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Republicanism in France

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Independence, the Lockean natural rights philosophy embedded in it, and the interactions within the founders' political thought of Lockean natural rights philosophy with other strains of American political thought.

Zuckert, Michael. *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism*. Princeton, N.J., 1994. This study criticizes proponents of the republican synthesis for misunderstanding the character of commonwealth ideology and proposes that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English radicals (and subsequently the American founders) combined Locke's understanding of the ends of government with a republican science of politics.

ALAN GIBSON

France

Early in July 1791, just weeks after Louis XVI's failed flight to Varennes, the marquis de Condorcet gave a speech to the Cercle Social, a Parisian political club, advocating the creation of a republic in France. This speech, in the words of Pierre Nora, "marked the conversion of the Enlightenment to the republican ideal." This trenchant observation suggests a number of themes to explore. The first and most obvious is that the declaration of the first French Republic in September 1792 was not a logical outgrowth of Enlightenment philosophy. Indeed, for most thinkers of the French Enlightenment, republicanism was not an ideal at all, but rather a discredited form of government that had been shown historically to lead either to mob rule and anarchy or to tyranny. Second, among the revolutionaries themselves, there were still very few committed republicans as late as the summer of 1791. Even in the midst of the crisis triggered by the king's flight, a number of revolutionaries whom we would today consider radicals publicly disavowed the idea of a republic, and the deputies of the Constituent Assembly presented to the French people the fiction that the king had been kidnapped, in an effort to preserve public confidence in the monarchy. At least some of the people of Paris refused to accept that fiction, but when they gathered on the Champ de Mars on 17 July 1791 to sign petitions calling for the king's abdication, the marquis de Lafayette ordered the National Guard to open fire on the crowd. In the aftermath of this massacre, those who had most actively rallied the people against the king were forced into hiding, and the idea of a republic became once again disreputable. It was another year until a popular insurrection toppled the monarchy (10 August 1792), leading to the declaration of the first French Republic on 22 September 1792, despite the best efforts of the revolutionary leadership to preserve the constitutional monarchy. This first French Republic was short-lived (though Napoleon preserved the name even after declaring himself emperor), and this suggests a final theme: the difficulty that the deputies encountered in reaching consensus on a republican constitution, and their inability to put into practice a workable

republican system of government. Given the excesses of the Terror, which seemed to confirm in the minds of its critics their skepticism about republican government, it is remarkable that the ideal of a republic has remained so enduring ever since, not only among French men and women but for much of the rest of the world as well.

The Idea of Republicanism before the Revolution.

Enlightenment thinkers and French revolutionaries may have been skeptical about republicanism, but that is not to say that they never discussed it. Before the eighteenth century, however, Catholic political theorists in France made reference to republicanism chiefly to castigate the Huguenot (Protestant) minority for their alleged disloyalty to the monarchy. Across the Channel, the English Civil War, the execution of Charles I, and the eventual emergence of Oliver Cromwell as a despotic ruler did much to confirm the impression among French thinkers that republics were not a stable form of government.

Out of that political instability, however, came the writings of political theorists such as Locke, Shaftesbury, and Bolingbroke, and these drew the attention of French intellectuals in the eighteenth century. The new century also brought a revival of interest in the Greek and Roman classics. These influences are apparent in the works of Montesquieu, most notably in *L'esprit des lois* (1748). A nobleman himself and a member of the parlement of Bordeaux, Montesquieu ultimately came to be seen in France principally as an advocate of aristocratic restraint on the despotic tendencies of monarchical power. In his theoretical discussion of different forms of government, however, he devoted considerable attention to republicanism, describing at length its "ideal type"—the participatory republic exemplified by the ancient Greek polis—as well as the modern liberal republic that he had observed at first hand while living in England. Montesquieu contrasted the virtue that he viewed as an essential attribute of the populace of a republic to the honor among subjects of a monarchy and the fear that prevailed under despotism. Although Montesquieu concluded that a republican form of government was ill suited to a country like France, his emphasis on civic virtue stands as an important contribution to the French republican tradition.

The figure who looms largest in the eighteenth-century development of republican ideas in France is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, 1755) and *Du contract social* (The Social Contract, 1762), Rousseau called into question the divine right of monarchs and presented a theoretical argument that all legitimate government must derive from popular sovereignty, as expressed through the general will. Rousseau idealized the Greek city-states, particularly Sparta, but he joined Montesquieu in doubting the

applicability of the republican forms of the ancient world to the modern French state. Specifically, Rousseau insisted on the incompatibility between popular sovereignty and representation. In a country of twenty million people, a participatory republic was a virtual impossibility, and in Rousseau's view, the general will could not be expressed through representatives. Unlike Montesquieu, Rousseau scorned the English system, asserting that the English were truly free only at the moment when they participated in elections.

Some historians have questioned the influence of Rousseau on the eve of the Revolution, pointing out that, between 1762 and 1789, only two editions of *Du contract social* were published. It is worth noting, however, that his novels *La nouvelle Héloïse* and *Émile* were enormously popular during those years and contained many of his political ideas. Moreover, between 1789 and 1799, *Du contract social* was republished thirty-two times, ample evidence of an extensive reading public, and Rousseau became a virtual patron saint of the influential Jacobin clubs.

Rousseau's vision of the ideal republic placed more demands on its citizens than did Montesquieu's, calling on them to sacrifice individual interests to the civic community of virtue, the *res publica* of the ancient city-states. It was for this same reason, in part, that Denis Diderot, coeditor of the *Encyclopédie*, considered the republic unsuited to the modern nation-state. Human psychology had changed, in his view; modern men desired happiness and self-fulfillment and were no longer willing to devote themselves entirely to the common good. It is not surprising that the entry "Republic" in the *Encyclopédie*, written by Louis Jaucourt, focused almost entirely on the ancient republics and described the form as historically outmoded.

Religion and Republicanism. We must look not only to political philosophy for traces of republicanism in eighteenth-century France. Some important recent scholarship, in particular the work of Dale Van Kley, has pointed to the Jansenist controversy within the French Catholic Church as an important source of progressive political ideas critical of the excesses of absolutist monarchy. Beginning with the papal bull *Unigenitus* (1713) and culminating with an order of the archbishop of Paris in the 1750s denying them the sacraments, Jansenists found themselves the targets of concerted royal persecution. The response of the Jansenist minority to that persecution focused criticism not only on the hierarchy of the Catholic Church (by appealing to the conciliar tradition within the church), but also on the sacred character of the monarchy itself. Many Jansenists were prominent members of the parlement of Paris, the high court (largely aristocratic) responsible for registering royal edicts. When Louis XV's chancellor, Maupeou, imposed reforms in 1770 that effectively stripped the parlements of much of their authority

by creating new royal courts, the religious controversy that had simmered for twenty years became an open political controversy, with Jansenist *parlementaires* taking the lead in the pamphlet war against the Maupeou reforms.

Notable among these pamphlets was one published in Bordeaux by Guillaume-Joseph Saige, a young lawyer whose cousin sat on the parlement of Bordeaux. In his pamphlet, *Catechisme du Citoyen*, Saige combined Jansenist and Rousseauist ideas, arguing, on the one hand, that the conciliarist tradition within the French Catholic Church represented a kind of republicanism, and, on the other, that the many communes of rural France represented "so many little republics within the great republic of the French nation." So incendiary was this pamphlet, with its direct challenge to monarchical despotism and its insistence that sovereignty was embodied not in the king but in the nation, that the parlement of Bordeaux itself ordered it to be burned.

The Estates-General. A vast array of pamphlets and remonstrances defended the parlements as the legitimate constitutional restraint on royal power at the end of the ancien régime, but not all political theorists looked to those institutions for the solution to France's political woes. Two works by Gabriel Bonnot de Mably—*Observations sur l'histoire de France* (1765, 1788) and *Des Devoirs et des droits du citoyen* (Duties and Rights of the Citizen, 1789)—were published at the very moment of the ancien régime's final constitutional crisis and championed the Estates-General as the only legitimate embodiment of the nation's sovereignty. Like most of the other works cited here, Mably's writings were couched in the language of classical republicanism.

The Estates-General, convened by Louis XVI in late 1788, was a traditional institution, but it had not met since 1614. This lengthy adjournment, coinciding with the consolidation of royal absolutism, left much room for debate about both the composition of the Estates-General and the procedures for its deliberations. Six weeks of stalemate between aristocratic and commoner delegates followed the opening session on 5 May 1789; then the Estates-General underwent a revolutionary transformation. On 17 June, the majority of delegates declared themselves to be a National Assembly, no longer meeting at the pleasure of the king but rather as representatives of the nation itself. Faced with a financial crisis and popular mobilization throughout France, Louis XVI had no choice but to accept this declaration. France now became a constitutional monarchy.

The Role of the King. What was the place of the king to be in the new French polity? The preamble to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, adopted by the National Assembly in late August 1789, made no mention of the king, and Article III stated quite plainly

that “the principle of all sovereignty rests essentially in the nation.” While sovereignty had now shifted from the king to the people, the deputies had no intention of abolishing the monarchy. In September, the Assembly drafted articles vesting legislative authority in a unicameral legislature, while granting a suspensive veto to the king. In doing so, the deputies created an inherently unstable situation, which Robespierre would later term a “republic with a monarch at its head.” The constitution of 1791 clearly paid heed to Rousseau—the unicameral legislature was to be the embodiment of the general will—but it seemingly granted the king the power to thwart the general will, and it ignored Rousseau’s injunction that the general will could not practically be represented. Those unresolved tensions would ultimately bring down the constitutional monarchy.

That Louis XVI proved unwilling to accept his limited role as constitutional monarch should hardly be surprising, but the deputies of the Constituent Assembly, and the Legislative Assembly that followed, also were unwilling to exercise decisively the national sovereignty that they claimed to represent by deposing the recalcitrant monarch. It was the people of Paris, joined by several battalions of Marseillais and other provincials, who toppled the monarchy in a violent insurrection on 10 August 1792.

The Remains of Republicanism. One year earlier, even as he called for the creation of a republic, Condorcet had expressed his concern that the people would need to be taught what a republic was. But who was to teach them? Under the republican regime, even the most radical of the deputies, the Jacobins, remained profoundly skeptical of the ideal of popular sovereignty. Each government whittled away at it, first in the name of emergency wartime government under the Terror, and then in the name of stability and order under the Directory. If the mobilization of popular politics was responsible, almost by accident, for the creation of the French Republic, the suppression of popular politics led, almost unwittingly, to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte. The consensus of Enlightenment thinkers that a republic was not suited to a country like France seemed to have been confirmed.

[See also French Revolution; Jansenism; Political Philosophy; and Rousseau, Jean-Jacques.]

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The Netherlands

Historians long believed that Dutch political thought of the eighteenth century was not worthy of a place in the history of republicanism. Until the 1980s, there was a consensus in the historiography of republican thought that, in the Netherlands, serious theorizing about the republican state developed relatively late—from about 1650—and disappeared rather early, just before 1700. The “Golden Age” of the Dutch was not only a flowering of achievements in trade, sciences, and arts, but also their finest hour in respect to republicanism, with contributions from Baruch de Spinoza, Pieter de la Court, and Johan de la Court. After that time, however, the political Enlightenment in the Netherlands was perceived as no more than a flickering lamp.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, interest in the Dutch Enlightenment intensified, with new research by Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, Keith Baker, Robert Darnton,