



Introduction: Robert Roswell Palmer: A Transatlantic Journey of American Liberalism

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To study how American scholars have written about the history of France over the course of the last hundred years is, in certain ways, to appraise the evolving contours of American liberalism. For American historians who specialize in the past of France, its empire, or its wider continental context, the twentieth century saw a steady growth of institutional optimism. Although conservative suspicion against popular sovereignty and universal Enlightenment reason once markedly influenced the profession, since the late 1950s the American study of France has been increasingly associated with an advancement of progressive-minded ideals.¹ Yet, reflections over the past thirty years on the development of French history in American universities have been curiously silent on the nature or evolution of liberalism within their field. Its contours and challenges over the course of the twentieth century, as a distinct intellectual focus within the wider American Academy, remain in some ways terra incognita.

The career of Robert Roswell Palmer presents an outstanding case to begin an examination of the meaning and impact of liberalism on French historical scholarship in the United States. Throughout his long life, Palmer united an advocacy for social progress with a matchless dedication to original scholarship, graduate teaching, and the popularization of French history in the United States. The articles in this issue of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*—produced in honor of the centenary of Palmer's birth—reveal the breadth of his interests across what might be labeled as five phases of his life and career. First, following his graduate training at Cornell under Carl Becker, Palmer contributed to reconsiderations of the traditional historiography on the Enlightenment. A second short period was marked by embittered ideological divides in the late 1930s among the Western liberal democracies, during which Palmer rose to defend the liberal foundations of the French Revolution. After service in World War II, in the third phase Palmer broad-



ened his perspective with one of the most successful textbooks of European civilization, followed by his grand narrative—*The Age of the Democratic Revolution*.² A transition into administration and his reaction to a younger generation of assertive historians during the era of Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement defined the fourth phase. Finally, Palmer returned to defend an “enlightened Revolution” against the international revisionism of French historiography that reflected a wider tide of political conservatism, which crested after the collapse of European communism in 1989 and the dissolution of the USSR in 1990.

R. R. Palmer was a Midwesterner at heart.³ Born in 1909, he was raised in Chicago as the eldest of two sons, largely by his father, an accountant, following the tragic loss of his mother in 1919 during the height of the Spanish influenza outbreak. A gifted student, he won a Latin scholarship to the University of Chicago, and he became a prize undergraduate of the renowned historian Louis Gottschalk, who introduced Palmer to the study of the French Revolution.⁴ After Palmer earned his bachelor’s degree in 1931, Gottschalk steered him to work under his own great mentor, Carl Becker, who led the modern European seminar at Cornell University. After defending his dissertation in 1934, and a yearlong fellowship with the American Council of Learned Societies, in 1936 Palmer took a position as lecturer at Princeton University. Promotion rapidly followed over the next two decades, with Palmer appointed as Dodge Professor of History in 1952. Weak eyesight kept him stateside during World War II, where he served in the Historical Section of the War Department. Having published his most famous monographs and synthetic histories at Princeton, in 1963 Palmer accepted an invitation to serve as dean of faculty at Washington University in St. Louis. He returned to Princeton as dean of faculty in 1967; the following year he accepted a professorship at Yale University. After retiring from Yale in 1977 and several years as visiting professor at the University of Michigan, Palmer came back full circle to Princeton’s Institute of Advanced Study, where he devoted his remaining energies to scholarship on the influence of a liberal Enlightenment tradition on the French Revolution. Palmer served as president of the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1970. Married fairly early in his long career, Palmer and his wife, Esther, raised three children, one of whom has become an historian in his own right.⁵

The intellectual foundation for Palmer’s professional life was laid with his graduate training under Carl Becker, from which emerged his basic beliefs about the social purpose of historical study and his interest in the problem of objectivity in historical writing. As Palmer recalled later in his career, Becker was so attractive to ambitious students because he “was always willing to deal with big subjects” that surpassed narrow technical research, so disconnected from socio-ethical problems that bedeviled modern communities.⁶ Becker proposed a radical argument in favor of the relativity of historical knowledge: both an outgrowth of social values inherent to any author and a set of semiotic expressions whose meanings were ultimately independent of

any Kantian ideal of rational, universal values. His distrust of scientific “modernity” carried into his critique of the Enlightenment, which he famously considered a “heavenly city” of relativist faith, one that remained true to the “medieval temperament” that it claimed to have superseded.⁷

Palmer’s doctoral work reflected Becker’s critique of universal reason. His dissertation (which was never published), “The French Idea of American Independence on the Eve of the French Revolution,” used published works from American libraries to examine how Parisian observers envisioned the new republic overseas as “a kind of myth, a symbol constructed to satisfy their own needs ... a sign of better times soon to come [and] a place of emotional escape from the world in which they actually lived.”⁸ With its claim that cosmopolitan exchanges masked self-interest in practice, the study revealed the degree to which Palmer’s training had first internalized at least some of the skepticism toward liberal progress that so infused Becker’s thought.

With Becker’s support, Palmer obtained an assistant professorship at Princeton, following a postdoctorate fellowship in France, where he prepared his first book on Catholic intellectuals during the Age of Reason. Dale Van Kley, in the first article of this issue, carefully reviews how *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* contributed to a broader reconsideration of the Enlightenment movement away from a simplified dichotomous opposition between rational “modern intellectuals” set against “conservative” counterparts. He demonstrates how recent historiography on Jansenism broadly supports Palmer’s view of eighteenth-century Catholic thinkers as contributors to enlightened discourse about social ethics. Despite its age, *Catholics and Unbelievers* remains a sophisticated exposition on how a dialogue between faith and reason in tumultuous times was historically possible, and an example of civic improvement applicable to the present day.

Palmer strongly believed that American historical writing on Europe had to remain sensitive to present-day concerns. He distrusted writing that either settled into meaningless fact grubbing, or seemed to privilege overt concentration on methodology over the content of historical research.⁹ This linkage between national experience and scholarship led him to disavow hardened relativist positions in favor of a confidence in historians’ abilities to uncover epistemological truths, especially if domestic traditions such as isolationism seemed increasingly “out of joint with the times.”¹⁰ After World War II, Palmer distanced himself further from the “facile relativism” of the interwar years. Palmer rejected assertions that historical writing was indistinguishable from fictional construction, stating that “there is a historical process and the job is to get at it [with a] question that ought to be answered regardless of party lines or interests.”¹¹ By the late 1950s, Palmer had come to view relativism as a rhetorical instrument for neo-conservatives: he feared that “since Hitler, the Soviet rewriting of history, and the warnings of George Orwell” an overly “philosophical” tendency threatened to reduce knowledge to the mere validation of individual self-interest, thus negating the need for some legitimate acceptance of common values in the pursuit of “practical”

reform.¹² As the articles presented in this issue suggest, Palmer's search for a "middle road" between relativity and humanistic truths was indicative of a professional consensus that supported the reformist goals of the moderate political Left, while remaining loyal to an anti-communist establishment.

If Palmer disavowed polarized stances on the "objectivity debate," his actual practice of history might best be categorized as a "liberal political historicism." In general, Palmer treated political events, public institutions, or persons as unique agents specific to the historical context under study. His approach to historicism reflected his belief that individual agency was compatible to the potential universality of civic progress, as well as the power of public authorities to craft greater institutions of political democracy and human rights. Palmer found the study of European revolutions particularly conducive to his approach, but there were limits to his embrace of revolutionary trends in European history. He also feared certain strains of radicalism that could arise during moments of great historical change, especially if such measures seemed to threaten civic freedoms under a banner of more populist goals. Indeed, one of Palmer's thorniest problems was to navigate his own political-centered historicism against French scholarship based on more "structural" approaches to society, often influenced by elements of Marxist thought.

Palmer's service during World War II might have furthered his embrace of a pluralistic political historicism. After 1941, Palmer became an historian for the Army Ground Forces Command, based in Washington, D.C. During his service at the National War College he produced two prosaic studies on the mobilization effort of the Ground Forces Command,¹³ as well as an interesting chapter for the now-classic anthology on strategic thought, *The Makers of Modern Strategy*, in which he traced the steady militarization of male civilian life in Europe, leading ultimately to conflict that "hence has become increasingly 'total'."¹⁴ Palmer viewed this foray into military history as valuable professional experience that encouraged him to reconsider the interaction of civil-military relations in the French Revolution. Perhaps as a result of his fears regarding American society at the height of the Cold War, Palmer would later consider the "quasi self-militarization" of the National Assembly to be the principal reason for its betrayal of "self-government, meaningful elections, and freedom of speech." He continued to justify the legitimacy of military history in academia, as long as it embraced "social, economic, political, psychological technological and organizational conditions under which a society can exert armed force."¹⁵

The second phase of Palmer's career, during and in the decade after the war, was marked by his desire to reconcile French research with its relatively greater socio-economic focus to an American audience still dominated by concerns of political history. This effort was based on two developments in his personal and scholarly growth: his critique of a postwar "neo-conservatism" developing among American historians, and his intellectual relationship with Georges Lefebvre, then chair for the history of the French

Revolution at the Sorbonne and president of the Société des Études Robespierriennes, the subjects of John Harvey and James Friguglietti's articles. These two influences are marked in the publication, just before the Pearl Harbor attack, of his classic on the Committee of Public Safety, *Twelve Who Ruled*. Written during the crest of German conquest and the Vichy regime, Palmer's book sought to preserve the spirit of French democracy in America by making the Revolution as a whole acceptable to the general population, which explains its well-known lack of source annotation.¹⁶ Although Palmer unmistakably regretted the Revolution's sanguinary traits, especially in Year II, he strove to demonstrate that these horrors were not conditioned on the very existence of revolution as a means of civil change.

Even if Palmer recognized the brutality of violence that marked both sides of Year II, readers may ask if he was unclear about the degree to which upheaval could be sanctioned as a price for propelling a society toward long-term "progress." Palmer's support for the Revolution was probably also the majority view among American specialists of French history at the time of the Third Republic's surrender. John Harvey's study of Palmer's debate with the prominent Harvard historian of the Revolution Crane Brinton—played out both in private correspondence and their published works—demonstrates the extent to which he represented a tolerance for the French republican heritage before American eyes. By arguing for the Revolution as an open-ended drama, with authentic persons at the center of discrete events and national forces, Palmer called for citizens to recognize that neither the Terror, nor Napoleon's career, was determined by the demand for popular sovereignty unleashed in 1789.

In his discussion of the "transatlantic friendship" between Palmer and Lefebvre, James Friguglietti shows how common intellectual concerns are necessary to continue a rewarding discourse of ideas. Tapping into Lefebvre's letters that had been preserved by Palmer, Friguglietti's article reveals how personal bonds, from receiving material goods in a time of want to elucidating their understandings of "democracy" as a principle—or simply lending an ear to Lefebvre's personal fears as he aged in retirement—all became the true scaffolding behind their professional exchange of ideas. Friguglietti shows Palmer and his world in humanized terms, one that can enhance an empathetic grasp of a biographical subject, just as Palmer's own historical approach strongly promoted.

Lefebvre famously interpreted the Revolution as the changing of society from a "feudal" to "bourgeois" social structure. Even though his historicism clashed with Lefebvre's "sociological" perspective, Palmer was nevertheless attracted to Lefebvre's scholarship, because he felt that it attempted to refine class concepts of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy within a framework of political history, supported by careful empiricism.¹⁷ He disliked, however, Lefebvre's diminution of social equality as an outcome of the American Revolution, which was central to Palmer's contention that a Western revolution from the 1770s had introduced global concepts of political democracy.¹⁸

The third phase of Palmer's career in the postwar years is marked by his responses to what he sensed was a threat to liberalism from doctrinaire revolutionary Marxism. Despite his friendship with Lefebvre, their intellectual proximity was challenged by the latter's move further to the pro-Soviet Left in his writing and public statements. Upon Lefebvre's death in 1959, Palmer produced one of his most focused essays on the role of the peasantry in the origins of the Revolution. Acknowledging his debt to the departed "elder statesman," Palmer discussed *Les paysans du Nord*, in which Lefebvre had postulated that emerging capitalist markets threatened the peasantry's material well-being by the mid-eighteenth century to eventually trigger a populist rural reaction that fueled the collapse of royal authority in 1789.¹⁹ After detailing Lefebvre's conclusion that the "peasant revolution" was an ultimately unsuccessful "conservative" revolt against modern capitalism, Palmer questioned his assumption that an urban-rural bourgeois *mentalité* functioned as the "prime mover" of the revolutionary decade. A decade later, the revisionist challenges from Elizabeth Eisenstein, Catherine B. A. (Betty) Behrens, and George Taylor compelled Palmer to reconsider even more profoundly the existence of the Revolution's "bourgeois" origins. By the late 1960s, Palmer would echo warnings against interpretations that gathered everything under "a banal conflict between the rich and the poor." Without completely renouncing class-based interests in the study of France, Palmer grew to support some revisionism, if it lent greater precision to an "understanding of the Revolution."²⁰

All of Palmer's reactions to French historiography were framed by intellectual developments within the field and the wider political pressures of the Cold War. This was the context in which Palmer wrote perhaps his most recognized work, his two-volume study on *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*. Marvin Cox reads this treatise as an argument for a French "republican moment," not in the actions of the National Assembly or Convention, but through the post-Thermidorian government that lasted to the Brumaire Coup. Cox suggests that Palmer imagined a Western democratic revolution that was neither a single model of complete popular sovereignty, nor a specific type of representative structure (be it constitutional monarchy, presidential system, unicameral legislature). Democracy was not born in the "mystique" of 1789, or the Aulardian national mobilization of Year II. Instead, it first emerged as the ordinary "politique" of stabilized, constitutional government that tried to function among dramatically divergent political interests.²¹

What did Palmer mean by "politics" in his great revolution? Palmer saw "Western Civilization" in the modern era as a coherent, "certain cultural area" that developed novel identities of citizenship through "constituent" bodies that represented people's interests in state government, as established from the American Revolution to the rise of Bonaparte.²² This struggle of fundamental principles was not one of mere rhetoric; Palmer believed his "Democratic Revolution" to be the first widespread formation of these bodies.

Even if the democratic institutions failed in the 1790s, as Lynn Hunt noted in an echo of Palmer's ideas, they functioned as practical experiments in popular sovereignty for several years.²³

The breadth of his thesis about "the West" and the birth of modern democracy within "constituted bodies" met with a rather difficult reception abroad, aggravated by the ideological divide of the Cold War.²⁴ Those who most strongly supported the thesis tended to be of a conservative bent, such as Crane Brinton in the United States, and allies such as Jacques Godechot and Boris Mirkine-Guetzevitch in France.²⁵ Influential leaders of the "social interpretation" of the Revolution—especially Marxist-influenced historians such as Albert Soboul and Eric Hobsbawm—were far less kind because they rejected any thesis that ignored the Revolution's "essentially anti-feudal" nature, or blurred "its original character in an Atlantic or Western setting without social content, but not without ideologically ulterior motives."²⁶

Viewed from the present, we may ask whether Palmer's concept of politics was somewhat elusive, particularly about the role of "abstract ideas" that informed public law or constitutional experiments. Palmer never considered "politics" or "democracy" as a cultural phenomenon or a play of representation. Language for him was transparent in its practical meaning, and he was critical of what he considered François Furet's reduction of the Revolution to a discursive ideological joust, removed the realities of his "constituted bodies."²⁷ Yet well into the 1960s, Palmer seemed divided as to whether ideas had their own determinative power, or if they merely reflected the particular socio-economic characteristics of a community.²⁸ Conservative historians such as Behrens and Cobban voiced their own doubt, sensing a certain old Whiggish liberalism, despite Palmer's stated intent.²⁹ With the recent general success of democracy in Europe, however, his thesis of a "Western political revolution" has gained favor, at least as an international paradigm to explain the potential spread of pluralistic political structures and cultures.³⁰

With the publication of his major works of "big history" nearly finished, by the 1960s Palmer stood at the forefront of his academic profession in the United States. His maturation as a leading international historian led to a fourth phase of his career, when Palmer entered university administration and, eventually, moved to Yale. Palmer's sympathy for executive leadership and reform must have informed his decision in 1963 to accept Washington University of St. Louis's offer of the position of dean of the faculty of Arts and Sciences. There he focused intently on improving the competitive quality of the faculty and increasing the national recruitment of entering students. His wish, candidly phrased, was to make it the most significant private university of the Midwest, after Northwestern and the University of Chicago, without "taking in dumb-bunnies ... in order to fill up our dormitories."³¹ The new dean immediately set out to enhance the humanities and social sciences, believing that a potential danger of the Cold War era was an overemphasis on practical science, as it related to grant research and technical training. He increased funds for foreign research, nurtured study-abroad

options for students, and attempted to protect faculty salaries even as professors were inevitably “picked off” by other institutions.

It is not however clear that Palmer was completely satisfied at St. Louis. When granted the opportunity to replace J. Douglas Brown as dean of the faculty at Princeton in 1966, Palmer immediately seized the offer.³² He served in that position for one year, but seems to have been dissatisfied in the post: he may have sensed a lack of full authority in relation to the new university provost. Wishing to return full-time to teaching, but with his specialty of French history now taught by the new hire Robert Darnton, Palmer accepted a lateral move to Yale, where he served out his remaining career as research professor in the graduate school.³³

His arrival at New Haven marked the peak of his professional recognition, symbolized by his election to the presidency of the American Historical Association. But he was also challenged by an emerging caucus of young historians who viewed Palmer’s liberal historiography as an “establishment,” if not conservative, barrier to a more progressive orientation of historical writing. At the Association’s 1969 meeting, a “radical historians’ caucus” demanded that the AHA liberalize its policies concerning the AHA Executive Council and leadership positions in order to promote more inclusiveness and diversity. In addition, this group voiced their public support for greater political engagement by the AHA: they campaigned for the immediate American withdrawal from Vietnam, the release of “political prisoners” arrested in Chicago, and a defense of the Black Panther movement.³⁴ The caucus also nominated Staughton Lynd to run against Palmer, just after Lynd had been denied tenure at Yale. Palmer responded sympathetically to these challenges. He admitted overdue changes in the AHA were needed to encourage greater democratic representation and he supported further potential reforms to “modernize” its governance. Although Palmer did not concede to every point of the radicals, few Europeanist historians of his generation would likely have met the “revolt” with as much flexibility of opinion.

In this phase, Palmer was also to experience an unexpected reaction against his generation’s ideal of “democracy” and “progress,” one that culminated in the “radical historians’” critique of his popular textbook *A History of the Modern World*.³⁵ At the center of Palmer’s textbook was a sense of “modernity.” But Palmer’s understanding of economic change through material advancement and his view of “progress” through “constituent” institutions of democracy tended to consider “modernity” as a generally positive phenomenon that originated in the West.³⁶ These assumptions would leave Palmer unexpectedly vulnerable to a critique from “radical” historians in the late 1960s.

In 1971, three young Europeanists of the “Radical Historians Caucus,” who were then teaching at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, authored a stinging book-length critique of Palmer and Colton’s *A History of the Modern World*, by then in its sixth edition. Several hundred mimeographed copies, brazenly entitled “History as Indoctrination,” were reproduced, sold,

HISTORY AS INDOCTRINATION:

A Critique of Palmer and Colton's History
of the
Modern
World

By: Linda Gordon
Peter Weiler
David Hunt



Figure 1 Cover, "A History of Indoctrination." Reproduced with the kind permission of Jim O'Brien, Linda Gordon, David Hunt, and Peter Weiler.

or given away by the New England Free Press, a Boston-based group that supported the distribution of "radical" literature in the region.³⁷ The untenured professors' critique of Palmer challenged his notion of "Western Civilization" as a positive general rise of democratic central government, individual freedom, and measured expansion of social welfare and instead condemned it as a narrative of white and propertied-class male domination.

They drew from contemporary struggles to reveal rhetoric in the textbook that seemed to demean ethno-racial minorities and women as being implicitly antithetical to modern “liberalism,” which the radicals saw as an “ideology of dominance.” The young historians’ critique of specific content and language also contended that the “academic neutrality” claimed by Palmer and Cohen disguised raw political power, through its claim of consensual moderation as the only correct hallmark of professional discourse. Such legitimacy was used to refute political dissent, by merely categorizing a historical critique as “ideological” and, by implication, unprofessional.³⁸

Palmer seems to have ignored the original document. Neither he nor Joel Colton felt compelled to respond to the published version. Palmer agreed with the need to alter language in his texts in order to respect ethno-religious diversity. He certainly affirmed the need for scholars to remain engaged in the present.³⁹ But his liberalism rested on his sense of shared professional, rational judgment in the face of the “radicalisms” his generation had experienced, from European fascism to Stalinist/Maoist communism, and the American organizations of the radical Right and Left.⁴⁰ It also empowered his fruitful ties to scholars of widely divergent political stripes, even when they disagreed with him on important aspects of their current politics. Considering his own postwar re-evaluation of relativism, it is not clear that Palmer could therefore agree that “neutrality” was impossible, if not harmful, in historiography. For his generation, the alternative could devolve into unrelenting ideological, ethnic, or gendered conflict.

The final phase of Palmer’s career further demonstrated his belief “that men and women would want to group themselves under the authority of the nation-state, to organize a capitalist economy, and to think like philosophes,” best expressed in his edited documentary collection on the history of the renowned Collège Louis-le-Grand from the ancien régime to Napoleon and, after, his work on French education during the Revolution. At first, a documentary work on the Collège might seem at odds with a scholar more concerned with the rise of secular-minded progressivism, but the Collège documents offered an empirical opportunity to “test” historical assumptions about education, Catholicism, and the revolutionary state that had fascinated Palmer since the 1930s. Looking back from his own experience, he considered the evolution of the Collège to be a model of the birth of modern meritocracy. Palmer’s own experiences as dean might also have factored into his admiration for the school’s director, Jean François Champagne, who “went along willingly with the Revolution while hoping to check or guide it.”⁴¹

A decade later, in *The Improvement of Humanity* Palmer sought to demonstrate more comprehensively how the Revolution could usher in a “modern” form of French education.⁴² He structured his ideas about a “bourgeois Enlightenment” and the politics of the Revolution into four areas: the nationalization of private schools; the politicization of choices regarding the nature of education; the drive to democratize pedagogical opportunities throughout the country; and the “modernization” of institutions that would set France

on a later path to progress. Both books credited the ancien régime with real efforts of reform, especially with regard to a kind of Tocquevillian centralization of private education policy to the state level. Palmer was clear to emphasize, however, that conservative interests were too powerful to allow the “absolutist state” to implement modern reform, something only the Revolution could attempt.

On closer examination, however, Palmer’s study of *Louis-le Grand* and *The Improvement of Humanity* also reveal deeper uncertainties about his approach to history. While careful to emphasize the limited success of revolutionary proposals for universal education, Palmer’s association of the utilitarian and elitist Napoleonic bureaucracy with “modernity” tended to gloss over inconsistencies in his concept of “modern progress” without perhaps a clear question of whether Napoleon’s reforms could be compatible with liberal democracy.⁴³ For Palmer, modernization had become a process “when a society makes a conscious and successful use of knowledge, especially new knowledge, to increase its powers and well-being,”⁴⁴ and the bourgeoisie a class defined by family aspirations for access to secondary education, which were “at least as good a sign of bourgeois status as is the possession of property.”⁴⁵ It is not truly clear how this system’s “use of knowledge” could equate to the actual democratization of society, if the values the system imparted were conservative, elitist, or ethno-national essentialist. Moreover, this ideal “bourgeoisie” supposed a class “mentality” that could become a catch-all for anything that scholars wished to describe as “modern” from their twentieth-century Western perspectives.⁴⁶

In addition to these studies of French education, Palmer focused his energies in the final two decades of his career on biographies of revolutionary “liberals,” including the de Tocquevilles, Marc-Antoine Jullien, Jean-Baptiste Say, and an uncompleted study on Abbé Grégoire. Paul Hanson’s article on Marc-Antoine Jullien suggests how Palmer’s research on the French revolutionary era remained committed to reform in a capitalist-democratic state, despite the growing voice of the “Furet critique” up to the French bicentennial. Despite the prominence by the 1980s of the debate between structuralist and postmodern approaches in history, Palmer believed that biography and the publication of translated documents remained an effective means to explore the experience of the Revolution. He seemed to believe that such biographies could reveal a seedbed for eventual liberal democracy, endowed with its own fluid historical agency, and not a fixed omen for later disasters of the twentieth century.

Published in 1993, Palmer’s study of Jullien could be read as an implicit argument both for the need of revolutionary Jacobin change during periods of clear socio-political crises, balanced by a necessity to prevent such movements from slipping into abuses against human rights.⁴⁷ Although he began as a quintessential Jacobin idealist, as with many tragic figures, Jullien oversaw atrocities in the government’s “pacification” of Bordeaux in Year II. Hanson shows, however, that Palmer considered him an emblem of

how revolutionaries could reach for compromise and effective government, without forsaking their hopes of longer-term enlightened change. In short, Palmer was attempting to demonstrate that the Revolution held a legacy of “pragmatic progress,” even as it endured increasing criticism from conservatives bent on foreign interventionism, or disenchanting European liberals whose own views seemed based on counting “Edmund Burke as a source of perceived wisdom.”⁴⁸ A similar concern for “practical progressivism” guided Palmer’s last book (1997), in which he edited and translated a collection of writings by the economist J.-B. Say (1767–1832), a “pragmatic liberal and admirer of Franklin.”⁴⁹ From the vantage of President Bill Clinton’s re-election year and the collapse of Soviet communism, Say’s moral economic philosophy on free market capitalism, when coupled to reasonable social reform, all seemed a historical referent to the optimism shared by many before the shock of 9/11.

Lloyd Kramer, who shared co-authorship with Joel Colton of later editions of *A History of the Modern World*, completes this special issue with his reflections on the importance of Palmer to the working historian and teacher: the lyricism and power of Palmer’s prose, and his interest in tackling the “big questions” of history. Kramer summarizes these strengths through themes that are consistent with all of this issue’s contributions: Palmer’s talent for wonderfully readable prose; his capacity to address himself to grand, synthetic topics; and his commitment to the social importance of professional history. Indeed, Palmer considered Americans to be privileged synthesizers of continental history, given their tradition from “the colony of all Europe ... [and thus] better able to see the whole movement as one common to the Atlantic world.”⁵⁰ Of course Palmer’s writing had “blind spots” that have required substantial modifications with the changing times, particularly on issues of racism, Eurocentrism, and gender equality. But his interest in a liberal, inclusive world community has in fact become more important to academic leaders over the past half century.

With the final rest of his pen in 2002, so ends the story of Palmer’s engagement with the American liberal tradition. His passing also marked the end of a kind of genteel, but highly talented and analytical group of American historians who emerged from the decades of Depression and World War to reconfigure how university scholars imagined the European past. More than the simple sum of individual works, the entirety of his oeuvre amounts to a symbol for the intellectual rise of liberal ideals in the mid-twentieth century, which blossomed more fully with the further democratization of the profession after the 1960s. “Modernization” is an inappropriate term to categorize Palmer’s professional legacy. Yet in many ways the principal characteristics of his career seem to have gained much wider acceptance among historians across both sides of the Atlantic today. At a time when scholars in Europe often remained focused on exclusively national perspectives, aside from topics of diplomacy and warfare, Palmer promoted the globalization of research that was essential to the debate about democratic citizenship. His

devotion to a historicist approach to scholarship was also flexible enough to appreciate certain newer trends in historiography up to the 1980s. He attempted, within reason, to expand his form of research to account for some of these directions. His commitment to socio-political equality, within the limits of his generation, meant that in periods of strengthened conservative criticism against popular democracy, Palmer still believed that the French Revolution was a “rather good thing for all but a few, despite the suffering that it entailed.”⁵¹ The hope that every person held a right to wield conscious sovereignty in shaping one’s private life and contribute thereby equally to a public good guides the presentation on Palmer’s career in this special issue.

Notes

1. I understand twentieth-century American liberalism to be defined by a commitment to legal equality for all, ethno-cultural pluralism, and a moderate growth of state welfare programs (in contrast to the more extensive European model of modified socialism). See Robert B. Fowler, *Enduring Liberalism: American Political Thought Since the 1960s* (Lawrence, KS, 1999), 100–101, 104, 122–123, and Marcus G. Raskin, *Liberalism: The Genius of American Ideals* (Lanham, MD, 2004), esp. 9–19.
2. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ, 1959, 1964). The first volume received Columbia University’s Bancroft Prize and a generous \$10,000 prize from the ACLS.
3. Brief biographies of Palmer include those of his student Isser Woloch, in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 148 (2004): 394–398; the AHA’s *Perspectives* 40 (September, 2002); and his *nécrologie* in the *Annales historiques de la révolution française* 74 (2002): 159–163. See also James Friguglietti’s complementary piece in *The Scribner Encyclopedia of American Lives*, vol. 6 (2000–2002): 392–394. I have added biographical summaries from “Robert Palmer,” Faculty and Professional Staff Files, AC107, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton University. An obituary also appeared in the *New York Times*, June 18, 2002.
4. See Palmer’s *nécrologie* of Gottschalk in *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 48 (1976): 665–667.
5. Esther H. Green, his wife, was the daughter of a leading professor of economics at Princeton; they married in 1942. The Palmers raised three children: Richard, Emily, and Stanley—the latter an historian at The University of Texas-Arlington specializing in modern British and Irish history.
6. Palmer’s review of Burleigh Wilkins’ biography of Becker, *Journal of Modern History* 34 (1962): 351–352.
7. Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, CT, 1932). Even after ten English-language editions had appeared, it was not translated into French, as recognized by Louis Trenard in *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 11 (1964): 313–315. It remains so today.
8. Palmer, “The French Idea of American Independence on the Eve of the French Revolution: An Abstract of a Thesis,” June, 1934, Cornell University. I thank Cornell University’s Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections for a copy of the four-page, privately printed summary.

9. Palmer's position is revealed in his reviews of Harold Parker's study of Napoleon in the *Journal of Modern History* 16 (1944): 315, and of *Montesquieu in America*, in the *Journal of Modern History* 13 (1941): 405.
10. Palmer, "Ideas That Did Not Migrate from America to Europe," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 63 (1939): 378–379. As a European historian, Palmer was especially concerned about Americans rethinking their previous sense of "moral superiority in the face of Europe."
11. As quoted from Palmer's private correspondence by Peter Novick, "Historians, 'Objectivity,' and the Defense of the West," *Radical Historical Review* 40 (1988): 9, and Harvey Briet, "Talk with R. R. Palmer," *New York Times Book Review*, July 30, 1950, 6.
12. Palmer was especially revealing in "Thoughts on *The Heavenly City*," in *Carl Becker's Heavenly City Revisited*, ed. Raymond O. Rockwood (Ithaca, NY, 1958), esp. 124, 127–132.
13. Robert Palmer, Bell Wiley, and William Keast, *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington, DC, 1948) and Palmer, Wiley and Kent Greenfield, *The Organization of Ground Troops* (Washington, DC, 1946).
14. Palmer, "Frederick the Great, Guibert, Bülow: From Dynastic to National War," in *The Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, ed. Edward M. Earle, Gordon A. Craig, and Felix Gilbert (Princeton, NJ, 1943). As Palmer attested: "The wars of kings were over; the wars of peoples had begun." See the same chapter, reprinted in the second edition from 1986, edited by Peter Paret, p. 92.
15. See Palmer's panel comments on the American experience in the *Proceedings of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe* (1981): 209–212. On the legitimacy of military history, and how his wartime historical service influenced later research, see Palmer's preface to Jean-Paul Bertaud, *The Army of the French Revolution: From Citizen-Soldiers to Instrument of Power* (Princeton, NJ, 1988): xii and xvi.
16. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 1941). Two versions have appeared in French. Calman-Lévy published 1789: *Les Révolutions de la liberté et de l'égalité* (Paris, 1968), and a bicentennial edition was published by Armand Colin, *Le gouvernement de la Terreur: l'année du Comité de salut public*, trans. Marie-Hélène Dumas and Guy Desgranges (Paris, 1989).
17. On generalizations, see Palmer, "Life of Thomas Paine," *The Nation* 147, October 29, 1938: 459. On Lefebvre, see his preface to *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 1988), xiv–xvi.
18. Palmer review of Lefebvre's *Études sur la Révolution Française*, in the *American Historical Review* 60 (1955): 358–359 and Palmer, "The Revolution," in *The Comparative Approach to American History*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New York, 1968), 48. It responded to Lefebvre, "La Révolution française dans l'histoire du monde," *Annales ESC* 3 (1948): 257–266.
19. Palmer, "Georges Lefebvre: The Peasants and the French Revolution," *Journal of Modern History* 31 (1959): 329–342, which reviewed *Les paysans du Nord pendant la révolution française* (Paris, 1924) and *La grande peur de 1789* (Paris, 1932).
20. Palmer, "Polémique américaine sur le rôle de la bourgeoisie dans la Révolution française," *Annales historiques de la révolution française* 189 (1967): 369–380.
21. For earlier positive views of the Directory, Albert Goodwin, "The French Executive Directory—A Revaluation," *History* 22 (1937): 201–218; Pierre Bessand-Massenet, *La France après la Terreur: 1795–1799*; and Marcel Reinhard, *La France*

- du Directoire*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1956). More pessimistic evaluations of civic life range from Lefebvre, *La France sous le Directoire* (Paris, 1946) to Howard G. Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville, NC, 2006).
22. For Palmer's assertion of a "transatlantic cultural unity" and a true "Atlantic Civilization" in the 1790s, through the concrete individual in lieu of public opinion or collective discourse, see "A Revolutionary Republican: M. A. B. Mangourit," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 9 (1952): 485.
 23. Lynn Hunt, "The World We Have Gained: The Future of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 18.
 24. Recently in John Horne, "Une histoire à repenser," *Vingtième siècle* 71 (2001): 69.
 25. The volumes were seen as "taking back" the Revolution from French Marxist historians and establishing the "birth of the democratic West" with an acceptable positive gloss. See reviews: Crane Brinton in the *Journal of Modern History* 32 (1960): 164; Geoffrey Bruun in the *Journal of Modern History* 37 (1965): 373–374; Francis Childs in *Catholic Historical Review* 52 (1967): 615–616; Max Beloff in the book review section, *New York Times*, November 8, 1964, 6; Bruce Mazlish's concern for "democratic tyranny" in his curious review from *The Nation* 190, February 27, 1960: 191–192. For a West German comparison, see Paul Kluge in the *Historische Zeitschrift* 193 (1961): 666–670. (The books were translated into French in 1968; German in 1970.) See also Boris Mirkine-Guetzevitch, "Alphonse Aulard et l'histoire constitutionnelle de la Révolution française," *Cahiers d'Histoire de la Révolution Française: Alphonse Aulard* (Paris, 1956), 55.
 26. Quoted from Albert Soboul, "Survivances 'féodales' dans la société rurale française au XIXe siècle," *Annales E.S.C* 5 (1968): 981–982. See also Marcel Reinhard, "Sur l'histoire de la Révolution française: travaux récents et perspectives," *Annales ESC* 14 (1959): 553–557 and his review of Godechot's *La grande nation* in the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 5 (1958): 134–160.
 27. Palmer's tone in his revised preface in the Bicentennial edition of Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, xi–xix.
 28. For Palmer's balance of both traditions, see "The Great Inversion: America and Europe in the Eighteenth-Century Revolution," in *Ideas in History: Essays Presented to Louis Gottschalk by His Former Students* (Durham, NC, 1965), 3–19.
 29. Alfred Cobban, "The Age of the Democratic Revolution," in *France since the Revolution* (New York, 1970), 155–163; Betty Behrens, *The Ancien Régime* (New York, 1967), 20–22. On Palmer as a "Whig," see Isaac Kramnick, "Reflections on Revolution. Definition and Explanation of Recent Scholarship," *History and Theory* 11 (1972): 36.
 30. Especially the essays by Edoardo Tortarolo, Annie Jourdan, Jack Goldstone, Simone Neri Serneri, and Peter Onuf in "L'era delle rivoluzioni democratiche di Robert R. Palmer," *Contemporanea. Rivista di Storia dell'800 e del '900* 10 (2007): 125–167.
 31. Dean Palmer interview with William K. Wyant, Jr., in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 26, 1964.
 32. "Princeton Provost Named," *Newark Evening News*, April 5, 1966.
 33. For accounts of his return to Princeton, which are somewhat different in testimony, I thank Princeton professors Charles Gillispie and Robert Tignor, letters of November 5 and 6, 2010.

34. Compare the sympathetic view of Carl Mirra, "Forty Years On: Looking Back at the 1969 Annual Meeting," *Perspectives on History* 48 (2010): 14–15 to the critical commentary of David Donald, "Radical Historians on the Move," *New York Times Book Review*, July 19, 1970.
35. Palmer, *A History of the Modern World* (New York, 1950). Colton joined in the second edition, released in 1956. Published by Alfred Knopf, it was a very lucrative endeavor for the authors, having sold over 420,000 copies by 1965, with annual sales of 40,000–50,000 copies (from its original 10,000 per annum). Palmer was supposedly earning \$50,000/year in royalties by the 1960s. See Eleanor Dienstag, "Publish and Prosper, Professor," *Washington Post*, December 27, 1964, and the note in the *New York Times*, July 20, 1965.
36. As this issue applies to writing on the Revolution as a claim for a "modern era," see especially Rebecca L. Spang, "Paradigms and Paranoia: How Modern Is the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 119–147.
37. The original stapled mimeograph appeared in 1973. A shortened version was later reprinted in the *History Teacher*. See Linda Gordon, David Hunt, Peter Weiler, "History as Indoctrination: A Critique of Palmer and Colton's *History of the Modern World*," *History Teacher* 21 (1987): 53–103. My reading is from an original copy, in the (then unprocessed) papers of Joel Colton, Duke University Archives, Durham. For background, I thank Professors Peter Weiler and David Hunt, letters of 22 and 23 January 2011.
38. As they summarized it, "we intend to show that liberal objectivity is an illusion by demonstrating that a representative textbook employed in the teaching of western history is political in the way it interprets the past." See Gordon et al., "History as Indoctrination," 55, 62 or the original pamphlet. On the debate's context, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 422–425.
39. The three historians recognized weaknesses of the original when it was published in 1987, but while still supporting the ideas as presented decades ago, Professor Hunt in particular recognized the liberal engagement of Palmer. *Twelve Who Ruled* inspired him as a student, and Hunt today considers him "a terrific historian."
40. Thus Palmer and Colton could not have accepted the assertion that "anti-communism is a way of thinking about politics with a structure and logic of its own, a system of biases and fantasies ... as elaborate and as destructive as other, more familiar syndromes like racism or make chauvinism." In *Ibid.*, 62.
41. *Ibid.*, 10–11, 34.
42. Palmer, *The Improvement of Humanity: Education and the French Revolution* (Princeton, 1985).
43. See the general comments of the rather critical review essay by Dorinda Outram on Palmer's *The School of the French Revolution*, in the *Historical Journal* 19 (1976): esp. 285, 293–297.
44. In *The Improvement of Humanity*, 221.
45. In *The School of the French Revolution*, 12 and especially Palmer, "How Five Centuries of Educational Philanthropy Disappeared in the French Revolution," *History of Education Quarterly* 26 (1986): 197.
46. Henry Heller, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789–1815* (Oxford, 2006); Sara Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

47. Palmer, *From Jacobin to Liberal: Marc-Antoine Jullien, 1775–1848* (Princeton, 1993).
48. Palmer's letter in the *Wall Street Journal*, February 14, 1983.
49. Palmer, *J.-B. Say. An Economist in Troubled Times* (Princeton, 1997). The quote, which perfectly summarizes Palmer's view, is from Gwynne Lewis's review in the *English Historical Review* 114 (1999): 1999.
50. Palmer, "The World Revolution of the West: 1763–1801," *Political Science Quarterly* 69 (1954): 14.
51. Palmer, "A Marxist View of the First French Republic," *Journal of Modern History* 19 (1947): 333.