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Margaret Fuller's Rome and the problem of provincial American democracy

TIMOTHY M. ROBERTS

ABSTRACT Margaret Fuller's visit to Italy as a correspondent for the *New York Tribune* at the time of the 1848 revolutions gave her a unique perspective on them, not only as a feminist intellectual but also as a commentator on the American relationship with revolutionary Europe. In her *Tribune* writings she addressed issues at once more partisan and more global than those she had covered inside the United States, including the political condition of Italy as a subject state under Austrian imperial control, and as an object of ridicule by many American observers, and the condition of American slavery. Italian peoples and slaves, in her mind, were, like women, oppressed by a transatlantic patriarchy whose prejudices allowed only for white males to enjoy political independence. Fuller called for American support for the Roman republic, but her sympathies did not reflect the thrust of American opinion. Many Americans did not believe Italians were capable of maintaining republican self-government, which was different, they alleged, from their own version, part of the inheritance of the American Revolution. That heritage conferred a unique American revolutionary 'exceptionalism'. For these Americans, the 1848 revolutions provided evidence that Europe was impulsive, reactionary and flawed; they saw in them confirmation of the superiority of American race relations and democratic society. After her death in 1850, the American Civil War would confirm Fuller's implicit sense that the United States and Europe were more alike than many Americans of her generation believed or realized. Her critique of American attitudes to the prospect for democracy in Italy provides perspective on the ambiguity of American global leadership today.

KEYWORDS American exceptionalism, anti-slavery, 1848 revolutions, Italy, Margaret Fuller, *New York Tribune*, slavery, transatlantic, US foreign relations

In the middle of the nineteenth century the American feminist and literary scholar Margaret Fuller, stationed in revolutionary Rome, acted as an advocate for two causes: US intervention in revolutionary Europe and the emancipation of American slaves. Until recently, little attention has been

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paid to Fuller's experiences outside the United States, and her support for the 1848 revolutions has not been studied in relation to her support for the anti-slavery movement.¹ But a focus on how Fuller combined a critique of American isolation from Europe with a critique of American slavery can illuminate how her European experience enlarged her perspective. It can also show the relationship between American domestic politics and foreign relations at a formative period in American history. And it can suggest a problematic pattern with regard to how Americans respond to other nations' attempts at democratic reform and how they see themselves, not only in the nineteenth century but also in the twenty-first.

Margaret Fuller in Europe

In the year 1848 Europe exploded, seeing popular disturbances from Ireland to Sicily to Hungary. The French monarchy was overthrown for good. Italian and German peoples, who lived at the time in various city-states and small principalities, each attempted national unification. And the peoples of Eastern Europe sought to break up the crusty Austrian Habsburg empire. The revolutions of 1848 provided a fleeting democratic moment in nineteenth-century Europe.²

Many Americans were at first enthusiastic at the overthrow of the traditional European order.³ But they later became skeptical regarding Europeans' quest for change, once it became apparent that the European revolutions were not likely to be successful in establishing American-style

1 Among the many works on Fuller are Joan von Mehren, *Minerva and the Muse: Life of Margaret Fuller* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1994) and Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life: The Public Years* (New York: Oxford University Press 2005). For the impact of Fuller's time in Italy on her writing, see Larry Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1988), and Larry Reynolds, 'Righteous violence: the Roman republic and Margaret Fuller's revolutionary example', in Charles Capper and Cristina Giorcellie (eds), *Margaret Fuller: Transatlantic Crossings in a Revolutionary Age* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press forthcoming).

2 Peter Stearns, *1848: The Revolutionary Tide in Europe* (New York: Norton 1974); Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994).

3 For Americans' responses to the 1848 revolutions, see Eugene Curtis, 'American opinion of the French nineteenth-century revolutions', *American Historical Review*, vol. 29, January 1924, 249-70; John Gazley, *American Opinion of German Unification, 1848-1871* (New York: Columbia University Press 1926); Arthur James May, *Contemporary American Opinion on the Mid-century Revolutions in Central Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1927); Howard Marraro, *American Opinion on the Unification of Italy, 1846-1861* (New York: Columbia University Press 1932); Donald Spencer, *Louis Kossuth and Young America: A Study of Sectionalism and Foreign Policy, 1848-1852* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press 1977); and Michael Morrison, 'American reaction to European revolutions, 1848-1852: sectionalism, memory, and the revolutionary heritage', *Civil War History*, vol. 49, June 2003, 111-32.

democratic institutions.⁴ The American expatriate Margaret Fuller, however, was different. She pledged steadfast support to the European revolutions, especially the upheaval in Rome, where, astonishingly, in 1849 the people briefly drove the Pope from the Vatican and established a secular republic. Fuller witnessed these events and wrote about them extensively as a journalist for the *New York Tribune*; she effectively became America's first war correspondent. In Italy she also became a radical republican, offering what would prove to be a prophetic voice to a United States grappling with the forces of racism and gender prejudice to maintain its own republican institutions.

As a study of the experience and perspective of an American intellectual witnessing foreign revolutions at first hand, this article integrates the insights of the new cultural and gender history with traditional diplomatic history.⁵ It discusses four subjects concerning Margaret Fuller, the 1848 revolutions and US foreign relations. First, it assesses the responses of Americans—ordinary citizens, like Margaret Fuller, and also diplomatic personnel stationed in Europe—to European popular upheavals. Second, it describes Fuller's reaction to the European revolutions, in particular the overthrow of the Vatican's political authority; this will locate Fuller as an American intellectual as well as suggest American prejudices about foreign revolutions. Third, it shows how Fuller compared Italians' struggles for representative government with the struggles of marginalized Americans, namely women and African Americans, for full citizenship. Finally, it suggests that Fuller's experience of transatlantic conflict in the mid-nineteenth century provides perspective on the difficulties of more recent American attempts to exercise democratic global leadership.

When Fuller left New York City in August 1846 and headed for Europe it was the second resettlement of her life, following her earlier move from school teaching and magazine editing in Boston to New York journalism in 1844.⁶ Almost anyone who read the *Tribune*, whose editor Horace Greeley had hired Fuller as the newspaper's literary critic in 1844, considered Fuller either a visionary or a flake. She was an intellectual and a feminist, and wrote not only book reviews for the *Tribune* but also columns illuminating the unfairness she saw in not being a white male in mid-century America.

4 Timothy Roberts and Daniel Howe, 'The United States and the revolutions of 1848', in R. J. W. Evans and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann (eds), *The Revolutions in Europe 1848-1849: From Reform to Reaction* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 157-80.

5 Eric Foner (ed.), *The New American History*, rev. edn (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1997), 181-202, 375-94. Other works embracing a gendered analysis of US foreign relations are Andrew Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947-1964* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2000), and Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1998).

6 Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life: The Private Years* (New York: Oxford University Press 1992).

Nathaniel Hawthorne, who hated her, said Fuller lacked ‘the charms of womanhood’.⁷ Fortunately, such criticisms, at the time, endeared Fuller to Greeley, a leading advocate of reform causes, including government protection of workers’ rights, women’s rights, free land distribution in the American West and, ultimately most explosively, anti-slavery. Beyond its editor’s liberal political agenda, however, the *Tribune* was also innovative, inexpensive and well written. Such attributes, along with its publication in New York City, made it the most widely read newspaper in the United States in its day. Fuller’s opinions and arguments thus potentially enjoyed a wide readership. Aware of her surprisingly important status, Fuller in Europe wrote prophetically: ‘I write not to Americans, but to America.’⁸

Although it was not an accident that Margaret Fuller was in Europe during the 1848 revolutions, she had not crossed the Atlantic specifically to cover the revolutions for the *Tribune*. The reasons for her journey abroad, at least at the outset, were those of a typical young, single, American intellectual of the day.⁹ Fuller often criticized American provincialism, and she worked hard to differentiate herself from her less erudite compatriots. Indeed, many who met her found Fuller arrogant. She was steeped in European literature, and had mastered the Greek, Latin and German languages. Her book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, which became a manifesto for the early feminist movement,¹⁰ reflected her enormous knowledge of European literature and philosophy. Thus, Fuller’s European trip, as she anticipated it, would bring her not to a political hotbed, but to her intellectual home: indeed, when she first saw the Italian shore she exclaimed: ‘I have at last found *my* Italy’ (emphasis in the original).¹¹

European revolution and American exceptionalism

Fuller’s joy at arriving in Italy in the winter of 1847 was shared by many American tourists and expatriates, especially literary women.¹² Rome, Fuller’s destination, was home to a fully-fledged American colony, mainly artists and students. In the mid-nineteenth century most Americans came to

7 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Portable Hawthorne*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press 1948), 594.

8 Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance*, 81.

9 William Stowe, *Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-century American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1994).

10 Sandra Gustafson, ‘Choosing a medium: Margaret Fuller and the forms of sentiment’, *American Quarterly*, vol. 47, March 1995, 34–65.

11 Margaret Fuller, ‘Things and thoughts in Europe’, *New York Tribune*, 29 May 1847, in *These Sad But Glorious Days: Dispatches from Europe, 1846–1850*, ed. Larry Reynolds and Susan Belasco Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press 1991), 129.

12 Helen Barolini, ‘The Italian side of Emily Dickinson’, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 70, Summer 1994, 461–79.

Italy, and Europe generally, to witness the grand accumulations of Europe's traditional past, not the politics of its present.¹³ Abroad they customarily perceived the difference, as one scholar put it, between 'a naïve vigorous America and a polished, enervating Europe'.¹⁴ The United States, many Americans thought, was characterized by progressive change; Europe was not. Therefore, in 1848, when American expatriates witnessed at first hand Europeans struggling against conservative monarchical or imperial authority, many, though initially enthralled, quickly became squeamish and disturbed. This was true despite, in some cases, European groups attempting to establish republican governments and/or democratic political institutions.

To be sure, some Americans in Europe sympathized with the revolutionaries. The American colony in Paris organized a celebratory parade for the new French republic.¹⁵ The US minister to the monarchy of Prussia prematurely extended official recognition to the revolutionary Federal Government of Germany, even before Germans of the various states at the time had declared that such a regime existed.¹⁶ And Irish-Americans snuck into Ireland to assist an Irish uprising against British rule.¹⁷

Similarly, initially, ordinary Americans back home were enthusiastic about revolutionary Europe. A so-called Great Demonstration took place in New York City in April 1848, where orators delivered speeches, recited poetry and sang songs in English, German, Italian, French and Polish. One speaker emphasized the significance that the French revolution of 1848 had broken out on 22 February, George Washington's birthday. All demonstrators, it was reported, sang the *Marseillaise*. Elsewhere the French tricolour hat adorned fashionable citizens in the frontier town of Madison, Wisconsin, while each citizen of Little Rock, Arkansas pledged to give ten cents a month to the cause of European liberty until it could be achieved. Towns and counties in Arkansas, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin named or renamed themselves after the romantic European revolutionaries Alphonse de Lamartine and Lajos Kossuth.¹⁸

13 A. William Salomone, 'The nineteenth-century discovery of Italy: an essay in American cultural history', *American Historical Review*, vol. 73, June 1968, 1359–91.

14 Ernest Earnest, *Expatriates and Patriots: American Artists, Scholars, and Writers in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1968), 5.

15 *New York Tribune*, 29 March 1848.

16 May, *Contemporary American Opinion of the Mid-century Revolutions in Central Europe*, 26.

17 John Belchem, 'Nationalism, republicanism, and exile: Irish emigrants and the revolutions of 1848', *Past and Present*, vol. 146, February 1995, 103–35.

18 *New York Tribune*, 4 April 1848; *Wisconsin Argus* (Madison, WI), 30 May 1848; *The Liberator* (Boston), 7 December 1849; Robert Gale, *Cultural Encyclopedia of the 1850s in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1993), 222; *Alphabetical List of Towns and Counties* [taken from the 1880 United States Census] (Alamo, CA: The Gold Bug 1970); Henry Gannett, *American Names* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press 1947).

But American enthusiasm vanished with the onset of the counter-revolutions of 1849–50: the 1848 revolutions in the short term changed very little. Of course, revolutions cannot be supported from afar if they do not exist at home. On the other hand, 1848 was hardly as violent or bloody as France in 1791 or Russia in 1917. Rather, Americans became uncomfortable in witnessing a Europe that was dynamic, not static, even to the point of questioning the wisdom of such allegedly American political practices as ‘republicanism’ and ‘democracy’ should they be adopted by supposedly unqualified others. Such a reaction characterized American attitudes both abroad and at home. For example, shortly after the overthrow of the French monarchy in February 1848, Thomas Appleton, a Boston painter, visited the legislative national assembly in Paris, busy with organizing the affairs of the new republic. Appleton remarked: ‘Of all living creatures so far as temperament goes and the character of race, they are the least fitted for self-government.’¹⁹ Appleton’s racial perspective towards French revolutionary ineptitude was echoed elsewhere among American expatriates. Upon observing Slavic rebels organizing to fight for independence from the Habsburg empire, Elizabeth Stiles, the wife of the US chargé d’affaires to Austria, complained: ‘How unfit [these] people are for the changes taking place. . . . Too much equality is worse than too little. I am daily becoming less a republican.’²⁰

Similarly, a US agent, A. Dudley Mann, sent to Hungary by President Zachary Taylor to determine whether the Hungarian uprising against Austria warranted US recognition, initially wrote back to Washington: ‘I shall desire no more boundless joy than to report, “Hungary has established her independence.”’ A few months later, with Hungary’s uprising crushed by Austrian and Russian forces, Mann was still ebullient, but for a different reason. With astonishing irony he boasted that US officials were compelled ‘by reason, instead of passion’, and toasted the US Secretary of State for demonstrating that Americans never ‘lose sight of our true duty by becoming anarchists, monarchists, disunionists, false philanthropists, socialists, or communists’.²¹ Americans’ judgements of Italians were especially harsh. The US minister to the Kingdom of Sardinia felt that ‘moderation, the greatest of political virtues, is . . . a crime in the Italian mind’, while, after the Sicilian people had declared independence from the King of Naples and

19 Letter from Thomas Appleton to Nathan Appleton, 10 May 1848: Appleton Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

20 Letter from Elizabeth Stiles to Catherine MacKay, 2 July 1848: MacKay and Stiles Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

21 Letters from A. Dudley Mann to John Clayton, 13 June, 27, 9 September 1849, document no. 215 and no. 279, in US Congress, Senate Documents, 61st Congress, 2d Session, *United States Congressional Serial Set* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office 1979).

proclaimed a republic, the local US chargé d'affaires regretted, as 'a citizen of the United States that a better development of Democracy ha[d] not taken place'.²² These various critiques were as much the product of provincial American revolutionary ideology as they were assessments of European political and social circumstances.

Illustrating this retrenchment at home, American intellectuals at mid-century considered the reasons for the differences between a turbulent Europe and a halcyon America. The Harvard historian George Bancroft reflected on the European revolutions implicitly in his description of the American Revolution, which appeared in 1852:

For Europe, the crisis foreboded the struggles of generations. . . . In the impending chaos of states, the ancient forms of society, after convulsive agonies, were doomed to be broken in pieces. . . . In America, the influences of time were molded by the creative force of reason, sentiment and nature. Its political edifice rose in lovely proportions, as if to melodies of the lyre. Peacefully and without crime . . . the American Revolution . . . was most radical in its character, yet achieved with such benign tranquility, that even conservatism hesitated to censure.²³

Others also praised American revolutionary exceptionalism. The Virginia jurist Beverly Tucker distinguished between old (Anglo-Saxon) revolutions, including the American independence movement that sought 'to vindicate the rights of property', and new (continental) ones that 'assail[ed]' such rights. The French people were 'slow to understand' that the only justifiable upheavals were those ensuring that the government protected existing rights. Meanwhile, Archbishop John Hughes in New York City castigated European revolutionaries' exhibition of an 'intemperate and untimely zeal for freedom', different from Americans' experience because the latter's independence did not 'turn upon the spontaneous whim of the people to overthrow one form of government in order to substitute another'. Instead, the American Revolution had effected political change by vindicating the deliberations of 'a fair majority of the reasoning part of the community'. On account of its alleged gentleness the American Revolution '[shared] but few grounds with the revolutions in Europe'. Hughes envisioned revolutions as gradual and logical affairs; the United States had passed the test in the past, and therefore its present was virtuous. But a Europe experiencing revolutionary difficulties was corrupt.²⁴

22 Howard Marraro, 'Unpublished American documents on the Roman Republic of 1849', *Catholic Historical Review*, vol. 28, January 1943, 455–64 (460); Howard Marraro (ed.), *Diplomatic Relations between the United States and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies*, 2 vols (New York: S. F. Vanni 1951–2), i.670.

23 George Bancroft, *History of the United States*, quoted in Jack Greene (ed.), *The Ambiguity of the American Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row 1968), 49, 50, 54.

24 John Hughes, *The Church and the World. A Lecture* (New York: E. Dunigan and Brother 1850), 8, 25, 28–9.

Meanwhile, however, from the ramparts of Rome, Fuller continued to write positively of radical European politics, attempting to dispel American cynicism. She supported the Italian cause for several reasons. She tended to see the Italian people in gendered terms, remarking how ‘the habits of the Romans are so domestic’ and referring to Italy as ‘the Mother of Nations’.²⁵ When a nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, Louis Napoleon, elected president of France late in 1848, sent the French army against Rome to restore the Pope to his Vatican authority, Fuller focused on the French general Charles Oudinot, depicting his troops’ assault as the treachery of a rapist: ‘Rome will not trust him within her walls. . . . Cowardly man! He knows now that he comes upon a city which wishes to receive him only as a friend, and he cries, “With my cannon—with my bombs, I will compel you to let me betray you.”’²⁶ Like women in the United States, Italians for Fuller possessed a genius of residual intellect and spirit, though, at the time, traditional authority stifled that genius. Fuller saw in the situation in Rome a metaphor for problems she sensed bedeviling the United States. She took up the Italian revolutionary cause not only in defence of Rome, but also to call for American reform.

Revolution abroad and abolition at home

Though the markers were not obvious at the time, the United States that Fuller had left behind in the 1840s was beginning to fall apart. In 1846, the same year Fuller left for Europe, US forces invaded Mexico and, in two years, successfully occupied Mexico City and negotiated with the Mexican government for the US annexation of the territories of New Mexico and California. Many Americans rejoiced at the victory, and some even viewed success against Mexico as a springboard for similar action against European monarchies. Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan, for example, led the pro-war movement in Congress, proclaiming his belief in an ‘unlimited power of [American] expansion’. Regarding revolutionary Europe, Cass advocated severing diplomatic relations with regimes like the Habsburg empire that resisted American-style popular sovereignty, allegedly vindicated in the war with Mexico.²⁷

But American expansion and American slavery soon collided, and the question of whether the new western lands would be open to slavery would

25 Fuller, ‘Things and thoughts in Europe’, *New York Tribune*, 4 May 1848, and Fuller, ‘Undaunted Rome’, *New York Tribune*, 5 June 1849, both in ‘*These Sad But Glorious Days*’, 213, 274.

26 Fuller, ‘Things and thoughts in Europe’, *New York Daily Tribune*, 23 July 1849, in ‘*These Sad But Glorious Days*’, 298.

27 Quoted in Willard Carl Klunder, *Lewis Cass and the Politics of Moderation* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press 1996), 199.

later become a principal cause of the Civil War.²⁸ Some Americans sensed the danger: the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson predicted in 1846 that 'Mexico will poison us'.²⁹ Many others became convinced that the United States did not need radical political change of the kind that the Europeans in 1848 tried, and failed, to realize. For example, in 1848 President James Polk interpreted a Europe in upheaval as confirmation of American peacefulness, again a bequest of the American Revolution, declaring: 'While the people of other countries struggle to establish free institutions under which man may govern himself, we [Americans] are in actual enjoyment of them—a rich inheritance from our fathers.'³⁰ Americans were able to maintain the fruits of revolutionary upheaval; Europeans, as confirmed by their futile struggles for representative government in 1848–9, were not. Yet the failed 1848 revolutions had the effect in the United States of helping to persuade Americans that slavery, because it was an institution peculiar to the Americas, was not an issue requiring drastic or international measures. European efforts to accomplish dramatic political reform provided no model for Americans, many of whom believed their country to be exceptional. They therefore wrote off not only the prospects for mid-nineteenth-century European democracy but also, with more tragic consequences that would soon emerge, America's need to learn a lesson from allegedly benighted Europeans struggling for democratic reform.

Meanwhile, Margaret Fuller's words and actions in Rome signalled her radicalization. In her *New York Tribune* columns she praised the formation of Italian citizen militias to ward off Habsburg authority. Perhaps betraying her American background, she observed that these militia units were crucial for republican progress. She castigated Pope Pius IX for his refusal to help the Italian liberation movement against Austria. When Romans lynched the Pope's chief minister, Fuller applauded the assassination in her newspaper column, implicitly evoking Thomas Jefferson's infamous lusty words: 'The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.'³¹ As invading French troops neared Rome Fuller urged her fellow citizens to supply cannons to help defend the city. She proposed calling the cannons patriotic American names, like 'America', 'Columbo'

28 David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York: Harper and Row 1976); Michael Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1997).

29 James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press 1988), 51.

30 James Daniel Richardson (ed.), *Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 20 vols (New York: Bureau of National Literature and Art 1927), vi.2479.

31 Thomas Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian Boyd et al., 32 vols (to date) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1950–), xii.356.

and 'Washington'.³² Fuller envisioned Italians fulfilling the American revolutionary genius, not sabotaging it.

Beyond her newspaper writing, Fuller also took charge of a field hospital administering care to fallen soldiers defending Rome against French occupation forces. Recoiling from the carnage there she cried: 'I found myself inferior in courage to the occasion. . . . To sympathize with the poor mothers who had nursed these men, only to see them all lopped and gashed. . . . I forgot the great ideas.'³³ Such an admission shows the difference between Fuller's experience in Rome and that of the typical American abroad. As one scholar has written, young well-to-do Americans typically crossed the Atlantic eager to gain 'authoritative' cultural enrichment, and thus acquire a 'subjugating gaze', an 'elevat[ion] to the position of the authoritative knower'.³⁴ Fuller 'forgot the great ideas'; she literally rejected a search for authority and elevation in her vicarious experience among Italians demanding recognition against the odds. In her radicalization Margaret Fuller not only differed from her compatriots in her sympathy for radical change in Europe. She also moved from intellectual 'knower' to vigilante apologist, republican mother and bloodstained partisan.

But, in becoming a revolutionary partisan, Fuller emphasized the latent similarities between conditions in turbulent Europe and the allegedly peaceful United States. In dispatches to the *Tribune* in early 1848, Fuller began to link the Italian liberation movement with abolition in America. Before her European departure, Fuller had shied away from the movement to abolish slavery, on the grounds that it was too distant from her passionate commitment to bring about a changed perception of women.³⁵ Other reformers saw this as snobbery. The British writer Harriet Martineau, for example, fumed: 'while Fuller cultivated female independence, liberties of the [American] republic [were] running out.'³⁶ But in Rome Fuller exclaimed: 'How it pleases me here to think of the Abolitionists! [Their cause is] worth living and dying for[,] to free a great nation from such a threatening plague.'³⁷ This is a revealing statement. Fuller's perception of a feminized martyrdom in Italy prodded her to see American slavery and European despotism as emanating from the same system of transatlantic oppression: for her, patriarchal power, not liberal democracy, knitted the Atlantic world together. Anti-slavery and feminism therefore were not

32 Fuller, 'Things and thoughts in Europe', *New York Tribune*, 27 November 1847, in *These Sad But Glorious Days*, 160–1.

33 Margaret Fuller, *Letters of Margaret Fuller*, ed, Robert Hudspeth, 6 vols (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1983–94), v.258.

34 Stowe, *Going Abroad*, 48.

35 Francis Kearns, 'Margaret Fuller and the abolition movement', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 25, January–March 1964, 120–7.

36 Von Mehren, *Minerva and the Muse*, 94, 118.

37 Fuller, 'Things and thoughts in Europe', *New York Tribune*, 1 January 1848, in *These Sad But Glorious Days*, 166.

mutually exclusive causes but twin forms of resistance to a transatlantic evil. Fuller decided that, in their evocations of tranquil democracy, apologists for American exceptionalism were arrogant and mistaken.

Thus engaged, Fuller did her best to impugn skepticism about both Italian independence and the liberation of American slaves. In the *Tribune* she described her encounter with an American who doubted the legitimacy of the Roman republic because Romans, as he put it, 'were not like *our* people' (emphasis in original).³⁸ Fuller found such smug American travellers repugnant, for 'they talk about the degenerate state of Italy as they do about that of our slaves at home. They affirm that, because men are degraded by bad institutions, they are not fit for better.'³⁹ For many Americans, it was dangerous for 'degenerate' peoples, abroad or within the United States, to consider revolution. The majority of Americans, as Protestants, held Italians in particular suspicion on account of their Catholicism. Fuller's compatriot, the Presbyterian philanthropist Theodore Dwight, for example, published an account of the Roman republic that could only account for the Romans' establishment of a secular republic by their apparent conversion to Protestantism!⁴⁰ Similarly, many white Americans shared Thomas Jefferson's reluctant view that 'blacks . . . are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind', and therefore incapable 'in the faculties of reason' assumed to be essential to independence of mind and civic responsibility.⁴¹ In Fuller's day only the most radical of white abolitionists sought complete racial equality in the United States.⁴²

Fuller shared the anti-Catholicism of some Americans, writing 'how any one can remain a Catholic—I mean who has ever been aroused to think . . . I cannot conceive' and 'the revolution in Italy is now radical, nor can it stop till Italy become independent and united as a republic. Protestant she

38 Fuller, 'Things and thoughts in Europe', *New York Tribune*, 4 April 1849, in *ibid.*, 257.

39 Fuller, 'Things and thoughts in Europe', *New York Tribune*, 27 November 1847, in *ibid.*, 159.

40 Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans 1992), 143–245; Theodore Dwight, *The Roman Republic of 1849: With Accounts of the Inquisition, and the Siege of Rome* (New York: R. Van Dien 1851), 16, 34, 41, 237.

41 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781–2), 269–70, available on the online database Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefVirg.html> (viewed 25 October 2005). See also George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press 1971), 1–164; James Kettner, *The Development of American Citizenship, 1608–1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1978), 300–33; and Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in US History* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1997), 165–271.

42 James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* [1976] (New York: Hill and Wang 1996), 127–49.

already is.⁴³ But she did not share their racial prejudice. She praised Frederick Douglass's autobiography as 'an excellent piece of writing, and on that score to be prized as a specimen of the powers of the Black Race, which Prejudice persists in disputing', and compared racial disenfranchisement to superstitious farmers refusing to plant butternuts because of their black shell while relying only on rotten walnuts because of their lighter colour.⁴⁴

Likewise she did not believe that Italians' capacity for revolutionary virtue was fatally flawed. Decrying American newspapers' reliance on the reports from Italy of the arch-conservative *Times* of London, 'a paper . . . violently opposed to the cause of freedom', she recalled the irony of a line from a schoolbook: 'Ay, down to the dust with them, slaves as they are.'⁴⁵ For her, Italians had proven their right to freedom simply by offering revolutionary resistance against Habsburg and Bourbon authorities. Similar to the radical New Left attitude of the 1960s, Fuller believed that 'actions were . . . the guarantees and preconditions of ideas': revolutionary behaviour itself was redemptive, forming national character, not merely reflecting it.⁴⁶

The United States had once been a young republic and, against the odds, had initiated bold revolutionary action. In Fuller's view, her homeland needed to return to its radical roots. Many American abolitionists, who saw the ending of slavery as the final act of the American Revolution, shared such a view.⁴⁷ As such, by the 1850s, they would openly encourage violence against tyrannical American slave owners and even the US government.⁴⁸ Fuller never became an active abolitionist, though she might have found her way to an abolitionist meeting if she had ever returned to the United States. But the logic of her thought was that American slaves, should they, like Italian patriots, arise and accomplish a dramatic political act—an uprising

43 Fuller, 'Things and thoughts in Europe', *New York Tribune*, 13 March 1848 and 23 June 1849, in *These Sad But Glorious Days*, 205 and 278.

44 Margaret Fuller, 'Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave' and 'What fits a man to be a voter? Is it to be white within, or white without?', in *Margaret Fuller's New York Journalism*, ed. Catherine Mitchell (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press 1995), 136–8 (136) and 147–50.

45 Fuller, 'Things and thoughts in Europe', *New York Tribune*, 24 July 1849, in *These Sad But Glorious Days*, 294.

46 Dominick Cavallo, *A Fiction of the Past: The Sixties in American History* (New York: St Martin's Press 1999), 189–213; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, rev. edn (New York: Bantam 1993), 81–97, 127–9, 244–6, 285–8 (84); Robert Scott and Donald Smith, 'Rhetoric of confrontation', *Journal of Speech*, vol. 55, February 1969, 1–8.

47 Daniel McInerney, *Fortunate Heirs of Freedom: Abolition and Republican Thought* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1994).

48 Jane Pease and William Pease, 'Confrontation and abolition in the 1850s', *Journal of American History*, vol. 58, March 1972, 923–37. David Reynolds, in *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Knopf 2005), recently emphasized not only Brown's sanity but also the importance of his violence to the American anti-slavery movement.

whose objective was not simply violence but liberation—would thereby prove themselves worthy of republican citizenship.

Likewise, for Fuller, the redemption of the United States could be achieved by a single noble act, for example, by providing diplomatic and/or military assistance to the Roman republic. She called for US diplomatic recognition of the Roman republic, pointing out that ‘the only dignified ground for our Government, the only legitimate ground for any Republican Government, is to recognize for any nation the Government chosen by itself’.⁴⁹ She wryly mused that she might ask to be appointed US minister to Rome herself, except ‘woman’s day has not come yet’.⁵⁰ American revolutionary redemption could also be achieved by a radical shift in domestic policy, namely, allowing African Americans and women the opportunity to prove their republican capability by acknowledging their full civil rights. By the time Fuller left Italy in May 1850 the United States had enacted none of these policies.

The Civil War and the end of American exceptionalism

Indeed, while she was writing to America, Fuller was growing out of touch with Americans: 1850 began a conservative decade in the United States, marked by increasing inflexibility on the issue of slavery and weakening sympathy for European democrats, especially as European refugees swelled American shores. 1850 saw the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, which, because of its harshness, one historian termed the beginning of an ‘American 1848’.⁵¹ A few years later nativism would erupt into the Know-Nothing Party, committed to toughening citizenship requirements for immigrants. Lewis Cass, an advocate of American ‘manifest destiny’, sought the presidency in 1848 and the Democratic nomination for that office in 1852 on a platform of ‘popular sovereignty’ that called for local communities to decide whether or not to accept slavery. But, not surprisingly, in both years Americans chose candidates with less complicated attitudes to slavery and less bellicose positions in relation to a conservative Europe.⁵²

In the winter of 1849–50 Fuller prepared to return to the United States. She had, for the first time in her life, fallen in love with a man, a young Italian

49 Fuller, ‘Things and thoughts in Europe’, *New York Tribune*, 23 June 1849, in ‘*These Sad But Glorious Days*’, 282.

50 Fuller, ‘Things and thoughts in Europe’, *New York Tribune*, 26 January 1849, in *ibid.*, 245.

51 Michael Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf 1983), 102–9.

52 John Higham, *From Boundlessness to Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture, 1848–1860* (Ann Arbor, MI: William L. Clements Library 1969); Klunder, *Lewis Cass and the Politics of Moderation*, 195–261; Morrison, *Slavery and the American West*, 84–103, 133–42.

nobleman, by whom she had given birth to a child. (Fuller probably was not married when she became a mother, adding to the scandal about her back home in New England.) While she pondered her own circumstances she continued her observations of Europe, though she turned from analysing the present to predicting the future. She did not know it at the time, but her writings now would be her last public utterances: she drowned, along with her husband and child, when the ship carrying them to America sank near the New York coast. Sounding like a prophet, she boldly asserted: 'the next revolution will be uncompromising, [and] all forms of arbitrary lordship must be driven out.'⁵³ Her omission of the specific location of this revolution suggests her sense that the United States was not different from Europe. Failing to implement necessary democratic reforms, the United States was likely to be subject to the troubles of the 'failed' Old World. In this regard, Fuller would be vindicated in 1861 when the Civil War erupted. A violent revolution dwarfing the scenes in Europe in 1848–9, the Civil War undermined the myth that Americans, left to themselves, would always be capable of stable democratic success and leadership.

Yet, surprisingly, given her criticisms of American conservatism, Fuller's last written words anticipated a new, longstanding link between the two sides of the northern Atlantic, one that would supersede the crusty ties of patriarchy. Earlier she had declared, 'I am no bigoted Republican', but now predicted: 'for what has happened in these sad days, the entirety of Europe, at the end of this century, will be under [a] Republican form of Government'.⁵⁴ In this prophecy Fuller at once emphasized the virtues of possible global republicanism and rejected the need for such a transformation to depend exclusively on an 'American-centric' model.

During Fuller's last days and after her death her American associates were horrified at her radical turn. The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who saw Fuller in Italy, wrote home that Fuller had become 'one of the out & out *reds*' (emphasis in the original).⁵⁵ Her connection with the *Tribune* was severed, probably because rumours of her 'free love' had been circulating in New York.⁵⁶ The compilers of Fuller's memoirs—Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others—caught between honouring their friendship with her and disavowing her political opinions, were strangely silent about her final commentaries from Europe.⁵⁷ Opinion of Fuller among ordinary Americans near the time of her death is suggested by a letter written by a woman named Lucy Henry

53 Fuller, 'Italy', *New York Tribune*, 13 February 1850, in 'These Sad But Glorious Days', 321.

54 Fuller, *Letters*, v.73; Fuller, 'Italy', *New York Tribune*, 6 October 1849, in 'These Sad But Glorious Days', 313.

55 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederic Kenyon, 2 vols (New York: Macmillan 1898), i.428.

56 Joseph Jay Deiss, *The Roman Years of Margaret Fuller* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell 1969), 302–3.

57 Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Henry Channing and James Freeman Clarke (eds), *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, 2 vols (Boston: Phillips Sampson 1852).

in the rural district of Charlotte County, Virginia. Henry was writing to John Bigelow, the editor of the *New York Evening Post*, a rival of the *Tribune*, to ask for subscription information. She explained that her interest in the *Evening Post* began once she realized that '[Horace] Greeley is a socialist; [and]. . . Miss [Margaret] Fuller's papers are the most heinous articles I ever read'.⁵⁸ Henry's comment illustrates both Fuller's controversial status and her wide, if scandalized, readership at the end of her life. More generally, though, these frosty opinions suggest a larger phenomenon of anti-radicalism among Americans. At the mid-nineteenth century, in effect, the United States experienced a mild version of what in the twentieth century would be known as 'red scares'.

Margaret Fuller secured her radical status in Europe not because she exchanged American patriotism for European socialism, as some scholars have argued,⁵⁹ but because in Europe she became, too much so for the comfort of some, a clarion call for a redeemed American republicanism, matching its practice of pluralism and equality to its rhetoric.⁶⁰ Before coming to Italy Fuller travelled to France, where she met the French feminist and novelist George Sand. Fuller was in awe of Sand for her rejection of gender norms and political propriety. Sand wore men's attire, cohabitated with the composer Frederic Chopin and, during the French revolution of 1848, wrote inspirational literature and acted as a political consultant to the new government in Paris. Fuller wrote that George Sand was 'a boon precious and prized, both as a warning and a leader, for which none there can be ungrateful'.⁶¹ Margaret Fuller's radicalization and premature death meant, tragically, that she would be recognized as neither a boon nor a warning by her American homeland, until it was too late.

Moreover, Fuller's frustration with her compatriots' skepticism of Europeans' attempts to install constitutional government resonates, for two reasons, with the ambiguities of the case made today by the United States for democracy abroad. First, recent American policymakers, if they share the prejudices of their early forebears, will have difficulty supporting other nations, even ones undertaking democratic reform, which do not clearly embrace American precepts—toleration of evangelical Christianity, civic identity, sanctity of property, popular ratification of constitutional innovations—especially if those nations show signs of corruption, violence or conflicts over ethnic, religious or tribal identities. Second, Fuller argued that the Atlantic world was more complex than imagined by many of her

58 Letter from Lucy Henry to John Bigelow, 4 May 1849: John Bigelow Papers, New York Public Library, New York.

59 Bell Gale Chevigny, *Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller's Life and Writings* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press 1976), 368–95; Margaret Allen, 'The political and social criticism of Margaret Fuller', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 72, Autumn 1973, 560–73.

60 Gustafson, 'Choosing a medium', 36–7, 58–9.

61 Fuller, *Letters*, iv.256–7n1.

compatriots, one not clearly divided between liberalism on one side and authoritarianism on the other. Such a view is more troubling, yet more realistic, than a popular perspective today that bisects the world's governments into spheres of freedom and tyranny.⁶² Today, as in the mid-nineteenth century, many Americans have been mobilized in the belief that the outside world is alien and inferior, at the same time as attitudes towards domestic opposition grow harsher. Whether Americans can tolerate democratic change abroad, despite its eccentricities, and heed Margaret Fuller's warnings about the risks of mistaking short-term domestic security for sustainable democratic stability, still remains to be seen.

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⁶² Peter Baker, 'Bush doctrine is expected to get chilly reception', *Washington Post*, 23 January 2005; 'The odd couple', *The Economist*, 3 February 2005, 45.