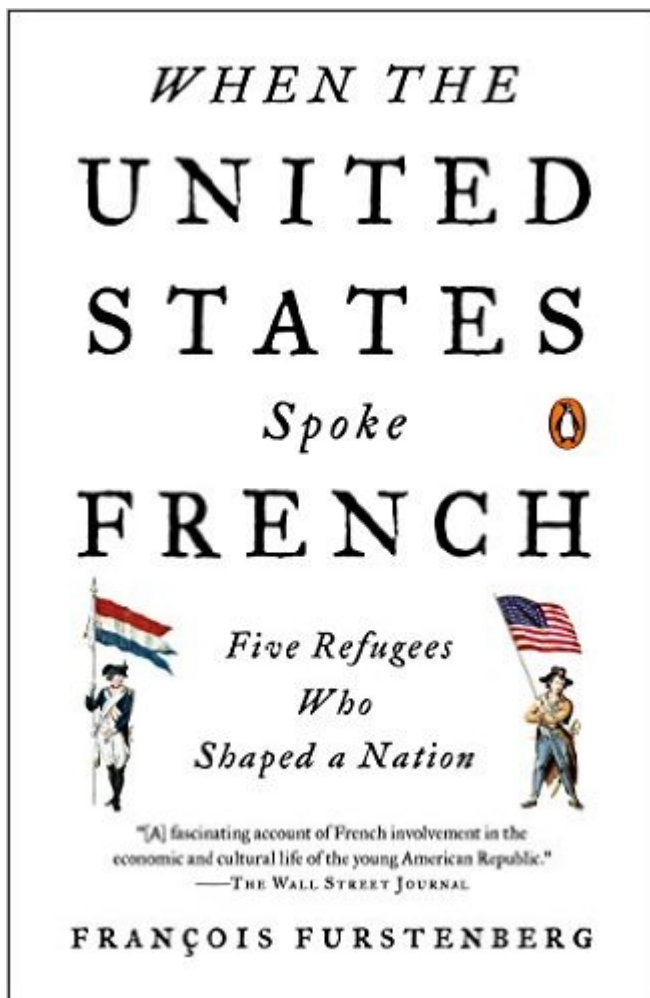


The American Republic and the French Revolution



✘ François Furstenberg, *When the United States Spoke French: Five Refugees Who Shaped a Nation*. New York: Penguin Press, 2014. 512 pp., \$20.

In some ways, historians of the American Revolution took the global turn long before it was *en vogue*. Their subject all but required it. The American republic was forged amidst competing empires and the seminal moment of its revolution was declaring its independence from one of them. Yet, the political history of the American founding remains a largely national one. The English—and the enlightened Scots—provided pools of thought from which the colonists fished ideas, sometimes with origins outside the Anglo world. But the story is often filtered through Britain and, more importantly, almost always turns out uniquely American.

Meanwhile, prominent historians of France are recently pointing to the global roots, spurs, and influences of the French Revolution as the most promising path to new understandings of the long-studied event. A 2013 volume edited by

Lynn Hunt, Suzanne Desan, and William Max Nelson—*The French Revolution in Global Perspective*—offers an array of essays seeking to trace the economic sinews, imperial tendencies, and, crucially, intellectual threads feeding into and streaming out of the country in the late eighteenth century. Some of the most promising essays in the collection explore the links between French and American revolutionaries and the course of these two events. The work points to one path for potentially enriching the political history of the American founding; the exchange of ideas between France and the United States is “ripe for re-exploration,” as David Bell suggested in a recent essay in *French Historical Studies*.



Seth Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. 288 pp., \$39.50.

Would the political history of the American Revolution look different if scholars of the United States took up this task? Three recent books on the influence of the French Revolution in the early American republic suggest that it would. Francois Furstenberg's *When the United States Spoke French: Five Refugees Who Shaped a Nation* (2014), Seth Cotlar's *Tom Paine's America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic* (2011), and Philipp Ziesche's *Cosmopolitan Patriots: Americans in Paris in the Age of Revolution* (2010), treat the early republic alongside the French Revolution, revealing the perspective to be gained from integrating France into interpretations of the American founding. These books examine American politics in relation to France during the 1790s, after most historians agree the revolution had technically ended, yet in taking this approach the authors challenge the boundaries of what constitutes the revolutionary period in North America. They also suggest, perhaps unwittingly, a comparison with the French Revolution that has yet to be fully explored: the common problem of defining a revolution—both its chronology and its character.

Historians' tendency to focus on American perceptions of France in the early national period is likely due to the chronological concurrence of events; the French stormed the Bastille only after George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the United States. For decades, historians have recognized the important role relations with France and perceptions of French events played in domestic political polarization. The early national press was filled with discussions of France, Congress teemed with debates over relations with the country, and political societies proliferated proclaiming support for their French brethren. More recently, historians have begun exploring the impact of the slave-led revolution that broke out in Saint Domingue, showing how it shaped American perceptions of their own revolution and that of the French. Leaving Haiti out of the story is certainly no longer a viable approach when integrating American history into the Atlantic context. And yet, the Atlantic

framework still has yet to fully embrace the Franco-American sphere on an east-west axis. Furstenberg, Cotlar, and Ziesche show how bringing the French Revolution into the American story necessitates a reconsideration of the rigid distinction between the revolutionary and early republican periods. If this distinction is softened, comparative and transnational analysis of the French and American Revolutions can yield new interpretations of the political history of the American founding and the nature of the revolution.



Philipp Ziesche, *Cosmopolitan Patriots: Americans in Paris in the Age of Revolution*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010. 256 pp., \$43.50.

It is the pervasive French presence in the early republic that Francois Furstenberg takes as the premise for his study of early America in *When the United States Spoke French*. Basing his story in Philadelphia, with the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys as ever-present imagined—and sometimes actual—destinations, Furstenberg follows the trail of French influence deep into the nascent United States. The book begins with the image of “revolutionary sparks, set off by the great explosion in France, fly[ing] upward,” some of which, Furstenberg sets out to show, fell in North America (1). These sparks, in Furstenberg’s study, were first and foremost the moderate *émigrés* reformers who fled the radicalizing violence of the French Revolution and the cultural and financial influences they brought to the American republic. Furstenberg traces the lives of this handful of men, who forged a vibrant French community amid the elite Federalist fever for French culture and capital in Philadelphia, only to end up fleeing their adoptive country and, for many of them, take prominent places in the Napoleonic regime (376). While most books on the early republic tend to trace American perceptions of France, Furstenberg uses French perceptions of America to try to further illuminate the country’s evolution. The approach yields new insight into the transformation of the American republic from a fragmented state into a unified country (16). Yet, being told through the journeys of French nationals, the book perhaps sheds more light on the course of French politics, the successive contested iterations of revolution, and the shifting strategic underpinnings of French involvement in North America.

Of course, elite *émigrés* and their cultural and financial connections were not the only sparks that flew from France and landed in the United States. Political events and ideas were omnipresent, though in the background of Furstenberg’s study. Foregrounding the influence of French style among Federalists, *émigré* land speculation, personal social connections, and high diplomacy, Furstenberg shifts focus away from the popular fervor for French republicanism and how it shaped American political development. The *émigrés* found a Philadelphia full of “Americans seeking to live like French aristocrats,” where trade between French and American merchants was surging and the moderate enlightenment spirit of the early French Revolution continued to

thrive (95, 107). At the same time, though, they confronted a popular passion for the French Revolution that they had been trying to escape (115). This is not entirely lost in Furstenberg's book, which dedicates many passages to French envoy Edmond Charles Genêt and diplomacy out of doors. Furstenberg also reminds us that many Americans wanted to enter a war against Great Britain in the mid-1790s, viewing it as an extension of the revolution—a perspective that makes the decade itself look a little more revolutionary (51). Yet, he does not pursue this tension as much as it begs to be investigated. The strength of the study is undoubtedly that it pushes beyond the usual investigation of popular perceptions of France in the press to show another, competing version of France that was perhaps just as prominent in the early republic. American politicians were in constant conversation with French figures, but they were those who had led moderate reform efforts in the early National Assembly and found themselves at odds with the France that was increasingly celebrated in American streets. By illuminating the influence of elite French figures connected to prominent Americans, Furstenberg effectively shows how France in early America was not one country, idea, or force, but many.

In linking his study to individuals who travelled back and forth across the Atlantic, Furstenberg followed a formula common among historians seeking an exchange of ideas and experiences. The title of Seth Cotlar's 2011 book on democratic thinking in the early republic speaks to this approach, but takes a very different methodological tack. In *Tom Paine's America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic*, Cotlar attempts a history of ideas from the bottom up by examining the development of democratic thought in relation to the French Revolution (9). Focused, again, on the early national period, Cotlar uses Paine and his publications as signposts to trace a transformation in thinking about democracy and national identity from the early 1790s through the turn of the century. Cotlar argues that the outbreak of the French Revolution and its universal utopianism shaped democratic discourse in America, providing the opponents of Federalists a legitimate angle from which to critique what they saw as an abandonment of the American Revolution's potential (67). In the process, Republican newspaper editors played a crucial role in translating local struggles into the context of global ideological battles by linking them to events in France (73). In Cotlar's study, the ideological and political revolution is, in many respects, still being fought well into the 1790s.

The book's arc ultimately traces a bend away from the radical infusions of French ideas into American democratic discourse and thinking. Cotlar argues that the French Revolution sparked debates about the meaning and role of democracy in the American republic, animating struggles to define the nature of the American nation and the values underpinning it. Americans experimented with radical forms of political organizing following French examples, Cotlar argues, but conceptions of democracy first forged in explicit relation to or even emulation of the French soon turned against cosmopolitan and French ideals. Early in the 1790s, Republicans adopted associational models to advance conceptions of active citizenship, which Cotlar says they perceived to be

similar and related to the Jacobin movement in France (171). Yet, 1794 proved a turning point, after which political societies and associations were decried as unnecessary based on the notion that America was not like France (189). Such a shift away from cosmopolitan, radical thinking and the linking of the American with the French Revolution, left someone like Tom Paine an outcast in the country he had been instrumental in founding (211).

Both Cotlar and Furstenberg focus in some manner on the influence of the French on Americans. There remains remarkably little scholarly work on influences of American Revolutionary thinking and experience abroad, especially in France. Some historians have cast a cursory glance at potential repercussions, including Furstenberg in the first chapter of his book, but serious analysis remains sparse. Studies that attempt to trace influence from America to France are often based on French individuals who fought in the American war of independence and then played a political role in the French Revolution. Most common among these figures is the Marquis de Lafayette, who has been the subject of many biographies that seek to treat the revolution in France as a failed attempt to implement American ideas. Some historians of revolutionary America, including Joyce Appleby and Jon Butler, have made gestures toward the importance of American revolutionary thought on the French, but their perspectives are firmly rooted in the United States with too little effort devoted to tracing the travel and iteration of ideas to the European continent.

In his 2010 book, *Cosmopolitan Patriots: Americans in Paris in the Age of Revolution*, Ziesche addresses this lacuna, picking up cosmopolitanism as a lens through which to examine the historical emergence of the idea of America first as a global example, then as an exception. Interested in the tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in the early republic, Ziesche carries out his study through individual Americans who spent time in Paris in the 1790s in order to trace the divergence between ideology and practice in regards to exporting American political thinking. In many ways Ziesche's book takes an approach similar to that of Furstenberg, following elite individuals across the Atlantic in the opposite direction. Though he concludes in the introduction that "even at the height of the Franco-American friendship, the role of Americans in French politics remained largely symbolic," Ziesche argues that American experiences in France ultimately shaped identity and political thinking back in the Western Hemisphere (5). The nearly contemporaneous example of the French Revolution, in his telling, was constitutive of American thinking about its own founding and the formation of its ideological identity. By the late 1790s, Americans distrusted the "cosmopolitan patriots" who remained in Paris, seeing them as "examples of the corrosive influence" of the French Revolution on the American republic (115). Federalists, Ziesche argues, used the turn against the French following the 1797 XYZ Affair to begin attacking cosmopolitanism as a force that undermined domestic national ties (120). The Federalist interpretation of the French Revolution as a failed application of republican principles, contrasted with American success, remains, Ziesche concludes, a trope to this day.

Ziesche engages in some degree of comparative analysis, arguing that both countries maintained a paradoxical attachment to cosmopolitan exportation of republican ideals while practicing what he calls a "politics of exclusion" in the 1790s (12). By mid-decade, he writes, political elites in both countries were attempting to reach a stable political situation, rejecting the more utopian elements of revolutionary ideology in favor of consolidating power in the hands of the few. "The people appeared as both the source of legitimacy and an agent of disorder as political elites in America and France tenaciously clung to the ideal of a united, harmonious, and stable political domain," he writes (91). In this vein, Ziesche compares the French Constitution of 1795 to the American Constitution and Federalist interpretation of politics as promising "stability at the price of limiting popular involvement in the decision-making process" (106). However, he argues there was a major divergence by the turn of the century between the ways each country viewed its revolution. Americans began to see their story as unique, while the French moved ahead with a conviction in the universal applicability of their revolutionary model. Americans remain, he argues, unsure of how to relate their revolution to others: as a model or an exception (169).

This diagnosis is borne out in the historiography. While Ziesche engages in some degree of comparative analysis, the relationship between the French and American Revolutions remains a largely untapped field, in need of serious scholarly consideration. The comparative framework, however, is by no means entirely new. At the height of the Cold War, Robert R. Palmer presented a two-volume interpretation of what he called the "Age of Democratic Revolution," linking American independence to the French Revolution and a host of others in Western Europe. Identifying a common set of struggles against entrenched elites, Palmer made the case that the last four decades of the eighteenth century witnessed a "single revolutionary movement" across what he identified as "Atlantic civilization." This movement was essentially democratic in that there was a rising sentiment against rigid social hierarchy in favor of equality and the limited delegation of governmental authority. In 1965, French historian Jacques Godechot also argued that there was one "age of Atlantic Revolution," based on the conviction that the causes and objectives of each national movement were fundamentally the same. At the height of the Cold War and amid efforts to construct a common Western identity, the conception of a singular, unified "age of revolution" was undoubtedly alluring.

Since then, however, historians have tended to emphasize national particularity and caution against placing too much stock in comparison, much less commonality. As history continues a disciplinary turn away from the social sciences, where it had been firmly nestled in the era of Palmer and Godechot, comparative analysis seems to pose the threat of flattening context and contingency by encouraging the identification of patterns across time and space. Perhaps because of this, historians of the American founding largely continue to ignore this approach. Since Palmer's mid-century analysis, and Patrice Higonnet's 1988 *Sister Republics*, few projects have put the revolutions in conversation. Some historians of France have recently fruitfully integrated

comparative analysis into their work, using the counter-example of the American Revolution to help explain, for example, why the French descended into the period known as the Terror. There has also been a proliferation of volumes riding a wave of Atlantic histories and embracing the now ubiquitous global history trend. The bulk of these books contain essays each dedicated to one revolution, with an introduction and conclusion hinting at the possibility of deeper comparative and transnational analysis. One notable exception to this, which suggests the possibility for reviving comparative historical analysis, is the recently released volume *Scripting Revolution: A historical approach to the comparative study of revolutions* (2015), edited by Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein. Still, aside from the genre of Lafayette biography, Susan Dunn's *Sister Revolutions: French Lightning, American Light* (1999) is the only recent monograph-length study to treat the French and American Revolutions together, and her analysis is not too difficult to guess from the title.

But comparative studies of the French and American Revolutions need not merely reinforce an American success story nearly as old as the United States itself. Part of what makes the political history of the American revolutionary period exciting are the evolving meanings attached to the ideas and values espoused by revolutionaries. The development of these ideas in different contexts opened possibilities for reimagining not only politics, but also social, economic, and cultural paradigms. Contrary to its reputation, comparison can throw contingency into sharp relief and help illuminate the context contributing to the formation of ideas and sociopolitical structures. Focused comparative histories could break open the field of early American political history, allowing for new chronologies and interpretations of the relationship between political thinking and experience.

As Furstenberg, Cotlar, and Ziesche's studies show, if American political thinking and practice are considered alongside developments in France, the very chronology of the revolution comes into question. And if the revolution does not end in 1783, or even 1787, its political history can look quite different. Looking at the exchange of ideas and experiences among French and American figures helps illuminate this potential; comparison should be adopted as a tool to better understand both similar and unique evolutions of political thinking and culture in both national contexts. Both of these revolutions fundamentally redefined the foundations of political legitimacy, basing the validity of government on its accountability to the population over which it ruled. Though Palmer and Godechot wrote in the context of the Cold War struggle, their observation that the late eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of representative democracy as a new idea should not be dismissed. Examining the evolution of these political maxims and institutions through a comparative lens could illuminate the nature of political principles that have come to serve as foundations of modern Western societies.

The birth of a nation is not only or always a national story. Perhaps because the founding is an ongoing component in the formation of national community it tends to be told as one. But it is time to start thinking about the American

Revolution outside the thirteen colonies, the English-speaking Atlantic, or even continental North America. Exploring intellectual, political, and cultural connections and comparisons with the French Revolution has the potential to offer a fresh perspective on the causes, course, and outcomes of the creation of the American republic.

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