"CHALLENGING DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONS" ATLANTIC HISTORY ENLIGHTENMENT FRENCH REVOLUTION

The Friends of Freedom and Atlantic Democratization

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Reading time 10 minutes

This post is a part of our "Challenging Democratic Revolutions (https://ageofrevolutions.com/category/challenging-democratic-revolutions/)" series, which explores the ways in which democratic ideologies challenged Old Regimes *and* how revolutionaries challenged notions of democratic liberty.

By *Micah Alpaugh*

The London Revolution Society's entry into French Revolutionary politics helped inspire the creation of the Jacobin Club network. In the French National Assembly on November 25, 1789, the session's President read a letter from the British club, which "disdaining National partialities," declared its approbation of France's revolution and "the prospect it gives to the two first Kingdoms in the World of a common participation in the blessings of Civil and Religious Liberty." By asserting the "inalienable rights of mankind," revolution could "make the World free and happy." The address produced a "great sensation and loud applause in the Assembly, which wrote back to London declaring it had seen the "aurora of the beautiful day" where the two nations could place aside their differences and "contract an intimate liaison by the similarity of their opinions, and by their common enthusiasm for liberty." Within a week, growing Anglophilia inspired the founding of Paris' own *Société de la Révolution*, which only in January 1790 adopted the better-known *Société des amis de la Constitution*, retaining the English-style nickname *Club des Jacobins*.

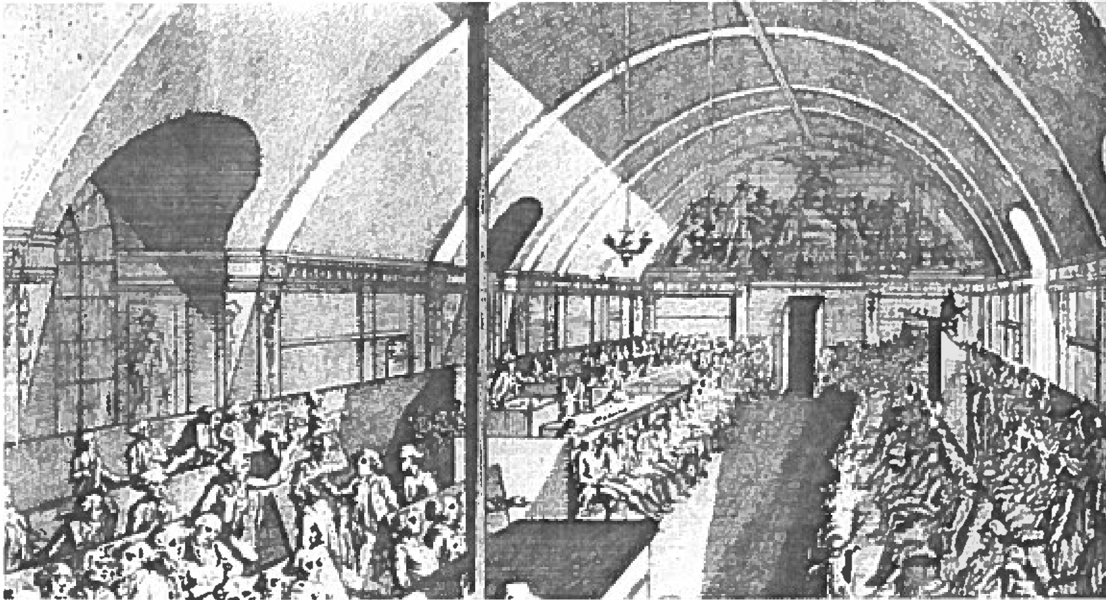

Image: [Une séance au Club des jacobins en 1791 dans la bibliothèque des Dominicains.Alexandre de Lameth préside, tandis que Mirabeau prononce un discours.](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Club_des_jacobins%252523/media/File:Club-des-jacobins.jpg) (https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Club_des_jacobins%252523/media/File:Club-des-jacobins.jpg)

Three and a half years later, events of longer-lasting direct import took place, setting the United States on its course towards modern party politics. Into Charleston harbor on April 8, 1793 sailed the French warship *L'Embuscade*. Crowds gathered by the dock, anxious to hear news of whether the French Republic had declared war on the British monarchy. Before them appeared Jacobin Edmond-Charles Genet, newly appointed French ambassador to the United States, blown six hundred miles off course from Philadelphia, who answered affirmatively to loud applause. With the Southern port town already a hotbed of pro-French sentiment, boasting a French Patriotic Society corresponding with the Paris Jacobins and affiliated with Bordeaux's *Société des amis de la liberté et de l'égalité*, Genet spent eleven days participating in Charleston banquets, reviewing parades, and commissioning pirating expeditions against British shipping. A new Charleston Republican Society took shape during his stay. Once Genet toured overland to the capital, Philadelphia enthusiasts founded a new network of popular societies – taking not the initially suggested Sons of Liberty for their name but rather, at Genet's suggestion, adopting a name describing their principles: "the Democratic Club."

Before becoming widely accepted by elite theorists, democratization was advanced on the ground level, as revolutionaries adapted international examples to craft new social movement networks. My current book project, "*Friends* of Freedom: The Interconnected Rise of Social Movements in America, Britain, Ireland, France and Haiti," examines how the trans-regional political correspondence networks of affiliated societies first crafted by the Sons of Liberty during the Stamp Act Crisis of 1765-6 inspired Atlantic reformers and revolutionaries. Britain's Wilkes and Liberty Movement in 1769 organized affiliated Societies of Supporters of the Bill of Rights with Virginian Arthur Lee soon serving as its coordinating secretary. Lee in turn wrote to Samuel Adams, encouraging him to propose the Committees of Correspondence that came to organize the American Revolutionary War. The American war led to the first organized social movement pushing for Parliamentary Reform in Britain, while Irish militias borrowing from the American example successfully pressured for Irish Parliamentary independence in 1782. The war simultaneously laid the groundwork for the rise of organized movements to abolish the slave trade and extend religious civil rights, with Anglophone activists working closely in tandem.

The French Revolution set off a second wave of still more radical changes. France's revolutionary Jacobin founders took explicit inspiration from the preceding groups, and the unprecedented power of their nationwide network helped inspire new movements for free blacks' political rights in the French colonies (that soon helped galvanize the Haitian Revolution), radical reform mobilization in Britain, a nonsectarian independence movement by the United Irishmen, and the rise of the Democratic-Republican Societies (and soon political party) in the United States. Each network explicitly built on international examples, pledged support to their international brethren, and remained in dialogue with sister movements. Only under the French First Republic and then in the American Democratic Party's rise would "democracy" lose its pejorative theoretical connotations and become an aspiration instead.

Organizers forged new standards for pursuing enlightenment through activism. As "friends of freedom" they commonly pledged to support their national and international brethren in sister movements against the era's worst excesses. An activist like Anglican antislavery stalwart Granville Sharp built connections with both London and Philadelphia Quakers, advocated for American political rights in the 1770s, participated in British Parliamentary reform campaigns, campaigned in favor of civil rights for English Protestant dissenters, helped develop abolitionist societies in America and France, and only then helped craft the British abolitionist corresponding societies that became the era's broadest and most inclusive campaign. Frenchman Jacques-Pierre Brissot experienced Swiss and Dutch uprisings of the 1780s, interacted with British abolitionists and reformers while living in London, and travelled across much of the United States in 1788 (meeting revolutionary veterans and budding abolitionists), before founding France's first abolition society and helping lead the early Jacobin Club network. Despite national pride and local particularity, reformers and revolutionaries privileged potentially universal models, regularly cheering advancements occurring elsewhere, seeking out distant interactions, and looking to integrate useful examples from abroad into their own movements.

R.R. Palmer did not go far enough in his comparative *Age of the Democratic Revolution*, largely overlooking the transnational connections that made the era's revolutions an interconnected phenomenon. Two hundred years of nationalist historiographies has minimized the extent to which eighteenth-century cosmopolitans saw themselves as part of a common movement. Whereas Atlantic History, by contrast, has been criticized for its neoliberal over-emphasis on trade and elite thinkers, this study focuses on the radical subversive potential of useful organizing concepts that mobilized millions – leading to future revolutionary as well as liberal internationalism. In these political societies, activists succeeded in implementing largely democratic networks in practice – commonly featuring elected leaders, open debating, participation across social classes and a broad willingness to challenge the status quo. "Democratic Revolution," for all its (necessary) imperfection, remains one of the strongest concepts we have for describing what made the late eighteenth century revolutionary.

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Title image: Vignette en forme de sceau du Club des jacobins. À partir de l'automne 1792, le club change de nom et devient la Société des amis de la Liberté et de l'Égalité. (https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Club_des_jacobins%252523/media/File:JacobinVignette03.jpg)

Further reading:

Seth Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011.

R.R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800,* 2 volumes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959 and 1964.

Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, "Atlantic Cultures and the Age of Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly,*74, no. 4 (2017), 667-696.

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A COMMENT

"CHALLENGING DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONS" FRENCH REVOLUTION POLITICAL CULTURE

The Invention of Representative Democracy

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This post is a part of our "Challenging Democratic Revolutions (https://ageofrevolutions.com/category/challenging-democratic-revolutions/)" series, which explores the ways in which democratic ideologies challenged Old Regimes *and* how revolutionaries challenged notions of democratic liberty.

By *Katlyn Marie Carter (https://ii.umich.edu/wced/postdoctoral-fellows/2017-18-fellows/katlyn-carter.html)*

"I know well that in a democracy, it would be the people who would judge the tyrant, because in a purely democratic state, the people do everything themselves; but what we are here [in], France is not a democracy." [1] Jacobin Deputy Pierre-François-Joseph Robert made this claim in early 1793, amidst debate over whether the National Convention should hold a popular referendum on the judgment of King Louis XVI. Indeed, France was not a democracy by eighteenth century standards, it was something different: a representative regime. Democracy, at that point, mainly connoted a form of government exercised in ancient republics wherein the entire citizenry participated in governance. It was generally considered inapplicable in modern societies because, for one, they were too large—both in terms of population and geographic size.

Representative government was something distinct and Robert, for one, considered making it synonymous with democracy all but impossible. "There is no democracy with national representation," he opined, "and those who wish to adapt all the principles of democratic government to a representative government are either imbeciles who disrupt without knowing it, or rogues who knowingly disrupt in the hope of not losing the fruits of anarchy." [2]

Despite what this emphatic assertion of difference might suggest, others were beginning to think differently. The term "representative democracy" came into being in the 1790s. [3] Just a year after Robert's statement, Maximilien Robespierre himself declared that the Revolution should aim to establish "a democratic or republican government; these two words are synonyms." Democracy, he contended, was not "a state wherein the people continually assembled, manage all public affairs by themselves," or even met in groups to decide the direction of society. "Democracy is a state wherein the sovereign people, guided by laws of their own making, does all that it can properly do on its own, and does by delegates all that it cannot do itself." [4] In making such a declaration, Robespierre was redefining democracy to encompass the previously distinct form of representative government.

This eliding of terms—which intriguingly took place in both the French and English languages around the same time—has since become so naturalized that today we often fail to recognize "representative democracy" as an invention that can be traced to a particular historical moment. But blunt statements like those issued by Robert should remind us of the improbability of the emergence of this unitary concept and prompt us to interrogate anew R.R. Palmer's characterization of the Age of Revolutions as democratic. [5] As Robespierre's declaration highlights, what it meant for a government to be democratic was changing in this period—something many historians are recently investigating. [6] In the process, what had previously been considered crucial distinctions between representative government and democracy were deliberately papered over, generating tensions we continue to live with today. Recovering the salient differences between these concepts stands to break us out of tired debates over whether the Age of Revolutions was democratic and usefully direct our attention to investigating how and with what consequences representative government came to be considered a form of democracy.

Disaggregating the terms is a first step to identifying the tensions inherent in "representative democracy," many of which are due to the fact that they were previously considered unique, even incompatible terms. As Paul Friedland pointed out in the French context: "Representative democracy … was from its very inception a contradiction in terms, for the basic reason that a true democracy precluded representation." [7] Indeed, for some, political representation could not be considered a form of democracy because the latter required an active participation of the citizenry in political decision-making. On the other hand, many who advocated for the application of political representation saw it as something more than just a solution to the impossibility of applying democracy in large countries. To many, it offered particular benefits and corrected for what they considered defects of democracy. Chief among these was the need to rely on the masses and their ability to reason and determine their own best interests—an ability of which many were skeptical.

In France, political circumstances could lead to these strands of thinking appearing in unlikely places. In the midst of the king's trial, left-leaning deputy Jean-Louis Seconds argued against consulting the people on the judgment by laying out the benefits of a representative government over democracy. "Among men equal in reason or in enlightenment, the right of every one in the direction of the government and the public good, is equal for all and as a consequence all should govern if it were possible," he declared. However, this would only work if "an entire people could assemble and deliberate simultaneously," and also if the government were not founded partly on "this weakness of the reason of a large number of men, on this impossibility, and on the contradiction in the government of all." It was thus necessary to select "an elite, and a deliberative, even a guiding minority, who govern the majority" with the aim of determining "truly and really the will and reason of all." [8] In other words, the deputies had to consider the possibility that one purpose for allowing representatives to exercise popular sovereignty was simply to guarantee better decisions made by individuals endowed with superior reason. This argument may well have been made in service of political exigency. Nonetheless, the characterization of representative government as an improvement upon democracy for this specific reason is significant and telling of an attitude that was certainly present at the time.

Across the Atlantic, James Madison saw the large size of the United States as an impetus to improve upon the concept of democracy through the introduction of representative politics. Some five years before Louis XVI went on trial, in the *Federalist No.10*, Madison argued that a republic—which he described as "a government in which the scheme of representation takes place"—could avoid the pitfalls of democracy by refining public views through representative institutions. "Under such a regulation, it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose," he wrote. [9] He further argued that a large republic could increase the likelihood of this outcome by

expanding the political sphere to elicit the election of "fit characters" who would have enough distance from popular pressure and factional interests to make sound decisions on behalf of the nation. In defending the utility of the Senate, Madison wrote in the *Federalist No. 63* that such a body was necessary to guard against the people's "temporary errors and delusions." Having a body of "temperate and respectable" citizens to "check" the people until "reason, justice and truth can regain their authority over the public mind," he suggested, was a necessary precaution. [10] Madison distinguished democracy from the government outlined in the Constitution and political representation was crucial to what made them distinct, an observation Seth Cotlar has also made. [11]

In the 1790s, as the discourse of "representative democracy" began to take hold, the salient differences between the two terms were muddled. Many of the debates we still have about representative government and how it should work bear the marks of this imperfect intellectual welding. We would do well to pay more attention to precisely how these concepts differed and were then combined if for no other reason than it might afford opportunities to re-imagine our politics today.

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Title image: Le Ci-devant roi à la barre de la Convention nationale : mardi XI décembre 1792, Louis Capet dernier roi des Français fut traduit de la tour du Temple... : [estampe] / [non identifié], 1792. (https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8411694s/f1.item.r=proces%20de%20louis%20XVI)

Further Reading:

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Friedland, Paul. *Political Actors: Representative Bodies & Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.

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Endnotes:

[1] *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860, Volume 57: du 12 janvier 1793 au 28 janvier, 1793* (Paris: Librairie administrative de P. Dupont, 1862-1913), 316.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Mark Philp, "Talking about Democracy: Britain in the 1790s," in Joanna Innes and Mark Philp, *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, and Ireland, 1750-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 101-113; Ruth Scurr, "Varieties of Democracy in the French Revolution," in *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions*, pp. 57-68.

[4] Maximilien Robespierre, "Sur les Principes de Morale Politique qui Doivent Guider la Convention Nationale dans l'Administration Intérieure de la République," in *Robespierre: Textes Choisis, Tome Troisième, aout 1793-juillet 1794*, ed. Jean Poperen (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1958) pp.110-131, 113. This passage is also cited in: William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 272; Scurr, "Varieties of Democracy in the French Revolution," 66-67.

[5] R.R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: a political history of Europe and America; 1760-1800 , 2 vols.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959-1964).

[6] Seth Cotlar, "Languages of Democracy in America from the Revolution to the Election of 1800," in *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions*, pp. 13-27; Matthew Rainbow Hale, "Regenerating the World: The French Revolution, Civic Festivals, and the Forging of Modern American Democracy, 1793-1795," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (March 2017), pp. 891-920; Dana Nelson, *Commons Democracy: Reading the Politics of Participation in the Early United States* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

[6] Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies & Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 11.

[8] *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860, Volume 56: du 29 décembre 1792 au 11 janvier 1793 (Paris: Librairie administrative de P. Dupont, 1862-1913)*, 561.

[9] Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 51.

[10] *Ibid.*, 320.

[11] Cotlar, "Languages of Democracy in America from the Revolution to the Election of 1800," 20-21.

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