

Democracy: 1776, 1926, 2026

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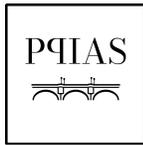
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ABSTRACT

The 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence is on the immediate horizon in 2026. This essay considers how to celebrate or even narrate that history in light of the precarious status of democracy in the United States and in many parts of the world right now and looks to texts written on the 150th anniversary, in 1926, for clues.

As I write in the summer of 2025, the United States of America is on the cusp of celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence--or what is also known, awkwardly, as its semiquincentennial. Normally, that would mean historical flags, tall ships, and revolutionary costumes. We might also anticipate lots of familiar talk of liberty, equality, and self-evident truths, albeit with different implications depending on whether those phrases were being uttered on the political right or left. Like the French, Americans have traditionally taken a single text or, really, a short declaration of rights hastily drawn up by committee at the start of a late eighteenth-century war, to stand for the founding of their nation, in all its glory, as a democratic entity.

The present moment is a strange time for such festivities, however. That is not only because, in the United States as in France, we are now far more likely than before to recognize the combination of violence and exclusions that made possible the writing and implementation of our nations' foundational texts. It's also because democracy itself has come to feel precarious in ways that most of us have not experienced before in our own lifetimes. The same can be said for any commitment to any set of shared civic values. What can such seemingly definitive statements of political principle as embedded in the Declaration of Independence, or, for that matter, the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* just fourteen years later in 1789, mean in current circumstances? That is the question of our moment.



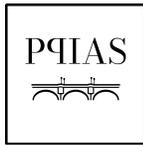
A truism of anniversaries, and maybe of historical recollections as a whole, is that they generate a vision of the past that responds to the needs and desires of the present as much as “what really happened” 100, 150, 200 years ago. There is no reason to think that we will escape from this pattern next year, on the 250th anniversary of July 4, 1776, or even that we really want to. On the contrary, anniversaries of major events generally give celebrants a double opportunity: to take stock of the sum total of historical knowledge on that topic and to reflect on where we are now and maybe even where we hope to go.

The last time we did this in the United States and France (1976 and 1989, respectively), the story was largely triumphant. Telling and re-telling it also produced relatively limited conflict, except, occasionally, at the local level. In France, where the bicentennial happened at a moment that coincided with the demise of the Iron Curtain, the reunification of Germany, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and even the stirrings of democracy in China, it was enough for some major commentators, following the lead of the great historian François Furet, to declare the revolution essentially “over,” like a match won by the forces of capitalist democracy and settled with a handshake or maybe even like the inevitable result of coming of age. In the rearview mirror, this conclusion looks an awful lot like misplaced complacency¹.

Now, just decades later, such sentiments seem alien. Our current context, especially in the United States, in many ways recalls less that of these late twentieth-century bicentennials than it does that of the 150th anniversaries in the interwar period (1926, 1939 respectively). For then, too, a sense of a looming crisis and a foreboding that democracy might not be as strong or as permanent a form of government as once imagined were common features of an already dark political moment in much of the world. After all, not only was fascism on a steady rise through these years across much of Europe and Asia, but World War I and the Russian Revolution had already started the century out in the most cataclysmic way possible. And even as the latter had been inspired in part by a revolutionary democratic tradition going back to the eighteenth century, communist revolution meant a break in significant ways with the existing revolutionary script.² Moreover, from Germany to Latin America, it was already clear in the 1920s that recent history had left in its wake intensified internal divisions that were to keep the future of national democratic governance, especially in its liberal, capitalist form, very much in the balance until the recovery from another cataclysmic world war began in the mid-1940s.

¹ On the bicentennial in the US, see Tammy S. Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976: Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), who stresses tensions over the planning of the celebrations and the way they presaged a growing mistrust of the federal government, though she makes clear that the popular history narrative was largely accepted, as well as part six of Michael Hattem, *The Memory of '76: The Revolution in American History* (Yale University Press, 2024). On the bicentennial celebrations in France, see Steven Laurence Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution: Disputed Legacies, France, 1789/1989* (Cornell University Press, 1995). The idea of the revolution being over, in the sense that the potential for revolution itself had disappeared, comes from François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Gallimard, 1978); see *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1.

² Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein, eds., *Scripting Revolution: A Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions* (Stanford University Press, 2015).



So how did this similarly anxious age to our own manifest itself in the writing of the history of what we now frequently call, following the first international revolutionary Thomas Paine, “the age of revolutions”? Interestingly, even as explanations of those upheavals stressing economic and social origins and effects flourished in the 1920s and 30s, in good part as a result of the impact of Marxism on understandings of the past, the greatest historians of the period on both sides of the Atlantic also repeatedly emphasized something else: the importance of the world of popular belief. That is, they took seriously affect and ideology, the mental worlds of revolutionary participants and bystanders, famous and not. Even Marxist scholars treated those beliefs, at least in practice, as more than superstructural. In the pages of the leading interwar historians, certain common intellectual commitments and sentiments became a kind of essential if largely invisible glue, making politics and society coterminous. We might do well to heed those historians’ insights right now, especially if we hope to understand not just how democracies get off the ground but also what it takes to hold on to them.

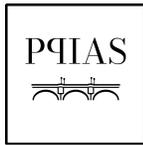
The greatest French historians of the first half of the twentieth century are still celebrated today for their attention to the thought and affective condition of the masses--or what would eventually come to be known as the history of *mentalités*-- along with other aspects of so-called “history from below.”³ This scholarly investigation began as early as the 1920s and 30s. Writing about the French Revolution, the Marxist historian Georges Lefebvre inserted the study of shared emotions like fear and wounded pride into the story of class and, ultimately, political competition that he recognized in that moment, and he gave both causal force in major works, including *La Grande Peur de 1789* (1932) and *Quatre-vingt-neuf* (1939).⁴ Almost simultaneously, even as the most innovative historians of the *Annales* school like Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre were turning their collective backs on a political history wedded to great events and famous texts, they too incorporated the study of shared and often tacit ideas and feelings into the history of the Old Regime, and especially the study of its peasant classes, in ways that indirectly helped illuminate the political currents of the late eighteenth century. For their studies made it that much easier to imagine the revolutionary era as provoking and necessitating breaks in the existing “mental apparatus” (in the words of Febvre) of the sort that intrigued historians, like Lefebvre, dedicated to understanding revolutionary upheaval.⁵

What’s less recognized is that slightly earlier, something parallel, even if less theoretically developed, happened in the historiography of the American revolutionary era. This is not a question of conventional influence, as in “X must have read Y,” though subsequent historians have

³ On the origins, rise, and impact of the history of the study of *mentalités*, see Patrick Hutton, “The History of Mentalities: The New Map of Cultural History,” *History and Theory* 20, no. 3 (October 1981): 237-259; and Philippe Poirrier, *Les Enjeux de l’histoire culturelle* (Seuil, 2004).

⁴ See Georges Lefebvre, *La Grande Peur de 1789* (1932) and *Quatre-vingt-neuf* (1939). For a subsequent account of Lefebvre’s impact on writing about the French Revolution, see Peter Jones, “Georges Lefebvre and the Peasant Revolution: Fifty Years on,” *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1990): 645-663.

⁵ The expression “mental apparatus” comes from Lucien Febvre, *Le Problème de l’incroyance au XVIe siècle: la religion de Rabelais* (1942), but variants of this expression can be found in the work of Febvre and Bloch going back to the 1920s.



uncovered some surprising moments of historical exchange between major French and American scholars of the 1920s.⁶ Mainly, it is a question of an attentiveness on the part of interwar historians on both sides of the Atlantic to the ways in which the first stirrings of anti-monarchical, anti-aristocratic politics both introduced and depended upon certain low-level and hard-to-articulate but widespread habits of mind that need, once again, to be called out and bolstered rather than simply taken for granted.

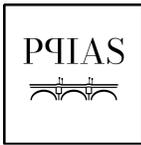
Take the case of the American historian J. Franklin Jameson. He neither paid much attention to French history nor traveled in France. He was also not a member of any particular interpretive school. If he is remembered today, it is largely for his key institutional role in helping create professionalized history teaching and writing in the United States. That, and for setting the stage for a “progressive” reading of 1776 and its aftermath that, in his words, would demonstrate that “political democracy came to the United States as a result of economic democracy,” as well as vice versa. But in the brief lectures that he gave at Princeton University in November 1925 and that were published as *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* in 1926 as part of the 150th anniversary celebration of 1776, the commonalities with his French counterparts in the interwar era are striking.⁷

Two features of Jameson’s case are especially worth calling attention to now. First, Jameson insisted that the American War for Independence, as it was generally known then, was, in fact, a real revolution. Rather than limited and essentially conservative, it was radical and transformative for the people who experienced it and for their world. As such, Jameson notably conferred on the series of military and political events that broke Britain’s grip over its North American colonies a status that they had not previously maintained--despite Tom Paine’s earlier remarks--as but one node in a select group of events, called revolutions, that had ushered the modern democratic world into being. With the Russian Revolution as his explicit backdrop, he made the then-unusual case that Americans needed to see eighteenth-century developments in France and the nascent United States as more closely related than previously thought. It was an idea that would be adopted in the mid-twentieth-century moment by a transatlantic group of scholars, including R.R. Palmer, eager to tell the story of the coming of “democratic revolution.”⁸ In our own era, we’ve gone even farther in this direction, adding Haiti (previously Saint-Domingue) and much of Latin America to the mix as well.

⁶ John Harvey, “An American *Annales*? The AHA and the *Revue économique* of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch,” *Journal of Modern History* 76, no. 3 (September 2004): 578-621.

⁷ J. Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Princeton, 1967 [orig. 1926]); for the quote above, see 27. Scholarly studies of this text include Ronald Huffman and Peter Arnold, *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement* (University of Virginia Press, 1995) and Alfred F. Young, “American Historians Confront ‘The Transforming Hand of Revolution,’” in Alfred Young and Gregory H. Nobles, *Whose Revolution Was It? Historians Interpret the Founding* (NYU Press, 2011), esp. 12-33. For biographical information about Jameson, see Morey Rothberg and Jacqueline Goggin, eds., *John Franklin Jameson and the Development of Humanistic Scholarship in America*, 3 vols. (University of Georgia Press, 1993-2001) and Elizabeth Donnan and Leo Stock, eds., *An Historian’s World: Selections from the Correspondence of John Franklin Jameson* (American Philosophical Society, 1956).

⁸ R.R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, updated ed. with forward by David Armitage (Princeton University Press, 2014 [orig. 1959]).



Second, while effectively rewriting this newly discovered “revolution” as a social and economic turning point as well as a political one, Jameson also drew attention to something more like its ethos. Specifically, addressing his 1920s American audience, he stressed how the principles of democratic governance were, after 1776, turned into cultural values. In the immediate aftermath of the fight for independence, he proposed, a limited menu of shared assumptions became the intellectual property of Americans in general, even if they were not always recognized as such.

All of this happens only late in Jameson’s four-part lecture series. The first three detail changes in the status of persons, of land holding, and of industry and commerce that both helped bring about and were products of the political upheaval associated with the 1770s and 80s. Only in the fourth and final lecture-turned-chapter of *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* does Jameson turn his attention to “thought and feeling,” again with an emphasis on ordinary people rather than leaders and on unconscious aims as much as deliberate ones. Without a true mass culture to consider, Jameson looks primarily to religion as a proxy for some kind of shared place for values and sentiments--or what he calls “public opinion or popular emotion”-- in a world in which few left records and those who did, he notes, mainly echoed European ideas.⁹ What he aims to show at the conclusion of his lectures and subsequent book is that democracy, as it was established in the course of the war with Britain, started to transform modes of thinking and indeed culture more generally. Moreover, it did so in ways that fully justify the use of the term “revolution” to describe this prior moment, but that also ultimately solidified and expanded that revolution’s achievements.

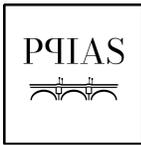
At first, Jameson insists, a recognizable “post-war” psychology became the new norm in North America once the British were finally defeated. Here again, he draws direct parallels to his own recent past, and especially 1919, calling attention to phenomena ranging from enduring respect for military men to a general taste for frivolity, that, one imagines, he might have read backward onto the mid-1780s as another moment marked by the aftereffects of intensive warfare. But he also suggests that the more lasting impact, visible mainly in the religious sphere, had little to do with the hierarchical and honor-starved culture of either the eighteenth- or twentieth-century military. What is more significant was the leakage and mainstreaming of the new political values of the revolutionary upheaval into ordinary, everyday life and thought.

First, Jameson points to a growing secularism rooted in disestablishment and the separation of church and state, which, ironically, had been intended initially to foster and protect multiple faiths. For alongside the flourishing of new religious movements and even a revivalism that Jameson links with romanticism and describes as increasingly untethered from the state apparatus, the possibility of turning away from religion and its “zeal” altogether became ever more real for many kinds of Americans.

But the other “mental effects,” he suggests, can be seen by treating Christianity, broadly defined, as the popular culture of its moment.¹⁰ Within the varied religious sphere itself, he describes what he takes to be a growing commitment to the dissemination of knowledge, made manifest in the

⁹ Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement*, 74.

¹⁰ Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement*, 79.



growth of new educational institutions, especially at the highest levels. Colleges and universities became more common at the close of the eighteenth century not so much because of their appeal to new kinds of students (which Jameson does not discuss), but rather because they represented a certain kind of intellectual striving characteristic of various religious denominations in that age. Jameson points further to a burgeoning post-revolutionary taste for drafting constitutions for ecclesiastical government that kept many of the same churches hard at work on national bylaws in the last decades of the eighteenth century. For him, this “constitution-making spirit,” or attachment to formal rules, is one more important cultural consequence of the revolutionary political upheaval.¹¹

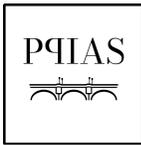
Moreover, Jameson notes a growing attachment not just to an honor culture born of military experience, but also to some fundamental sense of equality among persons as it seeped into religious life and teachings. To his way of thinking, this was almost inevitable, given the new political principles of the age. As Jameson announces in the second to last sentence of the last of the four lectures, “In a period in which special privileges of individuals were being called into question or destroyed, there would naturally be less favor for that form of theology which was dominated by the doctrine of the especial election of a part of mankind, [and] a growing favor for those forms which seemed more distinctly to be based upon the idea of the natural equality of all men.”¹²

None of these topics is developed in any depth in *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement*. There are no footnotes to determine whether Jameson’s claims are rooted in research or purely suppositions. He says little about how or why these particular turns in religious culture mattered or to whom they did or what other kinds of struggles they might have begun or exacerbated. For in the end, Jameson’s goal is to offer, in an impressionistic way, an overview of what happened in toto to transform British North America into a new world governed by a new mentalité as well as a new political order. But what is so interesting, from our vantage point, is that each of these arguments about influence can be reverse engineered. It is easy to imagine that Jameson thought these particular ways of thinking and feeling were worth emphasizing in the mid-1920s. On the cusp of 2026, when all of them seem to be under assault once again, Jameson could be read as offering us a brief treatise on the significance of a small set of widely-held values—or a common culture of some sort—to democracy’s future flourishing, even as we grow ever more diverse.

As a thought experiment, let’s go back to Jameson’s arguments about what the revolution of 1776 produced in its wake, but now read them in terms of what democracy’s endurance requires. Jameson’s shorthand for his first claim is religious freedom, which still makes sense if we, like Jameson, take religion to be culture and belief more generally. In our current vocabulary, though, we might reword this as a sustained commitment to pluralism and to anti-dogmatism in the realm of ideas and beliefs. This is, in a sense, a bedrock liberal democratic value, an agreement that we

¹¹ Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement*, 98.

¹² Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement*, 100.



do not all have to live or think in unison, indeed that we are better off with this particular kind of freedom and difference intact.

But Jameson also stresses certain shared ideals. Think, first, of Jameson's emphasis on the development of new institutions of higher education. Today, we might see it as stemming from a shared conviction, across different belief systems, about the importance of truth, and especially what is sometimes called factual or empirically-demonstrable truth, as both aspiration and starting point for all other endeavors, including the development of political opinion. Then consider Jameson's fascination with churches' post-revolutionary creation of standard "constitutional" procedures and etiquette for their own functioning. Surely that impulse corresponds to a willingness to abide by a set of shared rules of the game--that is, a set of procedures to which all individuals and all groups must jointly adhere--from how to conduct and settle elections to how to achieve citizenship, as a matter of fairness and also the peaceful transference of power. Finally, we need to consider the corollary to what Jameson saw as the growth of new notions of equality (though he says little about race or gender or other forms of difference) as naturally emerging in popular culture out of the revolutionary upheaval. That conviction should lead not only to a widespread feeling that the rules be the same for all, but also to the possession of at least a thin sense of solidarity with others as fellow humans. In politics, this would mean viewing one's adversaries as the loyal opposition rather than, pace Trump, enemies or embodiments of evil; from such a basic idea flows the possibility of compromise or even, on occasion, changing one's mind. In everyday life, it would mean something less strong than empathy, but still some instinct that the fates of others matter to every individual, even if he or she does not like or know much about the way those others live or what they believe.

Jameson wants us to see these ways of thinking and feeling, which he deduces from concrete developments like new educational institutions, new church bylaws, and new theological principles, as natural outgrowths of democratic revolutions. I want instead to suggest that, without these very basic shared assumptions and sentiments, it is hard to imagine democracy—an otherwise inherently contentious and difficult form of governance—surviving much longer. The formal elements, I think we tacitly agree, have never been sufficient unto themselves.

It is hard to feel optimistic at present. The reasons are multifold: because such elemental but deeply democratic principles are being challenged in new ways from the very top; because many people in many places support that challenge, making for a hostile environment characterized by quasi-warring camps; because we have seen how similar situations have played out before. Indeed, one of the reasons that it is difficult to celebrate 1776 in the near future is because the next phase of this particular American story seems, at the moment, hard to guess. I would suggest only that, following the lead of our predecessors of one hundred years ago, we think more about not just how did we get to this point, but also what do we need to do to save what we have. That's not going to be a matter of raising old flags or staging battle reenactments or quoting Declarations or even a new constitutional convention, as some are suggesting. It may be a matter of reinforcing a set of values—let's call them a commitment to pluralism and difference, along with respect for truth,



belief in rules, and basic solidarity with others as one's equals in a moral sense—that do not always sound political yet absolutely are.