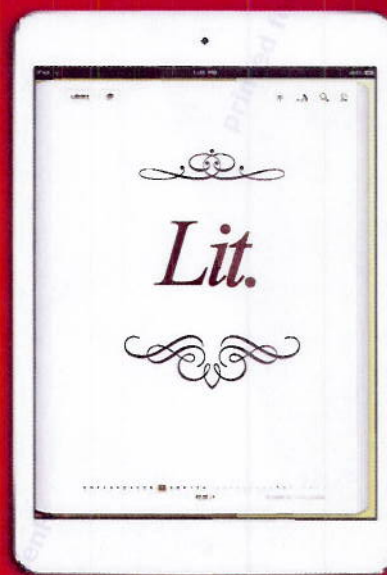
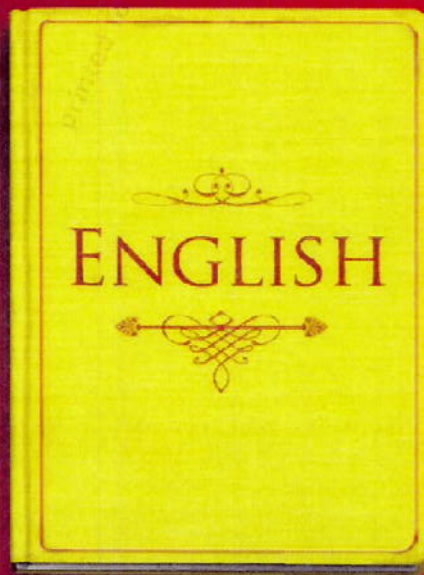
The prescience of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* has only become clearer since 1989 and its relevance has increased since the Arab Spring and the explosion of popular protest across the world since 2011. Little of the energy of these movements has been directed at kings and lords, of course. Nor do they often focus on actually existing forms of slavery, despite the fact that as many as 29 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 work, 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". 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 can have a purpose: to call the present to account at the bar of the past. In the light of R. R. 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* in its anniversary year than the one accorded it by Franco Venturi, the greatest Italian historian of the revolutionary era: "a masterpiece about the revolutions of the past born of an inspiring debate with the revolutions of our own time".

*This is an edited version of the foreword to a new edition of The Age of the Democratic Revolution, which will be published in April by Princeton University Press.*



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