Review Articles

If We Think Globally, Should We Write Local, National, or Imperial History?

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War, Empire and Slavery, 1770-1830. RICHARD BESSEL, NICHOLAS GUYATT & JANE RENDALL (eds.) Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xv + 299 pp. (Cloth US$ 85.00)

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Questions of definition and scale are coming to claim equal prominence with questions about inclusion and exclusion in discussions of the period of widespread political and social change that was once unproblematically referred to as the “Age of Democratic Revolutions.” The essays in these two anthologies address both sets of questions. Almost all ask who different cultures or polities included or excluded and how they explained the exclusions. They also address the question of scale. On the one hand, they move beyond the Atlantic basin—the traditional site of studies of the Age of Revolution—to consider how we should conceptualize the relationships among the different regions throughout the globe that were influenced by European expansion during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, various essays ask this broad question of
places of different size. Some balance careful attention to the specifics of
local histories with a global perspective, while others work on a national,
imperial, or continental scale. If none of the essays solves the riddle of how
to strike this balance—it’s not, in truth, a riddle amenable to an ultimate
solution—they exemplify, especially when read together, the different ana-
lytical trade-offs inherent in various approaches to the problem.

Robert Palmer famously chronicled the waves of political upheaval that
led to the independence of the United States, the creation of the French
Republic and then Empire, and the Spanish American wars of indepen-
dence in a way that inadvertently called attention to questions about who
was included and who excluded from the new nations that emerged in that
era. Many came to see his failure to discuss the Haitian Revolution in his
opus (1969) as indicative of a blind spot for the racial (and by extension
other) exclusions that marred the democratic revolutions he championed.
Could that problem be remedied by incorporating the Haitian story into
the broader narrative? This question helped stimulate the remarkable out-
pouring of scholarship on revolutionary Saint Domingue and Haiti over
the last thirty years (including Julius S. Scott III’s influential dissertation
[1986] and important books by Joan Dayan [1995], Laurent Dubois [2004,
2012], John Garrigus [2006], David Geggus [1982, 2002], Stewart King [2001],
Jeremy Popkin [2010], and others). The increasing prominence of Haiti in
the histories of the Age of Revolution has both reflected and contributed
to the established consensus in “mainstream” scholarship on the centrality
of the history of the Caribbean to the burgeoning field of Atlantic History.
Some historians insist that including Haiti, while necessary, cannot substi-
tute for a more fundamental interrogation of Palmer’s optimistic descrip-
tion of the revolutions as “democratic.”

All of this work has contributed to a consensus about the importance
of Caribbean slavery to Atlantic History that has taken hold as a growing
chorus of historians has questioned the coherence of Atlantic History as
a field of study. One of the strongest challenges to the Atlantic paradigm
has come from scholars who point out that Atlantic societies cannot be
separated from the rest of the world, that just as the Atlantic connects to
the Pacific and Indian Oceans, so Atlantic societies interacted with peoples
beyond the basin. They argue that we should study World History rather
than Atlantic World History, because studying the Atlantic basin without
adequate attention to the ties between Atlantic societies and the rest of
the globe, especially the Middle East and Asia, paints a misleadingly partial picture. Some pursue this argument through the lens of imperial histories: one cannot understand British Atlantic societies without attention to British expansion in India and East Asia; nor can one adequately understand Dutch and Iberian expansion while limiting attention to the Americas. Others insist that one cannot understand the choices made by Atlantic European powers without attending to the fortunes of the non-Atlantic Ottoman, Russian, and German-speaking polities. Still others argue that important insights can be gained by seeing the military, dynastic, ideological, fiscal, and other administrative challenges at the heart of the classic Atlantic revolutions within the context of similar challenges faced by contemporary Middle Eastern and Asian societies. This perspective suggests that 1760 to 1840 is better understood as a period of “world crisis” (Armitage & Subrahmanyam, p. xxiii) rather than as an age of Atlantic democratic revolutions.

The two volumes reviewed here underscore the widespread dislocation and upheaval experienced in different African, American, Asian, and European societies. With individual national or local case studies ranging across Africa, the Americas (North, South and the Caribbean), and various parts of Eurasia, these collections push readers to make connections beyond their personal areas of geographical expertise and to think seriously about how the forces of revolution, war, and imperial expansion shaped the globe during that era. Most of the essays in The Age of Revolutions in Global Context are synthetic discussions of the period in a single nation or empire (the United States, France, Haiti, Java, China) or region (Iberian America, the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia), though Maya Jasanoff’s essay comparing the American Loyalist and French Émigré diasporas and Juan Cole’s discussion of creolizations in French-occupied Egypt are less broadly synthetic in approach. In that sense, those two fine essays might have fit more naturally in War, Empire and Slavery, which is dominated by case studies of the effects of war and revolution in a wide range of specific places, including Haiti, France, Buenos Aires, South Africa, St. Louis (U.S.A.), Russia, Iran, and the island of Grenada. Each of the essays in both anthologies offers a valuable reading of the issue it addresses. Rather than attempt to summarize roughly twenty-five arguments in a single review, I will focus on general claims made by three of the authors—C.A. Bayly, Lynn Hunt, and
Joseph C. Miller—to highlight the themes and problems that run through both collections.

Bayly’s work serves as the connective tissue joining the two collections, in part because he writes an agenda-defining essay in each one—the “Afterword” for *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context* and the first substantive chapter in *War, Empire and Slavery*—but more importantly, because his seminal *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* is so important in framing the move from the Atlantic to the Global. In his essay in *War, Empire and Slavery*, Bayly articulates a specific version of the general question raised in both books: “how far should we widen the lens through which we observe the supposedly Euro-American revolutions after 1776?” (p. 32). Lynn Hunt raises a similar issue when she warns readers to guard against losing “all the things we have been able to learn from local and national studies,” especially the much richer understanding of racial and gender systems and subaltern agency that is found in recent work, by turning to global history. “The global turn should not just offer a broader or bigger view; it has to offer a better one” (p. 34).

The essays in these books embody the tension that Bayly and Hunt point toward. Almost all place their topics in a global context and use that context to ask interesting questions. In *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context*, Gary Nash uses the greater international currency of the anti-imperial thrust of the American Revolution (as opposed to internal struggles over power in the new nation) to suggest that what U.S. historians often see as the more conservative aspects of the Independence movement—the struggle for home rule—were more radical in effect than the struggle over who would rule at home. His is the first of several essays, including Jeremy Adelman’s on Iberian America and David Geggus’s on the Caribbean and Juan Cole’s on Egypt, to suggest that the most fundamental changes that occurred in the era often came as unintended consequences, rather than as the preconceived effect of actions inspired by political ideologies. In each case broad political and ideological currents got redirected into local streams where they created unanticipated historical change. Uncertain and nonlinear connections among local trends and international forces also predominate in the essays discussing Asia. Robert Travers traces the way that British and French intervention in South Asia accelerated and exacerbated pre-existing trends toward “political decentralization and regional state formation,” (p. 146), which ultimately contributed to the construction of the British Raj. Peter Carey shows that Dutch and British colonial interventions undercut
the cultural power of Javanese court traditions, and Kenneth Pommerantz untangles the ways in which the Qing dynasty sought to address fiscal and military challenges that paralleled but did not coincide with problems faced by contemporary European powers. Though the individual authors do not make this point explicitly, most of the essays negotiate the complicated terrain highlighted by Lynn Hunt’s warning as they seek to fit complicated and idiosyncratic local pictures into a global framework.

The essays in *War, Empire and Slavery* engage with the same set of challenges. Laurent Dubois foregrounds the difficulties involved in untangling two very different conceptions of history and politics—one rooted in Europe and the other in Africa—when trying to make sense of the course of emancipation in Haiti. His essay is followed by four local studies that explore specific events or discuss important individuals. Lyman Johnson explores the way that rumor carried international events into Buenos Aires, creating a state of paranoia that produced what was probably a conspiracy scare. Nigel Worden analyzes an 1808 slave conspiracy at the Cape Colony in present-day South Africa, showing how conspirators used both indigenous and external semiotic systems to organize their uprising. Marie-Jeanne Rossignol’s reading of Jacques-Pierre Brissot’s failed effort to build an antislavery international provides a useful reminder of the way that narrowly national interests could undercut transnational efforts, just as Julie Winch’s case study of a mixed race family in St. Louis illustrates the unpredictable ways that changing imperial boundaries opened and closed opportunities for individuals who crossed them. The subjects of each of these essays were influenced by large transnational forces that alternately opened new possibilities or limited available options. The book closes with five essays, each of which discusses processes of identity formation at different sites, from the Spanish-American imagination (Rebecca Earle) and Grenada (Caitlin Anderson) in the Americas to Russia (Janet Hartley), Iran (Joanna de Groot), and the Portuguese Empire (Foteini Vlachou). In each case the author show that people dealt with the specific challenges they faced by drawing on cultural resources from both local and international sources.

The blandness of that generalization does a disservice to the fascinating insights and arguments offered in several of the essays, and it suggests a corollary to Lynn Hunt’s warning that bigger views are not necessarily better: broader perspectives are not necessarily more interesting. As we move from fascinating stories of people seeking social, political, or cultural space
in which to build more meaningful lives to overarching generalizations about the strengthening state or the growing importance of different governments' relative ability to mobilize their societies' fiscal resources, there is a danger that the global turn will become a re-turn, replicating earlier historiographical imbalances that placed imperial metropoles and political elites at the center of History. The editors of both of these volumes have worked hard to resist that danger, and the individual essays succeed, but their successes highlight a yawning gap separating our conceptualizations of global history and our understandings of the ways actual people living on the globe struggle to make meaning in their lives.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that one of the leading historians of Africa—Joseph C. Miller—offers the most promising way to think in global terms about how to bridge that gap in his essay in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context*. Faced with explaining how to understand sub-Saharan Africa, which seems at first glance to have been largely removed from Atlantic Revolutions, during the Age of Atlantic Revolutions, he manages in a single brief essay to use Africans' responses to challenges of the Age to cast a de-familiarizing light on better known western narratives, and to offer a powerful way to think about the forces shaping global history during that period and the different ways different peoples responded. From the perspective of Africa, the age was characterized by an explosion of European and European-American credit, and the revolutionary effect was to transform relationships once characterized by mutuality and reciprocity into relationships characterized by freebooting capitalism and the use of commodity exchange to gain commercial advantage. This financed the militarization of African societies much as it financed the militarization of European and Asian societies. The African case is particularly instructive as a comparison to European and American cases that are treated as the norm, because Africans strove to come to grips with these forces using a restorative rather than a progressive vision of history.

Africans did not find more humane ways of surmounting the challenges of rampant commercialization than did Americans, Asians, or Europeans. Their societies were turned upside down as slaving intensified and warrior states emerged to defend themselves by preying on others. If there was a communalist answer to predatory commercial capitalism in the age of revolution, Africans did not find it. Miller's essay does not offer a historical road not taken that could have produced a more humane world order. Instead,
it offers a historiographical road to take, by providing the kinds of clearly conceptualized links between broad global forces and the lives of common people. Miller cannot, of course, create those links in a single essay; instead he points toward the connections that he has spent a career uncovering. In doing so his essay best exemplifies what Armitage and Subrahmanyam call for in the introduction to their anthology: he begins to craft “an account of the chains of causation, modes of connection, and means of comparison” that will be necessary to see the age of revolutions “as a whole and on a global scale” (p. xiv), but to do so without losing sight of the human scale on which residents of the globe lived their lives.

References