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Introduction by Elizabeth Kelly Gray, Towson University

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Introduction by Elizabeth Kelly Gray, Towson University

In the past few years, scholarship on the early American republic has increasingly adopted a transnational perspective, and a fine example is Timothy Mason Roberts's *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism*. Roberts explores Americans' perceptions of the revolutions that year in France, Hungary, and the German and Italian states. Many Americans initially cheered on the revolutions, which they saw as akin to their own. As the movements fractured and turned violent, however, support turned to disillusion. The rebels' subsequent inability to produce stable republican governments reinforced many Americans' beliefs in the superiority of their own revolution and, hence, in their nation's exceptionalism.

The reviewers praise Roberts for his "tireless and meticulous scholarship," in the words of Dennis Berthold. Roberts analyzed a wide variety of primary sources—including some pertaining to the era's popular culture—as he outlined the breadth and intensity of American interest in European events. The display of cockades, for example, indicated support for the revolutionaries, as did the popularity of the polka. Wendy H. Wong notes that the concomitant growth of mass communication facilitated the spread of updates on the revolutions, and consequently interest in them. Albrecht Koschnik maintains that Roberts proves that the revolutions "permeated American society and politics."

To what extent, however, did the revolutions influence America, beyond the adoption of European dances and beards that resembled Louis Kossuth's? Clearly, there was some influence. Koschnik notes that many American reformers had transnational connections. Some members of the roundtable believe that Roberts could have taken the connections further. Koschnik wonders about the role of "transnational secret organizations," such as the Freemasons, while Daniel Kilbride suggests that Roberts downplayed the degree to which Americans saw themselves as politically connected to Europeans. He points out that Lincoln maintained that "liberty-loving men ... throughout the world" believed in the principle of human equality. Wong notes a diplomat's suggestion that Europe's fate was linked to America's endurance—that "all of Europe might be republicanized—'provided that the United States does not fall apart'" (141).

The revolutions inclined Americans to reflect on the idea of their nation's exceptionalism, though the reviewers disagree as to what they concluded. Kilbride suggests that the revolutions reinforced Americans' beliefs in their nation's exceptionalism. Those who opposed change at home were more likely to see their nation as exceptional and tended to see the past through rose-colored glasses. As Wong puts it, Americans saw Europeans as having "squandered" their chance to emulate the U. S. But as she notes, the title *Distant Revolutions* refers to Americans' distance from their own revolution, as well as their distance from Europe's. Many concluded that their nation was exceptional not only because their revolution had succeeded but also because, as Koschnik notes, "historical amnesia" led them to recall that revolution as nonviolent. European revolutionaries could not hope to emulate this mythical past. Those who pursued reform, meanwhile, were less inclined to see the U. S. as exceptional. Some saw Europe, not the U. S., in the vanguard of reform on

various issues, including abolition. Reformers saw the revolutions as providing an impetus for domestic change by reminding Americans that their nation still had work to do. Berthold sees the “challenge” in Roberts’s title as referring to both “the shortcomings of the American revolution,” from liberals’ perspective, and, from the conservative standpoint, to the wish “to maintain the status quo.”

The members of the roundtable disagree on the degree to which European events caused Americans to change their views. Kilbride maintains that, in some cases, many Americans were genuinely interested in European developments and that they did not follow events simply to reinforce their beliefs in their nation’s exceptionalism. Many observers at the time, however, tended to see in the revolutions what they wanted to see. Overall, Berthold is correct when he asserts that Americans who observed the revolutions did not embrace their nuances, but rather “refashioned events to fit their own agendas.” There is little in *Distant Revolutions* to suggest that the revolutions led many Americans—except for those who already championed reform—to take a sober look at their own nation and emerge sadder but wiser. To a degree, the revolutions served as a kind of Rorschach test, providing observers with additional insight into preexisting American beliefs rather than causing any significant rethinking.

The issue of impact is a tenuous one, and some reviewers, including John Belohlavek, suggest that Roberts overstated the degree to which Europe’s revolutions influenced America’s move toward civil war. Roberts never claims that the impact was direct, but Berthold—pointing to American violence that long predated 1848—suggests that even his more measured assertions are overstated. Roberts maintains that the revolutions contributed to the Civil War’s “timing and its meaning for many Americans” (20). Berthold suggests that it would be more accurate to assert that the revolutions inspired American “soul-searching” that only “brought into relief issues and conflicts already endemic to the American experiment.”

The nettlesome problem of influence is one reason that members of the roundtable question the overall impact of transnational histories on historiography, while admiring such works and encouraging other scholars to use a transnational approach. Berthold encourages additional transnational studies and recommends that they include “foreign opinions of American political values.” Kilbride sees *Distant Revolutions* and other recent transnational works as “innovative, finely crafted pieces of scholarship that address significant questions” and provide new information. Yet while he sees them as having the potential to force historians “to see this era in new ways,” he maintains that they shed little new light on historical debates and that, rather than reframing debates, they speak to the same questions that historians have pondered for years. Belohlavek, on the other hand, deems *Distant Revolutions* a “provocative” book that helps in the “re-examination of American revolutionary ideals and their meaning on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth century.”

Undeniably, transnational histories allow historians to cover their subjects more completely than do studies with a narrower focus, and the broader scope can result in new insights. Wong points out that *Distant Revolutions* shows how “porous” the boundary is

between the domestic and the foreign. She applauds Roberts for exploring a “woefully neglected” era of diplomatic history and for including culture in his study. More such studies from diplomatic historians would be welcome in a field that, thus far, has attracted quite a number of scholars who might not be members of SHAFR. Berthold notes that “literary circles” have long explored connections between the U. S. and the 1848 revolutions, and the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic has increasingly promoted a transnational perspective. As Kilbride notes, H-SHEAR has explored this topic. In her presidential address to SHEAR in 2010, Rosemarie Zagarri spoke on “The Significance of the ‘Global Turn’ for the Early American Republic.” A transnational approach might not revolutionize the historiography, but it does help to show more fully how Americans regarded the world—why, for example, they adopted Kossuth’s beard but resisted directly adopting his cause, and how both these facts help us to understand American foreign relations more fully. And as Wong notes, such an approach presents a more accurate depiction of influence, by demonstrating that the U. S., rather than always driving things, is sometimes the nation that is acted upon.

Participants:

Timothy Mason Roberts is assistant professor of history at Western Illinois University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Oxford. He is currently writing a book on the interaction of American missionaries and merchants over the Asian opium trade, and editing a collection of documents on the history of American exceptionalism.

John M. Belohlavek received his doctorate from the University of Nebraska and is a professor of history at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Major publications include *George Mifflin Dallas: Jacksonian Patrician*, “*Let the Eagle Soar!*”: *The Foreign Policy of Andrew Jackson*, and *Broken Glass: Caleb Cushing and the Shattering of the Union*. His most recent monographic research focuses on a study of “Women and the Mexican War.”

Dennis Berthold is professor of English at Texas A&M University where he has published numerous articles on the literature of the American Renaissance in its historical context. His most recent book is *American Risorgimento: Herman Melville and the Cultural Politics of Italy* (2009), a study of Melville’s appropriation of the ideas, images, and iconography of the Italian quest for national unity and independence.

Elizabeth Kelly Gray is an associate professor and assistant chair in the Department of History at Towson University. She received her doctorate from the College of William and Mary. Her essay “The Trade-Off: Chinese Opium Traders and Antebellum Reform in the United States, 1815–1860” appeared in *Drugs and Empires: Essays in Modern Imperialism and Intoxication, c. 1500–c. 1930*, eds. James H. Mills and Patricia Barton; her article “Whisper to him the word ‘India’”: Trans-Atlantic Critics and American Slavery, 1830–1860” was published in the *Journal of the Early Republic* in 2008; and her article “The World by Gaslight: Urban-gothic Literature and Moral Reform in New York City, 1845–1860” was published in *American Nineteenth-Century History* in 2009. She is currently working on a book-length transnational study of early American drug addiction.

Daniel Kilbride is chair of the history department of John Carroll University outside Cleveland, Ohio. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Florida and is a specialist on Antebellum America. He is writing a book on American travelers to Europe, circa 1750-1870.

Albrecht Koschnik is an independent scholar living in Philadelphia, PA. He received his Ph.D. in American history from the University of Virginia in 2000. His articles have appeared in the *William and Mary Quarterly* and the collection *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, among other venues, and he is the author of *“Let a Common Interest Bind Us Together”: Associations, Partisanship, and Culture in Philadelphia, 1775-1840* (2007). Currently he is at work on a book manuscript describing American conceptions of civil society from the American Revolution to the Civil War.

Wendy H. Wong is Ph.D. Candidate in the department of history at Temple University. She is currently working on her dissertation entitled, “Diplomatic Subtleties and Frank Overtures: Publicity, Diplomacy, and Neutrality in the Early American Republic, 1793-1801.”

There is something very special about French revolution. The blood stirs listening to flag-waving patriots sing “La Marseille” and watching brave young men clamor atop gun barrels in a crowded *rue*--or maybe I have just seen the play “Les Miserables” too often. Regardless, the romance of European upheaval, especially in France, seems somehow magical. Whether in 1789, 1830, 1848, or 1871, Parisians rallied—not always successfully-- to the glorious causes of democracy and a greater voice for the people. Similarly, other uprisings in Europe caught America’s historical eye; including those in Ireland, Spain, Greece, Italy, Germany, and Hungary. A fickle folk, Americans watched and listened, their attention span short and their demand for measurable and identifiable change ever-present. Americans preferred the role of “revolutionary cheerleader.” Shouting encouragement from the sidelines to those who espouse a noble republican cause is far safer than the active and risky responsibilities of engaged collaborator. Many Yankees initially applauded the goals of a Colombian rebel struggling against Spanish oppression or a Greek seeking to overthrow Ottoman tyranny. After considerable public debate and congressional hand wringing, however, the American people were comfortable with a position of non-intervention. Particularly in the early nineteenth century, eloquent and forceful advocates of a bolder national policy, such as Henry Clay or Daniel Webster, sought a more engaged role for the United States. But traditional voices prevailed. America would serve as a model, not an ally.

Within this context of antebellum revolution, Timothy Mason Roberts offers us a well written, comprehensive, and thoughtful analysis of the European uprisings of 1848 and the American reaction to them. This is indeed a transatlantic study—as the author claims. He provides an examination of the rebellions in France, Italy, Germany, and Hungary, and the response of Americans living in Europe at the time—both government officials and private individuals. We move through the violence and changing directions of the revolutionary movements as new leaders and goals emerge. Accordingly, Americans both at home and abroad often shifted their views (and their support) depending upon the radical direction of the revolutionaries’ aspirations. In the U.S., eager readers devoured rather stale reports by the first dedicated overseas newspaper correspondents. Roberts provides solid insight into the thinking of Americans representing differing classes and stretching the geographic breadth of the nation from New England to New Orleans. The volume focuses on the period in which the revolutions were most active (1848-1852), and also offers a challenging postscript that takes us through 1860.

Roberts himself is not a passionate insurgent. He is coolly analytical in his portrayal of conditions before and during the continental rebellions. Sounding very contemporary, the author points to massive crop failures, unemployment, and unregulated financial markets as the background for massive resistance. The initial revolutionary thrusts often met with considerable success. Resultant liberal reforms generated by new republican bodies, such as widening male suffrage, received the approbation of most Americans. However, more extreme measures, public works projects or ending slavery in the colonies, sparked controversy or condemnation. Americans became especially uneasy when events turned

violent, such as during the “June Days” in Paris in 1848. There, the fears of “revolutionary socialism” resulted in a government crackdown on demonstrators and thousands of deaths. Advocates of dramatic social change, such as Horace Greeley or Margaret Fuller, embraced or defended radical actions or even violence as necessary to achieve the ends of the revolution, but the majority of Americans recoiled from both the means and the goals. Similarly, as Roberts emphasizes, the nuanced nature of European revolution that divided peoples by ideology, party, faction, and ethnicity, generally escaped most naïve Americans who sought a simpler framework based upon their own revolution.

Arguably, the key point of this volume comes back to the observation that Americans initially embraced the 1848 rebellions in large part because they believed that the Europeans sought the same goals as the revolution of 1776. Americans contended that notions of private property, minimal government, peaceful change, and Christian morality, had guided their revolution and so should provide the inspiration for others. Engaging in selective historical memory, many conveniently forgot the violence of the 1776 revolution and focused on themes of unity, peace, and prosperity. When it became apparent that the Europeans’ goals differed, and incorporated violence and radicalism, Americans began to distance themselves. Conveniently, as the continentals failed in their efforts and monarchy and conservative government reasserted themselves, Americans pride in the “exceptional” nature of their revolution. “In short, a Europe apparently unable to create peaceful republican society showed that post-revolutionary America had no problems to solve.” (p. 15). That particular notion would implode in the 1850s.

Widespread fervor, tempered with modest dissent, marked the initial American responses in 1848. Diplomats such as Richard Rush in Paris and Andrew Jackson Donelson in Frankfurt, hurried to embrace and recognize the new regimes, often well ahead of the official endorsement of the administration in Washington. Americans crowded the streets in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia in displays of sympathy for the rebels, while the debate grew increasingly intolerant of those who criticized their goals or ambitions. Many readers (including this one) may be surprised to learn that filibusters organized in the U.S. in an attempt to provide assistance to the Forty-Eighters in Germany and Ireland. Roberts relates how the public culture also mirrored the initial fervor of sympathy through dress, language, dance, theater, and art. Politics offered a forum for revolutionary debate as well. In a presidential election year, the “Young Americans” of the Democratic Party were vociferous in their support of the “liberty, equality, and fraternity” of the French Revolution and damned their Whig opponents as anti-democratic elitists. The Whigs found themselves awkwardly divided. The anti-slavery element sympathized with some of the more radical elements, while the conservatives were generally suspicious of all revolution.

For a brief shining moment, however, reformers held the international stage and dealt with issues of universal rights relating to the working classes, race, and gender.

Again, Roberts enlightens with his discussion of transatlantic themes and events that inspired Americans; the Peace Conference in Paris led by Victor Hugo and the New York Industrial Congress in 1850. Likewise, the author sees Europeans impacting the American feminist movement (especially on suffrage) and the antislavery crusade.

Too often, at least in the United States, such crusades faded with the revolutions themselves.

Eventually, the conservative sentiment had its day. Americans grew disillusioned, or, in some cases, smugly satisfied that the righteousness of their own revolution could not be duplicated. Bennett's *New York Herald* led the chorus of critics, and a Broadway production parodied "Socialism: A Modern Philosophy Put in Practice." The International banker W.W. Corcoran took contentment in the economic stability in the bond markets brought by the return of monarchical governments throughout Europe. Religion also played a role in supporting a conservative backlash against the 1848 upheavals. While Protestants and Catholics had differing perceptions of the rebellions, they fundamentally agreed that revolution at its essence was wrongheaded and blamed their religious opposites for the continental chaos. They also concurred that a radicalized Europe could only lead to the subversion of American ideals. Southerners, too, were largely skeptical of the rebellions and the threat to the status quo. Socialism (or any "ism" for that matter) was mistrusted and smacked of unwanted social change. The implied—and real—threat to the institution of slavery lurked beneath the surface. In that regard, after an obligatory flirtation with the republican aspects of European revolution, the fundamentally conservative mindset held by many Americans—business and religious leaders, southerners--kicked in and subverted any initial and transitory support. Violence and perceived radicalism made the leap easy and revealed a deep-seated conservatism among the American people.

Perhaps no single event demonstrates how far the image of the revolutions had fallen than the national tour of failed Hungarian rebel Louis Kossuth in 1851-1852. The author points out that he was the most celebrated foreign visitor since the Marquis de Lafayette. Yet, after initial wild bursts of enthusiasm in cities as diverse as New York and Cincinnati, his star faded quickly. The hoped-for political and financial support materialized, but never to the extent where it would make a difference to Kossuth's cause. Ultimately, Americans realized that the Hungarian and his revolution were different than their own; and they were unwilling to jeopardize domestic tranquility in the U.S. to advance international freedom.

Roberts deserves praise for a well researched volume that reveals a thoroughgoing command of the primary sources, especially newspapers and magazines, and an exhaustive and impressive compendium of secondary books and articles. If there is a weakness, some may suggest that a more detailed look at the reaction of American politicians might be in order. Even so, this is a well balanced, informed narrative that bridges the Atlantic in its theme and content, and also posits interpretations that should generate serious discussion. Oftentimes, those interpretations relate to the impact of European events on the American mindset. Did such a one-to-one relationship exist?

Is the author over-reaching? For example, Roberts suggests that "The 1848 revolutions did not by themselves cause the Civil War, but they did contribute to its timing and its meaning for many Americans." (p. 20) The author reinforces this statement in his discussion of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the 1850s as he explains that European violence informed the way in which Yankees viewed the bloodshed in Kansas. Essentially, as in Europe, "order,"

as represented by the national government was defied by a morally superior form of violence. Likewise, in reference to the domestic crisis in 1850 Roberts notes that: "Paradoxically, authoritarianism in Europe at the time helped pull the troubled American democracy from the brink of fragmentation. Southern radicals subsequently revealed a reluctance to move toward secession once they saw the prospect of reconciliation in Congress and the disastrous consequences of revolutions overseas." (p. 140) Perhaps. Healthy discourse should result from scholars weighing in on the impact of foreign events and ideas on an evolving sectional crisis.

There are minor errors or issues that could be addressed, but do not seriously detract from the manuscript; (1) Was there really a depression in the U.S. that lasted until 1852? (p. 87); (2) John C. Calhoun did not die in 1849 (p. 130), though this appears corrected (p. 135); and (3) Horace Mann was a U.S. Representative, not a Senator (p. 134).

In sum, Roberts contends that the European revolutions posed a serious challenge to accepted beliefs in American exceptionalism, helped destabilize the nation, and laid the groundwork for Civil War. This is a provocative book that merits the attention of historians of American politics and foreign affairs in the antebellum era. Readability and length also suggest it may be suitable for a broader student audience who would profit from a re-examination of American revolutionary ideals and their meaning on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth century.

In literary circles the relationships between Europe's 1848 revolutions and American politics, culture, and identity have been discussed for a number of years. Michael Paul Rogin's apt phrase "the American 1848," which Roberts quotes late in the book, stimulated the groundbreaking work of Larry J. Reynolds, whose *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* encouraged the transnational turn in American studies in the 1990s.¹ The basic pattern of this interaction was established in Howard R. Marraro's early work on America and the *Risorgimento*: initial enthusiasm for the spread of republican ideology from the New World to the Old, cautious support for reforms, growing disenchantment with the increasing violence and anarchy, horror at the counterrevolutionary repression led by Austria and Louis Napoleon, and a renewed sense of American political superiority when all the revolutions failed less than two years after they had begun.² Superficially America remained exceptional, the one place where a moderate revolution established a permanent republic and avoided anarchy and democratic excess; more deeply, however, as Roberts argues, the European revolutions exposed America's simmering fissures of ethnic and religious conflict, gender inequality, slavery, and secession, the last two leading causes of the country's own "1848," the Civil War. These are some of the challenges to American exceptionalism Roberts unpacks in a well researched, fast-paced narrative focusing on the years 1848-54, from the first shots fired in Europe to the opening salvos in the border wars in Kansas.

By narrowing his chronological scope Roberts can divide his analysis into discrete chapters that assess European influences on American travelers, newspapers, popular culture, elections, reform movements, and religions, notably the conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics. In every arena he finds fascination and support alternating with skepticism and disdain as Americans adapted European events to their own experience. For example the polka entered the American dance repertoire more for its egalitarian associations than its European origins, and public celebrations of revolutionary successes "actually affirmed a unique American revolutionary tradition and, through that tradition, a unique national identity" (57). By the time of the 1848 election, political parties had divided along revolutionary and anti-revolutionary lines, complicating Americans' sense of their own revolutionary past and necessitating a reevaluation of what "revolution" actually meant. In the first half of 1848 Americans proudly identified with the political aspirations of oppressed peoples abroad, but after the bloody "June days" in Paris they became uneasy with the European turn toward socialism, secularism, female suffrage, and abolition, radical measures their own revolution had suppressed. Only extremists such as the organizers of

¹ Michael Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988). Rogin's fourth chapter is titled "Moby-Dick and the American 1848" (102-51); Reynolds (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983). Roberts frequently acknowledges his debt to Reynolds.

² Dennis Marraro, *American Opinion on the Unification of Italy, 1846-1861* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932).

the Seneca Falls convention or reformers like Horace Greeley and Theodore Parker continued to find inspiration in Europe's struggles. Although America's own revolution had been violent it was fought to promote individual freedom and protect private property, not to advance working-class democracy and socialism, the twin specters of radical change captured in the inflammatory charge of "red republicanism." As more Americans looked askance at the European '48, they embraced Whiggery and elected Zachary Taylor, in "an American reaction against revolution" (80).

The most incisive chapter analyzing this complex and, as Roberts frankly confesses, often illogical carousel of allegiances, is "Secession or Revolution?," which examines Southern desires to support popular sovereignty, a keystone of the European revolutions, while maintaining slavery, which was anathema to all European revolutionaries. Southerners, Roberts writes, "distinguished the United States from Europe by emphasizing the American Revolution's minimal social upheaval and violence, the material prosperity enjoyed by Americans both before and after the conflict, the safeguarding of Christian values, and the American Revolution's success compared to the Europeans' apparent inability to achieve similar results" (128). Whereas American reformers viewed France, Germany, Hungary, and Italy as fulfilling American ideals of equality and social progress, Southerners, along with many moderate and conservative Northerners, saw anarchy and disorder, a grotesque distortion of the American Revolution's true meaning. Reacting to events in Europe as surely as did the reformers, Southerners constructed an opposite version of American exceptionalism that countenanced slavery and secession as constitutional rights, rendering them lawful, not revolutionary, practices. The ultimate failure of the revolutions in 1849 proved the South right and led to the Compromise of 1850 which preserved both slavery and popular sovereignty, the foundations, Southerners believed, of a sound American republic.

The "challenge" in Roberts's title is thus two-edged: the revolutions abroad confirmed for liberals the shortcomings of the American revolution and for conservatives the need to maintain the status quo rather than risk internecine war and disunion. Often ignoring the nuances of European ideology and historical differences among the countries involved, Americans refashioned events in Europe to fit their own agendas and burnish them with the glow of cosmopolitanism and universalism.

For the most part Roberts supports his thesis brilliantly, covering a breathtaking range of primary materials in newspapers, periodicals, state documents, family papers, manuscripts, diaries, journals, speeches, and travel writing, along with enormous amounts of secondary material both old and new, all attested to in a 30-page bibliography. He recognizes the role popular culture was beginning to play in shaping American values, and cites melodramas, panoramas, ballads, and novels (such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) for their diverse reflections of European national struggles. Although some of these sources are obscure and likely unrepresentative of wider opinion, they testify to Roberts' tireless and meticulous scholarship and the depth of American reaction to 1848. At one point he quotes from essays that 38 Philadelphia students read at a ceremony welcoming the Hungarian patriot Louis Kossuth to Philadelphia in 1852: "nineteen of the thirty-eight essays," Roberts notes, "compared Kossuth to George Washington" (155), tangible evidence of the connections

Roberts finds so crucial. Along with such detailed evidence of domestic identifications with Europe, it would be helpful to know whether Hungarians made similar comparisons, and I would challenge future students of transnational historical studies to include foreign opinions of American political values, something lacking not only in this book but others as well.

While I am persuaded by Roberts' argument for the polarizing influence of Europe's 1848 revolutions, there remains some uncertainty about their causal role. He acknowledges at the outset that "preexisting ideological and social conditions" in the United States were important, but he still claims a contributory role for the European 1848 "in directing Americans' path to the Civil War" (20). The verbs he uses to characterize this role are telling: inspire, direct, contribute, help create, respond, and so forth. That may be the best one can do, but in light of more direct domestic influences on the Civil War the cause-effect logic appears overstated. Americans were steeped in bloodshed long before unruly peasants fired the first shots in Sicily in 1848: whether in conflicts with Native Americans, slaves, labor agitators, or lynch mobs, such as the one that killed the abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy in 1837, the American propensity to violence had deep roots and abundant blossoms in the antebellum period.³ As British travelers often noticed, Americans were as exceptional in their tolerance for violence as in their regard for republican principles, a theme that runs through American classics such as *Moby-Dick* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. American disdain for European violence involved at least a whiff of hypocrisy, if not self-satisfied ignorance. Similarly, despite a fine section on New York's Archbishop John Hughes and American Catholic opposition to the revolutions, Roberts largely elides the rampant religious prejudice that fueled Americans' belief that Roman Catholicism was incompatible with republicanism, a belief that resulted in a burned convent and paranoid fears of a Papal takeover.⁴ While the foreign revolutions of 1848 unquestionably stimulated American soul-searching on the meaning of their revolution, it could feasibly be argued that they simply brought into relief issues and conflicts already endemic to the American experiment. Finally, I wish Roberts had differentiated somewhat more rigorously among the various revolutions in Europe and their various phases. Most of his examples come from France, where moderate revolutionaries such as Lamartine were overtaken by the extremism of the bloody "June days" of 1848 and the "red republicanism" that evoked memories of the Reign of Terror and confirmed the French reputation for anarchy, atheism, and irrational violence. Yet Roberts hardly touches on Italy, where the revolutions of 1848 began and ended less than two years later, and where Americans warmly supported the Roman Republic of 1849 and its courageous stand against the French legions of Louis Napoleon.

³ In the large literature on American violence, one book that Roberts does not cite seems especially relevant to this thesis: David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴ Roberts cites Ray Allen Billington's classic study, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Rinehart, 1952), as well as more recent studies of anti-Catholicism, but to my mind he underemphasizes their arguments.

My critique, I hope, indicates how complex and demanding transnational studies can be, problems that can only be addressed by more scholarship of the kind Roberts produces here. His book goes a long way toward encouraging transnational studies and discovering through them fresh perspectives and relationships. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the European revolutions and their place in American history and culture.

In a 2004 review of trans-border histories of early America, Joyce Chaplin concluded that they have “flourished only when they easily contribute to discussion of long-standing questions about the American history originally crafted to explain white settlers.” Can something similar be said of Tim Roberts’s *Distant Revolutions*, which is one of several histories of Americans’ engagement with the wider world to be published lately? Do these studies break new ground, ask new questions, suggest new paradigms, or do they (mostly) stick to well-established routes blazed by American historians?¹

Naturally, the answer I propose is more complicated than a simple yes or no, but I think that, on balance, Roberts’s book, as well as the studies I have in mind, have favored the familiar over the innovative. Although they have all proposed new possibilities for reorienting the history of the early republic, they have not tried to change the big questions we should be asking about the United States in this era. It could be countered that the issues historians have been wrestling with for a long time are the right ones. Maybe transnational questions simply are not as consequential as those historians have been asking (a recent line on H-SHEAR – prompted by a post from Tim Roberts -- debated precisely this question regarding the second party system).² But I don’t think so. I think that putting early American history into an international context does offer the potential to force historians to see this era in new ways.

The Big Question *Distant Revolutions* addresses is, how did the Revolutions of 1848 reorient Americans’ relations with Europe? By “relations” I do not mean merely diplomatic affairs, but the more complex question of the country’s cultural orientation, or identity. To what extent did Americans see themselves as Europeans? To what degree did Americans believe themselves bound to Europeans by the mission of the American Revolution: to bring self-government and human rights to all peoples, even those of the Old World?

This is indeed a very large, significant, and even original question, considering how so much of the literature on this period has been, and continues to be, circumscribed by national borders and driven by national (or sectional) questions. While Roberts believes that the answer is complex, it is clear that the weight of his argument leans towards the proposition that the Revolutions of 1848 deepened American parochialism, reinforcing already-strong convictions of national exceptionalism. Most significantly, *Distant Revolutions* makes clear that many Americans came to believe that their revolutionary experience was unique. They reimagined the War of Independence as a conservative affair that restrained violence and respected property. Americans established this collective

¹ Joyce E. Chaplin, “Expansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History,” *Journal of American History* 89 (2003), 1432.

² See the thread under the line “transnational approaches to the 2nd party system,” starting with <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-SHEAR&month=1008&week=a&msg=YiNRLDEII9Nsp9AFk0o/vw&user=&pw=>, at H-SHEAR.

memory as the only legitimate model for revolutionary change. In so doing they not only set up other peoples for failure; they saddled them with the blame when it occurred. In this respect *Distant Revolutions* follows recent studies of Americans' response to the French Revolution of 1789 by Philipp Ziesche, Rachel Cleves, and William L. Chew III. Ziesche puts Americans' paradoxical revolutionary consciousness nicely: "Drawing on notions of national character and race, Americans have concluded that other nations are inherently incapable of following the American model *and* that the perceived failure of foreign revolutions stems from not following that model closely enough." *Distant Revolutions* shows that this sentiment was alive and well in 1848.³

Not every chapter in *Distant Revolutions* argues that the events of 1848 affirmed Americans' belief in their own superiority vis-à-vis Europe, but those that do make this case relentlessly. Roberts recognizes that Americans, both those who happened to be on the Continent at the time and those back home, initially celebrated what they understood as the triumph of their ideals in the Old World. The early stages of the upheavals disappointed some travelers by dispelling the illusion that Europe existed in history, not in the present. But most Americans grew disillusioned only after the revolutionaries deviated from the American script, especially by taking violent turns or by wading into the labor question. At home, the different ways that Americans celebrated the Revolutions inevitably simplified the complex events of 1848. The "Kossuth hats," whiskers, cockades, dances, plays, and other ways by which Americans commemorated the revolutions actually affirmed American uniqueness, Roberts argues, by rendering European events as a 19th century extension of the American Revolution. When they veered in different directions, or succumbed to counter-revolution, Americans felt let down, even betrayed.

There is much to recommend this argument. It did not take long for Americans to fashion a soothing, self-aggrandizing memory of their revolution that practically guaranteed that they would find those of other peoples wanting. And there is no doubt that Americans in 1848 only dimly understood the European revolutions in their local complexity. In trying to comprehend these events, they translated them into familiar terms – the terms of their own revolutionary memory. When European revolutionaries "failed" to conform to that model, it reinforced suspicions that self-government would never flourish in the Old World. Roberts' chapter on Lajos Kossuth's tour through the United States in the 1850s makes this point very effectively. But he overextends by arguing that Americans lost faith in European republicanism after 1848. Likewise Roberts' case that Americans politically saw little in common with Europeans – that, in his words, "in the early 1850s many Americans saw themselves alone, with a fate to be determined by historically unique circumstances and internal events, rather than as contributing or receiving members of a transatlantic world"

³ Philipp Ziesche, *Cosmopolitan Patriots: Americans in Paris in the Age of Revolution* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), quotation on 169; Rachel Hope Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); William L. Chew III, "Life before Fodor and Frommer: Americans in Paris from Thomas Jefferson to John Quincy Adams," *French History* 18 (2004), 25-49.

-- is not supported by his evidence (168). Many, perhaps most, Americans clearly did not believe this.

Take Whigs for example. Roberts is right to point out that Whigs were especially skittish toward violent revolution, but a faith in progress – central to which was the spread of democratic, Christian civilization throughout the world – remained a core Whig principle. In 1844 William Seward declared that “[t]he rights asserted by our forefathers were not peculiar to themselves – they were the common rights of mankind.” The Revolutions of 1848 did nothing to shake Seward’s faith in the long-term prospects of self-government. Indeed, if Roberts is right, it is difficult to explain why northerners found so stirring Abraham Lincoln’s insistence that what was at stake during the Civil War was not merely American democracy, but the future of self-government the world over. The principle of human equality, Lincoln wrote in 1858, was the “electric cord” binding the “hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together . . . throughout the world.” On the Democratic side, Young Americans grew disillusioned by the success of the counter-revolution, and sectional issues drew their attention away from Europe. But they, too, remained sanguine about the eventual success of democracy in the monarchical Old World. It would be useful to know which Americans lost faith in the universal meaning of American Revolutionary ideals, and which didn’t.⁴

Distant Revolutions is more successful when it argues that 1848 compelled Americans to inspect the comforting assumptions of exceptionalism. When they took this difficult step, it strengthened their connections to the European community of nations. Some reformers, especially those in radical causes, came to see Europe as more progressive, more open to change, than the United States. Abolitionists and labor activists were particularly inspired by France, whose revolutionary government ended slavery in its West Indian possessions and experimented with national workshops. During the controversy over the extension of slavery in the territories wrested from Mexico, fire-eating southerners drew from European counterrevolution the wise lesson that precipitate action – like secession – tended to produce unintended, and often unpleasant, consequences. Antislavery northerners likened the federal government’s policies in Bleeding Kansas to the counterrevolutionary measures of European despots like Louis Napoleon and Tsar Nicholas I. In these chapters, Roberts portrays Americans as learning from the European upheavals of 1848. They learned because they paid attention – not in order to reinforce smug notions of American superiority, but because they were genuinely, candidly interested in what went on across the Atlantic. No doubt many of these Americans would have agreed that the United States was an exceptional, even superior, nation. But one of the lessons to be inferred from a close reading of *Distant Revolutions* is that exceptionalism

⁴ Seward to James Maher and others, March 15, 1844, in George E. Baker, ed., *The Works of William H. Seward*, 5 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1884), 3:495; Lincoln quoted in Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 203. Yonathan Eyal, *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

and cosmopolitanism, much like cosmopolitanism and nationalism, could be quite complementary.

Like *Distant Revolutions*, Philipp Ziesche's *Cosmopolitan Patriots* and Rachel Cleves's *Reign of Terror in America* also conclude that Americans' engagement in Europe largely "confirmed the idea of American exceptionalism."⁵ All three of these works (and also William L. Chew III's study of Americans in Revolutionary France) are innovative, finely crafted pieces of scholarship that address significant questions. But the questions are familiar ones: the roots of Federalist/New England antislavery sentiment (Cleves); nation building in the Revolutionary U.S. and France (Ziesche); the origins of negative American attitudes toward France (Chew); the American response to 1848 (Roberts). Understanding the world that newly independent Americans found themselves in compels us to question exceptionalist assumptions. As Peter Onuf argues, "Nation-making drew [American patriots] into the vortex of European diplomacy and power politics, compromising the very differences that Jefferson and other provincial nationalists celebrated."⁶ The problem Joyce Chaplin identified in early American scholarship – the nearly irresistible gravity of well-established historiographical lines – also inhibits fresh research in the global position of the United States in the era of the European Revolutions of 1848.

⁵ Ziesche, *Cosmopolitan Patriots*, 167.

⁶ Onuf, "Introduction," to Leonard J. Sadosky, et al, eds., *Old World, New World: America and Europe in the Age of Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 12.

Timothy Roberts provides a wide-ranging, yet succinct account of the American reaction to the European revolutions of 1848-1849 and their influence on the highly charged domestic politics of the late 1840s and 1850s. His book joins a growing body of work that employs a transnational approach to nineteenth-century American history and traces the myriad ties connecting American politics, reform movements, and intellectual currents to events on other continents. The American response to the European revolutions has received a fair amount of attention from historians. The recent literature demonstrates how Americans constructed a national identity in distinction to monarchical Europe (Paola Gemme), and emphasizes either the cautious and apprehensive American response, followed by the conclusion that Europeans were not ready to sustain republican governments (Michael Morrison), or the Young Americans' call for American intervention, especially in Italy, to support democracy as well as American commercial expansion (Yonatan Eyal). It also traces the engagement with radical ideologies and their influence on American politics (Adam-Max Tuchinsky), and delineates the influence of American debates over the meaning of 1848 on sectional tensions and the coming of the Civil War (Andre Michel Fleche).¹ Roberts pays careful attention to these aspects, but the primary task of his book is to show how the European revolutions triggered an American debate about the meaning of revolution in the Atlantic world that combined a selective recollection of the American Revolution with an equally selective reading of the European revolutions.

American observers and commentators, according to Roberts, used events in Europe primarily to reflect on the nature of the American Revolution and the current status of the republic's democratic experiment. In a particular case of historical amnesia, a version of the American Revolution as a nonviolent and bloodless transfer of political power became the standard for assessing the 1848-1849 revolutions. American observers did not consider applying American history to European conditions as inherently problematic and, after an initial mostly positive response, fairly quickly reached the conclusion that European revolutionaries were not prepared to execute a carefully calibrated political transformation along the lines of their image of the American Revolution. This ideal type included establishing republican government based on a cautious expansion of the suffrage, preserving private property and social order, as well as abjuring violence as a

¹ References are limited to work completed or published since 2003: Gemme, *Domesticating Foreign Struggles: The Italian Risorgimento and Antebellum American Identity* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Eyal, *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 93-115; Morrison, "American Reaction to European Revolutions, 1848-1852: Sectionalism, Memory, and the Revolutionary Heritage," *Civil War History* 49 (2003), 111-32; Tuchinsky, "'The Bourgeoisie Will Fall and Fall Forever': The *New-York Tribune*, the 1848 French Revolution, and American Social Democratic Discourse," *Journal of American History* 92 (2005), 470-97; Fleche, "The Revolution of 1861: The Legacy of the Revolutions of 1848 and the American Civil War" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Virginia, 2006). See also Matthew David Norman, "Revolutions in the Republican Imagination: American Perceptions of the 1848-1849 Revolutions in Europe" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2006).

political means. Thus the restoration of monarchical government was inevitable, even welcome. Here Roberts identifies a fundamental tension in the American responses: a country born out of revolution did not necessarily welcome revolution elsewhere. What Americans took away from the turmoil of the late 1840s was the vindication of their understanding of the young republic's unique accomplishments. "Many Americans ... responded to evidence of Europeans' failures by concluding not only that the American Revolution was exceptional, but also that, indeed, *so was* America at the mid-nineteenth century, on account of its revolutionary heritage and its apparent lack of problems in contrast to the social unrest that plagued Europe" (15). Thus the European revolutions made the case for American exceptionalism.

Throughout his introduction, eight chapters, and a brief epilogue Roberts systematically identifies important actors and movements to illustrate the range of American responses to revolution. First-hand witnesses, including American diplomats and travelers, exemplify the trajectory of the American reaction: after welcoming the declaration of the Second Republic in Paris in February 1848, in some instances enthusiastically so, disillusionment set in quickly, eventually followed by the conclusion that American republicanism was superior. Richard Rush and George Bancroft, United States ministers to France and Great Britain, respectively, attempted to educate the leading men of the Second Republic in the advantages of a bicameral legislature; but this sense of "American mission" (41) quickly evaporated as revolutions turned chaotic or violent. Espousing republicanism and popular sovereignty in the abstract was very different from observing the messy and contradictory ways in which Europeans tried to reach these goals. Charles Dana, sympathetic to socialist communities like Brook Farm, observed the clashes between government troops and Parisian workers, and returned to the United States embracing "American economic opportunity and political democracy" (29). Conservatives such as Robert Walsh, the American consul in Paris, embraced the restoration of monarchy and empire as the only effective bulwark against an "immense democratic conspiracy" which threatened to engulf Europe in further violence and bloodshed (quoted on 36). Similarly, William Henry Stiles, a Georgia planter and US chargé d'affaires in Austria, came away from observing the Hungarian struggle for independence from the Habsburg empire extolling the superiority of southern slavery over central European serfdom. He reported to Washington that "the people of Europe have been kept so long in the darkness of slavery that they are totally unfit for the light of freedom After a disastrous experience of their incapacity they [are] most ready to return to their former institutions" (quoted on 36).

In the United States itself, responding to the European revolutions allowed Americans to selectively commemorate aspects of their own revolutionary past. Roberts presents a snapshot of American popular political culture between 1848 and 1852, focusing on the uses of dress and paraphernalia such as cockades to trace the initial excitement greeting news from Europe. Theaters presented reenactments of revolutionary scenes, such as *The Insurrection of Paris; or, The People's Triumph*, but quickly followed with productions that focused on the chaos and disorder in Paris. Correspondingly, as events in Europe progressed, the American engagement with them changed from pointing to the commonalities between the American republic and the projected European republics to a renewed emphasis on American "uniqueness" and the "conservative values" undergirding

American society--"a nascent transatlantic revolutionary community thus rapidly became distinctly American" (44).

Responding to the European revolutions, especially that of the French, became a central element of the campaign rhetoric in the presidential election of 1848. With sectional conflict over the expansion of slavery into the Southwest and the emergence of the Free Soil Party convulsing national politics, Democrats and Whigs attempted to sidestep a direct engagement with the slavery question by offering visions of the United States' history and future based on their mutually exclusive conceptions of the American and European revolutions. Democrats pointed to French popular politics as a model for the American struggle between capital and labor. Conservative Whigs focused on the American penchant for stability--the United States was a "model of antirevolution"--and wanted to shield the republic from domestic and foreign agitation for change (76). Free Soilers and antislavery Whigs used events in Europe as the standard for assessing where the American experiment in republicanism had fallen short. Free Soilers in particular, such as Charles Sumner, viewed their party's platform as a continuation of the American Revolution, revitalized by the French proclamation of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." In the election, however, the Whigs' rejection of "the idea that the United States was part of a transatlantic revolutionary community" prevailed (80).

Roberts emphasizes the transatlantic connections of American reformers, especially among anti-slavery and women's rights activists. The immigration of English and German labor radicals and the activities of men like Robert Owen and Charles Fourier had pushed reformers to conceive of their causes as international movements. The turn of events in Europe broadened their perspective: Frederick Douglass, for example, who had seen slavery as a distinct form of unfreedom, now envisioned a fusion of labor radicalism and anti-slavery to combat different but related forms of coerced labor that required a common solution. Abolitionists measured the United States against what they considered as one of the central promises of the American Revolution, universal human rights, and came to see ending slavery as the necessary step to finally realize that promise. Theodore Parker, speaking before the American Anti-Slavery Society, noted that "Liberty and Equality were American ideas; they never were American facts" (quoted on 84). Events in Europe also pointed to a rapprochement between abolition and women's rights. The revolutionary quest for natural rights-based equality and political rights -- expressed, for example, in the "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" at the Seneca Falls convention -- emboldened advocates of women's rights and powerfully suggested to anti-slavery reformers the linked concerns of their respective causes. In this reading the demand of the convention to grant women the suffrage can only be explained by similar demands in Britain and France and especially women's active participation in fighting and political work in Germany and France.

As the European revolutions progressed, both the American Revolution and the American republic assumed an ever more distinct character as a fundamentally conservative political event and political system that demonstrated the folly of attempting rapid political and social change. James Henry Thornwell of South Carolina, Presbyterian and slaveholder, viewed the revolutions as the opposite to the "regulated liberty" underlying American

republicanism and southern slavery. In his view all agitators were alike: on both continents the “friends of order and regulated freedom” were arrayed against “Abolitionists” and “Atheists, Socialists, Communists, Red Republicans, [and] Jacobins” (quoted on 113). Similarly, the pre-eminent Catholic public intellectual Orestes Brownson and New York’s Bishop John Hughes saw the American republic as a conservative bulwark against the secular and atheistic revolutions sweeping Europe, and celebrated the American Revolution as the symbol for ordered, barely perceptible change. Even before the abolition of slavery in the French West Indian colonies, southerners -- prompted by abolitionist rhetoric and the Free Soil movement -- focused on the lessons Americans ought to learn from observing European events. Support among southerners for the 1850 secession movement collapsed as the vagaries of the unsuccessful European independence movements became clearly observable. Just as northern critics of revolution, southerners presented the American Revolution as the ideal-type of a political revolution, limited to asserting “the right of local self-government” (William Stiles, 129) and securing the rights of property. Such a circumscribed view of the nature of the American Revolution also cautioned Congress against commenting on or intervening in European affairs, though the leaders of independence movements, such as the Hungarian Louis Kossuth during his 1851-1852 tour of the United States, pleaded with the administration to do so. Robert E. Lee, then a colonel in the United States army, summarized prevailing American attitudes: “I look solely to the good of my country. ... [W]e are not called on to engage in the quixotic scheme of righting European wrongs” (quoted on 163).

In the concluding chapter, aptly titled “The Antislavery Movement as a Crisis of American Exceptionalism,” Roberts demonstrates how violence in the Kansas territory challenged exceptionalist convictions that had only been strengthened during the years 1848 to 1850. Stability and tranquility, notwithstanding the presence of slavery in the South, characterized the United States, in contrast to the turmoil in Europe. The violent clashes between pro- and antislavery settlers in Kansas challenged that narrative, and comparisons to Europe provided the conceptual language to understand the events in Kansas. Abolitionists, in particular, began to conceive of the conflict between North and South as a clash of different civilizations. President Franklin Pierce’s plan to send federal troops to police the Kansas territory struck them as antithetical to the republican promise. Calls for restoring “law and order” through bayonets smacked of European despotism.

Distant Revolutions is an important contribution to the historical scholarship on the American engagement with revolutions abroad, as it reveals just how intensely that engagement permeated American society and politics in the years after 1848. It also broadens the perspective of the ever more influential and compelling work that forces us to place American history into an international context. The book covers a great deal of ground in 191 pages of text, which is one of its considerable strengths. At the same time, Roberts synthesizes so much material in his narrative that I found myself wanting more detail. He clearly has an eye for the telling quote, and quoting from his sources more frequently would have given the reader an even better sense of the frequently overwrought language Americans used to express their support for or rejection of the European revolutions. Similarly, Roberts has a compelling cast of characters, ranging from travelers, expatriates, journalists, and diplomats who observed events first-hand to government

officials, politicians, reformers, and newspaper editors who opined on news from Europe. While they are introduced properly, only in two instances does Roberts weave the individual engagement with revolution into a detailed account of an observer's life to explore how biography shaped the reaction (and vice versa). He devotes almost half of the chapter on reformers to describing how William Wells Brown and especially Margaret Fuller responded to their observations in Paris and Rome. Brown, a former slave and anti-slavery orator, had no problem with seeing violence as a legitimate means of change -- in his view abolishing slavery in the United States would require a violent revolution. Fuller in particular influenced American views of Europe through her articles in the *New York Tribune*, which were at variance with the highly critical reporting in British papers, the source for most news from Europe in other American papers. As a "radical expatriate" she came to join anti-slavery with her feminism only after seeing the street fighting in Rome (96). In Fuller's estimation, "American slavery and European despotism ... emanat[ed] from the same system of transatlantic oppression[.] ... [P]atriarchal power, not liberal democracy, knitted the Atlantic world together. Antislavery and feminism therefore were not mutually exclusive causes but twin forms of resistance to a transatlantic evil" (100). For Fuller, a revolution, specifically a slave rebellion, in the United States would accomplish the same "dramatic political act" -- bestowing republican citizenship on the former slaves -- that she had observed in Rome (102).

An account of the American response to revolution in the 1840s cries out for a comparison with the reaction to the French Revolution and its aftermath in the 1790s. Although Roberts references French revolutionaries of 1848 looking back to the 1790s, or the Whiggish *Daily National Intelligencer* pointing to the bloodshed of the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution to illustrate the dangers of popular rebellion, and relates Kossuth's visit to the arrival of the French ambassador Edmond Genet in 1793, he does not pursue such comparisons in detail. In revealing ways, however, the respective revolutions factored differently in American conceptions of revolution and republicanism. For one thing, we can trace different trajectories: in the early 1790s initial enthusiasm across the political spectrum -- Americans embraced what they considered as a sister revolution -- was followed by disappointment and exaggerated stories about fratricidal violence, but in 1848 southerners and many Whigs voiced their concerns from the outset, in response to the proclamation of the Second Republic in Paris in February (and the abolition of colonial slavery). In the 1790s the Federalists took Great Britain as the model of a stable polity, in contrast to the turmoil in France, whereas their opponents, the Republicans, held on to their admiration for the First Republic much longer and condemned Britain as the embodiment of all the anti-democratic, imperial, and centralizing tendencies in the Atlantic world. Did Britain play a similar role -- that of the stable "other" to the chaos in continental Europe -- in 1848-1849? A more systematic comparison also would have cautioned Roberts not to conceive of the popular political culture of the late 1840s and early 1850s as a novel phenomenon. The kind of public gatherings that discussed political news and commentary taken from partisan newspapers, and that Roberts rightly sees as a major conduit of news about international events, existed in the 1790s and materially contributed to the political volatility of that decade.

On a related point, I wonder if paying more attention to the alleged role of transnational secret organizations in the fomenting of political instability and revolution would have yielded further insights into the continuities of American responses to revolution from the 1790s to the 1840s. Conservative clerics in Britain and the United States implicated the Illuminati and Freemasons in the coming of the French Revolution, and the arrival of Irish refugees in the United States, following the suppression of the Irish rebellion in 1798, raised fears about the reincarnation of the main revolutionary organization, the Society of United Irishmen, in North America. By the 1840s American society had undergone further panics in response to secret associations, in particular anti-Masonry. The transnational dimensions of these panics are well established: the growing number of German and Irish Catholic immigrants revived Protestant suspicions of a Catholic conspiracy to undermine the republican institutions of the United States, eventually culminating in the Know Nothings' Nativism in the 1850s. Convinced that Catholicism and democracy were antithetical -- a belief that also raised doubts about the survival of republican regimes in the Catholic countries of Europe -- American Protestants further argued that the immigrants constituted a fifth column in the Pope's secret employ. Roberts introduces George Lippard's Brotherhood of the Union, a labor union with a secret membership and branches in 140 eastern and Midwestern cities, to highlight his debt to 1848: the Brotherhood's goals included advancing land reform and the right to collective bargaining, two long-standing demands of the American labor movement, and Lippard emphasized that peaceful negotiations without results could very well give way to "Labor ... go[ing] to War ... with the Rifle, Sword and Knife," a direct reference to the clashes between workers and government forces in Paris (quoted on 88). In his writings that defended and explained the Brotherhood Lippard developed a new history of secret fraternities that traced their history from the 1790s to the 1840s and offered a positive evaluation of secrecy as a mode of organization, including a defense of Masonry, profoundly at odds with the established suspicion of secret associations. It would be instructive to contrast Lippard's embrace of secrecy with these suspicions, as well as with the American response to violent revolution: after all, the prevailing image of the Jacobins and Jacobin clubs in the United States highlighted violence and bloodshed. Similarly, the arrival of political refugees (the "Forty-Eighters") revived the specter of traveling revolutionaries and international revolutionary societies like the United Irishmen that had figured so prominently in the conservative paranoia of the 1790s.

In *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism*, Timothy Mason Roberts finds American enthusiasm for revolution to be peculiar, limited, and romantic (166). In this study of the way Americans attempted to understand the European Revolutions of 1848, he addresses a paradox: Americans easily invoked the language of revolution, and yet just as easily suspected foreign revolutions.¹ That paradox, he suggests, unfolded during the mid-19th century, amid war, territorial expansion, and growing sectional crisis over slavery. 1848 was not just a time of upheaval for Europe, but also for the United States.

Roberts argues the following regarding the significance of the European revolutions of 1848 for the United States: Americans at first responded positively to them, premising their approval on the Europeans achieving results similar to the American Revolution. Initially, therefore, Americans understood the European revolutions and the American Revolution to be part of a broader, transatlantic revolutionary context. But when the European revolutions turned violent and failed, Americans then distanced themselves from the Europeans, patted themselves on the back, and took comfort in the myth that their own revolution was exceptional.

In doing so, they confirmed for themselves that America was a place of natural liberty: its people instinctively embraced home rule, transcending the violence that had befallen the Old World (14). Americans understood their revolution as one that had already been achieved—in an orderly fashion and with reverence for God, at that. As for Europeans, they had their chance to follow the American example. In failing to do so, they squandered it. Failed European revolutions impressed upon Americans that their post-revolutionary society had no problems to solve (15). The expansion of slavery in the wake of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo changed that, however. Roberts further argues that the way the republic became unstable in the 1850s “owed to antislavery Americans’ perceptions that conditions in America had become foreign and alien”—and therefore dangerous (Ibid). He therefore notes that American exceptionalism to the contrary, “history does not show popularly accountable governments being achieved or sustained without significant violence” (190).

Distant Revolutions is a larger elaboration on an article on European revolutions, the South, and the crisis of the 1850s that Roberts wrote previously for the *Journal of the Early Republic*.² Driving the methodology of this study is an examination of the European

¹ This paradox has been addressed before by scholars such as David Brion Davis, *Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations* (Harvard, 1990), and Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York, 1983).

² See Timothy Mason Roberts, “Revolutions Have Become The Bloody Toy of the Multitude: European Revolutions, the South, and the Crisis of 1850.” *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Summer, 2005. P. 259-283.

revolutions through American public culture and politics. *Distant Revolutions* makes use of a varied source base—namely, print, personal correspondence, and personal diaries. With the outbreak of revolution in Hungary, Italy, and France, Americans openly expressed their solidarity with revolutionary activity through fashion, public commemorations and celebrations, dance, theater, and other forms of entertainment. American enthusiasm for foreign revolutions took the form of a fondness for mazurkas, the wearing of cockades sporting the colors of the Italian flag, Kossuth novelties, and comparing Kossuth to George Washington (150, 155). News of the revolutions could not but gain entry into American culture and politics due to the prevalence of European news being reprinted in American newspapers, and the increase of mass communication in the antebellum period. But at a more intimate level, this broad dissemination of information tended to evoke disquiet and existential questions about the nature of republicanism and revolution, the place of violence in either or both, and the place of the United States in the world.

Indeed, the transatlantic exchange of information simultaneously allowed Americans to distance themselves from Europe while bringing its revolutions closer to home. Roberts expounds on American consumption of foreign revolutions, and the complex ways in which they parsed that information— that information’s entry into American public culture, the way individual Americans refracted it through an idealized understanding of their own revolution, and its use in antebellum politics. He convincingly shows how intertwined discussion of the fates of the American and European revolutions became in the process. His argument that Americans tended to relate the European situation to their own revolution is consistent throughout. If news of the European revolutions did not mesh with their expectations of revolutionary propriety, some Americans ignored it. Others used the European revolutions to skewer opponents on their lack of Americanness, to discuss or deflect more divisive issues such as slavery, or for even critique the unfulfilled promises of American republicanism. This parsing of information and its subsequent political deployment for various reasons came to entrench the revolutions of 1848 in American cultural and political life, ultimately undermining Americans’ simplistic understanding of their own revolution’s privileged position. Abolitionist William Wells Brown went so far as to argue that a Europe paralyzed by revolution indicated that the American Revolution itself had failed (96). Failure to reform, too, was transatlantic (104); thus the United States was unexceptional.

Distant Revolutions is a work about distances—or, rather, the perception of distances. They consisted of national and sectional differences, but also the situation of a revolution in time and space as an accomplished or yet-to-be accomplished event. The title’s obviousness therefore belies an intriguing dual meaning. Roberts aptly demonstrates that it was not only the European revolutions that Americans saw as distant. The American Revolution and its turmoil, refracted as it was through nostalgia, had also become distant through time. In the early 1850s, he writes, Americans hardly saw themselves as contributing or receiving members of a transatlantic world (168). The limited and limiting way in which they saw their own revolution, as Roberts notes, was hardly lost on reformers such as Lucretia Mott and Margaret Fuller, and later Harriet Beecher Stowe, all of whom hoped that relating the American Revolution to events in Europe, and not its own idealized past, would give it a much-needed shot in the arm. The European example would allow the American

Revolution to recover its own radicalism—and its unfulfilled promises of equality for women and slaves—all of which had been silenced by its commemoration as a non-violent event (90-91).

The multifaceted nature of Roberts's argument can be a bit convoluted, and at times, one can easily get lost in the details, the linkages, and marveling at the way they all fit together. But given that he aims for a broad understanding of the way the European revolutions had an impact on the United States, this is probably unavoidable. One question that appears to hover at the edges of its discussion of revolution, however, is that of the looming threat of disunion. Disunion, as Elizabeth Varon has recently noted, was "frequently invoked as a threat"³ from the founding of the Republic to the coming of the Civil War. How closely and extensively did ambivalence toward foreign revolution, in the North and in the South, dovetail with the fear of disunion? Given that Americans considered their example to the world—that is to say, their exceptionalism—to be contingent upon maintaining the union, it is curious that Roberts does not discuss this in any great or specific detail, despite tantalizing references to traditional, Washingtonian non-entanglement and Andrew Jackson Donelson writing to James Buchanan that "all of Europe might be republicanized—'provided that the United States does not fall apart'" (141).

All in all, *Distant Revolutions* is a very rich book, whose chapters flow together smoothly. The attention to detail, the author's close reading of the sources, and his overall execution is admirable. Roberts's work has significance for both historians of American foreign relations and historians of the Early American Republic. This work is, by the author's own admission, a "cis-Atlantic" history, which places the history of a particular place within a larger global context (2). His work is in a similar vein to Ian Tyrrell's *Transnational Nation* and Thomas Bender's *A Nation among Nations*—and their prescriptions for seeing America as a part of the world, as opposed to being apart from it. Furthermore, his work acts as a corrective to tendencies to view the United States as a driver of global events, but not as subject to the impact of global events.

But this book also builds on the insights of earlier work on Early American political culture, and the way Americans dealt with the repercussions of foreign influence. Roberts's work foregrounds how the making of public opinion and its place in American domestic politics constituted a contact zone in foreign relations. It is therefore a complement to much newer work such as Rachel Hope Cleaves's *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Anti-slavery* (2009) and Todd Estes's *The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture* (2006), as well as older work, such as David Waldstreicher's *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1821* (1997). The global dimension of the antebellum years, so long neglected by historians of the period, and mostly neglected by historians of American foreign relations was not just economic; it was cultural. As such, it serves as a good reminder, both to foreign relations historians and historians studying the Early American Republic that the boundary between domestic and foreign was porous.

³ Elizabeth Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859*. (Chapel Hill, 2008). p. 7.

The value of Roberts's work lies also in the opportunities it provides for linking up the Early Republic's Atlantic-turn historiography with the heretofore woefully neglected historiography of the American foreign relations during the Civil War.⁴ Issues such as slavery and abolition, long seen by historians as primarily domestic, were also part of a much larger, transatlantic enterprise. Roberts therefore contributes to placing the antebellum politics of slavery and the antebellum South within an international context. Furthermore, by discussing American reform and the concerns of abolitionists in the wake of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo with reference to the Revolutions of 1848, Roberts joins Daniel Walker Howe in asking, and providing answers to, the larger question of whether Atlantic history really ends with the event of Westward expansion.⁵

⁴ Indeed, the *Blackwell Companion to American Foreign Relations* (Robert D. Schulzinger, ed) explores the Early Republic up until William Earl Weeks's essay on "American Expansionism, 1815-1860," before launching into the next essay by Frank Ninkovich on American imperialism during the latter half of the 19th century.

⁵ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America*. (Oxford, 2007).

Response by Timothy Mason Roberts, Western Illinois University

I am very grateful to Tom Maddux for arranging this elaborate roundtable for H-Diplo about *Distant Revolutions*, and to the reviewers John Belohlavek, Dennis Berthold, Daniel Kilbride, Albrecht Koschnik, and Wendy Wong for their detailed and thoughtful appraisals, commendations, and criticisms of the work. I will use my commentary below to respond to several of the points that the reviewers raise, and to suggest, or echo, the reviewers' calls for further roads of inquiry about Americans' attitudes about foreign revolutions, national exceptionalism, and transnational history.

John Belohlavek compliments the book as "indeed a transatlantic study." Actually, I use both the terms "transatlantic" and "cis-Atlantic" to characterize the book. Non-specialists may perhaps yawn at this quibbling over terms, but location of the book in terms of what kind of Atlantic history it offers is worth specifying. David Armitage has described three "concepts of Atlantic history": circum-Atlantic history, "the history of the Atlantic as a particular zone of exchange and interchange, circulation and transmission"; trans-Atlantic history, "the history of the Atlantic world told through comparisons"; and cis-Atlantic history, the history "of particular places as unique locations within an Atlantic world and [description of] that uniqueness as the result of the interaction between local particularity and a wider web of connections (and comparisons)." In the book's introduction I characterized the study as "cis-Atlantic history," because I wanted to tell the story of the early United States and investigate contours of its uniqueness, both material and rhetorical, measured through reaction to and interaction with the European revolutions of the mid-nineteenth century. But perhaps Belohlavek sees the book as accomplishing all three kinds of Atlantic history that Armitage envisions, and in retrospect I think he is right. The book explores how concepts like "revolution," "democracy," "popular sovereignty," and "Jacobinism" circulated around the Atlantic world, carried by newspapers, tourists, expatriates, and diplomats. The book also presents a comparison of the United States and Western Europe at the time, especially in terms of how Americans in 1848 compared their situation, mostly favorably, with that of European would-be democrats and republicans. As I note below, however, more could be done with comparative analysis of the Western and Eastern Atlantic worlds in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as important nation-building ideologies in the early American republic and developing nations elsewhere.¹

I am gratified that the reviewers picked up what I think is a central tension revealed not only in *Distant Revolutions* but in American foreign relations generally: as Albrecht Koschnik writes, the paradox that "a country born out of revolution did not necessarily welcome revolution elsewhere." Previous scholars of American foreign relations have of course detected this tension.² To go in a different direction, however, this important

¹ David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in David Armitage and Michael Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World 1500-1800* (New York, 2009), 11-30, esp. 16, 18, 21.

² David Brion Davis, *Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Jeremy Suri, "Revolution," in Alexander DeConde, Richard Dean Burns, and Fredrik

ideology in American history begs for comparison. Do other countries, present and past, with revolutionary origins – the French and Haitian republics, the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic of Iran – embrace or dismiss the potential of foreign revolutions? It is only through comparison to another place or another people’s self-conceptualization that we can try to understand the particular aspects of Americans’ outlook.³

On this same point, as Wendy Wong notices, a component of American exceptionalism I detected is an “instinctive” predilection to “natural liberty” and self-government. This belief, in asserting an organic or community-wide character of the American people, paradoxically diminished the heroism or individual achievement of any one American – George Washington, prominently – in antebellum Americans’ invocation of “lessons” from the American Revolution. Again this issue begs for comparison, if only to understand the construction and distinctiveness of Americans’ assertions of exceptionalism – did Haitians, Turks, and Vietnamese people attribute their national distinctiveness to the revolutionary leadership of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and Ho Chi Minh, respectively, or to the “greatest generations,” the “people” alive at the time of national origins?

I am glad that Dennis Berthold notes how “Americans...burnish[ed events in Europe] with the glow of cosmopolitanism and universalism.” Both conservatives hostile to rapid political and social change and liberals skeptical of inherited institutions selected elements of the European upheavals with universal aspects to emphasize; as Daniel Kilbride observes, “Exceptionalism and cosmopolitanism, much like cosmopolitanism and nationalism, could be quite complementary.” It’s easiest to notice the universal language of American reformers, who, frustrated with the slow pace or failure of broadened citizenship for slaves, women, and working men, sought new strategies and encouragement from abroad. As civil rights activists during the Cold War found alliances with activists in Africa, for example, so antebellum American reformers were driven to contemplate a transatlantic citizenship – the benefits of which would accrue less from how the world might benefit from the spread of corrupted American institutions, and more from how American provincialism might be cured by foreign influences.⁴ But American conservatives are also capable of a transnational outlook. Roman Catholics and proslavery advocates, for example, saw in the “lessons” of 1848 how Europeans should embrace American conservative institutions – a restricted franchise, protection of property, and even slavery. Thus, an important rule or pattern of American reactions to the 1848 revolutions, worth testing in other studies of the impact in one society of foreign liberation movements, is that American

Logevall, eds., *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, 3 vols. (New York, 2002), III:425-442; William Appleman Williams, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World, 1776-1976* (New York, 1976).

³ For a comparison of nation-building ideas, including concepts of national exceptionalism, in the United States and the Republic of Turkey, see Timothy Roberts and Emrah Şahin, “Construction of National Identities in Early Republics: A Comparison of the American and Turkish Cases,” *Journal of the Historical Society* 10 (December 2010): 507-531.

⁴ Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2002); *Idem.*, *Exporting American Dreams: Thurgood Marshall’s African Journey* (New York, 2008).

conservatives held up domestic institutions for foreign emulation, while American liberals sought to import foreign ideas. Such a dual relationship with the world illustrates the problem, as Wong observes, of viewing “the United States as a driver of global events, but not as subject to the impact of global events.” As far as the mid-nineteenth century is concerned, and as Berthold notes about the book’s title, Americans were challenged by a Europe in upheaval, though in different, and before too long, irreconcilable ways.

Berthold notes his skepticism about the causal role of the 1848 revolutions in bringing about the Civil War. The difficulty of showing the causal relationship between one event and another has become so accepted that it no longer gets much close scholarly attention. In a responding to a review of his *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969, 1998), which criticized the book for “an overly intellectual approach to the study of American politics,” Gordon Wood observed, “When we write about ideas we are not saying, or we ought not to be saying, that ideas ‘caused’ people to act and that they are to be weighed for their motivating importance. The meanings we give [to what we do] are public ones, and they are defined and delimited by the conventions and language of the culture of the time. It is in this sense that culture or ideology creates behavior.”⁵ I must beg to hitch the pennant of *Distant Revolutions* to Wood’s flag pole here. It is impossible to say, for example, what exactly caused the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, the collapse of the secession impulse in 1850, the formation of the Republican Party, or the Civil War, but, on the other hand, I meant to suggest that scholars focused simply on domestic issues, institutions, and individuals as sole “causes” have neglected important circumstances extant in the culture of the Atlantic world at the time that also “caused” Americans to behave in certain ways over others. Obviously the flow of ideas onto and away from American shores did not end in 1787 or 1815 and pick up again in 1898 or 1917, though these are traditional dates that bookend the presumed nationalist or nation-building period in American history, when transnational or global aspects of the United States go into hiding. Actually, a fascinating outcome of transnational history could be, not only as Wong writes, “that the boundary between domestic and foreign [in 1848] was porous,” but that differentiation between “domestic” and “foreign” influences in history may lose meaning.

Berthold remarks that *Distant Revolutions* focuses too much for his liking on the French revolution in 1848. Although events in Paris gained the most attention in the American press, I would beg that the book pays quite a bit of attention to popular uprisings in Hungary and Rome. Indeed, the juxtaposition of Americans’ attitudes towards Hungary and France is the premise for the book’s chapters on the divided attitudes towards revolution of expatriates and proslavery southerners. And Americans’ attitudes towards the Roman Republic is the setting for the book’s meditation on Margaret Fuller, encompassing her struggles not only alongside Roman revolutionaries’ defense of their city from an invading French army, but also against British and even American prejudices against the potential

⁵ Gordon Wood, “Ideology and the Origins of Liberal America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (July 1987), 628-640, esp. 630-1.

for Romans, as Catholics, to embrace stable democratic institutions (not unlike, by the way, westerners' debates today about the capacity of Middle East Muslims for democracy).

Dan Kilbride criticizes *Distant Revolutions*, as I understand him, on three general points. One, that it is old-fashioned history; second, that it underestimates the cosmopolitanism of the early American republic; and third, to the extent that it shows Americans conflicted about the European upheavals, it does not identify sympathizers and critics. He writes first, "Roberts's book... favor[s] the familiar over the innovative...not [trying] to change the big questions we should be asking about the United States in this era" but instead fitting a "well-established historiographical line." Second, he observes, Roberts "overextends by arguing that Americans lost faith in European republicanism after 1848.... [Likewise his] case that Americans politically saw little in common with Europeans...is not supported by his evidence.... *Distant Revolutions* is more successful when it argues that 1848 compelled Americans to inspect the comforting assumptions of exceptionalism.... Many, perhaps most, Americans clearly did not believe this.... If Roberts is right, it is difficult to explain why northerners found so stirring Abraham Lincoln's insistence that what was at stake during the Civil War was not merely American democracy, but the future of self-government the world over." And lastly, Kilbride writes, "It would be useful to know which Americans lost faith in the universal meaning of American Revolutionary ideals, and which didn't."

Kilbride seems not to think much of the last chapter and epilogue of the book, which show in fact that an important segment of the American population – radical abolitionists as well as the leadership, and, implicitly, ordinary supporters of the Republican Party – rejected American exceptionalism, and saw the show-down over slavery in Kansas as evidence of revolutionary conditions crossing the Atlantic. The book concludes with a reflection on Lincoln's sense of America's global mission, a conviction, I argue, which he gained from his observations of the failure of democratic reform in Europe in the previous decade. These chapters, in retrospect, might have included more detailed evidence of such an anti-exceptionalist attitude existing among rank-and-file antislavery and abolitionist northerners. But criticism that I miss evidence of this attitude simply has no basis in the book's contents taken as a whole.

On the other hand, clearly not all, and probably not most, Americans before the Civil War, abandoned their belief in American exceptionalism (hence the book's title as "challenge," not "end"). American exceptionalism, despite scholars' questions of it in the past generation, continues live and well in American public opinion. Advocacy of American exceptionalism today in the rhetoric of "Tea Party" politicians, for example, suggests how American political culture at the end of 2010 was still connected with the themes, if not actual events, of the 1850s and 1860s.⁶ So I would disagree that my argument that some Americans reexamined or rejected assumptions of exceptionalism is more successful than my argument that other Americans did not. By 1861 many Americans clashed, and even were prepared to resort to violence, over beliefs about American exceptionalism, although

⁶ "Tea Party Rooted in Religious Fervor for Constitution," *New York Times* 5 November 2010; "In a Suburb, A Microcosm of the Nation," *Ibid.*, 7 November 2010.

whether such conflicts aligned with the major sectional issues of slavery and states' rights would take careful study to document and map. In any case, the book does assess the global position of the United States in 1848, using as a framework of study the American nation-state, one whose majority was, in fact, provincial white settlers.⁷ Yet the 1848 revolutions disrupted that provincialism, and how they did so offers a new and important perspective, not easily fitting "a well established historiographical line."

As for the question of which Americans remained or became sympathetic to the European revolutions, and which did not, Kilbride and other reviewers speak to the complexity of the narrative in *Distant Revolutions*. The nature of transnational history requires the author to keep (at least) two national landscapes or political and cultural theaters in view, to assess how and when changes in one place arrive in another, what different forms they take upon arrival, and even what messages are sent back. But to reiterate the book's organization outlined on pages 16 and 17, chapters 3 and 4 describe political and reform movements in America evincing sympathy for the revolutions in Europe, whereas chapters 5, 6, and 7 describe groups that resisted the radicalisms of 1848.

Regarding the book's study of how Democrats and Whigs wrestled with news of the European revolutions, several reviewers made helpful observations. Behlolavek suggests, "A more detailed look at the reaction of American politicians might be in order." My goal was to show not only that American political actors expressed awareness of the overseas revolutions, but that the impact of those revolutions could be measured in their visibility in political campaigns – that is, in the Americans' contest for domestic power using, for the time being, ballots not bullets. Thus the chapters on the elections of 1848 and 1852 focus on how events in Europe shaped voters' and politicians' attitudes and policies towards domestic issues, especially the outcome of the U.S.-Mexican war, American continental expansion, and the related issue of territorial slavery. As I noted above about the task of providing evidence of the influence in antebellum America of ideas from revolutionary Europe, demonstration of meaningful political action in American society, not merely of intellectual or casual awareness among American elites, seems crucial in such a study as *Distant Revolutions*.

Koschnik, meanwhile, notes the fact, surprising to my mind, that "Democrats pointed to French popular politics as a model for the American struggle between capital and labor." Democrats' tolerance for and even momentary sympathy for French workers' demands for reform deserves more scrutiny than I gave it. Adam Tuchinsky has documented the

⁷ While a stretch, it is possible to imagine Americans taking inspiration from a rapid triumph of democratic institutions in Western Europe – with the velocity, say, of the astonishing events in Eastern Europe in 1989-1990 – to begin peaceful antislavery reform in America – perhaps towards gradual emancipation of slaves on the model of Brazil or the British Empire. But for a brief comparative study of the institutional obstacles to such a path see William Freehling, "The Divided South, Democracy's Limitations, and the Causes of the Peculiarly North American Civil War," in Gabor Boritt, ed., *Why the Civil War Came* (New York, 1997), 125-176.

paradoxically popular *New York Tribune*, which editor Horace Greeley used as a vehicle to advocate the Whig and Republican parties as well as democratic socialism. Tuchinsky argues that the *Tribune* bridged individualism, a bedrock value of American exceptionalism, and collectivism, which hardcore American exceptionalists in 1848-1852 normally condemned as a dangerous offshoot of European revolution.⁸ Greeley himself was lampooned by his rivals in the press for paying too much attention to French revolutionary workers, and for advocating social engineering in America. Meanwhile, the Free Soil Party gained support from a minority of Democrats and Whigs as well as previously unaligned antislavery voters in 1848, motivated by revolutionary events in Europe to engage in the radical politics of breaking with the second party system. But not all liberal Democrats became Free Soilers. Was there a Democratic, or even a Working Men's, counterpart to Greeley?

Along with Greeley, of course, other internationalist Whigs could be found in the 1840s, such as William Seward, as Kilbride notes. But as Koschnik observes, these Whigs lost out in 1848 as well as 1852 to conservatives who "focused on the American penchant for stability--the United States was a model of anti-revolution--and wanted to shield the republic from domestic and foreign agitation for change." For every Seward declaring in 1844, "[t]he rights asserted by our forefathers were not peculiar to themselves - they were the common rights of mankind," there was a Greeley writing in 1852, "We have been wickedly beaten by a coalition of the Go-Slowly factions against us. I mean now to lie quiet a while and see how the world goes on," thus expressing his disappointment that Americans would not, apparently, embrace the idea of human rights very quickly.⁹ The dates of these two statements, I would argue, are not a coincidence. The revolutionary and counterrevolutionary years 1848-1850 taught American internationalists a lesson about the reality of power, politics, and violence. The changes in American politics in this era of Atlantic democratic revolutions point out that to answer the question, "What was the American reaction to the 1848 Revolutions," requires first answering the question, "When?"

Koschnik aptly summarizes the argument of the last chapter of the book: "Abolitionists, in particular, began to conceive of the conflict between North and South as a clash of different civilizations." Abolitionists' skepticism that southerners were really part of the same country as northerners reminds us of the tenuous acceptance of the Union in antebellum America, and not only among proslavery secessionists. The mid-nineteenth century was a pivotal moment of transition from colonial empires to nation-states; thus official "national" boundaries, on both sides of the Atlantic, often had little to do with political realities. As Koschnik and Berthold both rightly observe, *Distant Revolutions* focuses heavily on the impact in America of Europeans' fighting over sovereignty and boundaries; and as

⁸ Adam Tuchinsky, *Horace Greeley's New-York Tribune: Civil War-Era Socialism and the Crisis of Free Labor* (Ithaca, 2009).

⁹ Timothy Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville, 2009), 174.

Behlolavek notes, I briefly explain the causes of the 1848 Revolutions in ideologically neutral, economic terms. In retrospect, investigation of European primary sources on the causes of the 1848 upheavals as well as on European reactions to the American Civil War could greatly enrich what we know about the extent and age of revolutionary ideas circulating around the Atlantic between, say, 1776, the establishment of the American republic, and 1871, the establishment of the Paris Commune. Did memory of the French and/or American Revolutions trigger the 1848 uprisings? How did southern secession in 1861 and northern unification in 1865 (notwithstanding the problems of Reconstruction) shape Europeans' understanding of self-determination and nation-building in the 1860s and 1870s? These latter questions would require usage of non-English sources, an important resource for much emerging transnational scholarship.

Koschnik and Wong note how quickly Americans turned to the past, or at least their impressions of past revolutions, to assess Europeans' striving for democratic institutions in 1848. Like longstanding members of Congress who run for the presidency, French revolutionaries in 1848 perhaps had spent too much of their previous career engaging in revolutions for American tastes. Instead, to continue the analogy, Americans, at least initially, preferred an "outsider" like Hungary, which had no track record for Americans to examine. Of course, as I argue, Americans quickly grew skeptical of the Hungarians' capacity for revolutionary success, a testimony to the powerful barometer of the remembered American Revolution among Americans in 1850. This was true, as Koschnik observes, despite the fact that "Abolitionists measured the United States against what they considered as one of the central promises of the American Revolution, universal human rights, and came to see ending slavery as the necessary step to finally realize that promise." Liberal Americans keen to oppose slavery or establish women's rights had no greater insight into the "true" meaning of the American Revolution than did their conservative opponents. As scholars of historical memory have recently reminded us, actual battles often become fought all over again in terms of whose memory takes hold most firmly in the public imagination.¹⁰

Koschnik further asks some probing questions about the parallels between Americans grappling with the French (and, I will add, the Haitian) revolution in the 1790s, and with their successors in the 1840s. On the potential role of Britain as a stable "other" for Americans in 1848, the main source for European news was British newspapers and periodicals, brought over by steamship, whose perspective, notwithstanding Margaret Fuller's fulminations in the *New York Tribune* against British prejudice, no doubt helped chill American enthusiasm for European upheaval. On the other hand, anti-British attitudes were common in the early American republic, arising, for example, in the South over the abolition of Caribbean slavery, in the West over the Oregon dispute, and in the Northeast among Irish immigrants. These events made Britain a less appealing model than it had

¹⁰ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). For contests over memory of the Revolutions of 1848, see Robert Gildea, "1848 in European Collective Memory," in R. J. W. Evans and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, eds., *The Revolutions in Europe, 1848-1849: From Reform to Reaction* (Oxford, 2002), 207-236.

been for Federalists in the 1790s. On attitudes towards secret organizations in American reactions to the 1848 Revolutions, the embrace of secrecy among the fledgling labor unions established by George Lippard's leadership went against the grain of American anti-conspiracy opinion at the time. The first American political convention, held in 1832, was organized by the anti-conspiratorial Anti-Masonic Party, reflective of a larger opposition in Jacksonian America to possible aristocratic manipulation of popular politics. Meanwhile labor organizations were barely accepted, if at all, in antebellum America, perhaps excepting large urban areas Philadelphia and New York City. The important decision of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts in *Commonwealth v. Hunt* (1842) ruled that labor unions were not criminal conspiracies, but most courts continued to treat them as threats to public order, even in states where legislatures recognized them as legitimate.¹¹

On the subject of nativism, an important point that Koschnik and Berthold both raise, as David Brion Davis noted long ago, anti-Catholic, anti-Masonic, and anti-abolitionist violence erupted frequently in the antebellum North, stemming from fears of these groups' different conspiratorial tendencies.¹² *Distant Revolutions*, in fact, argues that condemnation of foreign revolutions was one way that Catholic immigrants could seek entrée into mainstream American society at the time, thus disavowing the pro-French attitudes that Irish immigrants espoused in the 1790s, which had triggered Federalist backlashes in the Alien and Sedition Acts and extending, temporarily, the residence requirement for U.S. citizenship. Of course the Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s showed nativism to be alive and well, hostile not only to Roman Catholics but also German radical free laborers new in the country. Important numbers of the German Forty-Eighters joined the antislavery vanguard, as documented by Bruce Levine, a testimony to the sudden fluidity of the American political landscape in the late 1850s, as well as the arrival, as I argue, of a European revolutionary climate in a dividing United States.¹³ Compared to the 1790s, ethnic attitudes, Irish and German, towards European revolutions were more complicated in the 1840s and 1850s, on account of antagonisms among first and second generation immigrants, and the problem of slavery, a comparatively peripheral issue in the late eighteenth century.

Finally, Wong asks about the possible relationship between controversial invocations of "disunion" in the early American republic, as explored by Elizabeth Varon, and similar invocations of "revolution," the focus of *Distant Revolutions*. This is a valuable question. To my knowledge no one has thoroughly studied the meaning and usages of "revolution" in the

¹¹ Kermit Hall and Peter Karsten, *The Magic Mirror: Law in American History* (New York, 2009), 125-126.

¹² David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47 (September 1960), 205-224.

¹³ Bruce Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Urbana, 1992).

early American republic through the Civil War era.¹⁴ I suspect, however, that, as Varon found among antebellum Americans' debates over "disunion," "revolution" was both an authentic threat to the country's status quo, and a rhetorical tool to gain political power. Moreover, as Varon writes about reactions to cries for disunion, individuals and groups threatening, not commemorating, "revolution," would paradoxically be labeled as un-American, disloyal both to the country and to assumptions about American exceptionalism. American newspapers in 1850, for example, quoted by Varon, declared, "Fanatics...in helping to weaken the bonds of the Union by familiarizing the public mind to the idea of disunion...commit a substantial treason against their country," thus threatening to "Europeanise this continent."¹⁵ By the later 1850s, as *Distant Revolutions* concludes, this "Europeanization" is precisely what happened, in terms of the turn of the antislavery movement towards revolutionary violence.

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¹⁴ The closest studies to this topic are Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* [1963] (New York, 1991); Rachel Cleves, *Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (Cambridge, 2009); Michael Kammen, *Season of Youth: The American Revolution & the Historical Imaginative* (Ithaca, 1988); and Andrew Robertson, *Language of Democracy: Political Rhetoric in the United States and Britain, 1790-1900* (Charlottesville, 2005).

¹⁵ Elizabeth Varon, *Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (Chapel Hill, 2008), 214-5.