



## The Origins of Modern Nationalism in the North Atlantic Interaction Sphere

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### Abstract

This article challenges the standard narrative (e.g. Gellner) regarding the origins of modern nationalism in Europe, and Benedict Anderson's contrary suggestion that it first took shape in creole America, arguing instead that the formation of modern nationalism needs to be understood as a transatlantic process, in keeping with recent research on Atlantic history. More specifically, the North Atlantic dynamic of imperial competition between Britain and France, that led to the American and French Revolutions, is seen as the crucible of modern state formation, and it is argued that the North Atlantic needs to be understood not simply as a geographic space, but as a distinctive sphere of social and ideological interaction, given the centrality of sea-going during this period. It was this complex social environment, centred on a long 18th century, that most provoked new imaginings of national community. Toward this end the article articulates the analytic concept of the 'interaction sphere'. With this it picks up on Charles Tilly's key concerns with how best to analyse large historical processes, and his emphasis on political competition and social interaction in explaining social change.

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**Keywords:** *Origins of Nationalism, Interaction Spheres, Social Change, Charles Tilly, Revolutions, Empires, Atlantic History*

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### Introduction

Our revolution has often been attributed to that of America: in fact the American Revolution had a lot of influence on the French Revolution, but less because of what was then done in the United States than because of what was being thought at the same time in France. While in the rest of Europe the American Revolution was still nothing but a new and unusual fact, among us it only made more evident and more striking what we thought we already knew. It astonished Europe; here it completed our conversion. The Americans seemed merely to apply what our writers had thought of: they gave substantial reality to what we were dreaming about.

--Alexis de Tocqueville, Volume One of *The Old Regime*, 1856, (in Zunz and Kahan 2002: 306).

1.1 This article critically engages scholarly narratives about the origins of modern nationalism that locate it in a history of European social evolution, a narrative sometimes criticised for its Eurocentric bias (e.g. Chatterjee 1993, Drakulic 2008). It qualifies the idea of nationalism's European origins, arguing for a geographic shift in focus towards a wider social sphere defined by European populations on both sides of the North Atlantic Ocean, both colonial settlers and Europeans *in situ*, but also influenced by indigenous American societies, enslaved populations, communities founded on Protestant faith, and the peculiar interstitial micro-societies engendered by sea-going livelihoods. More generally, it seeks to reframe the social and symbolic milieu in which new imaginings of national communities took shape (Anderson 1991). The argument is that this field of ideas and opinions is best understood not simply as the outcome of a European intellectual genealogy, although that is an important element, but also as the effect of a rapidly changing transatlantic network of interrelated societies, that were characterised by an intensification of processes of communication, and crucially, experiencing new strains and demands on increasingly antiquated and inadequate systems of political authority and legitimation. After outlining standard accounts of the origins of modern nationalism, I propose framing the question in terms of the concept of the 'interaction sphere', borrowed from archaeology, and the field of 'Atlantic history' that has flourished in recent decades. The main body of the article elaborates this perspective, before drawing conclusions.

**1.2** In the spirit of Charles Tilly, the article interrogates a process of large-scale social change (1985a), shaped by contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2006) and interstate competition (1975). Tilly's work is so vast that almost anything one writes can be connected to it in several ways, and some connections will be highlighted below. Most fundamentally however, in terms of constructing explanatory social scientific narratives, I share his inclination toward what he called 'encompassing comparisons' (1985a: 147). That is, toward understanding a single complex historical process (modern nation formation) by examining how particular cases variably fit into that process, and correspondingly, to understand particular cases (revolutionary nationalisms) according to how they are situated within that larger process. The concept of the interaction sphere is meant to facilitate this way of approaching things. This article offers an initial reframing of large-scale narratives about how nationalism first arose, primarily using secondary historical sources. Further empirical research will hopefully help substantiate its claims by reconstructing eighteenth-century transatlantic social interactions, networks, interlocking biographies, and repertoires of contention. At that stage Tilly's notion of 'relational realism'—that analysis should begin with attention to concrete social ties and interactions (2008: 7-8)—already implicit in this article, would come more fully into play.

## **Reframing the Origins of Modern Nationalism**

**2.1** Most accounts of the rise of nationalism place it squarely in the context of European social development (e.g. Bendix 1978, Breuilly 1993, Gellner 1997, Hobsbawm 1992, Mann 1986)<sup>[1]</sup>. Usually the narrative pivots around a longish Eighteenth Century (say 1688 to 1830) in which economic transformation and political crises in the seaboard dynasties of Western Europe issue forth in the first modern nation-states, based on notions of popular sovereignty, and driven by intensified commercial and military competition. From this pivot, the story frequently looks back in time to ideological precursors in the Renaissance and the struggles of the Reformation, and forward to the spread of this model eastward across the archaic Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian Empires, and finally across the globe as part of post-World War Two decolonisation, with the latest chapter of nationalist movements being triggered by the collapse of the USSR in 1989.

**2.2** Within this paradigm there are significant variants. The present argument engages particularly with those offered by Liah Greenfeld, Benedict Anderson, and Charles Tilly. Greenfeld (1992) pinpoints sixteenth-century England as the source of modern nationalism, focussing on how Tudor monarchs consolidated their power bases by strategically expanding the aristocracy, thereby creating a reconfigured elite with a greater need to look downward into the populous for legitimation. Consolidating a Protestant-English identity in the face of counter-reformation persecutions, this new class led the way in the formation of the first truly national identity, which would subsequently spread outward, by imitation, across Europe and the world. While I recognise the seminal role of England, I instead see its history and traditions of political conflict feeding into the ideology of the American Revolution as its most important impact.

**2.3** Anderson's (1991) well-known thesis that nations are 'imagined communities' made possible by modern communication based on the printed word and expanded literacy, was linked to the claim that people of European birth or descent in the Americas ('creoles') were the true seedbed of this new national worldview. According to Anderson, the exceptionally literate, governing strata of this population found itself structurally confined in its careers and social horizons, to the provinces of various New World colonies, socially unequal to their political masters in the European homeland, and unable to advance their interests beyond the colonial context (see Figure 1). So constrained, they naturally began to identify as people's of these colonies, which eventually became nations. This new paradigm in turn was imported back across the Atlantic, thus secondarily shaping the strategies of nation-building in the European homeland. Oddly, Anderson focuses this argument primarily on the colonies of New Spain, which in many ways were the least innovative (see below), treating the much more dynamic and innovative British colonies of North America as almost secondary. I share Anderson's emphasis on the New World context, and his interest in the forces that shape the imagining of communities, but I take issue with his misplaced emphasis on the Spanish colonies.



**Figure 1.** Portuguese and Spanish colonies. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.<sup>[2]</sup>

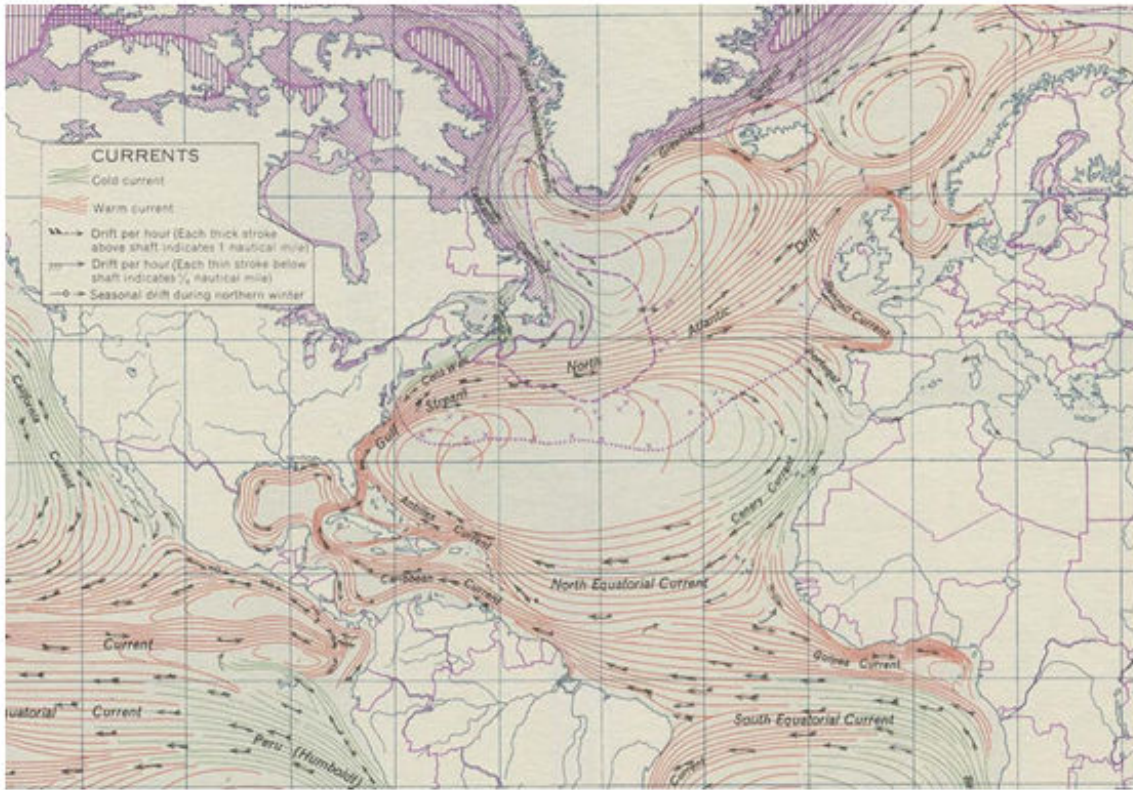
**2.4** Tilly (1975) argued early on that nation formation was a process that took place between as well as within states. He emphasised the competitive, interactive dynamic of modernising states in Europe, as the fiscal and personnel demands of warfare accelerated the development of armies and navies, systems of national debt and taxation, government bureaucracy, and ideas of citizenship and rights. As he aphorised, 'war makes states' as much as states make war (1985b: 170). I follow Tilly in believing that modern nations took shape as part of a multi-centred competitive dynamic, not through the endogenous development of single societies, but I shift the centre of gravity of the analysis toward the mid-Atlantic, to an arena of transatlantic imperial competition. Tilly was of course mindful of the imperial dimension, but saw this as anchored in Europe among European states, treating developments in the American colonies as more marginal, where I see these as at least half the story.

**2.5** Now for the conceptual tools and frame of my own analysis. I borrow the term 'interaction sphere' (Caldwell 1964) from archaeology, where it was coined to help conceptualise cultural interconnections among distinct communities within wider regions, sharing common ecological conditions and traditions, and often historical and genealogical links. The idea of the interaction sphere was to shift focus to the communication and exchange relations among networks of elite groups within these communities, suggesting that it was this process, rather than ecological pressures or the inertia of traditions, that best accounted for the cultural continuities suggested by the material record (Friedel 1979, Gilmore 1982). I transpose the term here from archaeology to sociological history, because it succinctly signals the emphasis I want to place on a social space defined by interactions, albeit not 'elite' in the narrowest sense of the term. My purpose is to try to define the main discursive horizons within which the idea of 'the nation' took its recognisably modern shape.

**2.6** Acknowledging this terminological pilfering, the argument also fits within the historiographic trend that has come to be known as 'Atlantic history' (see Greene and Morgan 2009). On the model of Braudel's (1972) history of the Mediterranean world, this approach attempts to view the Atlantic Ocean as the logical frame for investigating an array of interpenetrating socio-historical processes. At its broadest, it becomes simply a geographic container for any number of diverse historical investigations (Bodl 2009; Games 2006). Three major historical foci have coalesced to some degree under this banner: the transatlantic slave trade (e.g. Gilroy 1993), colonial societies of the Americas (e.g. Bailyn 1986, see Steele 2007), and the history of Atlantic oriented Empires (e.g. Gould and Onuf 2005). But alongside these major currents, many others flow, including histories of: demography and migration; environmental, ecological and epidemiological impact; the movement of commodities; and naval and coastal ways of life.

**2.7** Within this vast field my focus is specifically on the North Atlantic, and that field of interactions defined especially by the competing spheres of colonisation and imperial pretension defined by Britain and France (and earlier and to a lesser degree by the Dutch), and oriented primarily to the North American continent. This was roughly the zone defined by the infamous 'triangle trade' of slaves from West Africa, basic commodities from the Caribbean and North American colonies, and manufactured goods from Europe. While eschewing geographical determinism, it is worth noting the equatorial calms and prevailing currents helped reinforce this division of the Atlantic into northern and southern spheres for navigators by sail, with

traffic to and from Europe proceeding much more rapidly in the northern hemisphere (Steele 2007: 52) (See Figure 2). However, the demarcation here has more to do with the very different process of conquest and colonisation prosecuted by the Iberians in New Spain, based on the reproduction of a manorial system in the New World interior, and the pursuit of precious metals. To the north the British trading empire led to a pattern of widespread land-holding, both large and small, and merchant-based coastal towns. But most fundamentally, this North Atlantic interaction sphere was driven by diverse trade, suffused with the ideologies of the Reformation and later the Enlightenment, and governed by systems of monarchical absolutism that were gradually being pushed to their limits. This sphere has a temporal centre of gravity as well. Anchored by the pivotal events of the American and French Revolutions, framed by a long Eighteenth Century, and trailing into the Seventeenth and Nineteenth Centuries at either end. The idea of the modern nation emerges out of this welter of thought and experience, triggered by transatlantic contact, and the particular tensions in conceptions of polity and community that developed on both sides of the Atlantic in this period, feeding on one another.



**Figure 2.** North Atlantic Ocean currents. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

### Imagining Nations in the North Atlantic Interaction Sphere

**3.1** I construct an analytic account through three comparative concepts: empires, revolutions, and interstitial communities, emphasising significant differences of social and political structures under each of these headings.

#### **Empires**

**3.2** Atlantic history gets accused of being 'merely imperial history in a more acceptable guise' (Morgan and Greene 2009: 6-9). It is clearly more than this, but the history of European empires is unavoidably central to understanding the process in question (see Figure 3). Most basically, we need to appreciate the differences between the three major imperial systems, and why it was the predominantly North Atlantic empires of Britain and France that became the first seedbeds for political and social revolution, and new ideas of polity based on notions citizenship, rights, liberty and equality.



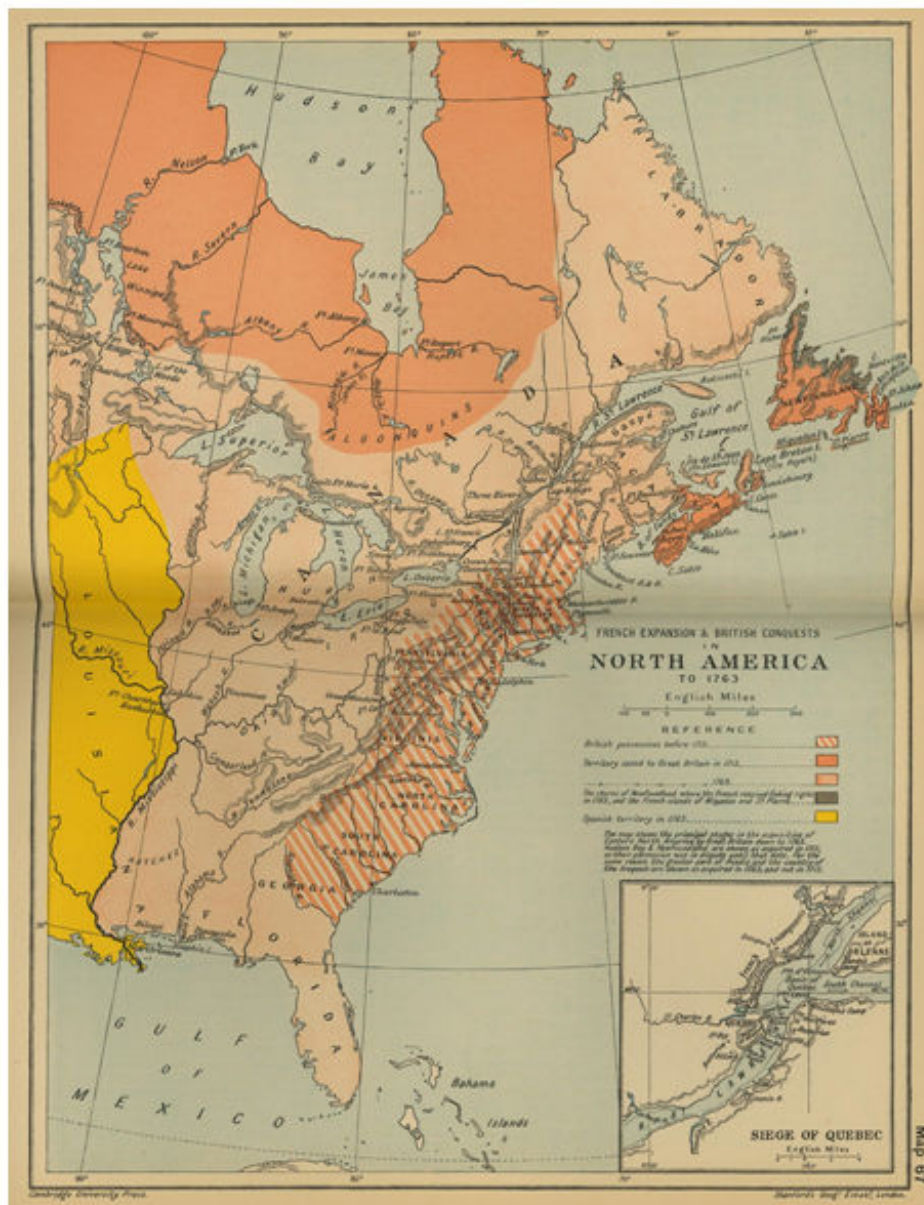
**Figure 3.** English, French and Spanish colonies, c. 1700. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

**3.3** The first question is why the Spanish empire was a 'late developer' when it came to republican revolution, reacting to the impact of the American and French Revolutions, rather than leading (Elliott 2006: 391). In part, the Spanish Empire showed the inhibiting effects of being first in the conquest and colonisation of the Americas, in effect getting locked into an effort to reproduce contemporary European social and political structures just as these were heading into a long period of transformation (Andrien 2009: 56). The early motor of Spanish conquest was the pursuit of silver and gold to return to the homeland and subsidise the costs of empire and European wars, with minimal interest at first in the opportunities of commerce in a wider array of commodities. Moreover, the Spanish sought to reproduce the manorial system associated with European feudalism, with vast estates (*encomienda*) and Indian labour tied to estates and their owners, on the model of European peasantries. As Pagden (1995) puts it: "Whereas the Spanish 'were overwhelmingly concerned with rights over people' the British and French stressed 'rights in things,' mostly lands" (cited in Morgan and Greene 2009: 17), but including people treated as things, i.e. slaves. As a result of toppling indigenous Aztec and Inca empires and then incorporating (by subjugating) diverse Indian communities, as opposed to the North American pattern of warfare and displacement westward, the Spanish were led to reconstruct a medieval hierarchical social order, albeit with race (*castas*) and faith as additional markers of how the lower indigenous orders fit into the system. The Spanish colonisers also brought with them a highly centralised bureaucratic order. Despite some disputes regarding claims over the bodies and souls of indigenous peoples, the imperial bureaucracy of Crown appointees and the Catholic Church, via various religious orders in the first instance, formed an overarching framework that attempted to span and organise the vast landmass of New Spain. The Spanish empire was, uniquely, an attempt to build the *ancien regime* in the 'new world'.

**3.4** The French imperial system never gained as firm a foothold in the Americas. Territories in Canada, Louisiana and the Caribbean were geographically disjunct and diverse, and numbers of French settlers remained relatively small. The North American territories were sparsely populated by French settlers, and often remained effectively under the control of Native American groups, especially in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. The Caribbean islands were by far the most economically valuable, receiving the largest migration from France, but [e]ven if French migration is estimated generously and slave imports are estimated very

conservatively, enslaved Africans made up at least two-thirds of the population that came into the French Americas' (Dubois 2009:139). In contrast to the sprawling Spanish empire, the French one was tightly centred on the sugar producing and exporting islands of the Caribbean, dense slavery based societies assembled for purposes trade, which eventually erupted in their own revolution on Saint-Dominique (Haiti) [3]. But in common with the Spanish system, the French colonies were governed through a highly centralised imperial bureaucracy, linked by 'a single state agency, the Marine, which connected the Royal Government to the colonies, oversaw the navy, and infused much of the governance of the colonies with a military ethos' (Ibid.: 141).

**3.5** For our account, by far the most significant aspect of the French colonial project, is how it was bound up with competition with Britain for domination and influence in Europe, with the Americas as something of an adjunct to that struggle (Colley 1992). Ongoing conflicts along the frontier between the British and French territories, with the Iroquois Confederacy in between negotiating on both fronts, eventually fed into a transatlantic war (1754-1763), styled the 'Seven Years War' in Europe and the 'French and Indian War' in North America (Phillips 2009: 256). France's defeat meant the cession of Louisiana to Spain (1763), and the rest of its North American colonies to Britain (see Figure 4). In turn, when the British colonists rebelled in 1776, the French supported the rebels, stimulating the traffic in radical political ideas between the two societies. We look more closely at the causes and impact of the Eighteenth Century revolutions below. Here it suffices to underscore that this dynamic of imperial competition and conflict had the effect of generating a shared Anglo-French universe of radical critiques and conservative apologies for the old political orders.



**Figure 4.** French territories ceded to Britain and Spain, 1763. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

**3.6** Compared to the Spanish and French Empires, the British Empire in North America was a piecemeal and relatively unsystematic affair, and that difference had significant consequences. Early efforts at colonisation, from the 1580s to the 1620s sought to emulate and compete with the Spanish example. But gradually over the next hundred years a more economically realistic and regionally diversified pattern emerged, as dreams of gold were replaced by profits from new commodities such as tobacco. Two factors need emphasis. First, the colonisation process in the Seventeenth Century was deeply affected by the

English Civil War in the homeland. As Burnard comments:

A major difference between events in British America and those in French and Spanish America ... was that in British America the breakdown in authority came early in the settlement process, even before that authority had been fully established (2009: 117).

**3.7** Thus early on settler leaders became used to running their own affairs with relative disregard for the Crown, a situation that was not reversed by the Restoration. Notwithstanding this autonomy however, many of the conflicts engendered by the Civil War were reproduced in the colonies, indicating the underlying shared universe of politico-religious ideas and debates (Elliott 2006: 147).

**3.8** Secondly, there was a diversity of bases for colonial settlement and self-government. The original English colonies were established, and sometimes re-established and reincorporated, through a variety of charters issued either by the king or the king and parliament together. These were issued to enterprising individuals or small groups, chartered companies, or held directly by the Crown and administered by an appointed governor. Thus the intentions behind the establishment of these colonies were varied, although the predominant motives, in varying ratios, concerned the pursuit of economic profit and establishing denominationally based communities free from religious persecution. Combined with a formative condition of detachment from the metropole, the result was a variety of systems of *in situ* administration. Early assemblies, with relatively extensive franchises compared to England, were established in Virginia (1619) and Bermuda (1620) to help regulate public order, ease administration, and raise needed taxes. Unlike the viceroalties of New Spain, the British colonies routinely institutionalised representative assemblies, a move made more likely by the fact that 'voting was an established feature of joint stock companies, and was therefore likely to be transferred with relative ease to colonial settlements operating under company charters' (Elliott 2006: 135). In the long run this patchwork impulse towards systems of self-government yielded such robust and varied results that when revolution arrived, the framers of the new constitution struggled mightily to get agreement on an overarching system from the states of the former colonies jealously guarding their own systems and interests (Greene 2006).

## **Revolutions**

**3.9** By 'revolutions' I mean not just the events themselves, but the wider ideological context that led to them. I would also stress that the old European regime had been a 'dual' regime in which authority and legitimacy were mutually invested in both civil and ecclesiastical powers. Therefore the decline of the old regime needs to be understood as taking place in two major phases: first the Reformation and the fragmentation of the centralised authority of the Catholic Church, and then in the sequence of revolutions that either toppled, circumscribed, or abandoned monarchical authority. Because of this two-stage process, the narrative of the formation of modern nations inevitably involves a 'proto' stage (e.g. Breuilly 2001: 34-35) in which radical protestant reform movements prefigure demotic, if not truly democratic, aspects of later nation formation (cf. Gorski 2000). The late historian Martin Malia has magnificently traced the evolution of major political revolutions, originating in and radiating out of Europe, creating the modern world in the process (2006, see also Kooster 2009). Between an initial proto-phase of religiously formed revolutions bound up with the Reformation (e.g. Hussites in Bohemia, Lutherans in Germany, Huguenots in France), and a final phase of secular and socialist revolutions that characterised the Twentieth Century, he locates the 'classic Atlantic revolutions' (Malia 2006: Part II), namely in England/Britain 1640-1688, the British North American colonies 1776-1787, and France 1789-1799. Together, in their interconnections and divergences, these define the arc of modern nation formation in the North Atlantic interaction sphere.

**3.10** The 'English' (but more broadly British) revolution of the Seventeenth Century must be considered first because of the way it conditioned the revolution in the British colonies. This was a piecemeal and incomplete affair. First a Civil War (1641-1651) led to the replacement of monarchy by a commonwealth (1649-1653) and then Protectorate (1653-1659) under Cromwell, then monarchy was restored (1660), and finally the kingly lineage was changed in the Glorious Revolution (1688), bringing in the properly Protestant House of Hanover, and guaranteeing Parliament's powers in relation to the monarchy. It was a struggle conducted within, rather than against, the horizons of religion and monarchy (apart from the anomaly of the Cromwellian interregnum). It asserted the freedom of confessional groups, and of Parliament, from royal interference, but it did this in terms of an imagined re-assertion of traditional liberties that had been abused. This was revolution understood by most of the actors involved not as fundamental change, but as a return to the proper order of things; and a defence of the traditional liberties not of individual persons, but of institutions, of churches and parliaments (Malia 2006: 158-160; 210-211).

**3.11** As already indicated, the colonising of British North America was shaped, both pragmatically and ideologically, by the effects of the English Civil War. But this did not mean a rejection of the British monarchical system, indeed, there were strong royalist traditions in the vernacular culture of the colonies well into the Eighteenth Century (McConville 2006). The tensions that led to the War of Independence were, very much as in that previous revolution, couched as a defence of traditional English liberties against unwarranted trespasses, although now the source of those incursions was the British Parliament itself, viewed as corrupt, effete and arrogant, rather than the Crown. The king was seen as failing to provide a check on this parliamentary abuse of power, not as the main impetus behind it. General commitment to monarchy only collapsed during the decade leading up to 1776, as pressures from the metropole to pay new taxes to help offset the costs the Seven Years War intensified. Then the full revolutionary ideology took shape, often expressing almost paranoid fears of a conspiracy in Parliament to destroy traditional liberties, and taking that final, often reluctant step toward full rejection of the monarchical system (Bailyn 1992). As Malia wryly notes:

Ideologically, the Americans began their struggle in the long afterglow of 1688—that is, as an attempt to defend their historic rights as Englishmen. But they ended it, both literally and figuratively, on the eve of 1789—that is, with a citizen's republic, that the French were then

readying to radicalise and universalize further still (2006: 163).

**3.12** This 'overshooting of the mark' was due to the unique combination of a distinctively European, and English/British, ideological struggle over the nature of sovereignty, playing out in the colonial context of relative distance and autonomy from the homeland. The ideological repertoire was largely the same, but the old regime itself was materially and institutionally remote, and practically supplanted by the colonial social networks and forms of government that developed in the previous 150 years, and provided an organisational infrastructure for political action (Malia 2006: 177). In this context it was easier, and made more sense, to make a full break and begin anew.

**3.13** If the Seven Years War triggered conflicts that ultimately led to American Independence, and spelled the end of France's American empire, France's retaliatory support for the American War of Independence led its monarchy to bankruptcy, and set the stage for its revolution (see Anderson 2000). If the great cry of the American Revolution was for the defence of 'liberty', now understood as the liberty of persons bearing rights, and not just those of institutions as in the English Revolution, the central cry of the French Revolution was for 'equality'. Malia argues that whereas the American patriot elites were rebelling against a remote but overweening political authority infringing on liberties, the French ones were rebelling against 'a legally privileged social stratum, the hereditary nobility, indeed against the whole starkly hierarchical estate system' (2006:210). Where the American revolutionaries experienced a degree of prejudice from the metropole toward their relatively unsophisticated colonial habitus and manners, the French revolutionaries experienced an acute dissonance, when despite high degrees of education and worldly experience, they were disbarred by birth from the social status they felt they deserved. Thus 'equality' was their solution.

**3.14** Beneath these individual political crises, each with its specific circumstances, lies a more general North Atlantic-European crisis of the Old Regime. Despite their ideological, institutional, and social structural difference, these three Revolutions were socially intertwined. Let me stress three points.

**3.15** First, it is a truism that the period in question was shaped by Enlightenment thought embodied in widely read and debated works by those such as Locke, Harrington, Hume, and Rousseau. To wit: 'The Virginian planter, Landon Carter, inherited from his father the 1700 folio edition of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and his annotations show him quite prepared to engage in debate with "this great man"' (Elliott 2006: 332). This discursive field had material underpinnings. Robert Wuthnow has argued that by the mid-Seventeenth Century mercantilist strategies had become well-established and stabilised in Europe, stimulating the growth of much larger state bureaucracies, particularly in Britain, France and Prussia. This in turn provided institutional support and livelihoods for the social stratum of 'public officials, administrators, parliamentary representatives, courtiers, lawyers, professionals, military officers, men and women of leisure, university faculty, and in some cases clergy associated with the hierarchies of the state' (1989: 312), who were key in promoting the growth of publishing and a public sphere for the exchange of ideas. And these yielded intellectual, diplomatic and social networks that spanned British and French societies. Thus the very dynamic of interstate competition that drove the dynasties of Britain and France across the Atlantic in search of wealth, and into costly and debilitating imperial wars, was also generating the social conditions for a ferment of ideas that would end up challenging monarchical political authority and legitimacy, in different ways, in both countries.

**3.16** Second, the neo-classical ideas informing this period had pre-enlightenment roots in the Renaissance Florence, where Machiavelli and his lesser contemporaries articulated ideas of republicanism, patriotism, civic virtue, and the need to balance powers, that were rearticulated through influential figures such as James Harrington (Pocock 2003, Viroli 1995). Thus a set of ideas originally formulated in the context of the specific problems of mercantile city-states dominated by powerful families, a kind of polity that existed in the interstices of much larger dynastic states that dominated Europe, eventually found fuller application when some of those dynastic states expanded into over-extended, over-seas empires, and groups within them interpreted their own situations as conditions of illegitimate domination.

**3.17** Finally, the traffics in ideas, key figures, and peoples, were transatlantic, and fed into the growing phenomenon of 'public opinion' among literate urban classes. The critique of government corruption articulated by the British American colonists had its corollary in the similar contemporary critiques made by John Wilkes as a Member of Parliament in England (Bailyn 1992: 110-112). It is not just that the printed word diffused ideas throughout the colonies and across the Atlantic, but the persons who used those ideas and words themselves most effectively in many cases travelled back and forth, as in the journeys of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Marquis de La Fayette, and Thomas Paine. More generally soldiers, sailors, merchants and government officials, routinely traversed the Atlantic, which both separated and connected the two shores. Politically discontent Europeans took great interest in American events, and French radicals specifically debated the merits of the American system and its various state constitutions in the years leading up to the 1789 (Palmer 1959: 326). As R. R. Palmer observed:

This growth of communication was obviously one of the fundamental preconditions to the whole revolutionary era. It had enabled the Thirteen Colonies to stage a collective resistance to England, it now made America and Europe feel together, and it undermined, in Europe, the whole idea of government as a kind of private occupation of limited governmental circles (1959: 243).

### ***Diverse Communities***

**3.18** If empires and revolutions provide the bolder strokes in this picture, it is necessary to say something also about a range of other kinds of community, which further elaborated the universe of comparison. Narrowing in particularly on British North America at this point, I consider the roles of Indians, slaves, Protestants and pirates, as foils for communal imaginings.



**3.19** The symbolic use of indigenous peoples of the Americas in European social and political thought, most famously in Rousseau's image of the 'noble savage', is well known. But there is a further question about the more direct impact of actual social encounters between Indians and Europeans. By far the most significant native group for early colonial North America was the Iroquois. This loose and sometimes factious 'confederacy' of linguistically related matrilineal groups, the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onandagas, Cayugas and Senecas, often called 'the Five Nations', was located in what became upstate New York, west of the Hudson River and south of Lake Ontario. Probably formed to reduce warfare and conflict between the groups in the 100 years before European contact, the confederacy evolved from a cluster of horticultural and hunting groups, into a militarised intermediary of the beaver fur trade, first with the Dutch and then the English. They made alliances with the Europeans, waged war on their Indian neighbours to capture hunting territories and pelts, and provided a buffer toward the French and their Algonquin allies to the north. For a period they were a force to be reckoned with, but the different 'nations' made conflicting and shifting alliances during French and Indian Wars and the American War of Independence, ultimately fragmenting the confederacy (see Anderson 2000: 11-32, White 1991, Richter and Merrell 1987).

**3.20** A lore has developed that the Iroquois commanded a powerful indigenous empire, and that their notions of government significantly influenced the constitutional ideas of the founders of the United States. Reinvigorated in the 1980s and 1990s, the 'Iroquois influence thesis' has been debated and effectively criticised (Johansen 1990, Tooker 1988, Levy 1996). While there was diplomatic contact between the Iroquois and figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, among others, these seem to have largely concerned the pragmatics of power relations on the frontier, and any admiration for the vigour and liberty of the Iroquois, as representatives of indigenous Americans more generally, appears to have been mixed with a clear sense of the ultimate superiority of European ways. But while the Iroquois had minimal influence on American constitutional thought, that is not to say they had no symbolic significance for the colonists, radicals and founders. Linda Colley (1992: 132-145) has highlighted the British artistic convention around the time of the American Revolution, of representing 'America', i.e. the British American colonists as a constituent part of the British Empire, as a romanticised Indian princess:

The main reason why an American Indian was used to symbolise the Thirteen Colonies was, of course, that their white inhabitants had yet to evolve a recognisable and autonomous identity of their own ... On the one hand, it summoned up the idea of a noble savage and was therefore well suited to those Britons who wanted to idealise America as a second Eden, a haven untouched by the corruption and luxury of the Old World. On the other hand, the image of an American Indian carried with it also an element of menace, and this I suspect was often deliberate. Well-informed Britons at this time were not unaware that imperial dominion might in the future shift from their own small island to the massive continent inhabited by their American colonists. Dixon's [the artist's] Indian princess carries a bow and arrows. Far more than her sisters in empire, even Britannia, whose spear rests casually beside her, she is a warrior, a possible threat (Ibid: 134-135). (See Figure 5)



**Figure 5.** John Dixon's *The Oracle*. Representing Britannia, Hibernia, Scotia and America. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

**3.21** Perhaps it is in this context that we should interpret that famous 'Boston Tea Party' (1773), in which the rebellious, tax-rejecting colonists dressed up as Mohawks when they boarded the ships and threw the cargo overboard. Though it may have obscured individual identities, from the beginning the disguise appears to have fooled no-one, and cast no blame on the Mohawks themselves. It may be that these colonists were embracing that threatening identity, and asserting their rough-hewn liberty, by deploying a commonly understood symbolic language.

**3.22** If the American Indian could provide a symbol of liberty, the American slave clearly could not. But slaves, despite their material subjugation, were nonetheless symbolically relevant in, and in a way constitutive of, the discourse of American independence. The manifest contradiction of a slave-holding society declaring that 'all men are created equal' is often remarked upon. Francois Furstenberg (2003) has argued that what has been missed here is a set of ideas prevalent at the time that viewed freedom not simply as a birthright, but as something that had to be asserted and earned through active resistance, and those that fail to adequately resist, such as the African slaves, in effect endorsed their subjugated status. Beginning with a statement that 'nations are as free as they deserved to be', attributed to Samuel Adams by Benjamin Rush, reflecting on the heady days of revolution in correspondence with John Adams in 1812, Furstenberg explores a neglected context of the term 'slavery'. He points out that at the time it was commonly used to describe any threats to freedom, not simply the case of humans treated as chattels. Thus resistance to British parliamentary authority was repeatedly couched as a rejection of 'enslavement' (and this usage interpenetrated with protestant fears and references to 'popish slavery'). This usage no doubt arose partly out of a heightened rhetoric that sought to legitimate active, violent resistance, and glorify personal sacrifice in the revolutionary cause (e.g. Patrick Henry's 'give me liberty or give me death'). And it again underscores the distinction made earlier between a French revolutionary discourse that stressed a levelling equality, and an American one that sought in the first instance to defend existing liberty, a difference that tends to get elided in historical retrospect. In the popular imagination of the time, the argument was not that slavery was wrong (though many believed this), but that 'we will not be slaves' (to echo *Rule Britannia*), and the existence of slaves within the society provided a concrete point of negative comparison, not just a moral embarrassment, as we might assume it should today (see also Bailyn 1992: 232-246).

**3.23** If Indians and slaves provided foils for the identities of the British colonists in North America, so did the numerous, mainly Protestant religious communities they imported with them from eastern shores. The very founding of the colonies was in part as a series of regional, religiously-based sub-societies: Anglicans in Virginia, Congregationalists in New England, Quakers in Pennsylvania, a small community of Catholics in Maryland, with Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, Mennonites and others flowing into the mix. Original aspirations towards religiously pure communities, with a few exceptions, gave way to the sheer force of religiously diverse in-migration, resulting in a dynamic religious pluralism, underwritten by a shared culture of bible-focused Christianity. And this diversity, combined with the memory of civil strife caused by churches with too much worldly power, and a general drift towards deism among some of the more educated, inhibited the establishment of any overarching orthodoxy in the colonies (Elliott 2006: Ch. 5). Instead, the religious movement called 'The Great Awakening' led by ministers such as Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) generated an ecumenical religious culture that undergirded this sectarian diversity (Johnson 1997: 119). Thus, while the British colonies by the mid-1700s lacked integrated religious identities and institutions that might serve to ideologically organise them and differentiate them from their peers in the metropole, by the same token, they had before them repeated examples of efforts to imagine and bring into being new, intentional communities, and an increasingly shared religious idiom of thought, that served to underwrite a common political language. The business of imagining and founding communities (and in figures such as the entrepreneurial founder of Quaker Pennsylvania, William Penn, it was a kind of 'business') was something the Americans had become uniquely accustomed to. By the time of the revolution, they had had considerable practice.

**3.24** We also need to remember that sea-going was itself a way of life, whether based on the exploitation of sea resources such as cod and whale (Bolster 2008), or the more general role of the sea as a mode of traffic for land-derived commodities and people, both slave and free. Sailing ships, and sea-going livelihoods, with their peculiar and heavy demands on time, skill and labour, provided a kind of alternate or sub-society, linked to, and linking, the societies on the western and eastern shores of the Atlantic. The 'impressing' of vagabonds into service in the growing English/British navy, often under dictatorial naval commanders, created a particularly intense situation of dependency and resentment among many crews (Hill 1996: 162-176). Linebaugh and Rediker have argued that:

Sailors were prime movers in the cycle of rebellion, especially in North America, where they helped to secure numerous victories for the movement against Great Britain between 1765 and 1776. They led a series of riots against impressments beginning in the 1740s, moving Thomas Paine (in *Common Sense*) and Thomas Jefferson (in the Declaration of Independence) to list that practice as a major grievance. Their militancy in port grew out of their daily work experience at sea, which combined coordinated cooperation with daring initiative. Sailors engaged on board ship in collective struggles over food, pay, work, and discipline, and they brought to the ports a militant attitude towards arbitrary and excessive authority, and empathy for the troubles of others, and a willingness to cooperate for the sake of self-defense (2000: 214).

**3.25** These authors further suggest that the most developed expression of the sailor's militancy and spirit of independence is found in the later variants of piracy in the North Atlantic. Originally growing out of privateers such as Francis Drake, empowered by the English Crown to prey upon the Spanish navy and the riches it extracted from the new world, by the early Eighteenth Century, with the British navy in ascendancy, pirate ships no longer found favour as agents of the British state, and instead went into business for themselves. Linebaugh and Rediker (see also Rediker 1987) maintain that the 'pirate ship was democratic in an undemocratic age' (Ibid.: 162), with crews enjoying a large hand in decision making, distribution of spoils, and ultimately the legitimation of the captain's authority, which only went unquestioned in the heat of chase and battle. These arguments suffer from a somewhat romanticised view of pirates as proto-proletarians in a struggle against early capitalism, but the facts that sailors could be volatile in relation to the larger social order, and that ship-board life provided a unique natural laboratory for experiments in both harsh domination and collective self-determination, is well documented.

**3.26** In this section I have been trying to convey, not so much 'influences' on the formation of the idea of

the modern nation, as a general atmosphere of social contrasts, possibilities, and opportunities, that I suggest served to quicken the imagination. Anderson's account of the 'creole pioneers' first imaginings of nationhood places great emphasis on their sense of exclusion from opportunities in the metropole and the wider empire, due to their diminished status as colonials (1991: 57-58). And this was certainly the case in the American colonies where, for instance, as an able soldier and commander, George Washington might have gone on to an imperial military career in the British Army, if not for the condescending attitude towards colonial army officers held by the leaders of the British Army in London (Johnson 1997: 132-133). To this notion of structural barriers that encouraged the development of a distinctive, oppositional national identity, I am trying to add a sense of an encompassing environment, which at every turn stimulated the imagination in response to such frustrations.

## Conclusion

**4.1** I have argued that the origins of modern nationalism should be explained, not as an endogenous transformation of one or a few societies in western Europe, which then radiates out from that core, but instead as emerging from an historically specific 'interaction sphere' that existed around the North Atlantic during the long Eighteenth Century. The idea of the interaction sphere is meant to guide our attention away from named social units—nations, states, peoples—and toward overarching patterns of relations and exchanges among them. This first step helps us see, with Tilly, the importance of conflict-laden interactions between social units in driving social change, and the error of allowing individual states and societies to become autonomous protagonists in the drama of social transformation. There are many different orders of things interacting in this account: empires, revolutions, sub-societies, states, ideologies, and ideologues, to name a few. What makes any particular one salient is how it fits into a larger pattern of explanation.

**4.2** Two processes have been central in my account of this interaction sphere. First, expanding communication. By this I have meant not just the spread of literacy and printed matter (Anderson 1991) and the exchange of ideas (Deutsch 1953) so often emphasised, but communication in its broader sense of movement and the means of movement. Just as, at a later point, the building of roads was bound up with the building of nations (Weber 1976: 195-220), in the period in question, oceanic travel routes provided the sinews along which ideas moved, ideas which both forged new nations, and unhinged monarchical empires. Second, changing terms of political authority and legitimacy. To understand how modern nations emerged, we have to understand how Britain lost its American colonies, and France lost its aristocracy. These are two sides of the same process, in which existing structures of authority and legitimacy fail, and new ones, based on still forming notions of a self-governing people, step into the breach. It is this new conception of authority and legitimation, whether conceived as a 'liberal demos' or an 'organic ethnos' (Mann 2005: 55-69), that defines the modern nation, and has inspired nationalist movements ever since (cf. Armitage 2007).

**4.3** Finally, the narrative image here is not one of a bounded plot that has a beginning, middle and end. Instead there is a central axis of a larger transition, the causes of which trail of into the past, and the consequences of which continue to the present. Although the American Revolution stands at the centre of my story, this is not to endow the British colonists of North America with exceptional historical agency, nor would I bestow that role on the French revolutionaries who stand near the centre as well. In all the Atlantic revolutions, events tended to spin out of control, leading to collective actions that were far beyond and different from what those involved initially envisioned. These revolutions are better imagined as the epicentres of a large, transformative historical process in which events beyond anyone's ultimate control led to profound political innovation. But that innovation, however contingent in the first instance, became persistent, and provided a model for future social and political evolution, precisely because it tended to endow these new political systems with greater capacities to generate and mobilise social power, gradually spelling the decline of the older model of imperial polity, in the Americas, back in Europe, and across the world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article engages with approaches that regard nationalism as an aspect of the formation of modernity, leaving aside approaches that treat it as having origins in historically deeper processes of ethnicity.

<sup>2</sup> The maps used in this article were all obtained online from the Perry-Casteneda Library Map Collection: <<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/world.html>>

<sup>3</sup> For reasons of space I have not tried to address the Haitian Revolution, which was also a significant though less consequential part of this nexus of eighteenth-century Atlantic revolutions. See Blackburn (2006).

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