

INTRODUCTION



The American Revolution and the Origins of Democratic Modernity

The Americans have taught us how to conquer liberty; it is from them also that we must learn the secret of how to conserve it.

—Condorcet, *Bibliothèque de l'Homme Public*, series II (1791), 5:250–51

The American Revolution (1774–83) ranks among the most written about episodes in history. It achieved independence and forged a great nation. But historians and readers have mostly approached it as an isolated American drama, the decisive formative episode in the history of the nation-state. That it also exerted an immense social, cultural, and ideological impact on the rest of the world that proved fundamental to the shaping of democratic modernity has since the mid-nineteenth century until very recently attracted little attention. The American Revolution, preceding the great French Revolution of 1789–99, was the first and one of the most momentous upheavals of a whole series of revolutionary events gripping the Atlantic world during the three-quarters of a century from 1775 to 1848–49. Like the French Revolution, these were all profoundly affected by, and impacted on, America in ways rarely examined and discussed in broad context.

The Thirteen Colonies seceded from Britain's empire, at the time by land and sea economically, politically, and militarily the world's most powerful entity, overthrowing the principle of monarchy in a vast territory where monarchy, long accepted, remained deeply rooted in culture and society. Challenging the three main pillars of Old World *ancien régime* society—monarchy, aristocracy, and religious authority—the Revolution altered, though not without extensive resistance, the character of religious authority and ecclesiastical involvement in politics, law, and institutions, and weakened, even if it did not

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overthrow, the principle of “aristocracy.” Its political and institutional innovations grounded a wholly new kind of republic embodying a diametrically opposed social vision built on shared liberty and equal civil rights. The Revolution commenced the demolition of the early modern hierarchical world of kings, aristocracy, serfdom, slavery, and mercantilist colonial empires, initiating its slow, complex refashioning into the basic format of modernity. The wide repercussions of this American drama, the Revolution’s world impact, accounts for the book’s title, *The Expanding Blaze*, a phrase taken from Freneau’s poem, and for its approach—presenting an overview of the revolutionary process in the Western and colonial worlds down to the 1850s viewed from the particular perspective of the American revolutionary example, experience, and ideas.

At the start of the American Revolution in 1774–75, hardly anyone intended to replace the highly elitist political systems in the Thirteen Colonies with more democratic and representative legislatures and constitutions, or make substantial alterations to the general frame of American culture and society. But amid the vast strain and effort involved, at a time when fundamentally new and disturbing ideas about politics, religion, and society radiated widely, it was inevitable that huge internal changes, intended and unintended, should ensue. The Revolution by no means ended the grip of the old elites on power or transformed the essentially hierarchical and deferential character of eighteenth-century American society, but it did exert an internationally democratizing and emancipating effect that proved—as many renowned reformers, project-formers, and political visionaries, male and female, acknowledged at the time—of immense consequence for America’s future *and* the rest of the globe.

The Revolution affected and potentially, some thought and others feared, transformed all humanity, a few even claiming its external significance considerably outweighed the national. “The independence of America would have added but little to her own happiness, and been of no benefit to the world,” contended the American Revolution’s most forceful and internationally widely read publicist, Tom Paine (1737–1809), in 1805, “if her government had been formed on the corrupt models of the old world.”¹ By “corrupt models,” Paine, English by birth and upbringing, meant not just the absolutist and despotic monarchies dominating the European continent from Portugal to Russia, and the colonial empires then dominating Latin America, Africa, and Asia, but also “mixed government” systems, like Britain’s constitutional monarchy, affording subjects more rights and freedoms than the absolutist monarchies but retaining appreciable influence for Crown and Church while transferring most power to the aristocracy. No country at that time resided under a more domi-

nant and globally powerful aristocracy than Britain. Hence, radical detractors of “mixed government” expressly included England among the “corrupt models” presided over by kings, priests, and aristocrats. But only some Founding Fathers and parts of American society shared Paine’s democratic republican standpoint; most revolutionary leaders and their followers rejected it.

Jefferson, Franklin, and their admirers, if sometimes less stridently than Paine, Price, Priestley, Barlow, Palmer, Freneau, Coram, Allen, and other Anglo-American democrats of the time, urged an American Revolution devoted not just to national independence but a much more expansive and ambitious goal: fundamental political, social, and educational reform within the United States and beyond. No doubt few adhered consistently to their publicly proclaimed emancipatory ideals. Many tailored their idealism in one way or another, compromising with the old order, including, when it came to slavery, America’s foremost radical republican and declared opponent of “aristocracy,” Jefferson himself. Nevertheless, in principle these democratizing republican writers and orators all demanded an American Revolution that adopted the powerful new concept of universal and equal human rights, emancipated every oppressed and exploited group, established full freedom of religion, expression, and the press, and removed religious control over society and education.

With the conclusion of the American War of Independence in 1783, there was much to celebrate, not only in America and countries allied to the nascent United States during the war—France, Spain, and the Dutch Republic—but, in the eyes of the progressive minded at least, also in Britain and beyond. In 1784, a year after the Peace of Versailles that set the seal on independence, the Welsh preacher and democrat Richard Price (1723–91), a leading political theorist of the age, delivered a stirring speech at an English banquet: “With heart-felt satisfaction, I see the revolution in favour of universal liberty which has taken place in America;—a revolution which opens a new prospect in human affairs, and begins a new era in the history of mankind;—a revolution by which Britons themselves will be the greatest gainers, if wise enough to improve properly the check that has been given to the despotism of their ministers, and to catch the flame of virtuous liberty which has saved their American brethren.”² The American Revolution “did great good by disseminating just sentiments of the rights of mankind, and the nature of legitimate government; by exciting a spirit of resistance to tyranny which has emancipated one European country [the Netherlands], and is likely to emancipate others; and by occasioning the establishment in America of forms of government more equitable and more liberal than any that the world has yet known.”³

In the Netherlands, American developments helped Europe’s first avowedly democratic movement, the pro-American *Patriottenbeweging* (1780–87), to gain

momentum and, during the 1780s, hold the attention of all European and American reformers. The Revolution's post-1780 consolidation, observed Price, afforded "still greater good by preserving the new governments . . . of the American States" from that "destruction in which they must have been involved had Britain conquered; by providing, in a sequestered continent possessed of many singular advantages, a place of refuge for oppressed men in every region of the world; and by laying the foundation there of an empire which may be the seat of liberty, science and virtue, and from whence there is reason to hope these sacred blessings will spread, till they become universal, and the time arrives when kings and priests shall have no more power to oppress, and that ignominious slavery which has hitherto debased the world is exterminated."⁴

Both the American and French revolutions, and all the other supposedly "national" revolutions, were essentially tussles between rival "democratic" and "aristocratic" variants of a single Atlantic Revolution, just as all the alleged "national" enlightenments were in reality always battlegrounds between rival "moderate" and "radical" Enlightenment streams. Key themes of all the revolutions were democratic versus aristocratic republicanism, support for, versus rejection of, universal rights, citizenship for all versus limited suffrage, and disagreement over the place of religious authority in society. Where many late eighteenth-century contemporaries concurred with Adams and Hamilton in venerating Sidney, Locke, and Montesquieu, and in aligning American republicanism with existing aristocratic republics and "mixed government" systems, radical democrats like Paine loudly demurred, flatly denying such regimes—including the Netherlands, where the initial democratic upsurge was suppressed (with Prussian help) in 1787—were genuine republics at all. "It is true that certain countries, such as Holland, Berne, Genoa, Venice etc. call themselves Republics," affirmed Paine in June 1791, in a letter to the French revolutionary democrats Condorcet and Bonneville, "but these countries do not merit such a designation. All the principles upon which they are founded are in direct contradiction to every republican sentiment, and they are really in a condition of absolute servitude to an aristocracy."⁵ In the Americas just as in Europe, the two kinds of republicanism, democratic and aristocratic, Paine rightly contended, were fundamentally divergent, at odds and irreconcilable.

Until 1848, "moderates" and democratizing radicals either side of the Atlantic not only argued their viewpoints drawing basic principles, examples, and precedents to a large extent from the American example and framework but appealed in conflicting ways to the two principal competing ideological trends, conservative and democratizing, within the American Revolution, to

legitimate and justify their own moderate and radical perspectives and commitments. The architects of the radically reforming American Revolution—Franklin, Jefferson, and Paine—consequently became icons and sources of guidance for the Atlantic Revolution as a whole in its universalizing, secularizing, and egalitarian aspects. Correspondingly, those Founding Fathers—Adams, Hamilton, Morris, Jay, and to an extent Washington himself—associated with defending the pre-1776 American social status quo deploying Locke, Montesquieu, and the widely admired “mixed government” doctrine inherited from England served internationally, until the mid-nineteenth century, as standard-bearers of the “aristocratic” republicanism championing primacy of property and tenaciously resisting democracy by means of restricted suffrages, special qualifications for officeholders, and other oligarchic devices. In waging their ideological war, the rival groups of Founding Fathers inevitably construed the Revolution’s founding documents divergently. The 1776 *Declaration of Independence*, more than any other American revolutionary document, strongly affirmed the everywhere bitterly divisive principle of universal and equal human rights, an aspect of the Revolution that proved of pivotal importance, becoming a particular hub of controversy in America and the entire sequence of Atlantic revolutions that followed, a controversy that powerfully surged up, once again, during the second half of the twentieth century following the 1948 Declaration of the United Nations and the African American civil rights movement.⁶

By an amazing coincidence, Adams and Jefferson died on the same day, 4 July 1826, the very day marking the fiftieth anniversary of the 1776 *Declaration of Independence*. The new republic of the United States, as Price, Priestley, Paine, and their British and European followers saw it, was not just unique but pressingly and universally relevant. For them, it was what Paine called the “opportunity of beginning the world anew” and “bringing forward a new system of government in which the rights of all men should be preserved that gave value” to American independence.⁷ However, within and outside of America most of society prior to 1850 firmly rejected such perspectives, predominantly preferring to view Britain, the wealthiest, most powerful, and most industrially advanced nation, as the principal guide and inspiration for mankind’s advancement, the best available model for political, economic, and social organization and reform. In Britain itself, all classes of the population except for certain dissenting elements nurtured an almost uncritical veneration for the “mixed government” constitution believed foundational to the country’s unique world status. If not all English plebeians gloried in being “Protestant, flag-waving, foreigner-hating xenophobes,”⁸ Britons predominantly shared the monarchical bias and politically and religiously reactionary leanings characterizing the late

eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British ruling elites and empire. Most people angrily denounced the homegrown movement of dissent that not only resented but dared to noisily deprecate monarchy, aristocracy, Anglicanism, and empire.

Yet adversaries of the “aristocratic” system in Britain, as in France, Holland, Ireland, Germany, and the United States, included much of the intellectual and literary elite. Indeed, England boasted an impressive number of radical enlighteners, progressive-minded thinkers, artists, writers, and poets, headed by Paine, Price, Jebb, Priestley, Godwin, Shelley, Millar, Erasmus Darwin, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Catharine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and later George Eliot, who all detested the antiquated legal system, restricted suffrage, “rotten borough” vestiges vitiating representation, lack of educational opportunity for most, and absence of full liberty of expression and religious freedom characterizing their country until the mid-nineteenth century, not to mention naval impressment (i.e., the “press gang” lasting until 1853), unequal marriage laws, and the obsolete penal code. In their eyes it seemed as plain as it was to Franklin, Jefferson, and Paine at the advent of the American Revolution that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England fell lamentably short of being the chief exemplum to the wider world. Together with many other Americans and European radicals they fervently hoped and expected that the nascent United States would assume this role.

Throughout the era from the 1760s to the 1850s, radicals rejecting the prevailing system in Britain and Europe faced a solid wall of disapproval and opprobrium. Some like Coleridge and Wordsworth abandoned the radicalism they espoused during their early years and later joined the intolerant conservative consensus. Equally, some post-1815 radicals designing the overthrow of British “mixed government” and aristocracy had earlier been firm supporters of the “corrupt” system they now unwaveringly assailed. The leading British philosopher of legal reform, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), in the 1770s a staunch critic of the American Revolution and of the proto-democratic ideas some contemporaries derived from its principles, after 1815 became an ardent advocate of democracy and the America he now considered modern representative democracy’s prime vehicle. The consequent protracted, tortuous transatlantic ideological conflict reached its crescendo in the 1790s and opening years of the nineteenth century in Britain and America but dragged on disruptively for decades after throughout the Western world. In Britain, this social and cultural war waxed far more vehement during the first third of the nineteenth century than most Victorian Britons subsequently cared to recall. The rage and vitriol of an age in which the chief architect of modern political

conservatism, Edmund Burke (1729–97), vilified Price for his “black heart” and “wicked principles” were later either watered down or, as with the great poet Shelley’s unmitigated radicalism, altogether buried in oblivion.⁹

America’s Revolution was the crucible of the United States, the “Atlantic Revolution” as a whole the crucible of modern representative democracy. It introduced universal and equal human rights, freedom of expression and the press, and republican liberty generally, as well as concerted efforts to end oppression of minority ethnic groups and establish an international code curtailing the curse of war. A sense of America’s quest for liberty representing a new beginning socially, politically, and philosophically in a way the earlier Dutch Revolt against Spain (1567–1609) and the English seventeenth-century revolutions had not, and of great consequence for all men and worthy of close study, received widespread expression down to around 1850. So did acclaiming the Revolution’s most renowned leaders—Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, and, more divisively, Paine—as heroes of all humanity. Yet the first modern historian to focus on this international aspect, R. R. Palmer, in his *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, did so only in 1959. The American and French revolutions, Palmer reminded readers, “shared a good deal in common,” and “what they shared was shared also at the same time by various people and movements in other countries,” particularly, he suggested, Britain, Ireland, Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland but also Germany, Italy, and beyond.¹⁰ This broad connection between the revolutions he presented as an overarching “Atlantic revolution.” But Palmer’s path-breaking idea never attracted as much consideration and discussion from Americanists or Europeanists (or Latin Americanists) as one might have expected.

Where the American Revolution’s greatest impact in the 1770s and 1780s was on France, Holland, and Ireland (where the American example became especially closely linked to rising discontent), and among opponents of the British Crown and aristocracy, it was considerable also in southern Europe and Latin America. The most comprehensive work of political theory written during the Revolutionary War was actually composed in southern Italy by the Neapolitan political and legal theorist Gaetano Filangieri (1752–88) and much more widely diffused in Spain and Spanish America than in the English-speaking world. Banned outright by the papacy in December 1784, owing to its vehement declarations against the clergy and in favor of religious toleration, this multivolume work, *La Scienza della legislazione* (1780), a cornerstone of the late eighteenth-century “Radical Enlightenment,”¹¹ was “perus’d with great pleasure” by Franklin.¹² Inspired by the ideas of Raynal, Diderot, Helvétius, and Vico, Filangieri adopted the principle of equality of

rights as proclaimed in America in 1776, viewing the American Revolution as the commencement of a generalized revolt against all despotism, oligarchy, and colonial oppression, and the hierarchical character of Old World society generally.¹³ American revolutionary principles also permeated Filangieri's extended assault on the political ideas and geographical relativism of the most widely influential "moderate" political theorist of the age, the great French Enlightenment thinker Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755). Filangieri attacked Montesquieu for his promotion of the "mixed government" model bequeathing power in practice predominantly to aristocracies.¹⁴

Filangieri felt so uplifted by recent developments in America, he assured Franklin in 1782, he would have liked to settle permanently in Pennsylvania, America's "refuge of virtue," "country of heroes" and "brothers."¹⁵ This was more than flowery courtesy. If the American Revolution exerted a democratizing effect, Pennsylvania, from 1776, surpassed the other colonies (except Vermont) by becoming the modern world's first near-democratic state, the first where government was formed by male society as a whole, electing the legislature and adopting a constitution granting universal adult male suffrage. Some contemporary observers eulogized Pennsylvania's new constitution and the inspiring part Pennsylvania's leaders played in ending state-supported institutionalized religious authority and in projecting black emancipation. The "immense populace that blesses your name," wrote Filangieri in his last letter to Franklin, dated 24 December 1785, endorsing his international, transatlantic renown, "is the only reward befitting the author of its liberty and avenger of its wrongs." In celebrating Pennsylvania's special character and the state's triumphs over royalty, aristocracy, slave owners, and ecclesiastical authority, Filangieri echoed a sentiment then common among radical *philosophes* and reformers that lingered for decades.¹⁶ Philadelphia, which had around thirty thousand inhabitants when the Spanish American revolutionary Francisco de Miranda (1750–1816) arrived there in 1783, striking him as "one of the most pleasant and well-ordered cities in the world," was the heart of this extended, more democratic "American Revolution."¹⁷ The French democratic republican Joseph Cérutti, in 1791, fully concurred: Philadelphia, "entirely populated with brothers and devoid of tyrants, slaves, priests, and without atheists, idle men or any poor, would deserve to be the capital of the world."¹⁸

The American Revolution's global impact was a matter of example and inspiration, providing a new ground-plan for human society. But this in turn raised issues of how far the Revolution had fulfilled its own promises at home and how far the United States should encourage and promote the wider process of transatlantic revolution abroad. In attributing to the new United States

an especially exalted status in mankind's progress toward equality, liberty, and democratic republicanism, radical Enlightenment thinkers consciously assigned a global responsibility to America, a responsibility applying both within and outside the United States. "You free citizens of independent America," exhorted Filangieri in the fourth volume of *La Scienza*, in 1780, "you are too virtuous and too enlightened not to know that by winning the right to rule yourselves, you have accepted in the eyes of the entire world the sacred duty to be wiser, more moderate and happier than all other peoples! [agli occhi dell'universo il sacro dovere di esser più savi, più moderati e più felici de tutti gli altri popoli]. You must answer before the tribunal of mankind for all the sophisms your mistakes might produce contrary to liberty."¹⁹ Price, Paine, and Condorcet too, besides others, were acutely conscious that the American Revolution's democratic aspect they and their allies cherished not only needed extending to Britain, Ireland, Europe, and the rest of the world but needed urgently to be consolidated, built on, and safeguarded within the United States themselves.

This part utopian, part realistic vision of the American Revolution stoked disaffection with the existing order in Europe and Latin America for three-quarters of a century. Where earlier revolutions rendering Switzerland and the United Provinces free republics, and seventeenth-century England a constitutional monarchy, were regarded virtually with "indifference" by the rest of humanity, remarked one of Filangieri's disciples, the Italian revolutionary Francesco Saverio Salfi (1759–1832), in 1821, and these upheavals had no truly lasting global effect, the American Revolution impacted far more widely and lastingly. The reason, contended Salfi, was that by the 1770s the Enlightenment had taken hold broadly, whereas before 1750 it had not yet pervaded society generally. Having first initiated a revolution of the mind "which soon became that of all Europe," the transatlantic intelligentsia, "les amis de la philosophie," priding themselves on having overthrown ecclesiastical intolerance and demolished the universities' obsolete science and scholasticism rooted in "the systems of Plato and Aristotle," entered on a new phase commencing in 1775, spurred by the American revolutionary experience, instigating a general assault on "political servitude." As a consequence of the new ideas and proliferation of the press the American Revolution was "forged in the crucible of the Enlightenment"; and it was this that made its message resonate as a truly universal event.²⁰ "The present is an age of philosophy; and America, the empire of reason,"²¹ confidently averred Tom Paine's ally, the Connecticut revolutionary Joel Barlow (1754–1812), in 1787. Amid the optimism following the securing of American independence, he fully expected America to fulfill his radical vision of a world permanently transformed for

the better. He later acknowledged having been wildly overoptimistic in his expectations of America *and* France.

By 1776, educated Pennsylvanians, New Englanders, and Virginians had changed appreciably in general culture, outlook, and religious beliefs—as had the societies of Europe and Latin America. Old-style piety had lost much of its hold at the elite level, and this was directly related to the advent of the innovative new political and social ideas. In New England, Enlightenment stress on reason and moral earnestness had displaced Calvinist dogmatism and stringency, though something of Puritan moral austerity still lingered. Gradual shedding of the old obsession with theology and denominational doctrinal disputes had engineered a fundamental shift toward toleration and secularization, trends common to all enlighteners. The United States' second president, John Adams (1735–1826), like Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), the third president, was an outspoken champion of the Enlightenment, including freedom of conscience and worship. He disliked religious dogmatism, the clergy, and all talk of theological “mysteries.” But suffused with New England earnestness, Adams did not push rejecting the claims of orthodoxy as far as the radical enlighteners. He was no atheist or “deist” but an austere Unitarian trusting in the ultimate reality and benign intent of divine providence, convinced organized religion, residually at least, remained necessary to society's well-being.²²

Adams's moderate reformism in religion matched his moderate stance in political theory. His Enlightenment diverged from Jefferson's with respect to religion and, equally, the social and political spheres. Adams, admiring Sidney, Locke (no favorite of Jefferson's), and Montesquieu, upheld an older tradition of political theory, extolling “mixed government” and separation of powers, precisely the English gentry republicanism that until the mid-nineteenth century attracted ruling elites in Britain, France, Switzerland, and Holland as well as the United States. This type of republicanism, despised by Jefferson, Paine, and Condorcet, projected the aspirations of a landowner oligarchy venerating the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that first brought Britain and Ireland firmly under the political and economic domination of the aristocracy. A tradition mildly averse to commerce, cities, and the Dutch-Swiss commercial republican models, his was essentially an early Enlightenment thought-world, backward-looking socially but exerting a powerful enduring attraction for “moderates.”²³ Few blended gentry republicanism with post-1750 mainstream Enlightenment constraint on religious authority more stereotypically than Adams.

Adams, consequently, never suffered anything like the public reprobation for irreligion that later dogged Paine and Jefferson.²⁴ His still more conser-

vative son, John Quincy Adams (1767–1848), sixth president of the United States (1825–29), recalled these differences later, in 1831, rightly insisting on a considerable gap between his father’s Enlightenment and that of Jefferson regarding politics, religion, and morality. As puritanical as his father but in later years tending more to religious orthodoxy, John Quincy had known Jefferson since childhood. It was the Enlightenment philosophy Jefferson imbibed in the 1760s from a certain teacher at William and Mary College in Virginia, he observed disparagingly, that led Jefferson to the “mysteries of freethinking and irreligion,” “loose morals,” and becoming if not an “absolute atheist” someone without “belief in a future existence.” An avid reader, polymath, and convinced “deist,” Jefferson, in fact, derived his philosophical outlook from a wide range of English and French writers, and unlike John and John Quincy Adams, grew more radical in outlook after 1775 down to around 1800. Jefferson, like Paine, combined his publicly more explicit animosity to religious authority with a more sweeping republican reformism and frequently declared hostility to “aristocracy.”²⁵ As many realized, these various strands were closely linked practically and philosophically: Jefferson’s radical reformism such as his abolishing the laws of primogeniture in Virginia and other anti-“aristocratic” reforms, noted John Quincy, arose from his “infidel philosophy.”²⁶

Adams and Jefferson were each iconic of a different type of Enlightenment. Each reflected, from opposite sides, the clash of revolutionary ideologies, moderate and radical, transforming political thought into a warring duality pervading the entire political and social arena—a struggle between “aristocratic” and democratic republicanism, partial and full rejection of religious authority, broad and narrow suffrages, and restricted and full freedom of thought and expression—all with vast implications for the late eighteenth-century world, the nineteenth century, and the future. Two irreconcilable tendencies within the American Revolution confronted each other, nationally and internationally, each working from a different philosophical base in league with closely related political movements abroad. American “moderates” exalted Locke, the legacy of the Glorious Revolution, and especially British “mixed government” as the proper ground-plan for America and all societies while Jeffersonians and Paineites embraced the philosophical democratic universalism and anti-aristocratic tendencies of Condorcet, Brissot, and the pre-Robespierre French Revolution, seeing Franco-American democratic republicanism as one body and the right path for mankind.

Until the 1970s historians, philosophers, and political scientists merely paid lip service to the fact that the Revolution, *Declaration of Independence*, and Constitution all stemmed from the “American Enlightenment.”²⁷ Only with

Henry F. May's *The Enlightenment in America* (1976), still perhaps the best introduction among the remarkably few books devoted to the subject, did scholars begin investigating the Enlightenment's precise relation and relevance to the American Revolution. There was a serious problem with the historiography, May pointed out, regarding the Revolution's aspirations, rhetoric, political thought, and goals, a need to explore more fully the implications of attributing its special character to Enlightenment debates and ideas. May fully agreed that the Enlightenment in Europe and the Americas "tried to bring about," as one recent historian put it, through science, philosophical endeavor, critique of religion, educational reorganization, law reform, and studying political theory, "a new hopeful society."²⁸ The vast movement of intellectual and cultural reform and renewal comprehensively revolutionized philosophy, theology, historiography, the exact sciences, social science, literature, and moral thought and continued to strive for amelioration, he demonstrated, throughout the Napoleonic era (1799–1815) too. Historians and philosophers, May showed, therefore needed to appraise the American Revolution's ideas, rhetoric, and legislative terminology in a broader intellectual context than they had been accustomed to. But they also needed to sharpen their general categories. For the Western Enlightenment could never resolve its abiding internal split over whether Enlightenment meant reforming the existing social, legal, and institutional order while leaving the main structure intact, or whether correcting abuses meant replacing the old institutions, laws, and practices with an entirely new structure.²⁹ Only up to a point did enlighteners share a "common goal—the moralization and humanization of the world."

Disagreement over how far to retain the *ancien régime* built on monarchical, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical hegemony integrally connected developments and ideas either side of the Atlantic. The Atlantic revolutions were all intimately linked pragmatically and philosophically, rendering the rift between the competing Enlightenment moderate and radical streams universal and everywhere bitter and protracted. The first to step significantly beyond Palmer, May identified at the core of the American Revolution a struggle between two opposing transatlantic ideological wings, designating these "moderate Enlightenment" and "revolutionary Enlightenment" (or alternatively "radical Enlightenment"). These conflicting and irreconcilable ideological tendencies were rooted in divergent philosophical principles and systems of thought, extolling different thinkers, books, and intellectual trends. This dialectic between the American Revolution's rival dimensions, moderate and radical, along with the close affinities between the American and European revolutions, were for over six decades, down to around 1850, also widely understood and invoked by contemporaries.

Following May's seminal book it became more widely appreciated that while the American Enlightenment's intellectual content derived mostly from Europe (especially Britain and France), "America served European intellectuals as an example and even an inspiration of ideas at work, theories put into practice."³⁰ During the 1970s, the ensuing flurry of interest in America's Enlightenment as a deeply contested intellectual arena, a basic duality fundamentally shaping the essential character of American society and politics, proved, however, curiously brief. Distracted by the "cultural turn" of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, scholars were soon again drawn away from the key intellectual and ideological issues, instead promoting the notion that the Enlightenment was chiefly a question of social practice and sociability rather than new principles, concepts, and thinking, as was always claimed by pre-1850 philosophers and revolutionaries. Scholars came to focus chiefly on general attitudes, changing modes, and culture, thereby reverting to the older pre-1970 conviction that Enlightenment intellectual and ideological debates and ideas were, after all, peripheral.³¹

The "cultural turn" hence obscured once again the main contours within the American and transatlantic Enlightenment that May identified as fundamental.³² This is not to deny that the "cultural turn" opened up useful new fields of inquiry and yielded worthwhile results. But its historiographical one-sidedness, prioritizing popular and mass attitudes over intellectual debates, encouraged oversimplification by largely ignoring the role of conflicting philosophies and ideologies intellectually grounding and shaping, though not socially driving, the American Revolution and all the revolutions of the age. Clashing ideologies are, of course, to an extent socially driven; but their specific emphases, forms, rhetoric, and terminology are mainly determined not by sociability or social practice but by competing intellectual, ideological, educational, and religious agendas. Admittedly, the part played by the American people—then mainly farmers, artisans, and traders—as distinct from their leaders, who were mostly from a privileged background or aspiring to be part of the gentry elite, had been greatly understated by earlier historians. In terms of popular protest, group anger, mob behavior, broad civil disobedience, and rising exasperation, the American Revolution clearly began not in 1775 but with the Stamp Act of 1765 and the wide popular resentment it aroused.

But, as in France in 1787–99, social disaffection, unrest, and protest, no matter how powerful and turbulent, functioned mainly as a generator of social pressures and emotional reaction. Rising discontent, experience soon made abundantly obvious, just as present-day world events also show, could all too easily be shepherded in dramatically different directions. Anger and emotion,

however furious, have no inherent connection with the claims promoted, propagated, and vaunted by the interminably changing, unstable, and shifting leadership vanguards of protest movements. Exactly as with Bolshevism, Fascism, Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism later, all directing very different kinds of revolutionary upheaval, guiding ideologies, often fanatically championed and propagated by revolutionary leaders, far more often mold and exploit than derive from social or economic pressures.

Revolutions, then, are not shaped by sociability or general attitudes but by organized revolutionary vanguards marshaling their own distinctive political language and rhetoric, including apt slogans, as a means of capturing, taking charge of, and interpreting the discontent generated by social and economic pressures. In determining the actual direction and precise objectives of the revolutions of the 1775–1850 era, when justifying American (or Belgian, Greek, or Spanish American) independence, rewriting constitutions, reshaping institutions, drafting major new legislation, and formulating the “rights of mankind,” it was invariably challenging new ideological frameworks opposing the status quo, not economic forces or culture, that were primary. As one of the Massachusetts delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia recalled years later, revolutionary Americans were born the subjects of a king and until 1776 steeped in monarchical loyalty and thinking, initiating the “quarrel which ended in the Revolution not against the King, but against his parliament.”³³ The Crown was nevertheless resoundingly eradicated despite the fact that practically no one wanted this earlier. Setting aside monarchy and instituting a republic in America, like abolition of the French monarchy in September 1792, in fact had very little to do with established or slowly changing general attitudes. The *Declaration of Independence*, the 1787 United States Constitution, and subsequent institutional framework, far from arising from sociability, contradicted everything the people were used to.

Bearing this is in mind, it has also seemed important to reverse the usual practice of historians discussing the nineteenth century who, anxious to separate the nineteenth from the eighteenth century, often employ the terms “nationalist” and “nationalism” and “liberal” and “liberalism” to lend the post-1815 era a distinctive cast, rendering these terms familiar to readers of nineteenth-century history but in the process erasing crucial continuities. European nationalism did indeed rear its head in the middle and later decades of the century but played little part during the first third despite the efforts of scholars, convinced the birth of the modern nation-state was the chief development of the age, to prove the contrary. And if the idea that nationalism was central has been greatly exaggerated for reasons that once mattered far more than they do now, regularly employing the term “liberalism” to characterize

key early nineteenth-century trends is nothing less than a general historiographical disaster since this absurdly vague and elastic term equally accommodates anti-democratic moderates, heirs of the “moderate Enlightenment,” and post-1800 philosophical radicals conserving the Radical Enlightenment legacy. These irreconcilably opposed trends figured among the principal ideological tendencies of the age; so it is almost as if some evil genius deliberately introduced these highly misleading and obfuscating labels to render the entire historiography of the period a fog of confusion. It is best assiduously to avoid them.

Reverting to the intellectual and ideological core of the American Revolution in recent years, historians such as Gary Nash, Seth Cotlar, Sean Wilentz, and Matthew Stewart revived and reworked May’s basic dichotomy dividing the Revolution and Enlightenment into conflicting “moderate” and “radical” streams (albeit only in the last case actually using the key terms “radical Enlightenment” and “moderate Enlightenment” to designate these rival streams) as the most appropriate way to explain the American Revolution’s inner dynamics and interaction with the wider world. This now firmly established theoretical framework has subsequently been developed further by others, including myself.³⁴ Such a schema implies that far from having “profoundly different social and political implications and consequences,” the American Enlightenment’s essential duality exactly paralleled the dual trajectory of the European Enlightenment.³⁵ Equally, the American and French revolutions, far from sharply diverging in character (as has frequently been claimed), actually ran parallel with no basic differences in principle or general tendencies discernible prior to the Montagnard takeover of June 1793, the change that dramatically (albeit only briefly) diverted the French Revolution from the basic and common transatlantic Enlightenment pattern.³⁶

A major recent contribution to the study of transatlantic democratic thought and practice down to the nineteenth century resoundingly breaking with the old parochialism is James Kloppenberg’s pathbreaking *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (2016). There are significant points of convergence between his interpretation and this present study, notably a common impulse to place transatlantic intellectual debates, clashes, and theories at the center and sideline the “cultural turn.” We both present the story as a complex mix of success and failure. But there are striking differences. Where we especially diverge is in his identifying as “partisans of democracy” key thinkers and statesmen such as John Locke and John Adams, supposedly drawing inspiration from religious faith (Kloppenbergs assigns a major formative role to the Reformation and to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition), whom I classify as proponents of “mixed government”

and the aristocratic republic clashing with the democratic tendency.³⁷ Our disagreement revolves at bottom around our different ways of defining “radical” and “moderate” Enlightenment: Kloppenberg characterizes “radical Enlightenment” rather narrowly as just atheism and materialism, excluding non-providential deists and democratic Unitarians like Price and Priestley, however opposed these were to the prevailing system of society and politics, while—confusingly as I see it—bracketing the Jeffersonian (democratic) and Hamiltonian (aristocratic) tendencies in post-Independence American ideological politics together as both being “moderate.”

Despite the “hyperbolic rhetoric deployed by both sides from the 1790s through the War of 1812,” holds Kloppenberg, both main American ideological factions should be deemed “moderate Enlightenment” not least because both “understood that a thoroughgoing democracy acknowledges the force of popular piety.”³⁸ This approach reaffirms the wide gulf between the French Enlightenment and the Anglo-American Enlightenment that Hannah Arendt, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and many others have postulated. But the question whether Franklin, Jefferson, and Paine (who all professed to be deists) were really inspired by Christian piety remains highly debatable and anyway less decisive in this connection than whether a given enlightener held that a knowing, benevolent divinity governs the course of human affairs, sanctions the prevailing political, social, and educational norms, and revealed His purposes—or at least needs to be regarded as having so communicated his requirements—to religious leaders. If the answer is “yes” then ecclesiastical authority and theological rulings must necessarily be retained in the legislative process, policymaking and representation, education, and the accepted legal and moral order. By contrast, the “radical Enlightenment” built its “pursuit of happiness” exclusively on secular values, wholly eradicating religious authority. Hence, wherever an enlightener’s views entail systematic elimination of theology, clergy, and state support for churches from the political sphere and education, demanding full secularization of public authority and comprehensive separation of church and state, he belongs to the “radical Enlightenment” whether he admitted to being an atheist and materialist or not.

Conversely, figures like Hume, Gibbon, Adams, Hamilton, and Morris whose Christian allegiance was just as dubious as that of a Franklin or Jefferson but who recommended limited suffrages, aristocratic political systems, and keeping a measure of ecclesiastical influence and privilege should be deemed “moderate Enlightenment” irrespective of whether they were personally irreligious or not. Differentiating between radical and moderate Enlightenment in a manner that locates Franklin and Jefferson among the “moderates” is especially problematic, I argue, in that it helps justify the long-

standing and unfortunate historiographical tendency to understate America's protracted conflict between democratic and aristocratic republicanism, the central dynamic that became a major factor in 1776, grew intense during the 1790s, and subsequently remained central in America over the centuries.

Correctly characterizing “radical Enlightenment” as democratic republicanism combined with rejection of religious authority³⁹ shows at once that the relentless polemics dividing Federalists from Jeffersonians during the 1790s amounted to far more than just “hyperbolic rhetoric.” Instead of presenting the French and American revolutions as standing in stark contrast, a great historical error, a viable classification must bring out the basic parallelism: demonstrating that the American and French revolutions share the same basic trajectory (until June 1793), both being equally a battleground for rival moderate and radical Enlightenment factions. The French Revolution, except during the Terror, was conceptually and rhetorically much the same kind of unremitting ideological arena as post-Independence America with “moderates” venerating Locke, Montesquieu, and British “mixed government” fighting democratic republicans championing secularism and universal and equal human rights, the latter consciously and explicitly aligning with Jefferson and his followers.⁴⁰ French republican revolutionaries like Condorcet, Bonneville, Desmoulins, Carra, Cérutti, and Brissot, and Italian radicals like Filangieri, Mazzei, and Gorani—no less than British “philosophical radicals”—pursued much the same goals of liberty, democracy, and equality with freedom of expression and the press, and security of person and property, as were promoted in America by Franklin, Paine, Freneau, Jefferson, Barlow, Coram, and Palmer. This wide international sweep continued throughout the revolutionary era down to 1848.⁴¹

The American Revolution, then, had a dual trajectory and in this respect formed part of a wider transatlantic revolutionary sequence, a series of revolutions in France, Italy, Holland, Switzerland, Germany, Ireland, Haiti, Poland, Spain, Greece, and Spanish America. In presenting the wider revolutionary context, I have striven to keep the comparative transatlantic dimension firmly in the foreground while maintaining a balance between American and non-American developments. Political narrative and recounting public controversies and ideological clashes are combined with a biographical component focusing on key Founding Fathers. Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, and Paine emerge not just as major figures in negotiating and harmonizing the dynamics of the American Revolution but equally as revolutionary icons and representatives inspiring, mobilizing, and cajoling competing forces within other revolutionary upheavals. The endeavors of the Founding Fathers and their followings abroad prove the deep interaction of the American Revolution and its

principles with the other revolutions, substantiating the Revolution's global role less as a directly intervening force than inspirational motor, the primary model, for universal change.

During the 1790s, May pointed out, intellectuals everywhere were locked in a bitterly divisive debate about the French Revolution, and books by "intellectual representatives of the Revolutionary Enlightenment," the quantitative data show, "reached impressive heights of popularity in America."⁴² Claiming basic ideological convergence between the American and French revolutions, strikingly, remained usual among the radicals themselves for decades. Stressing the affinities of the democratic wings of the two revolutions helped keep alive what true radicals deemed the authentic values of the American Revolution while continually reconnecting them with the democratic revolutionary consciousness of Europe, albeit after 1793 with only very sporadic success. Only during and especially after the Montagnard populist tyranny (1793–94) was there any plausible basis for the rival view, the potent myth that the American and French revolutions differed fundamentally. From 1795–96, however, a growing conservative pulpit and press campaign partly succeeded in introducing precisely this alleged basic divergence between the two great Atlantic revolutions, conjuring up a powerful new ideological device, anti-Jacobinism, afterward long utilized by American defenders of social hierarchy and checks and balances to tar the democratic tendency by denouncing Jeffersonians and Paineites as un-American "Jacobins."

An American writer who often invoked the consanguinity of the American and French revolutions and their common rootedness in the Enlightenment's radical tendency was the ex-Presbyterian minister Elihu Palmer (1764–1806), leader of the Deistical Society of New York in the 1790s. "The benevolent effects of reason, science and true philosophy," wrote this stalwart representative of democratic radicalism in 1797, would eventually triumph, overthrow political despotism and "despotism of the mind," and ground an age of peace and general "happiness." Philosophy would "extend over the face of the whole earth, and render happy the great family of mankind!" and then men would remember that "writings of the philosophers and philanthropists" had prepared the way. "Although superstition, from her dark and gloomy abodes, may hurl her envenomed darts, yet the names of Paine, Volney, Barlow, Condorcet, and Godwin will be revered by posterity, and these men will be ranked among the greatest benefactors of mankind."⁴³

Radical literature diffused widely on both sides of the Atlantic, but many Americans abhorred the radicals and their ideas so that demand for books and pamphlets rejecting "radical Enlightenment" concepts escalated too, stoking up the rival impulses contesting the American Revolution's legacy in a man-

ner vividly reflected in American bookselling and reading patterns. Writers like Condorcet, Raynal, Volney, Paine, Price, Priestley, Godwin, Beccaria, and Wollstonecraft abounded in American libraries and intellectual culture, but “anti-radical Americans,” countering their conjoined democratic and irreligious claims, observed May, also penetrated the intellectual arena “in enormous volume.” Moderates preferred Scottish Enlightenment religion-friendly books by writers like Kames, Smith, Beattie, and Blair, reconciling a rationalized conception of faith with science, philosophy, and nondemocratic forms of revolutionary politics. This divide, still perceptible long after 1800, arose, observed Donald Meyer—embracing May’s findings—from majority American resolve to “tame the Enlightenment, dulling its radical and skeptical edge, and seeking accommodation between enlightened thinking and traditional moral and religious values.”⁴⁴ The majority, led by the gentry elites, lawyers, and pastors, sought to restrain the Enlightenment and to an extent check the spirit of ’76, the democratizing tendency itself.⁴⁵

This profound rift in post-1783 American society caused some to consider the Revolution triumphantly complete while others judged it worryingly incomplete. The Revolution’s deficiencies, held the radicals, lay partly in “defects” in the state constitutions, partly in the revival of religious authority, and partly in failing to abolish slavery and emancipate the blacks. America’s state constitutions mostly left informal “aristocracy” intact while drastically restricting the right to vote even for adult white males—except, all too briefly, in Pennsylvania (until 1790) and Vermont. In 1784, Price had expected speedy improvement, his “heart-felt satisfaction” deriving in part from his trust that the “United States are entering into measures for discountenancing [the slave trade], and for abolishing the odious slavery which it has introduced.” Until then, the American people would not “deserve the liberty for which they have been contending. For it is self-evident, that if there are any men whom they have a right to hold in slavery, there may be others who have a right to hold *them* in slavery.”⁴⁶

To restricted state constitutions, white resistance to black emancipation, and powerfully entrenched religious authority including compulsory taxes to fund churches and clergy was added the threat of strengthened oligarchy. In his 1784 speech exalting America’s achievement Price expressed great optimism but also worried that he might have carried his expectations “too high, and deceived myself with visionary expectations.” Independence only superficially ended “all their dangers,” the greatest risk now being to “those virtuous and simple manners by which alone Republics can long subsist.” With Independence, naked pursuit of wealth, complacency, and “clashing interests, subject to no strong control,” so flourished as seemed likely to destabilize

the Revolution and “break the federal union.” Growing inequality spelled widespread loss of individual independence and economic and moral “self-direction,” key principles for Price. The stakes were high for America and the world. Should America fail to build on her founding principles and promise, the “consequence will be that the fairest experiment ever tried in human affairs will miscarry; and that a Revolution which had revived the hopes of good men and promised an opening to better times, will become a discouragement to all future efforts in favor of liberty, and prove only an opening to a new scene of human degeneracy and misery.”⁴⁷

Despite the initially high expectations, America’s revolutionary achievement was scarcely matched by comparable achievements elsewhere during the next three-quarters of a century. In fact, what followed American Independence disappointed even Enlightenment “moderates” and eventually all but shattered the hopes of radical democratic republican political thinkers. For all the apparent variety of political forms in the world and Montesquieu’s relativism, radicals were convinced, there were ultimately only two kinds of political system: genuine democratic republics based on reason, natural rights, and the collective good, and those of the “intriguers,” as Condorcet put it, that is, monarchies, dictatorships, and aristocratic republics entrenching vested interests, vitiating the common interest, and using religious authority, or what he deemed specious arguments, to dupe the great mass of the ignorant, confused, and “superstitious” deferring to monarchy, aristocracy, financial elites, and ecclesiastical control.⁴⁸ The American Revolution may have begun a process to make the world anew, but by the late 1790s “the intriguers” appeared to be winning.

A prominent “moderate” regretting the lack of successful follow-up to the American Revolution abroad was Adams. Beyond avid study of American developments, nothing lasting had emerged so far outside the United States, he agreed in 1814, writing to Jefferson, his former archrival in politics now a regular correspondent. Neither former president, surveying the scene in 1814, four decades after the Revolution’s advent, underestimated what Adams called the “horrors we have experienced for the last forty years.” In a world increasingly resistant to political reform and freedom of expression since 1793–94, all efforts to establish stable representative government had collapsed. What followed was an unrelieved story of failed revolutionary attempts, bitter ideological conflict, and war. Yet, Adams too, while unwilling to go so far as Jefferson, Paine, Price, or Filangieri in dismantling crowns, aristocracy, clergy, ecclesiastical authority, and colonial oligarchy, believed social, cultural, and political reform in emulation of America, correcting abuses and making substantial improvements, would eventually occur and benefit all humanity.

“Government has never been much studied by mankind,” lamented Adams. “But [men’s] attention has been drawn to it, in the latter part of the last century and the beginning of this, more than at any former period: and the vast variety of experiments that have been made of constitutions in America, in France, in Holland, in Geneva, in Switzerland, and even in Spain and South America, can never be forgotten.” All these upheavals “will be studied and their immediate and remote effects, and final catastrophies noted. The result in time will be improvements.”⁴⁹ This, however, was no preordained, inevitable progress. After Napoleon’s downfall the world witnessed a powerful revival of absolutist monarchy, aristocratic dominance, and religious authority along with Counter-Enlightenment ideas, even perceptibly in the United States. After 1815, political and intellectual censorship, compared to pre-1789 levels, was significantly strengthened throughout Europe. To Adams it was clear that the “course of science and literature is obstructed and by so many causes discouraged that it is to be feared, their motions will be slow.”⁵⁰ Slavery and serfdom were being reaffirmed and extended in the French, Spanish, and Brazilian empires, and also in the United States. Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia all experienced a general reversal of Enlightenment attitudes and institutions—a dramatic overall deterioration in rights, freedom of thought, and circumstances for the great bulk of humanity.

The root cause of the disheartening reverses, Adams and Jefferson agreed, was “superstition,” ignorance, and defects in men’s understanding of society, politics, and religion—in other words insufficient Enlightenment. When it came to battling Counter-Enlightenment attitudes, the basic split between radical and moderate Enlightenment receded into the background. Despite having long differed over political theory and the general principles of the American and French revolutions, in their last years Adams and Jefferson more and more converged in denouncing the reactionary surge. Republican liberty, free expression, religious toleration, spread of republican institutions, and just, orderly, constructive government for peoples everywhere remained for both, despite all the setbacks and opposition, desirable and possible.⁵¹ The ferment convulsing the then world would “ultimately terminate in the advancement of civil and religious liberty and amelioration in the condition of mankind.”⁵²

After 1815, Adams and Jefferson hovered uneasily between optimism and pessimism. Adams had all along deplored Paine’s excessive optimism and recalled this, writing to Jefferson in 1815. But Adams too had once been insufficiently cautious, replied Jefferson, and now, after Napoleon, was too pessimistic. The revolutions of 1789–1814 had indeed all disintegrated. “But altho’ your prophecy has proved true so far,” responded Jefferson, in January

1816, “I hope it does not preclude a better final result. That same light from our West seems to have spread and illuminated the very engines employed to extinguish it. It has given [Europeans] a glimmering of their rights and their power. The idea of representative government has taken root and growth among them. Their masters feel it, and are saving themselves by timely offers of this modification of their own powers. Belgium, Prussia, Poland, Lombardy etc., are now offered a representative organization: illusive probably at first, but it will grow into power in the end. Opinion is power, and that opinion will come. Even France will yet attain representative government.”⁵³ Jefferson was probably right, replied Adams, but “all will depend on the progress of knowledge. But how shall knowledge advance?”⁵⁴

Among those most intently pondering this continuing late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century transatlantic drama was the novelist James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), who composed his historical novel *The Bravo* (Philadelphia, 1831) during a stay in Venice in the spring of 1830, shortly after the outbreak of the July Revolution in France. He intended it as a literary exposé of the injustice and perverseness of aristocratic republics in general (classifying Britain among the worst). By 1833 when he returned to America, Cooper had spent seven years in Europe and become convinced the post-1814 Restoration conservatism that so dismayed both Adams and Jefferson was an ideological curse blighting the Old World and the New alike. His own compatriots, he felt, were far too blind and unaware of the close intellectual and practical interaction between the American and European revolutions, and American and European counterrevolutionary tendencies, and how profoundly this complex interplay affected their own republic and America’s social, cultural, and economic future.

No one, remarks Fenimore Cooper in the novel’s preface, had yet authored a “history of the progress of political liberty, written purely in the interests of humanity”; but such a work was urgently needed. The old Venetian Republic, abolished by Napoleon in 1797 and incapable of protest, he adopted as his archetype of the corrupt, aristocratic republic. The Venetian Republic “though ambitious and tenacious of the name of republic, was in truth, a narrow, a vulgar, and an exceedingly heartless oligarchy.”⁵⁵ His Venetian aristocrat was “equally opposed to the domination of one, or of the whole [that is, of monarchy and popular sovereignty]; being, as respects the first, a furious republican, and, in reference to the last, leaning to that singular sophism which calls the dominion of the majority the rule of many tyrants!” No one more diligently propagated “all the dogmas that were favorable to his caste,” especially the notion that social hierarchy, and the subordination of the many, is a fact ordained by God.⁵⁶ Literary critics have noted the novel’s relevance

to both the French 1830 Revolution and contemporary American and British politics. Cooper's assault on the old Venetian oligarchy was actually a veiled attempt to discredit both the British ruling class *and* the American East Coast "aristocracy" of his day. Among the latter figured his own father, who had acquired land and a gentry lifestyle in Otsego County, New York.⁵⁷ Britain's aristocracy, though highly insidious according to Cooper, was at that time extolled by the East Coast social elite as the very epitome of political wisdom, probity, and good sense. A noteworthy contribution to the Radical Enlightenment as well as literature, Cooper's *The Bravo* was above all a timely admonition to his American fellow citizens.

It took decades for the American Revolution's broad global impact fully to recede in scholarly and general awareness and become a largely forgotten past. In the vastly changed intellectual milieu of the later nineteenth century, a post-Enlightenment era dominated by nationalism, imperialism, socialism, Marxism, and American isolationism, the American Revolution came to appear marginal to modern history outside America. It became standard to claim the American Revolution differed fundamentally from the French, and from all European and Latin American revolutions, and did not exert a broad impact. Untypical and highly perceptive in other ways, Hannah Arendt (1906–75), among the twentieth century's greatest political philosophers, wholly conformed to this curiously blinkered twentieth-century misapprehension. "That neither the spirit of [the American] Revolution nor the thoughtful and erudite political theories of the Founding Fathers had much noticeable impact upon the European continent," she stated in her book *On Revolution* (1963), "is a fact beyond dispute."⁵⁸ In this she could not have been more mistaken. Still more misguided, many scholars and readers today concur with the modishly dismissive stance that all this has ceased to be relevant and that "the eighteenth-century war of ideas is finally over."

Overly preoccupied with creating separate national stories, late nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and Latin American historians and philosophers shared their American colleagues' post-1850 disavowal of the Revolution's role in molding global modernity, refusing to see it as crucial to the wider Enlightenment movement and for shaping specific revolutions either side of the Atlantic between 1780 and 1848. If modern American historiography "remained remarkably insular,"⁵⁹ so equally did European historiography, both setting aside the broader picture and justifying a narrow approach by endorsing the myth of America's "exceptionalism." By its very nature, America's Revolution and post-revolutionary success was supposedly an experience others could not share, fully comprehend, or employ as a model. Accordingly, the Revolution remained familiar to readers almost

exclusively as the harbinger of America's own independence, nationhood, and Constitution.⁶⁰

Colonial rebellions against imperial governments have regularly occurred since the eighteenth century. National movements have often secured independence from the imperial power but only rarely succeeded in replacing it with a stable, manifestly better political and social order. In this respect, the American Revolution differed dramatically from the usual pattern. From 1775, America became the first albeit highly imperfect model of a new kind of society, laying the path by which the modern world stumbled more generally toward republicanism, human rights, equality, and democracy. Besides independence, it introduced egalitarian republican principles that impressed and appealed widely, forging an eventually democratic republic in principle even if in practice often not embracing equality before the law and equal treatment of citizens' interests. The American Revolution's global significance stemmed from its offering a new kind of polity starkly contrasting with the *ancien régime* monarchical-aristocratic political and social system dominating Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia between 1775 and 1850, and the vast, exploitative colonial empires that then, and long afterward, overshadowed the globe. It was the crucible of democratic modernity.