Introduction

Pollmann, J.S.; Velde, H. te

CHAPTER 1

Civic Continuities in an Age of Revolutionary Change: Europe and the Americas, c.1750–1850

Judith Pollmann and Henk te Velde

Introduction[1]

On 5 March 1795, only weeks after the Batavian Revolution had ended the Ancien Régime in the United Provinces of the Netherlands, the citizens of the small Frisian town of Franeker organised a festive ceremony

J. Pollmann · H. te Velde (✉)
Institute for History, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands
e-mail: h.te.velde@hum.leidenuniv.nl

J. Pollmann
e-mail: j.pollmann@hum.leidenuniv.nl

to celebrate the reclosing of the city gates. Seven years earlier, in 1787, the Dutch stadholder had punished the town for its role in the so-called Patriot movement by ordering the removal of the gates, symbolically robbing the town of its traditional urban privileges. But now the stadholder had fled, and in the Republic a new regime was taking steps to implement a local version of the revolutionary agenda that had emerged in the French Revolution. At first sight, and judging by events in the political centre of The Hague, this involved a radical break with tradition. The new regime organised general elections, separated church and state, ended the exclusion of religious minorities from political life and aimed to restructure the Dutch state radically. Local privileges lost their meaning. Yet as the Franeker example shows, at local level, the Revolution simultaneously enabled a political agenda that was local and traditional, in which the right to have one's own gates signified the right to have one's own, local, jurisdiction.[2] Such appeals to the past were not just atavistic. Instead historical actors were mobilising continuities with the past because they thought that this was what change was or should be for them.

This book explores and compares the role of continuity in political processes and practices during the period of major political change that we know of as the Age of Revolutions, c. 1750–1850. It argues that the Age of Revolutions was enabled by different types of continuities, in Europe as well as the US and Latin America. We do so by shifting the perspective from political modernisation, with its exclusive attention for what was new and national, to the continued relevance of older, often local, practices in (post) revolutionary politics. Our aim in doing so is to highlight the role of local political traditions and practices in forging and enabling political change. The ten essays in this collection show that older practices were crucial both for political activism and the implementation of radical change, and thus played a significant role in political practice after 1800.

In the history of Europe and the Americas, the period around 1800 is seen as a period of massive transition and rupture. The 'Age of Revolutions' not only brought about decades of political crisis and international war but also signalled the emergence of the 'modern' nation-state and nationalism as well as the rise of mass media, new temporal regimes and, generally, the elusive phenomenon that we call 'modernity'. As Eric Hobsbawn put it in 1962, 'the "Age of Revolution" … forms the

---

[2] E.g. Wiebe Bergsma ed., *For uwz lân, wyv en bern: De patriottentijd in Friesland* (Leeuwarden: Fryske Akademy, 1987).

greatest transformation in human history since the remote times when men invented agriculture and metallurgy, writing, the city and the state. This revolution has transformed, and continues to transform, the entire world'.[3] By emphasising rupture and transformation as the hallmark of this period, Hobsbawm was able to bring economic developments in Britain and political developments on the European continent into analytical alignment. At about the same time, Robert Palmer published his influential two volumes on *The Age of the Democratic Revolution. A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800* (1959–1964). Such alternatives to the narrowly national approaches that had characterised most political history so far proved hugely influential and attractive not only because they allowed for comparisons but also because they had potential for alignment with the social sciences and discussions about modernity and with the internationalisation of the historical discipline. As such, they helped political historians to respond to critics who thought of political history as overly focussed on the contingent, the *événementiel* and the narrative.

Although the intense interest in 'revolutions' per se began to wane at the end of the 1970s, the notion of rupture was retained in the sudden turn around 1980 to the study of nationalism, another theme that could now be studied comparatively.[4] The nation-state was now presented as the main carrier of modernisation, and, although the new nationalism studies underlined the constructed nature of the nation, they paradoxically contributed to shift the focus of attention even more to the level of the nation-state. Such ideas chimed with arguments about the emergence of new attitudes to the past around 1800, such as those made by Reinhart Koselleck since the 1960s. Koselleck had argued that, at the end of the eighteenth century, Europeans had developed both a new awareness of the differences between past and present, which made it seem less likely

---

[3] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, 1962), 1.

[4] We discussed this development earlier, and specifically for the Dutch context in Judith Pollmann and Henk te Velde, 'New State, New Citizens? Political Change and Civic Continuities in the Low Countries, 1780–1830', *BMGN: Low Countries Historical Review* 133: 3 (2018), 4–23; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

that the past would simply repeat itself and an expectation that the future would bring continual change. As early as 1972 Hobsbawm had argued that the experience of unprecedented change, such as it had unfolded in the Age of Revolutions, had had its effect on the 'sense of the past'. The self-evident status and authority that the past had enjoyed, and that was associated with 'custom', was lost. In 1983, Hobsbawm argued that the new appeals to 'tradition' were suggesting coherence to mask the extent of discontinuity. This line of argument became extremely popular, not only among students of nationalism. It reappeared in the scholarship that began to chart 'transitions' from memory to history, or from 'milieux de mémoire' to 'lieux de mémoire'. Combined with the focus on the period around 1800 as a breaking point, this resulted in a persistent assumption that as the world of invented tradition and the nation emerged, the world of 'custom' and local politics withered and died.[5]

However, the scholars of Europe and North America who emphasised fissure were usually better equipped to highlight the new than analyse what had gone before. Social scientists and historians of modernity have assumed rather than proven that the rise of the new meant that existing modes of action, thought and practice simply became extinct, irrelevant or at least subordinate to these new modes. They have done little to test this assumption because they were interested in the new instead of the old and because institutional arrangements in the historical discipline have tended to discourage it. Precisely because it is believed that the West was made anew in the Age of Revolutions, most courses, handbooks and appointments focus either on the 'modern' or the 'premodern'; very few historians these days work equally far on both sides of the 1800 boundary.

This volume, by contrast, explores continuities between early modern and modern political cultures in Europe and the Americas. One reason to believe that it might be useful to do so is suggested by the scholarship on Latin America, which, as Jamie Sanders explains in this volume, has long been arguing that the Age of Revolutions left many existing power structures intact and that new bags often contained very old wine. Yet unlike some of that scholarship, our aim here is not to argue that, around

[5] Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (1979; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989); Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Social Function of the Past. Some Questions', *Past and Present* 55: 1 (1972), 3–17; and Judith Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800* (Oxford: UK Oxford University Press, 2017).

1800, people only innovated to remain the same, as the hero of Lampedusa's Leopard famously put it.[6] Neither is it to suggest, like Alexis de Tocqueville, that what revolutionary regimes offered was simply a variation on older political trends.[7] Rather, we want to highlight that major political change at the centre of the old and new polities that emerged in the Age of Revolutions, coexisted with, and was indeed enabled by, continuities at other levels, especially so in the localities. Political historians have often suggested that once the nation had made its modern appearance as the chief locus of politics, local governance became less important and so less interesting. This has obscured two basic but important factors in the forging of change: the force of habit, and the politics of place. When doing something out of habit, it requires less energy and effort, thereby freeing up room for experiments: 'because a lot of activity thus moves to the background of human consciousness through the process of habitualisation, a foreground opens up for deliberation and innovation'.[8] By the same mechanism, the continued existence of a traditional set of practices, frames and assumptions, allows for innovations to succeed, and deliberations to gain force, without a collapse of the social order. Even in a revolutionary situation, it is common to continue many practices (e.g. some of the rituals and practices of representative meetings) in order to retain some 'predictability' and to save energy for the real work of the revolution. While revolutionary regimes obviously made a big point of delivering change, and disturbing and replacing existing patterns, their political legitimacy was ultimately also dependent on the creation or maintenance of 'self-evident' habits, the self-evident role of local leadership, the ability to associate with public places, rituals and practices of existing significance and the ability to deliver a minimum of 'good governance' necessary to sustain a sense that life goes on. Without this ability to maintain 'business as usual', revolutionary regimes could not implement new agendas.

[6] Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, transl. Archibald Colquhoun, *The Leopard* (London: Vintage, 2005), from the original *Il Gattopardo* (Milan: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1958).

[7] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*. Jon Elster ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[8] Ton Otto and Poul Pedersen, 'Disentangling Traditions', in Ton Otto and Poul Pedersen eds., *Tradition and Agency: Tracing Cultural Continuity and Invention* (Santa Barbara: Aarhus University Press, 2005), 26.

Secondly, the implementation of changes desired by the centre depended on the interaction with local and regional communities. Historians of Germany have shown that however aggressive and violent regime change often was, and however radical the institutional overhaul and centralisation that followed, the new nation-states could only produce lasting reform by co-opting local support.[9] In order to overthrow the existing state of affairs and change society, new regimes had to rely on at least part of the citizenry and its local knowledge: not only its habits and customs of protesting and making themselves heard in their communities but also its ability to process, and engage with, the expectations of the new regime. Moreover, revolutionary regimes had to leave it up to local communities to run those things for which they simply did not have the manpower or the money, or which they chose not to politicise. It was local communities that needed to secure and maintain public space, feed the poor and clean the streets, regardless of the colour of the ruling regime. This created opportunities for newcomers on the political scene, but at the same time also allowed people to frame new developments in familiar ways, and rely on older, local practices and solutions when trying to imagine new ways forward. In other words, it helped them to 'domesticate' the new.

We believe that in order to really understand processes of revolutionary change, scholars should also take into account the continued importance of existing, often local, political practices for the way ordinary people understood, negotiated, produced and accommodated ideological and political change. To historians of early modern Europe, such insights may not seem very surprising; very similar points were made in the contexts of scholarly discussions that took place in the 1980s and 1990s about the spread of the Reformations and the workings of 'absolutism'.[10] In both cases, scholars who were debating the 'success' or 'failure' of initiatives to implement major change ultimately found that they needed to consider local power relations, traditions and stakeholders, as well as their relationships with the centre, to understand why some initiatives worked so much

---

[9] See e.g. Michael Rowe, *From Reich to State: The Rhineland in the Revolutionary Age, 1780–1830.* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[10] Mack Holt, 'The Social History of the Reformation: Recent Trends and Future Agendas', *Journal of Social History* 37: 1 (2003), 133–144; C. Scott Dixon, *Contesting the Reformation* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 152–196; and John Miller ed., *Absolutism in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1990).

better than others and why. They found that one good way to understand this was to look at practices and their functions. Who was prepared to spend money? Who controlled public space and public resources? Who was prepared to mobilise local energy and for what purpose? In the process, they also uncovered a great deal of new and useful knowledge about cities and villages as political communities, about the way representation worked in an age without elections and about the widespread use of tools like petitioning.[11]

Political historians of the modern world have been more reluctant to consider local politics. Some of them were only interested in supralocal modernisation, others want to stay clear of the romantic view of premodern 'communities' as places of perennial harmony, and others did not consider trivial local conflict truly 'political'. Yet, in recent years, there have been a number of studies that show how very fruitful it is to consider the premodern notions of commonwealth, civic republicanism and politics of place when thinking about the outcomes of the revolutionary processes. In North America, Gary Gerstle pointed to the continued importance of local political traditions and the 'residual powers' of the states of the USA.[12] In England, a recent article argues that petitions not only linked local and national concerns but were deeply grounded in the politics of place.[13] In a German context, Michael Rowe showed that Rhinelanders picked and chose which elements of the old they preferred to retain, and which of the new they wanted to adopt.[14] Katherine Aaslestad demonstrated that the response of Hamburg's citizens to the period of French rule was not, as used to be believed, to turn towards the German nation. Rather, they responded to the challenges

[11] Maarten Prak, 'Urban Governments and Their Citizens in Early Modern Europe', in Matthew Davies and James A. Galloway ed., *London and Beyond: Essays in Honour of Derek Keene* (London: University of London Press, 2012), 269–286.

[12] Gary Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government from the Founding to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[13] Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller, 'Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture. Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780–1918', *Past & Present* vol. 248 (2020) 123–164.

[14] Rowe, *From Reich to State*.

of war with cultural tools and the political expectations of the inhabitants of a premodern city-state.[15] Writing about the city of Würzburg, Clemens Tangerding has argued that, while government resources and regulations increasingly shaped lives, not everyone experienced 'rupture' simultaneously, even at a local level. We should think more in terms of plural turning points or 'Zäsurenpluralismus'.[16] Such studies question, but also remain closely tied, to national historiographies, and can easily be regarded as mere nuances to a bigger picture of dramatic rupture. Yet they also point the way to a more structural feature of change in the Age of Revolutions. Our ambition is to show that we can only truly understand the nature of this change if we take the local level and the continuity of local practices at least as seriously as the national level. Of course, we do not deny the very real change that took place, but concentrate on the interplay between the new and the old, and the local and the national, that characterised most processes of change. As Joanna Innes argues in her contribution to this book on the British case of 'Reform', even revolutionary change is not a sudden break; it is always a process. Even in the most hectic revolutionary times, 'it took some time before outcomes crystallised, ensuring that people had to exercise agency in highly confusing contexts'. People 'do not experience first an old, then a new order', but go through a process of adaptation and appropriation. Eventually, changes 'tend to be naturalised', as 'expectations adjust to what becomes the [new] everyday normal'.

   Accordingly, the aim of this volume is to explore in a comparative context how and why existing political practices, local civic habits and 'residual' powers remained productive throughout and after the Age of Revolutions, not as atavisms, but (1) as tools to implement change, (2) as a means for local people to participate in politics and acquire agency and (3) as a way to cope with change. This type of research depends to a large extent on local or national case studies. However, the aim of these case studies is to research the mechanisms of change rather than highlight local or national peculiarities. It has been particularly revealing to

[15] Katherine Aaslestad, *Place and Politics. Local Identity, Civic Culture, and German Nationalism in North Germany During the Revolutionary Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Katherine Aaslestad, 'Republican Traditions: Patriotism, Gender, and War in Hamburg, 1770–1815', *European History Quarterly* 37: 4 (2007), 582–602.

[16] Clemens Maria Tangerding, *Der Drang zum Staat: Lebenswelten in Würzburg Zwischen 1795 und 1815* (Göttingen: Böhlau Verlag, 2011).

see how many parallels there were between European and (Latin) American experiences, despite the obvious differences. If we concentrate on local manifestations of residual power and repertoires of collective action or experiences of domesticating the new, many analogies stand out. They can be explained by a transnational (and imperial) process of borrowing and learning but also by the same needs that produced the same results or called for the same instruments. Meanwhile, the peculiarities of one particular case may help to understand or even explain the peculiarities of another. That is why we have organised the volume along thematic, rather than geographic, lines. We take the categories introduced above as our guideline.

'Residual Powers'

The first chapters focus on different manifestations of 'residual power': the power that, in the process of creating or rethinking new political systems, was retained by players other than the new centralised nation-states. These powers, often less overtly (high) political and perhaps more mundane than those of the nation-state, were often the ones that seemed most crucial to citizens, since they defined society and the social order in their concrete or natural habitat.

The combination of power, continuity and revolution inevitably points in the direction of Tocqueville's famous *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*. Tocqueville did not see any continuity of local power but argued that there was a continuity of state power from the time of absolutism to the nineteenth century, right through the revolutionary period. The King was beheaded, but the centralising administration and bureaucracy continued to exist and were reinforced on a massive scale, albeit now under revolutionary guidance. Once Tocqueville had published his book, the continuity of the growth of state power seemed to be so obvious that reviewers asked how it was possible that they had not seen it before.[17] Tocqueville concentrates on the role of the executive and the administration, but one of the driving forces behind continuity of all sorts was the wish to maintain the social order. This was not only because of the elite's struggle for self-preservation but also because of the moral value attached to order, as we can see in the chapters by Ana

---

[17] De Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*; Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville et les Français* (Paris: Aubier, 1993) 152 (and footnote 91).

Maria Stuven in this section, and those of Anne Sophie Overkamp and Joris Oddens in part 2. This could lead to continuity at the state level, as is quite clearly shown by the example of Chile in Stuven's contribution, where the social elite tried to steer the revolutionary regime change in the right direction by working closely with the Catholic church and the existing social and political apparatus, and thus contributed to a form of continuity. It is noteworthy, though, that even there, the local government of the Cabildos was essential for managing the revolutionary crisis and filling the void left by the absence of the legitimate Spanish king. Apparently, local powers still mattered.

Local government in the Age of Revolutions has attracted only limited attention from historians. In France, this is partly due to a long-standing belief in the destruction of all 'corps intermédiaires' after the Revolution. This tradition inspired Tocqueville, according to whom the state had destroyed all intermediary powers and left nothing but an immense void. 'La société en poussière' was the expression used: society had turned into a heap of disconnected dust and all traditional self-governing local bodies had disappeared.[18] But had they really? Diederik Smit shows that, in the case of the Netherlands, things were different from what they appeared to be. The new unitary Dutch state abolished the old independent provinces and only kept them as part of hierarchical political order. However, they retained a large part of their old prestige, socio-cultural meaning and political influence. They have been neglected by historians, but they were still important players. Their political role has often been overlooked because it did not fit accepted modern ideas about proper political behaviour and it looked like an atavism.

Because the Netherlands had been a federation of sovereign provinces for centuries, perhaps the persistence of a form of local power does not come as a surprise. But what about Tocqueville's France, the archetypal example of centralisation? Tocqueville's continuity thesis argued that much of the spirit and mental habits of the absolute monarchy had been carried over from the Ancient Regime to the new nineteenth-century national state. Yet the power of the Bourbon state, and indeed of other European monarchs, was less absolute than Tocqueville thought. Over the last decades, historians have shown that absolute monarchs depended

---

[18] Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le modèle politique français: La société civile contre le jacobinisme de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 114, 158–164, and passim.

on the goodwill of local elites. In his contribution on France in the nine-teenth century, Bernard Rulof turns Tocqueville's argument upside down. Yes, there certainly was continuity, but rather continuity of local agency and local politics. In the nineteenth century, French administrators often dismissed disputes at the village level as insignificant. At the same time, Rulof shows that the interplay between national and local matters could turn local conflicts into more serious conflicts. Citizenship, political socia-bility and repertoires of contention often originated or took shape at the local level, also in the nineteenth century.

Modernisation has often been described as a project of social differ-entiation. Every domain of life, including politics, culture and economy, was turning into a more or less autonomous system. Sociologist Niklas Luhmann is one of the most prominent theorists of this view. Moreover, liberalism, the dominant political current of the nineteenth century, has been characterised as 'the art of separation', the attempt to separate the state and Church, politics and the economy, civil society and the polit-ical community, and public and private spheres. These pairs had been 'inseparable' before modernity.[19] It is doubtful whether the project of differentiation really worked as consistently as has been assumed, but there can be no doubt as to the ambitions of the liberal project. These ambitions presupposed a certain type of state that would maintain all these separations. It would be objective and 'just', because it was 'cold' and 'dis-tanced' from people and localities.[20] This new state should not lean on the residual powers that belonged to the old regime, since the old type of local government had mixed everything that the modern liberal state was supposed to separate. Moreover, local government might be close and within reach of the citizens, but that risked corruption and parochial near-sightedness.

It was hard to imagine that local communities had anything substantial to offer to modern politics, let alone foster liberal political ambitions. However, representative government needs an 'objective' distance as well

[19] Michael Walzer, 'Liberalism and the Art of Separation', *Political Theory* 12: 3 (1984), 315–330, 315–330, 319: 'Liberal theory reflects and reinforces a long-term process of social differentiation' (Walzer, by the way, exaggerates liberal individualism). Cf. Henk te Velde, 'The Organization of Liberty. Dutch Liberalism as a Case of the History of European Constitutional Liberalism', *European Journal of Political Theory* 7: 1 (2008), 65–79, esp. 68–69.

[20] Edouard Dupont-White, *La centralisation. Suite de 'l'individu et l'État'* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1860), 7; Mélonio, *Tocqueville et les Français*, 210.

as the proximity that enables engagement and appropriation. Tocqueville already highlighted the risks of distance in a social context. The rich and powerful 'are very ready to do good to the people, but they still choose to keep them at arm's length [in the French version: 'distance']; they think that is sufficient, but they are mistaken. They might spend fortunes thus without warming the hearts of the population around them;—that population does not ask them for the sacrifice of their money, but of their pride'.[21] It is only once we realise the importance of proximity that we see the important local contributions to the development of a modern and liberal national representative government. Henk te Velde shows that, in the nineteenth century, the persistent local foundation of representative politics was often simply taken for granted. Everybody knew that it existed in practice, but it was seldom acknowledged in theory.

The Power of Practice

The four chapters in part 2 focus on continuities in (local) practice and on ways of doing things and getting things done in times of change. While some people and parties hastened to exploit and maximise the chances that change brought, older local strategies and practices could also retain surprising effectiveness and power. Moreover, change was not exclusively happening at the national level and local continuities did not necessarily have a conservative effect. Scholars as diverse as Jürgen Habermas, Roger Chartier and Robert Darnton have demonstrated the importance of editors, the printing press and bookshops, which were centres of discussion in the public sphere, for the history of the Enlightenment and the emergence of middle-class liberalism. As Jim Brophy shows in his comparative study of German bookshops and publishers, the new development could perhaps be interpreted as a part of a process of 'modernisation', but it was firmly grounded in a long history of dodging censorship and commercial civil disobedience by publishers-booksellers. 'It is fascinating to observe', Brophy rightfully contends, 'how otherwise lawful-minded burghers so consistently flouted the law'. They had learned to do so during the long history of printing and publishing.

---

[21] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Waiheke Island: The Floating Press, 2009), 975.

Anne Sophie Overkamp's story about the wealthy burghers of the Wupper valley could also have been part of a history of liberal modernisation and the 'rise of the bourgeoisie' or modern history of the German 'Bürgertum'.[22] However, Overkamp shows that the burghers used strategies that they had learned during the long history of negotiating social and political rule. They wanted to protect the social order out of self-interest but also because they believed that they had a duty to serve the community. This community was primarily local, and even when they implored Napoleon to become part of his Empire, they did this because they thought it was the best way to protect the interests of their local communities. In this way, continuity enabled change.

The use of repertoires of collective action also offers many examples of this combination of continuity and change. The historical study of these repertoires has often focussed on the change from a traditional to a modern repertoire, and from direct action to means such as demonstrations and modern social movements.[23] However, the development of politics in around 1800 has been characterised as the 'invention of modern politics' (in the confrontation of the decline of classical republicanism and the rise of liberal democracy) or simply 'the discovery of politics'.[24] Without denying that many new things happened in politics at that time, it is worth pointing out that old repertoires were also used to get new, revolutionary results, as James Sanders and Joris Oddens demonstrate for Colombia, Mexico and the Netherlands, respectively.

Their chapters evoke E.P Thompson's older work on the agency of the common people in 'a rebellious traditional culture' and a 'paternalism-deference equilibrium'.[25] Thompson's work about customs showed how

---

[22] E.g. Jürgen Kocka and Ute Frevert, *Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert: Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich*, 3 vols (Munich, 1988).

[23] E.g. historical sociologist Tilly: Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain 1758–1834* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768–2004* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004).

[24] E.g. Niek van Sas, 'Tweedragt overal. Het patriottisme en de uitvinding van de moderne politiek', in Niek van Sas ed., *De metamorfose van Nederland: Van oude orde naar moderniteit, 1750–1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 175–194; and Michel Vovelle, *La découverte de la politique: Géopolitique de la révolution française* (Paris: La Découverte, 1993).

[25] Edward Palmer Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York: the New Press, 1991), 9, 71 (this is a collection of essays which mostly had appeared in the 1970s).

the continuity of some practices could help to produce or implement change in another field. This works at the level of justifications, especially in early modern campaigns to forge change by 'restoring' an older, better order. The present book demonstrates how these early modern patterns of action, local habits and priorities, not only survived the Age of Revolutions but also helped to shape and imagine the break with the past across societies. Thompson did not believe in a gap between the early modern and the modern age, nor in 'flat modernisation dogmas',[26] and found many examples of the role custom played in the nineteenth century, such as the continued use of 'rough music'. He did not concentrate on the nation-state at all. The way he analysed customs is flexible and acknowledges popular struggle instead of acquiescence. He showed that customs could also be used to maintain a balance between the common people and the elite.

One of the most popular of those instruments deserves separate attention because it returns in Sanders' and Oddens' chapters: the traditional means of petitioning that continued to be used in the nineteenth century. Even if Latin American middle classes were sometimes more reluctant revolutionaries than the French, Germans or Dutch during the same period, they often used the same means. Throughout the entire revolutionary period and beyond, petitioning in many different forms proved to be a traditional and successful means of protest, regardless of the country (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands or Colombia). There are striking similarities in even the formulas petitioners used. Of course, the Spanish took many European tools to Latin America, but apparently indigenous subalterns had soon discovered how they could use them to their own advantage. Moreover, the deferential language of many petitions does not hide the agency the petitioners were claiming nor their self-confidence. This is a revealing example of the mixture of old and new that characterised the Age of Revolutions. Sanders argues that the different choices that Afro-Colombians and Afro-Mexicans made proves that petitioners did not simply use traditional deferential forms because they were the only ones that they knew or were available. Afro-Colombians and Afro-Mexicans were unable to petition for the 'restoration' of old liberties, as other American and European petitioners customarily did, even when these petitioners were in fact petitioning for change. Instead, they proudly

---

[26] Norbert Schindler, *Rebellion, Community and Custom in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 297.

embraced the new age and new vocabulary that held the promise of freedom and emancipation.

EXPERIENCING AND DOMESTICATING CHANGE

The last part of the book focusses on the ways in which the impact of change could be cast and recast, so as to retain continuity with the present. This could take the shape of support for restoring the old regime. However, it was also possible to come to terms with a new situation by emphasising links with the past, and accept changes by incorporating them into a familiar framework. The extent of the changes could be denied, or toned down into a simple improvement. Some even embraced change by arguing that it was in line with the true national character.

Joanna Innes analyses two cases in England, the classic testing ground for adapting strategies. In the long term, Reform became part of the Whig story of gradual change in Britain, but Innes argues that the difference between Reform and revolutionary change was not so obvious for contemporaries, as they did not know what the outcome of the changes or the calls for change would be. There was, at least, one crucial difference, though: the lapse of time. The French Revolution could be presented as one moment in time, and the sudden regime changes certainly conveyed the message of complete rupture. With hindsight, the British Reform Act appeared to be the legal and legitimate outcome of a long process. It was also the starting point for implementing several acts with great local effect which, on the one hand, underlined the central role of Parliament and national administration and, on the other, led to local contestation and division. During the process, the rather new term 'local government' gained more currency, which may seem paradoxical: local self-government became a staple of stories about English national identity at a time when local autonomy was diminishing.

Dana Nelson's chapter on the experience of the American democracy takes us back to the beginning of this volume by concentrating on the residual power that lay buried in the local practices of the common people. According to Nelson, Americans normally understand the development of democratic political practices among ordinary citizens as a product of the new Constitution and its representative system, but we should look much closer to what happened before the Constitution was written. There appears to be an older tradition of what Nelson calls 'vernacular democracy', rooted in the 'customs of the commons', that

consisted of often informal, participatory practices which originated in the local collective work of mutual support in the commons. This tradition was still very much alive in the nineteenth century, as Tocqueville testifies in his *Democracy in America*, a book that is almost as much about continuity as his *Ancien Régime*. This time it was the continuity of local participatory practices which he studied and admired as the basis of democracy in America: 'A nation may establish a system of free government, but without the spirit of municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty'.[27] Vernacular democracy was not national, representative or urban. Nelson contends that old traditions of participation in the commons were at least as important as the famous Constitution.

This leads us to question what the chapters of this book tell us about the development of citizenship and democracy from the early modern to the modern world. The argument of most contributions is that local continuities have been much more relevant to the way political change occurred and was accepted or implemented during the Age of Revolutions than has often been assumed. The introduction of a new representative system at national level did not mean the end of local participation and agency. Judith Pollmann's contribution explores the local meanings of change in the Low Countries at the level of individual chroniclers, who recorded the impact of change on their immediate surroundings. While their framing of it was firmly rooted in the traditions of civic republicanism and civic practice, it was precisely this very local and low-level reading of political change, she argues, that ultimately allowed contemporaries to come to terms with it, bridge the gap between past and present, and domesticate the new.

Modern democracy has been institutionalised at the supra-local level. Of course democracy not only needs engaged citizens but also rules and rights. As was already argued in the nineteenth century,[28] state politics not only remedies the potentially oppressive parochialism of small communities but can also protect minorities and guarantee individual rights. The purpose of this book is not to idealise the politics of local communities. Yet we believe that if we want to understand how citizens understand politics and gauge the extent to which political change occurred, we need to look further than the state.

---

[27] De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 127.

[28] E.g. Dupont-White, *Centralisation*, 232–233.

This book concentrates on the persistence of local citizenship in all its diverse informal expressions and manifestations. Although few political historians would actually deny that local political agency continued to exist after the revolutions, the current division of labour between historians has meant that they have felt little incentive to pursue its importance. As an author of a book about the connections between local and more overarching citizenship in Spain and the Spanish territories in Latin America puts it, 'most [historical] research has centred either on local communities or on national structures, either on law and doctrine or on social practices'.[29] Early modern towns and local rural communities had developed many forms of citizenship, ranging from formal rights to informal roles based on what people actually did and how actively they identified with the local community.[30] Maarten Prak, whose fine study *Citizens without Nations* concentrates on early modern urban citizenship as a set of practices, believes that most of the institutions and practices of this citizenship disappeared after the French Revolution, and that 'nineteenth-century Europe was perhaps less democratic than it had been in previous centuries'.[31] Admittedly, this chimes with the views of most political historians of the nineteenth century, mainly because they have ignored local politics. Democracy was already associated with nationalisation and centralisation in the nineteenth century. Yet we contend that the development of modern democracy can only be properly understood if local citizenship is taken into account. Tocqueville noted that popular sovereignty worked best if it was 'scattered' (éparpillé) in small local communities.[32] A recent study about political participation in Europe until 1800 concludes that this participation only worked if there was a certain balance between different political actors (often at different geographical levels), which forced them to negotiate.[33] We should not underestimate the extent to which political rule after 1800

---

[29] Tamar Herzog, *Defining Nations. Immigrants and Citizens in Early Modern Spain and Spanish America* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), 4.

[30] Herzog, *Defining Nations*; Maarten Prak, *Citizens without Nations Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World, c.1000–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[31] Prak, *Citizens without Nations*, 23.

[32] Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: Les sources aristocratiques de la liberté: Biographie intellectuelle* (Paris: Fayard, 2008) 42.

[33] Wim Blockmans, *Medezeggenschap: Politieke participatie in Europa vóór 1800* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2020) 386.

was still a negotiated process. Also, the persistence of local citizenship was a precondition for the development of democracy in the nineteenth century.