

*Revolutions Without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World.* Janet Polasky. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780300208948

What is the Atlantic World? For many historians of ideas, it is that area where a revolutionary new idea of political liberty took hold in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Janet Polasky's *Revolutions Without Borders* uncovers the diversity of the ideas of political liberty in the Early Modern Atlantic world. She has offered an important new work that is most successful in its suggestiveness. Polasky draws on a wide range of sources and constructs a narrative that teaches us much about how idea of liberty championed in France spread to the colonies on the other side of the Atlantic and was fostered by a nascent cosmopolitanism. Not only that, she traces how these ideas returned to the "old" side of the Atlantic and landed upon the shores of Africa and Europe alike. How these ideas penetrated the European continent and stretched beyond the Atlantic world and into Poland and the city-state of Geneva is part of Polasky's story. She does much to deepen our understanding of how the failed liberal revolutions that took place in the "Old World" relate to those more successful revolts in the "New World". Polasky interprets how largely French liberal ideas of liberty can be used to understand the political hopes of anti-Enlightenment religious visionary slaves, women, and Parisian philosophes alike. Her work takes a significant step towards expanding our notions of how liberal ideas shaped rhetoric and politics and were a substantial part of how people experienced the Atlantic World.

Polasky organizes her nine chapters around distinct sets of sources. Featured among these are the work of the European pamphleteers (especially Thomas Paine), narratives describing blacks in the Americas as "citizens of the world," personal correspondence, and novels centered on domestic life. In each of these sources, notions of liberty are central. Moreover, these are sources that traveled--travel is an important part of this story that has yet to be developed. And

perhaps potential development is Polasky's greatest contribution with this work: she presents sources that have not been previously worked on (the personal correspondences) alongside academically overworked sources, like Paine. She lays before the reader the sources needed to create a comparative analysis of the development of notion(s) of liberty(-ies), or perhaps a transnational intellectual history that follows concepts as they travelled via the movement and spread of books, pamphlets, newspapers, clubs, persons, and stories. Thus she has opened doors for future scholars who might wish to analyze her sources in more depth.

Presenting sources in their own words is one of the book's central goals. In this respect, Polasky is successful, and her success allows the reader to gain access to the many ways that liberty was a key concept in the Atlantic World--even when her characters do not use the term in consistent ways. When describing her political, revolutionary pamphleteers, Polasky adopts the naturalizing vocabulary of her historical subjects: terms like "incendiary" and "inflammatory" abound, especially in her first chapter on pamphleteers. "Sparks" "ignite" uprisings as the desire for liberty "engulfs" readers (and illiterate hearers). The cry for liberty "cascades" down from the elite Parisian philosophes and into the mobs of Europe. Elsewhere, these naturalizing metaphors recede, when she describes the way plantation owners discussed slave uprisings, or when transatlantic families inscribed the diverse sensibilities that bound them together.

One of the book's secondary goals is to respond to R. R. Palmer, whose work *The Age of Democratic Revolutions: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, sets her geographic frame. This helps explain why a book with "Atlantic" in the title includes Geneva and Poland in its considerations. Palmer's text remains a monumental work, but it leaves out many revolutions, especially those relating to gender, race, labor, and the family. Polasky's interaction with Palmer arises through her choice of sources, rather than through a direct critical

response to his argument. Thus, her choice of sources is significant. Noticeably, she includes genre-literature and second-hand rumors amongst her sources. Polasky allows readers to see how broad interest in liberty as a concept was in the Early Modern Atlantic, and how many different parts of society were interested in applying it to their world. Enslaved people, free black people, a married white woman with a household, a citizen in Geneva, or Thomas Paine--for each of these, liberty was a significant concept. Polasky wishes to expand on Palmer's work by incorporating more expressions of liberty into her account, especially those of women and Africans (both enslaved and free). This book is, in many ways, adding to the understanding of the Atlantic age of democratic revolutions. Moreover, the focus on the intertwined ideas of democracy and liberty accords with the politics of the book, which are focused on "human rights" broadly conceived. The cosmopolitan nature of liberty provided the seedbed for the green shoot of liberty, but Polasky describes how cosmopolitanism was overwhelmed by nationalism, which introduced a newly circumscribed liberty. Nevertheless, historical understandings of human rights are as important as ever, and in both her Introduction and Conclusion she suggests that we consider this as we read and interpret her sources.

Polasky's choice of sources is important to the overall success of her work--but not because of how sources generally function (i.e., as more or less heavily interpreted evidence of a thesis) but because her sources gesture at what kind of histories of liberty are yet to be written. These histories will be as adept at interpreting how liberty operates within period genre fiction as they are in the pamphlets and Thomas Paine and in the rumored uprisings of slaves in the Southeastern United States. Few historians draw on such diverse sources for their understanding of an historical concept. Polasky herself does not engage in much interpretation, and seeks to let the breadth of her account emerge from the sources themselves. She wishes to "make transparent

the use of sources” (14) and this means that she approaches her pamphlets, novels, and other sources without critical or theoretical layering. Whether or not we concede that sources can ever be transparent, Polasky has nevertheless shown the incredible range of sources that are available to the historian of ideas who seeks to analyze the development of “liberty” in the Atlantic world. Women’s and enslaved Africans’ ideas of liberty are as important to the concept’s history as Thomas Paine and his interlocutors. Though one does wonder why Native Americans do not appear in her story; why not include Joseph Brant, the 18th century Mohawk leader whose struggle to secure liberty was ended by the victory of the revolutionary English colonies?

Polasky’s research and writing career has been substantial and lengthy and she has made a useful addition to it. Surely, reader-researchers have much to gain from her expertise and knowledge of Atlantic World literature. However, the publisher of this work, Yale University Press, has decided to do away with bibliographies. It is conceivable that this is out of a desire to draw in a broader reading public but it puts the researcher at a disadvantage. The Introduction’s otherwise confusing attempt to connect the “Arab Spring” to things like 18th slave uprisings might also be seen as a sought-after connection with a popular or excitable readership. While it is tempting to compare revolutions that proceed through media that travels--whether it’s tweets about Tahrir Square or Francophone pamphlets about liberty--the remainder of the book eschews this sort of analysis. The reader is not asked to think of Tahrir Square in the terms of an Enlightenment-era ideas of liberty. The title provokes attention as well, evoking as it does “Doctors without Borders,” the international aid organization that famously enters areas riven with violence and lacking in stable borders. Are Enlightenment ideas of liberty to be thought of alongside doctors who travel far to save lives regardless of the political situation? Ultimately, Polasky has produced a useful contribution to Atlantic World studies and has broadened the

source-base for understanding the many and conflicting uses of “liberty in the early modern Atlantic.”

Luke Freeman is a Ph.D. student in the Department of History at the University of Minnesota.