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'Tis *not* time to part! French historians¹ of the American Revolution: An interview² with Bernard Cottret³

Ghislain Potriquet

Ghislain Potriquet: Would you please outline your academic background and university career?

Bernard Cottret: I was a boarder at the *lycée*⁴ Chaptal in Paris for two years in 1969-1971; my family lived in Morocco at the time. I rediscovered Paris, where I had spent the first few years of my life between Notre-Dame and Saint-Germain-des-Prés. May 68 was still on the minds of all my fellow students though my half provincial, half post-colonial upbringing had kept me away from the turmoil. I could never become an acceptable, convincing left-wing radical, though I tried on several occasions. I attended a *classe préparatoire aux grandes écoles*⁵. We were taught all sorts of subjects there: from French literature and philosophy to history and geography, along with English and German, of course. Then, I was admitted to the *École Normale Supérieure de Saint-Cloud*⁶. I passed the *agrégation*⁷ in English in 1976. The following year, I fulfilled my military obligation as a linguist and interpreter. I left the army as a second lieutenant in the French reserve. I then taught in a high school for a few years and in 1981, I was appointed Assistant professor at the Sorbonne (*Université Paris IV*), the year Mitterrand was elected President of the French Republic (a mere coincidence!).

I published a few books and articles on English history and completed a PhD on Lord Bolingbroke, one of the founders of early-modern Toryism in the eighteenth century and one of the first exponents of the “one-country” tradition that was later taken up by Disraeli. In 1988, I was promoted to a full professorship at the *Université Lille III*. In 1992, I was asked to head a multidisciplinary department of humanities in a new

university, the *Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin*, located 15 miles southwest of Paris. I worked there until 2011, when I retired with relief to live in the country.

GP: What were your initial research interests?

BC: Earlier on, while working on my Master's dissertation devoted to a talented Irish bishop and his views of Providence (what a topic!), I developed an interest in comparative history. I needed a topic that would bring together the histories of France and England in the early modern period; the immigration of French Protestants would let me examine comparatively the social questions raised by immigration over several centuries, including our own (that is, the difference between economic migrants and asylum seekers, also known as "refugees": this word was first used at that time...). But my idea was met with skepticism: in the 1970s, in the French academic system, "English studies" chiefly meant "English literature". I was told that the immigration of Huguenots to England would be suitable only if studied through novels. But since no such novels were available, I moved on to another topic: Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke proved an excellent choice, for he had authored a series of essays on history, politics and natural religion. Having made friends with Voltaire and Swift, who named his horse "Bolingbroke", the English viscount was acceptable for literary scholars. I spent some ten years of my life with his lordship; we got on well at the end, I liked his sense of humor and he was delighted to see that I could give a fair appraisal of his painful, irritating evolution from Tory to Jacobite, then from Jacobite to Patriot... not to mention his reputation as a rake and libertine!

However, when asked: "what is the subject of your thesis?" my answer would be adapted to the person who asked the question. I would tell historians like Robert Mandrou, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Lawrence Stone or Maurice Agulhon: "I am working on Huguenot migrations to England". They would understand my topic and its interest immediately. But when asked by somebody else, I would throw in, looking as convinced as I could: "Bolingbroke, Bolingbroke, of course"! In 1985, my study of the Huguenots in England came out as *Terre d'Exil*; three years later I defended my doctoral dissertation on Bolingbroke. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie chaired the very formal viva which took place in grand style at Nanterre University (*Université Paris X*), a few days before Christmas.

So from the late 1970s onward, things started to change: our English and American studies departments gradually opened to historians. André Kaspí and Élise Marienstras were pioneers in this regard. Many historians now work in departments of English studies (historians of the United States, in particular). I consider this to be a very positive evolution. Let me add that throughout my career, I have enjoyed an excellent relationship with other historians, regardless of their institutional, let alone their denominational, affiliations.

I believe that French historians of the British Isles or the United States are key cultural intermediaries in English departments. Conversant in two languages and histories, they are in a unique position to provide the French public with the conceptual tools necessary for the understanding of distinct cultures. And the history of English-speaking countries had now become fully integrated to university curricula. I use "history", instead of the French word "*civilisation*"⁸ which might as

well refer to cultural studies. I keep repeating that “civilization should also be civilized”; most of my colleagues now seem to agree!

I would add that a book by a French historian on a given topic in English history will necessarily be different from a book written by an English historian on the same subject. And this is a very good thing! We need such historians: they make it possible for distinct publics to communicate across languages and cultures. Also, French publishers will tell you that the translation of books authored by English or American historians do not necessarily “meet their public” as they put it, tongue-in-cheek.

GP: How does your history of the American Revolution (*La Révolution américaine*) relate to your previous books on Calvin and the Reformation?

BC: My relationship to Protestant history is quite complex. I have written a bestselling biography of John Calvin which was translated into several languages, including English of course, but I have never believed there was such a thing as “Protestant” or, for that matter, “Catholic history”. History should always remain objective and secular in its approach. I wrote my history of the American Revolution at a time when I distanced myself from the intolerable bigotry that prevailed among some Protestants. As I once said to an evangelical friend: Marx has freed me from religion and Calvin has liberated me from Marx.

My interest in Protestantism as a scholarly topic was also linked to the tercentennial anniversary of the Edict of Nantes. It was a stimulating intellectual context. How does one bring a civil war to an end? In the 1990s, this question was highly topical: a civil war was tearing apart Yugoslavia, while South Africans were working to rebuild their country after decades of apartheid. I had and still have the deepest admiration for Mandela and even went to Cape Town for a short visit at the time.

Finally, I was drawn back to English and American history at the *Université Versailles Saint-Quentin* where I taught the history of the British Isles (or should we call it the “Atlantic archipelago” to please our Irish friends?). So, the idea of a new history of the American Revolution for a French public was regarded as a profitable investment by my publisher, who long ago convinced me that time is money. This was not my initial idea though. I intended to write a biography of Benjamin Franklin, the most popular American in eighteenth-century France. But my publisher suggested that I expand the scope of my study, which I did.

GP: The years 2002-2003 saw French and American relations deteriorate dramatically. What was it like to be a French historian of the United States then?

BC: It was difficult. I was then working on a project with Dale Van Kley and other American colleagues in Ohio, but it aborted because of the Iraq war, though we managed in due time to publish two collections of essays. I took this as a personal failure. Our idea was to study American and French patriotism in a comparative perspective.

By some coincidence, my *Révolution américaine* opens on a discussion of France and American rivalries, which are rooted in their very revolutions (Cottret, 2003, 10-11). Each country sees itself endowed with a universal, emancipatory mission, thereby validating its claim to exceptionalism, “*l'exception française*” as we call it. One cannot understand the tumultuous history of French and American relations without bearing in mind their profound kinship and common naivety.

A historian is a medium of sorts: he or she is sensitive to present events and seeks to understand the causes of such events in the past. But a historian is anchored in their time. My *Révolution américaine* brought answers to questions that were being raised as I was finishing the book and as people read it. Isn't that extraordinary?

GP: Did you use your position of authority – as a historian of Protestantism – to assert the secular dimension of the American Revolution?

BC: Yes, absolutely. French readers needed to understand this. The French perceive the United States as a country imbued with religion; they see it everywhere! Religion has a strong civic dimension in the United States; the two should not be opposed while they have been at loggerheads in French *laïcité*. I was once in South Carolina on the fourth of July. A good illustration is when Americans put their right hand on their heart when taking the oath of allegiance or singing the Star-Spangled Banner. I have paid tribute to the American Revolution as a French patriot in my *Révolution américaine*.

GP: Does writing about American history in French give you a certain liberty? Does language create a safe distance between historians and their topics?

BC: Yes, indeed. And I would add that a foreign historian should not feel compelled to write in English. One should use one's native language as much as possible. In international conferences, broken English (called by some "Globish") is a jargon leading up to misunderstandings and poor communication (Brussels English as spoken in the Eurozone is appalling). Multilingual comprehension⁹ should be a viable alternative for Europeans, if they really believe in Europe as a pluralistic association. In many instances, I have seen how English, when used indiscriminately, hampered communication and impoverished debates.

GP: What reception would get your *Révolution américaine* if translated into English?

BC: I am not sure. It all depends on the public. American readers might be interested in my *Révolution américaine*, but I would ask the publisher for the permission to rewrite some passages, as I did for the *Calvin*, when I stressed for example that Calvin was "no televangelist". This was a *bon mot*, a witticism, of course, but it conveyed my meaning: unlike his boisterous opponents, Calvin had a discreet, unobtrusive personality; he was far too distinguished not to resent all unnecessary, undue exuberance... A translator is not at liberty to do this, while in fact it is a real necessity: one should adapt one's style to the public. This is precisely what I did when my *Calvin* was translated into English and published in the United States: I rewrote whole passages for the American reader.

GP: Your *Révolution américaine* has a bibliographical essay in its appendix. All references are English-language references. Why? Is it intended for "angliciste"¹⁰ students who can read in English?

BC: Yes, of course. I would add that today, any French reader with an interest in the history of an English-speaking country has a reading knowledge of English. This may be taken for granted. This was not the case some fifty years ago.

GP: Condorcet, Abbé Raynal and Tocqueville all wrote about the American Revolution. Have such illustrious figures discouraged or encouraged French historians to write other histories of the American Revolution?

BC: They have encouraged French historians to write about the American Revolution, undeniably so. You mentioned Tocqueville: I am a very keen Tocqueville reader.

Alexis de Tocqueville was a nineteenth-century French aristocrat who witnessed the emergence of democracy in the United States and France, a transformation that he regarded as inevitable and damaging for his own status. As a member of the French aristocracy, he would have much to lose. There is a sense of tragic inevitability in his writings. But what I admire most about Tocqueville is the way he gets involved: he, as a subject, is involved in his writings, yet he does not write about himself. He is a writer who dares to think. He is a writer who makes you think. Good history is precisely this: it makes you think. And this is how our two Revolutions may be connected: through the writings of people like Alexis de Tocqueville.

GP: Which brings me to my central question: have French historians of the American Revolution long lived under the shadow of the French Revolution? In other words, may we hold the view that the French historiography of the American Revolution has had to emancipate itself from the French Revolution? Have French historians of the American Revolution succeeded in doing so?

BC: It has been a long process and I still believe that the two revolutions are very much connected. As a historian, I turn to great authors for guidance. Alexis de Tocqueville is one of them, Karl Marx is another. From a historiographical viewpoint, Marx is the opposite of Tocqueville. Historians have turned to Marx to escape Tocqueville and vice versa. I read them both.

I read Marx's works as unfinished histories. Conversely, many people have turned to Marx for answers, wishing to know how history would unfold. But Marx never meant to predict the future! So I read both Marx and Tocqueville, because they give complementary explanations of the two revolutions. They are two intellectual giants who lived in the same century and were equally fascinated by England and the United States.

The problem is that French historians have long privileged Marx over Tocqueville and they have based their works on an erroneous interpretation of Marx, as E. P. Thompson pointed out in his *Poverty of Theory*. In spite of its remarkable historical precision and acumen, the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution, propagated by the Communist post-war generation owes more to Robespierre than to Marx. Marx never was a Jacobin. He even blamed the 1871 *Communards* for attempting to reenact the French Revolution! Marx would have probably sided with Furet in the raging controversy of the 1970s.

One should always make a clear distinction between Marx and Marxism. Marx is a complex, fascinating figure, while Marxism is a boring, mechanistic, autocratic, totalitarian caricature. Marx is the author of a complex, unfinished body of writings, which does not boil down to the *Communist Manifesto*. And few people realize that Marx was actually fascinated by the American Civil War and the Reconstruction. As a journalist, he was at first not quite convinced by Abraham Lincoln, whom he found too moderate; but after a few months he realized that Lincoln was a methodical, incredibly efficient politician. For him, these events were of equal significance to the revolutions of the late eighteenth century. He saw the American Civil War as a conflict between two modes of production: slavery and paid labor. Oddly enough, Marx's writings on the American Civil war are very difficult to find in French as are most of his press articles on India and other topics, in spite of their great interest.

GP: Did French historians of the two revolutions attempt to work together?

BC: Yes, there were such attempts; but given the prevalence of the French brand of Marxism, these initial attempts failed. In 1955, Robert Palmer and his French colleague Albert Godechot defended the idea of an “Atlantic Revolution” in a joint paper presented at the tenth International Congress of Historical Sciences held in Rome. This infuriated Albert Soboul, who saw it as an attempted American takeover of the French Revolution. Palmer’s book even failed to get translated into French, because it was perceived as overtly “atlantiste”, that is to say, written with a strong pro-American bias. I find such debates completely irrelevant. It is simply futile to try to substitute one revolution for the other!

GP: What impact, if any, did the bicentennial anniversary of the Declaration of Independence have in France? Did it create an opportunity for French historians of the United States to become more visible?

BC: Yes, a number of academic events were organized. But French historians of the United States became more visible in French academia only.

GP: What role did Élise Marienstras play in this process? Her 1976 book entitled *Les Mythes Fondateurs*¹¹ was the first history of the American Revolution to be published for a long time, wasn't it?

BC: Yes, indeed. Élise Marienstras’s contribution in this process was very important. Her book studies the nation-building process underway at the time of the American Revolution. Her approach, I would say, is linked to our common experience of decolonization. We are a generation of historians who witnessed the dislocation of the French colonial empire, the war with Algeria and the birth of new nations carved out of this empire. This is where Marienstras’s interest for nationalism and nation-building comes from. The American Revolution also marked the end of a first colonial empire.

GP: In the mid-1970s and 80s, two French historians, André Kaspi and Bernard Vincent, compiled readers on American colonial history leading up to the Revolution. These readers were published in France, in English. May we infer from this that the American Revolution had become part of most “angliciste” curricula in French universities?

BC: Yes, absolutely. American history had earned its place among English studies and its ascendance was not over. Kaspi and Vincent published very good books. Unfortunately, some publications were discontinued. These books should have been assigned systematically at the undergraduate level. One interesting thing about Kaspi’s book is that its original title *L’Indépendance américaine* became *La Révolution américaine* in its latest paperback edition. For the politically correct *élite*, the first title – “American Independence” – suggested a conservative view of the American Revolution and it needed to be replaced with “the American Revolution”, which supposedly sounds more radical. But the book contents remained unchanged!

GP: Did the bicentennial of the French Revolution create an opportunity for French historians of the two revolutions to work together?

BC: No, but it did contribute to the emancipation of the American Revolution as an academic topic. It did so unexpectedly. The commemoration of the French Revolution by the French Left, while it irritated Mrs. Thatcher, turned this historical event into a thing of the past. The French Revolution has since disappeared almost totally from political debates. The French Left, in particular, seems uncomfortable with it, because of its *laïcité* or secularism¹², a topic that has now become a catch-word for the far-

right “*Front National*” party. One may say that the French Revolution has been defeated by its most vocal, sectarian supporters. This is very unfortunate. Americans have a quite different approach to their revolution, whose values are claimed by Democrats and Republicans alike. This is how, in the late 1980s, revolutions, French and American, became safer topics for French historians.

GP: One year before the bicentennial anniversary of the French Revolution, French philosopher Georges Gusdorf published a comparative history of the two revolutions: *Les Révolutions de France et d'Amérique : de la violence à la sagesse*¹³. As the title suggests, Gusdorf is very critical of the French Revolution and sees no connection with the American one. Did Gusdorf's book mark a turning point in the French historiography of the American Revolution? How much influence did it have?

BC: A very limited influence. Gusdorf had gone through many trials in his life and felt uncomfortable with the history of his country as a result. He was a prisoner of war during the Second World War, an ordeal from which he never recovered completely. His history of the two revolutions is too personal; it lacks a critical distance. This is why the book has failed to have an impact on French historiography. Gusdorf is remembered for his intellectual history published in thirteen volumes; he remains a renowned historian of ideas.

GP: In 1991, French political scientist Denis Lacorne published a book entitled *L'invention de la République : le modèle américain*¹⁴, in which he devotes a chapter on the mutual influences of the French and American Revolutions. He underlines the complexity of such influences and concludes that many “transpositions and appropriations”¹⁵ actually occurred in those years (Lacorne, 1991, 169). Has Lacorne closed the debate?

BC: Yes, I believe he has. Yet the two revolutions cannot be separated from one another, something that Lacorne demonstrates in his book. I hold Lacorne to be one of the keenest observers of American politics. His works have found a limited echo among the more parochial French *anglicistes*, I find, because he is not an *angliciste* but a political scientist, who taught at “Sciences Po”¹⁶ for most of his career. This is how the very structure of French higher education leads to an unfortunate compartmentalization¹⁷ of academia. But one should always forgive one's colleagues, for “they know not what they do”!

GP: Your own *Révolution américaine* alternates American and British perceptions of the 1763-1787 period; Canada is also included in your analysis. In other words, your history of the American Revolution “brings the Empire back in”¹⁸. Are you indebted in any way to French historians of the American Revolution?

BC: I would say that my focus on the imperial dimension of the American Revolution comes from my training as a historian of Britain primarily. The thirteen colonies' decision to break away from Westminster had to be examined in its imperial context. Remember that there were alternatives to independence; the institutional arrangements that bound Scotland and Ireland to the Kingdom could have served as a model.

Unlike the French Revolution, the American Revolution occurred within an empire. This is a significant difference, but it does not mean that comparative approaches are irrelevant. American and French Revolutionists were animated by a same understanding of happiness. This was a novel idea in the eighteenth century. It would warrant further studies.

GP: In 1921, French historian Alphonse Aulard posited that John Locke fathered the French and American Revolutions (Aulard, 80, 1921). Aulard also believed that self-determination

for Alsace-Lorraine, as advocated by Woodrow Wilson, was a direct consequence of Locke's ascendancy over Americans (Ibid. 88). This evidences that in France, the American Revolution is a topic sensitive to its political and intellectual contexts. Are there any other equally sensitive American topics, where French historiography experienced considerable reorientation?

BC: You might find similar evolutions for the 1929 Great depression and Roosevelt's New Deal. The French historiography of these crucial events probably underwent noticeable variation in the second half of the twentieth century. The slave trade could be another sensitive topic, owing to its global dimension. As to the American Civil War, I doubt that it is a topic of much debate among French historians, because it lacks a direct equivalent in French history.

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NOTES

1. I define "French historians" as historians who can work in French and who have spent at least half of their academic careers in France
2. made on September 21, 2016, in Provins
3. Professor emeritus of British Studies, Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin
4. secondary school
5. post-secondary preparatory course
6. an institute for advanced studies training the French academic élite
7. a highly selective competitive examination in English

8. area studies. "*Civilisation américaine*" is the interdisciplinary field of study pertaining to the United States of America. It encompasses all the humanities but literature and linguistics, which have remained distinct disciplines in French university curricula.
 9. the ability to understand a foreign language, regardless of one's writing or speaking capabilities in it.
 10. An English major
 11. "The Founding Myths"
 12. separation of Church and State
 13. "The Revolutions of France and the United States: from Violence to Wisdom"
 14. The book title translates as "The Invention of the Republic: The American model"
 15. "Transposition" and "appropriation" have the same meanings in English and French.
 16. The Paris Institute of Political Studies
 17. The French higher education system makes a distinction between "universités" and "grandes écoles", "great schools", literally. Universités may not select their undergraduate students, while grandes écoles may. Besides, academic disciplines are divided into some 80 branches, called in French "sections". Hence, a historian of the United States may find a university position affiliated with section n.3 (institutional history), n.4 (political science) or n.11 (English-language studies) or 22 (history and area studies). For a complete list of sections, see <http://www.cpcnu.fr/en/listes-des-sections-cnu>. Site accessed October 1, 2016.
 18. A reference to a 1985 book edited by Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol. *Bringing the State Back In* has become a work of reference for the study of social movements.
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