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Republicanism in France

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REPUBLICANISM: The United States

REPUBLICANISM: France

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 Nore, “marked the conversion of the Enlightenment to the republican ideal.” This revolutionary 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 disguised form of government that had been repressed historically to lead either to monarchy or anarchy.

Upon a second, the awakening of revolutionaries themselves, there were very few committed republicans as late in the summer of 1791. Even in the midst of the crisis triggered by the king’s flight, a number of revolutionaries who would today consider radicals publicly disapproved the idea of a republic, and those who did approve recognized the potential attractiveness of the French people the fiction that the king had been kidnaped in an effort to preserve public confidence in the monarchy. At least some of the people of France began to accept the 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 creation of a republic in France. This speech, in the words of Pierre Nore, “marked the conversion of the Enlightenment to the republican ideal.” This revolutionary 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 disguised form of government that had been repressed historically to lead either to monarchy or anarchy.

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applicability of the republican forms of the ancient world to the modern French state. Specifically, Rousseau insisted on the incompatibility between popular sovereignty and representative government 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 contrat 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 contrat social was republished thirty-two times, ample evidence of its 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 roi public of the ancient city-states. It was for this same reason, in part, that Denis Diderot, coordinator of the Encyclopédie, considered the republic anachronistic 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 "Republique" 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 turn now 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 concluding 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 Jansenists was 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 secular authority 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, Marqués, imposed reforms in 1770 that effectively stripped the parlement 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 pamphlets taking the lead in the pamphlet war against the Marqués 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, Catéchisme du Citoyen, Saige combined Jansenist and Roussean ideas, arguing, on the one hand, that the conciliar 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 insidious 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 reconstitutions defended the parlements as the legitimate constitutional restraints 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'état de la France (1787), and De l'aytresse et des droits du citoyen ( Duties and Rights of the Citizen, 1789)—were published as 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 deliberation. 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, 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 IV stated quite plainly that "the princi­

applicability of the republican forms of the ancient world to the modern French state. Specifically, Rousseau insisted on the incompatibility between popular sovereignty and representative government. In a society of millions of people, a participatory republic was a virtual impossibility, and in Rousseau's view, the monarchical despotism of the Ancien Régime represented "so many little republics within the great republic of France." So inscrutable was this puzzle, with its direct challenge to monarchical despotism and its insistence that sovereignty was embodied not in the king but in the nation, that the parliament of Bordeaux itself ordered it to be burned.

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The Role of the King. What was the place of the king to be in the new French polity? The declaration to the Declaratory 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 was quite plain: 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 veering legislative authority in a unicameral legislature, while granting a consultative veto to the king. In doing so, they followed Rousseau, who argued that the sovereignty, which Robespierre would later term "a republic with a monarch." The constitution of 1792 clearly paid heed to Rousseau; the (social) 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 will could not practically be represented. These unresolved tensions would ultimately bring down the constitutional monarchy.

That Louis XVI proved unwilling to accept his limited role as constitutional monarch would hardly be surprising, but the deputies of the Constituent Assembly, and the Legislative Assembly that followed, were also unwilling to exercise decisively the national sovereignty that they claimed to represent by depositing the royal authority. It was the people of Paris, joined by several batches of Parisians and other professionals, who toppled the monarchy by a violent insurrection on 10 August 1792. The Remaines of Republicanism. One year earlier, even as he called for the creation of a republic, Condorcet had echoed the sentiment that the political ideals of the ancien régime were "too fine" to be taught what a republic was. But who was to teach them? And in the face of the revolutionary republic, even the most radical of political thinkers, in particular the work of Dale Van Kley, has pointed to the political culture of the French Revolution, "the make-believe society of the Revolution," as one of the clearest examples of an overall transformation of the political culture of the French Revolution. This is the history of the political culture of the French Revolution, a story of the cultural origins of the French Revolution. It is the story of how the political culture of the French Revolution was formed, how it developed, and how it was transformed. This is the story of how the political culture of the French Revolution was formed, how it developed, and how it was transformed. This is the story of how the political culture of the French Revolution was formed, how it developed, and how it was transformed.