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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.

the Western world”.¹⁰ He also warned that overplaying the role of the history of ideas would divert research and that a more accurate definition of what an Atlantic civilization really was about should be worked out in geographical and theoretical terms. It was Godechot who provided Palmer with the perspective that was lacking in Kraus' book. Invited by Palmer, Godechot spent the academic year 1954–1955 at Princeton University, where Palmer was since 1936. Godechot, trained as a historian of the French revolution, published in 1947 a history of the Atlantic Ocean when he was teaching at the French naval academy.¹¹ Palmer knew and appreciated this path-breaking work before he invited Godechot to Princeton.¹² Palmer was basically grappling for a new understanding of the French revolution which he reached in the early 1950s. His 1954 “Reflections on the French revolution” forcefully made the point that “not all revolutionary agitation today is inspired by the Kremlin, and not all such agitation in the 1790s was due to the machinations of revolutionary Paris. [...] The point, at present, is simply that revolutionary aims and sympathies existed throughout Europe and America”.¹³ It became clear to Palmer that there was a political and social space, no matter how diverse, sharing common features across the Atlantic, “from the Mississippi to the Milanese and beyond”¹⁴ and that the revolutionary events in the 1780s and 1790s must be viewed in their mutual connections. Understandably, Palmer joined forces with Godechot at Princeton. Together they wrote the long paper that was delivered at the 10th International Conference of the Historical Sciences in Rome in 1955.¹⁵ Palmer and Godechot elaborated on the idea of an “Atlantic civilization” and suggested that the British and French colonies, the Spanish and Portuguese colonies and the European continent formed a unified civilizational area. According to them, in the age of the enlightenment links between Europe and America were very close. They shared cultural elements, essentially the leading ideas of the Jewish-Christian civilization, Roman law and Greek reason. This unity collapsed with the diverging evolution of the different parts of the Atlantic civilization in the 19th century. The culmination of this unity and the beginning of its decline was the succession of revolutionary movements that shattered the traditional systems of power on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁶ Reactions to Palmer's and Godechot's paper were mostly very critical, in some cases hostile. Hobsbawm's reply was symbolic of the Cold Age intellectual climate: to him the very notion of an Atlantic civilization was invented to justify the existence of the NATO (on that same occasion, Hobsbawm commented that the Atlantic area could be defined as that part of the world in which witches were burnt).¹⁷ Palmer himself later admitted that he was surprised by the very cool reception their paper met with.¹⁸ The books by Godechot (*La Grande Nation* was published in 1956) and *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* which built on the ideas presented at the Rome conference never really overcame the distrust originated by that paper. Left-wing historians were particularly vitriolic.¹⁹ In 1979 Palmer acknowledged that his interpretation of the Atlantic revolution as the founding moment of a democratic culture met with strong resistance and that it was far from being widely accepted.²⁰ This is probably an appropriate formulation. In 1963 Peter Amann edited a collection of essays focusing on Palmer's thesis. While expressing his interest in the notion of “Democratic Revolution of the West” taking place in the last quarter of the 18th century, Amann stressed in his introduction that even those scholars who shared Palmer's interpretation in very broad terms, were careful in pointing out their own different interpretation of those same events. Cobban, Calkin, Wangermann, Göhring among the others, distanced themselves from Palmer in their essays.²¹ A generation later, the notion of a democratic, supranational revolution was again employed, this time as a notion that could expose the insufficiencies of Palmer's perspective. According to the contributors to *Women and politics in the age of the democratic revolution* Palmer's book stands out for its neglect of the gender issues.²² According to Jaime E. Rodriguez “Spain and its American possessions constituted a part of the Atlantic world” and their role in the democratic transformation should be properly considered in contrast to Palmer's disregard.²³ Unlike Godechot, who consistently followed a transnational perspective in his works after *La Grande Nation*, Palmer rarely ventured again on the ground of the comparative

¹⁰ *American Historical Review* 55, n. 4 (1950), 868–870 (Michael Kraus, *The Atlantic Civilization: Eighteenth-Century Origins* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1949)).

¹¹ See Jacques Godechot, *Histoire de l'Atlantique* (Paris, Bordas, 1947), that in the final chapter evoked ‘an Atlantic civilization ... based on the humanism of Old Europe revised by American machinism (*machinisme*)’, 36–7.

¹² ‘American Historians Remember Jacques Godechot. Robert Forster, R. R. Palmer, James Friguglietti, Emmet Kennedy,’ *French Historical Studies*, 16, n. 4 (1990), 882.

¹³ Palmer, ‘Reflections on the French Revolution,’ *Political Science Quarterly*, 57, n. 1 (1952), 64–80, quote p. 66.

¹⁴ Palmer, *Reflections on the French Revolution*, 80.

¹⁵ Karl Dietrich Erdmann, ‘Toward a Global Community of Historians,’ *The International Historical Congresses and the International Committee of Historical Sciences, 1898–2000*, ed. Jürgen Kocka, Wolfgang J. Mommsen in collaboration with Agnes Blansdorf (New York–Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2005).

¹⁶ Jacques Godechot–Robert Palmer, ‘Le problème de l'Atlantique du XVIIIème au XXème siècle,’ *Relazioni*, Firenze, Sansoni vol. 5 (1955), 173–239.

¹⁷ Criticisms to Palmer's and Godechot's papers were presented in Walter Maturi, ‘La storia contemporanea al X congresso internazionale di scienze storiche (Roma, 4–11 settembre 1955),’ *Rivista storica italiana*, 68, n. 3 (1956), 532–540. Maturi and the editor of the *Rivista Storica Italiana*, Federico Chabod, who organised the international conference in Rome, were anti-communist liberals.

¹⁸ *American Historians Remember Jacques Godechot*, 883.

¹⁹ See A. A. Fursenko, ‘The American and French Revolutions Compared. The View from the U.S.S.R.,’ *The William and Mary Quarterly* 33, n. 3 (1976), 481–500, especially 482–3.

²⁰ La “Révolution atlantique” – Vingt ans après, in *Die Französische Revolution – Zufälliges oder notwendiges Ereignis?* Akten des internationalen Symposiums an der Universität Bamberg vom 4.–7. Juni 1979, ed. E. Schmitt, R. Reichardt (München–Wien, Oldenbourg, 1983), 89–104. In an autobiographical note sent to Franco Venturi in 1990, Palmer wrote in retrospect that “The topic proved to be controversial, since some French historians found that it diluted the importance of the French revolution, and some Marxists, in France and elsewhere, thought it too hostile to the communist revolution and even reflecting American propaganda for NATO and an ‘Atlantic community’” (Franco Venturi Papers, Torino).

²¹ *The Eighteenth-Century Revolution: French or Western?* Edited with an introduction by Peter Amann (Lexington, Heath, 1963).

²² *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution*, ed. Harriet B. Applewhite, Darline G. Levy (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1991).

²³ *Mexico in the Age of Democratic Revolutions, 1750–1850*, ed. Jaime E. Rodriguez O. (Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1994).

and transnational history. He did so on a few occasions. For the Festschrift in honour of Louis Gottschalk he compared the different social background of the American and French revolutionaries and argued that “a great inversion” had occurred. He remarked that the supporters of the French revolution in Europe were bourgeois, middle class, urban entrepreneurs while in the United States support for the French revolution and sympathy for its ideas were typical of the Jeffersonian, rural based population. The main point in Palmer’s essay was that the social background was indeed important but could not explain everything. The stress was rather on the role of such abstract ideas as “liberty and equality, citizenship and fraternity, law and constitutionalism, the sovereignty of the people and the rights of man”. They were at the core of both revolutions and in the mid-1960s were still highly effective in their political meaning: “In the United States today it need hardly be said that the issue is very much alive, that ‘desegregation’ is the old mystic triad of liberty, equality, and fraternity; that the demand for racial justice is a repudiation of racial privilege; that equal right cannot be perpetually refused to persons who are accepted as fellow citizens and fellow men”.²⁴ Palmer remained true to the notion of a democratic progress going on in the modern history of the Western world. He also shifted markedly from a transnational approach to a more French-oriented focus that led him to write a book on the education system in France in the late 18th century and under Napoleon. His foray into comparative history remained isolated.

For most of the European historians Palmer was throughout the 1960s and 1970s the theorizer of the justification of the NATO in historiographical guise. That this was not the case seems now to be obvious: the misrepresentation of Palmer’s “Atlantic” history sheds some light on the controversy-ridden intellectual climate prevailing in those years not only among historians in Eastern Europe.²⁵ A brief survey of his career after *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* shows that Palmer was neither a left-wing historian nor an *agent provocateur* proselytising for NATO. In January 1970, after having served as dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, he was elected president of the American Historical Association. It was a time of troubles: the student movement against the war in Vietnam had a massive impact on the university life and shattered the self-understanding of historians throughout the US.²⁶ Palmer apparently embodied the continuity of the profession. The conservative and liberal historians of the American Historical Association voted for Palmer and easily defeated Staughton Lynd, who ran as the representative of the “Radical Historians”. Palmer won by a wide margin 1040–396. Nonetheless, the Caucus of Radical Historians supporting Lynd submitted a resolution pleading for a thorough commitment of the historians to political action in order to “expose to critical analysis and public attack the disastrous direction in which our Government is taking us”. This resolution too was defeated, but this time the margin was much smaller: 822–493.²⁷ Lynd’s bid was connected to an alternative vision of the study of the past that Palmer and the majority of the American historians working within the academic institutions would not subscribe to.²⁸ Yet, as the new President of the American Historical Association, Palmer went to great lengths to deliver a speech that stressed the basic internal unity in the profession and its scientific requirements as well as acknowledged the excitement all too natural in revolutionary epochs: “My own belief is that historians, as individuals, should deal with the most inflammatory issues if they wish to; but that the Association, as an organization representing all forms of history, should remain more neutral and indeed academic. Let me remark that W.E.B. Du Bois, Herbert Aptheker, and Howard Fast have all belonged to our Association; and I hope that activists who can produce such history as they did will always be among us. The presence of these three and others on our membership list, in the days of Senator Joseph McCarthy, caused trouble for the Association, which in 1953 was denounced as the “second most subversive” scholarly group in the country”.²⁹ Palmer rejected the notion that history-writing could be neutral but still asked for a non-partisan attitude that the New Left historians were defying.

Half a century later much of the notions and categories that Palmer employed in the paper for the congress in Rome in 1955 and in the introductory chapters of the first volume of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* may appear to have conservative undertones that Palmer did not intend to express. In *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* there was much insistence on the concept of a Western civilization equivalent to an Atlantic civilization that in the last quarter of the 18th century went through a democratic revolution, successful only in the United States and in France. Differences were undeniable, according to Palmer, but both revolutions shared many elements as did all other upheavals and failed revolutions in continental Europe and in the British isles. This was an approach to the French revolution which was new in Palmer’s writings and one that challenged the received wisdom. It may hardly surprise that Soboul consistently refused to accept the non-paradigmatic value of the French revolution, whose meaning on the contrary was rooted in the unique French history and in its economic development leading to the emancipation of the bourgeoisie.³⁰ Making the French revolution a part of the European and transatlantic revolutionary scenario meant to Soboul detracting from the political value of the

²⁴ Palmer, ‘The Great Inversion: America and Europe in the Eighteenth-Century Revolution,’ in *Ideas in History: Essays presented to Louis Gottschalk by his Former Students*, ed. Richard Herr, Harold T. Parker (Durham (N.C.), Duke University Press, 1965), 3–19, quotes pp. 18 and 19.

²⁵ Marvin Cox, ‘A Reassessment of R. R. Palmer’s *The Age of Democratic Revolution*,’ *The History Teacher*, 24, n. 3 (1991), 343–52.

²⁶ Cfr. P. Novick, ‘That Noble Dream,’ *The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988) in particular 415–68.

²⁷ Jim O’Brien, ‘Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible: Staughton Lynd, Jesse Lemisch, and a Committed History,’ *Radical History Review*, 82 (2002), 65–90.

²⁸ Staughton Lynd, ‘Historical Past and Existential Present,’ in *The Dissenting Academy*, ed. Theodore Roszak (Vintage Books, New York, 1968) (1st ed. 1967), 92–109.

²⁹ R. R. Palmer, ‘The American Historical Association in 1970,’ *American Historical Review* 51, n. 1 (1971), 1–15 (http://www.historians.org/info/AHA_History/rrpalmer.htm).

³⁰ See Albert Soboul, *La Rivoluzione francese*, Bari, Laterza, 1974 [updated edition of the French *La Révolution française*, Paris, 1948], vol. II, p. 629, the first volume is considered to be “tainted by an Atlantic and Western bias, unacceptable in this field of studies”.

French revolution and from its meaning for French national history. Ironically, on the other end of the political spectrum, Hannah Arendt too rejected the argument that the American and the French revolutions might have a common origin or might be understood in the same framework. In an extended footnote to her *On Revolution* she stressed that the nature of public institutions in France and in the British colonies in the 18th century was so utterly different that using the same names to define them would mislead the historical analysis and obfuscate the meaning of their respective political achievements.³¹ Both Soboul and Arendt became more popular interpreters of the nature of the French and American revolutions than Palmer. The radical change in the interpretation of the French revolution advocated by François Furet in the 1970s and 1980s was unaffected by Palmer's work.³²

The Age of the Democratic Revolution looks now outdated in that it saw the last quarter of the 18th century as the breeding-ground for the advancement towards more political democracy and more equality: Palmer followed Tocqueville's lead, despite obvious differences between America and Europe, and expanded the focus of Tocqueville's diagnosis believing in the ultimate unity of Western civilization. According to Palmer, the attack on inequality and oligarchic governments was clear in the events occurring in the 1760s, 1770s and 1780s. Palmer treated these events in separate chapters about Geneva, the British society, the aristocratic revolts in France and the reforms carried out by Maria Theresia and Joseph II. None of these descriptions has really influenced the following historical writing on these specific topics as the sources used by Palmer did not bring new insights on the individual issues. Ironically, the sections of Palmer's work that are more influenced by Marxist historiography and Marxist categories seem to be quite obsolete now. Despite these shortcomings, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* can be appreciated as an involuntary contribution to the booming area of the study of the transformation of the Atlantic area. The perspective has changed dramatically, as some recent historical works show very clearly.³³ What looms large is no more the emergence of a set of democratic ideas, institutions and social classes interested in acquiring a representative system of government, and the implicit trust in the progress of democracy, but rather the disruption of a network of commercial relationships, ties of political loyalty, shared forms of culture and religious beliefs giving way to a variety of political and cultural arenas. This has led to a different and more sophisticated use of the evidence available and to a more detailed analysis of the local situations. The notion of "entangled histories" seems now to dominate the debate: it sees the Atlantic world in very different terms, incompatible with Palmer's perspective and vocabulary, based on the notion of a single "history".³⁴ In general it may be true that "We are all Atlanticists now", as David Armitage has claimed.³⁵ If so, then it is indeed true that we are Atlanticists in a very specific way: multinational, multicultural, multiethnic, multiconfessional, plurilinguistic, gender-aware, to an unprecedented extent. In his "Afterword" to that same survey of the new Atlantic history John Elliott has reminded with a slightly polemical undertone that historians are today encouraged to think in terms of a unified ocean and that this was already the case in the 1950s and 1960s when historians like Verlinden, Godechot and Palmer himself worked out the "prehistory" of the concept of Atlantic history.³⁶

Briefly comparing Palmer's and Franco Venturi's approach to the Atlantic dimension of 18th-century history may cast some light on the very first stages of this recent "explosion of interest in the Atlantic and the Atlantic world as subjects of study among historians".³⁷ Both approached a very broad view of European history in its transatlantic dimension with homogeneous agenda. Starting from the third volume of his opus magnum *Settecento riformatore* Franco Venturi followed by and large the same chronological and geographical setting as Palmer's.³⁸ Venturi acknowledged Palmer's example but stressed also that a transnational approach to the revolutionary epoch goes further back than Palmer to Sorel's *L'Europe et la révolution française* and Jean Jaurès' *Histoire socialiste de la révolution française*.³⁹ The nature and quality of the sources is different. Primary sources in Venturi's account include diplomatic and travel reports and gazettes that were absent from Palmer's books; as a consequence there is a deeper interest in individuals and interpersonal relationships and scepticism about the explanatory function of sociological categories that still appealed to Palmer as useful conceptual tools. Experiences made at the margin of civilized Europe appealed to Venturi as instances of the interaction between the progressive momentum of the enlightenment and the resistance made by hostile cultural settings, unwilling or unable to open up to the call to human emancipation. Venture saw the transatlantic history of the late 18th century in terms of the collapse of a social and political system that gave way to modernity and shaped new forms of political activity and new political alignments.⁴⁰ Despite dissimilar ways in dealing with the sources and a partially different perspective, Venturi acknowledged Palmer's *The Age of Democratic Revolution* as an important contribution to the study of the revolutionary era. When Venturi introduced

³¹ H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, Faber and Faber, 1963), chapter 5, footnote 1.

³² The point is also made in Michael Scott Christofferson, An Antitotalitarian 'History of the French Revolution: Francois Furet's "Penser la Revolution française" in the Intellectual Politics of the Late 1970s,' *French Historical Studies*, 22, n. 4 (1999), 557–611.

³³ John H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World. Britain and Spain in America 1492–1830* (New Haven–London, Yale University Press, 2006); Marcello Carmagnani, *L'altro occidente. L'America Latina dall'invasione europea al nuovo millennio* (Torino, Einaudi, 2003).

³⁴ See Eliga H. Gould, 'Entagled Atlantic Histories: A Response from the Anglo-American Periphery,' *American Historical Review* 112, n. 1 (2007), 1415–22.

³⁵ David Armitage, 'Three Concepts of Atlantic History,' in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*. ed. David Armitage, Michael J. Braddick (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2002), 11.

³⁶ John Elliott, 'Afterword,' in *The British Atlantic World*, 233 and footnote 3.

³⁷ Armitage, 'Three Concepts of Atlantic History,' in *The British Atlantic World*, 11.

³⁸ Franco Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, III–IV, Torino, Einaudi, 1979–84 (English translation as *End of the Old Regime in Europe, 1768–1776: the First Crisis* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989); *End of the Old Regime in Europe, 1776–1789* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991)).

³⁹ *Settecento riformatore. La caduta dell'antico regime (1776–1789). 1. I grandi stati dell'Occidente*, Torino, Einaudi, 1984, XV.

⁴⁰ John Robertson, 'Franco Venturi's Enlightenment,' *Past and Present*, 137 (1992), 183–206.

Palmer as the recipient of the prestigious Feltrinelli Award, given by the Accademia dei Lincei (in which Venturi himself was an influential member), he argued that *The Age of Democratic Revolution* “was the starting point of the researches, which have multiplied in the last years and decades, on the character and meaning of the American revolution, on the relationship between reforms and revolutions in France, Spain, Holland, Italy as well as in England in the age of George III. The results have varied. Palmer has convinced all living historians that only taking into consideration the whole picture of world’s transformations from the 18th to the 19th century is it possible to fully grasp their meaning and value. Palmer’s work is a masterpiece about the revolutions of the past born of an inspiring debate with the revolutions of our time”.⁴¹ In accepting the award, Palmer in fact alluded to the 1989 fall of communism, echoing much of what Venturi had argued. In the written summary of his speech Palmer compared the late 18th-century revolutions “with the revolutions of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, in the light of four general ideas. First, he finds the revolutions of both the 18th and 20th centuries to be democratic in their repudiation of self-perpetuating authority in government. Second, where the elements of both continuity and of rupture from the past can be seen in the 18th-century revolutions, the recent movements in Eastern Europe are clear cases of rupture or reversal of what preceded. Nevertheless, and third, they have been carried through with a minimum of violence because, unlike the 18th-century revolutions, they have met with little opposition, no foreign intervention, and as yet no counter-revolution. Fourth, the concepts of counter-revolution and revolution are examined, with the conclusion that in a strict sense the movements in Eastern Europe are not a revolution, and that it is gratifying to see such extraordinary and sweeping changes take place without revolution. 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”.⁴² Significantly, Palmer’s and Venturi’s perspectives converged on a political approach to 18th-century history shaped by a keen interest in the political development of post-war Europe. The dramatic end of the Soviet system in 1989 seemed to confirm that this approach was right and appropriate to the function of history-writing.

The cultural and linguistic turn have shifted our interest to areas of social experience that were alien to Palmer (and Venturi, for that matter). Palmer’s contribution to the establishment of Atlantic history, however unintended, cannot be underestimated, especially when Atlantic history is effervescent as it is now.

⁴¹ Franco Venturi, ‘Relazione per il conferimento del Premio internazionale “Antonio Feltrinelli” per le scienze storiche per il 1990’, Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, Archivio.

⁴² Copy sent by Palmer to Venturi attached to the letter of August 30, 1990, Franco Venturi Papers, Torino.