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Transposition(s) and Confrontation(s) in the
British Isles, in France and Northern America
(1688-1815)

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Introduction—on and off Topic

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Introduction—on and off Topic

It has long been established, mainly with the works of Robert Roswell Palmer, Jacques Godechot, and more recently, Wim Klooster and Janet Polasky¹, that a revolutionary wave, promoting more egalitarian and progressive political regimes, swept over Northern America and Europe, France more particularly, in the 18th century. This approach, known as the Atlantic Revolution theory, holds that the 1776 American War of Independence initiated such a philosophical and political process, later reaching Europe. As Robert Roswell Palmer put it in *The Age of Democratic Revolution*: “The present work attempts to deal with [...] what has sometimes recently been called the Atlantic Civilization [...]. It is argued that this whole civilization was swept in the last four decades of the eighteenth century by a single revolutionary movement [...]. It is held that this forty-year movement was essentially ‘democratic’ and that these years are in fact the Age of the Democratic Revolution”².

It appears however that this revolutionary movement was initiated a long time before 1776. In the 1960s, famous French historian Fernand Braudel had already raised the question whether the questioning of a society dominated by the Catholic Church originated from Renaissance humanism³. The English Glorious Revolution and, prior to that, the tolerant ideas defended by the Dutch Republic of the Seven Provinces (1581-1795), certainly played an important part in this revolutionary and democratic movement which characterised the Enlightenment era, with such thinkers as Baruch Spinoza promoting the democratisation of society as early as the mid-17th century⁴ and John Locke defending the principle of Parliamentary Monarchy⁵ only a few decades later.

The object of the present volume of MFDS/ECFW (as that of the 2019 volume), was therefore to explore how this Atlantic Revolution theory could actually be extended to a wider period, to a wider geographical area and not only from America to Europe but also the other way round; such a hypothesis opening the possibility of new approaches to the political, economic but also artistic relationships between the British Isles, France and Northern America, both prior to and after the 1776 Revolution. Political theories, artistic movements, and ideals did travel within Europe, from Europe to Northern America, and back again, during the Long 18th Century, a period actually spanning over 120 years, from 1688 to 1815: here was the ambition of the following collection of articles, and the first ones certainly hold some of this perspective.

Reed Benhamou reports on the ambitious project of founding an artistic institution, which assumes that the new colonies are now sufficiently established to foster a local market and that the civilization of the new colonies has grown on par with European countries, that creativity is part of its needs and designated endeavors. Catherine [Gallouët shows that](#) *Les Indes galantes* demonstrate that there is an evolution of the French stage that goes beyond esthetic considerations. They reproduce a conventional form of exoticism and yet, Rameau and Fuzelier introduce new harmonies and audacious textual modifications that produce a hybrid form of opéra-ballet free from definite rules and pointing in the direction of anti-conformism. Thus,

¹ Robert Roswell Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution : A Political History of Europe and America* (1760-1800), 1959 ; Jacques Godechot, *France and the Atlantic Revolution of the 18th century* (1770-1799), 1965 ; Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World : A Comparative History*, 2009 ; Janet Polasky, *Revolutions without Borders*, 2015.

² Robert Roswell Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, p. 6.

³ Fernand Braudel, *Grammaire des civilisations* (1963). Flammarion, collection “Champs”, Paris, p. 465.

⁴ Spinoza indeed promoted a regime ‘in which absolutely everyone [...] is bound by the laws of his patria and is otherwise independent [...] and has the right to vote in the supreme council and take up offices of state’ (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), Leiden, 1989, 443).

⁵ Locke wrote in his *Treatises of Government* that ‘when the people are made miserable and find themselves exposed to the ill usage of arbitrary power [...] the people [...] will be ready upon any occasion to ease themselves of a burden that sits heavy upon them.’ (Locke, *The works of John Locke in Three Volumes*, London: Browne, 1751, Vol. 2, 231).

evoking far-away shores bring about new forms of representation for exotic others. Muriel Brot also considers efforts at stage renewals. She evaluates the conceptual difficulties Diderot encountered when trying to conceive a renewal of Molière's didactic comedy of characters. This article was originally received as belonging to the "varia" section, but its theme reflects the effort of renewing the aesthetics of comedy as the century tends to produce a more democratic model of theatre—Diderot is usually considered the theoretician who attempts to breach the noble and common genres of tragedy and comedy with the bourgeois drama ("comédie sérieuse").

Juliette Christie reports on Diderot's controversial success when striking a new form of literary criticism—deemed overly emotional, or "colourful"—, when commenting on Richardson. It may fit in the general inspiration of the Enlightenment, counting of emotional appeals to modernise society and steer their contemporary readers toward an ethical review of mores. The reforms are often inspired by England, from its parliamentary monarchy to the talented Richardson. In a similar vein of aesthetics renewal, Servanne Woodward analyses how the birth of written landscapes in eighteenth-century literature evaluates landscapes from the perspective of labour and labour from the perspective of unproductive playfulness. Smith is quick to condemn short-sighted destructive "developments" of colonial economy, from the destruction of wooded areas to the practice of slavery, as well as the mechanical activity of factory workers destroying the humanity: their natural creativity is altered if not arrested. The creative dimension of humanity and the increments of happiness are measured in terms of human physiological mechanisms and creative nature. Spanning the Americas, France and Savoy, Adam Smith and Rousseau may find unexpected common grounds among their observations.

Pierre-François Peirano is interested in Jefferson as a cautious admirer of Buffon, documenting his objections from what he had observed on the ground in Virginia, and in Lewis and Clark refuting the celebrated naturalist who wrongly concluded that the American fauna was degenerative, because he was shipped only the most transportable, thus diminutive animals. Concerning the Indigenous populations of North America, Jefferson appears ambiguous, and worried about the prejudice of degeneracy applied to them by the European immigrants. It may be surmised that the basis of such contempt rests on their valuing agriculture and technology, and market economy over nomadic societies' hunting and trading principles. Hélène Palma also addresses identity issues. She observes how British activists of the abolitionist cause in the late 18th century came to Sierra Leone with odd feelings of superiority over its population of freed slaves and poor Blacks from Britain. Melville was eventually appalled by the savagery of the British crown over blacks, and upon her return to England "was made to feel like an African, rather than a British or Scottish subject".

Together with the previous volume, this issue constitutes a modest contribution to the theme of "Transposition(s) and Confrontation(s) in the British Isles, in France and Northern America (1688-1815)". For us, it began with a marvellous conference hosted at the university of Toulon, organised with the collaboration of the Dean of humanities of the Université de Toulon, with Dr. Pierre-François Peirano of that university and Hélène Palma, Université d'Aix-en-Provence, and Servanne Woodward, then directing an exchange program at the Université de Nice, Sophia-Antipolis.

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Among other projects currently related to this volume, we noted in the 2013 issue of the *Caliban*, the publication of Rachel Rogers about L'hôtel de White in Paris, hosting the British club in the 1790's where the observers of the French Revolution resided <https://journals.openedition.org/caliban/139> We also report our readers to Maria O'Malley and Denys von Renen, *Beyond 1776 globalizing the culture of the American Revolution* (U. of Virginia Press, 2018) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv6zdbcp> Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton UP, 2014)

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhq8t>----. “The ‘General Revolution’: (1795–1800) Holland, Italy, and the Levant.” *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre*, by Jonathan Israel, Princeton University Press, Oxford; Princeton, 2014, pp. 635–669. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhq8t.28. Accessed 19 Dec. 2020.

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