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Franklin, Paris and Freemasonry

A lecture given at the Grand Orient de France in Paris (October 24, 1995) to a delegation of the Philadelphia Franklin Institute

Ladies and Gentlemen, you probably know more about Benjamin Franklin than I do, including about Franklin and Freemasonry, or about Franklin and France, and I can't think of anything new or unheard of that I could inform you about—except perhaps the fact that, some time before the French Revolution, Franklin went to Orleans (60 miles south of Paris, where I teach) and was received there with great pomp by the local Masonic lodge, the main consequence of this visit being that today the largest high school in town bears the name of your illustrious compatriot (“lycée Benjamin Franklin”).

Thus, instead of just giving you facts, what I will try to do here is to link Franklin's dual relationship with France and Freemasonry to the dual context in which this relationship developed, i.e. the American community in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary Paris, and the more general framework of Masonic activism in those days.

Franklin as an American in Paris at the time of the French Revolution

When the French Revolution broke out, the population of Paris already included a number of foreigners. “Nationalism,” as we say today, had not yet emerged, and “cosmopolitanism” was the norm. The Americans, who were then the principal (and eventually the only) allies of France were given special consideration under the circumstances. Both in reality and in the hearts of the French, they stood out of the rest. Yvon Bizardel, who studied their presence in Paris during this period, discovered that over 200 Americans “had resided [in the capital] between 1789 and 1799” (Bizardel 8). This number did not take into account tourists or other short-term visitors: it included only Americans who had left evidence of their stay, and thus, only persons

whose visits were so remarkable or long enough as to appear in the printed documents of the time.

Why was there such a number of Americans in Paris, and who were they? In 1789, the intelligentsia of what we call the civilized world was attracted more than ever to France: in addition to the desire to be in Paris, traditionally the capital of fine taste and minds where Franklin had spent some nine years, there was an enormous sympathy with the new France and an eagerness to see the "land of liberty" in all its ebullience. Many therefore travelled far, and despite the obstacle of the ocean, the Americans were among the most enthusiastic visitors. Besides diplomats and special envoys sent by Congress, there were a number of intellectuals flocking to Paris to see, first-hand, the theories of the great "Philosophes" and "Encyclopedists" being put into practice, or to witness the initial steps of a revolution which, in large part, was the daughter of their own.

With regard to this pre-revolutionary and revolutionary period, history has retained but a few great names from this mass of characters: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Governor Morris, Thomas Paine, and James Monroe. This list seems obvious to us today, yet it is more than a little paradoxical. When the Revolution broke out, on 14 July 1789, Jefferson was still in Paris where he had been the official representative of his country for the past five years, but he was called back to Philadelphia and left France on October 8. It was his private secretary, William Short, who filled the gap until the nomination (much later) of Governor Morris to this post in 1792. Although Morris was already present in Paris in 1789, he only remained in the post for two short years and eventually left revolutionary France at the end of the summer of 1794. James Monroe, who succeeded him, also stayed in the capital for a mere two years. As for Thomas Paine, he only moved into Paris in September 1792: he had just been made a French citizen and elected to the Convention, but, arrested in December 1793, he was incarcerated in the Luxembourg prison for almost a year. Admiral John Paul Jones also spent a mere two years in the French capital, where he suddenly died in August 1792. While Bizardel describes Jones as the most popular of the Americans in Paris, it was the personality of Benjamin Franklin which, without ques-

tion, dominated all of the others. Ironically however, Franklin was by far the most absent of them all: he had left France in 1785, and died in Philadelphia on April 17, 1790. It was he, though, despite or due to his absence, who best embodied America in the eyes of the French—continuing after his departure, and even after his death, to exert the greatest influence on French public consciousness. This being said, the Parisians of the time had a vision of the Americans which had little to do with the examples—or samples—they had before them. The reality of these Americans was infinitely less important, it seems, than their mythical representation.

Nothing illustrates this French tendency better than the veritable cult which developed around Franklin.¹ When he arrived in Paris in 1776, he already had a flattering reputation and personified a country which, in the true sense of the word, was a dream country. Franklin represented much more than just his government or himself in Paris. If he stood for the New World better than any other American, it was because he was a kind of one-man band of Americanism and also because he was, without a doubt, the “great communicator” of his time. He actually had the makings of a legendary hero. He incarnated the political, moral and scientific values of the age of Enlightenment; his name was associated with the Pennsylvania constitution and everybody knew the part he had played in Philadelphia in the drafting of the U.S. Constitution. He wore his coonskin cap even at Versailles, and the simplicity of his garb and manners made him a sort of new Diogenes. *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, published in Paris in 1777 (price: 4 sous), spread the new principles of civic duty and common morality at all levels of society. Known for his experiments on lightning conduction, he was in 1772 triumphantly elected to the French Academy of Sciences. It was Turgot who had the honor of melting the daring man of science and the bold republican into one phrase, which itself was to become legendary: “Eripuit coelo fulmen, sceptrumque tyrannis.”

¹ See particularly James A. Leith, “Le culte de Franklin avant et pendant la Révolution française” (543-71). Also (although much less rigorous) Susan Mary Alsop, *Yankees at the Court: The First Americans in Paris*.

Franklin's glory in France was also gained through the way his image was portrayed by the various media of the time. As early as 1773, a two-volume translation of his works was published in Paris, and a host of newspaper articles were written about him. So many portraits were painted of him that he claimed to be tired of posing for them. He was included as a symbol in allegories: thus Fragonard represented him diverting the thunderbolt and ordering Mars to overthrow Tyranny. But, aside from paintings, Franklin was also depicted in a series of drawings, prints, statues (most often busts), monuments, miniatures, etc., that were exhibited in the Louvre at the time of the annual Salons. The image of Franklin found its way into the simplest households through more commonplace and popular objects, such as "figurines, wax statues, small plaques, bronze medallions, tobacco and candy boxes, coffee cups, pendants, rings and even on cloth" (Leith 557). Franklin's portrait was to be found in a great many houses and French people revered him like a household deity. He was so popular that Anacharsis Cloots went so far as to suggest that he had coined the famous phrase "*Ça ira*."² He was praised everywhere and was invited to the most fashionable salons; Masonic lodges, as we shall see, fought for his attendance, and he was celebrated in all forms of literature: encyclopaedia articles, historical monographs, satirical dialogs, plays, allegorical tales and poems. His death in 1790 marked the pinnacle of his popularity: the French National Assembly ordered three days of mourning, and the Masonic Lodge of the Nine Sisters (co-founded by Mme Helvétius, an excellent friend of his) of which he had been the "Venerable," and which was frequented by the finest minds of the time, paid homage to him in a grandiose ceremony. For the occasion, Boizot had made a sculpture of the hero at the base of which appeared this testimonial: "The life of Franklin is a hymn to divinity."³

The cult of Franklin, as already noted, survived both his departure from France and, later, his departure from the world. It was, so to speak, the presence of his absence that was used to turn him into a

² *Chronique de Paris*, May 4, 1792 (499).

³ *Tribut de la société nationale des Neuf Sœurs*, October 14, 1790, 288-91.

symbol of wise reason, austere virtue, and republican zeal. At the height of the Revolution, Franklin continued to appear in almanacs and readers. His name was hummed in popular songs. He was still represented in portraits, often in the company of Rousseau and Voltaire. His bust was carried in revolutionary celebrations. Streets and public squares were named after him, and after Robespierre was brought down, a new edition of *Poor Richard's Almanac* was recommended as a primary school textbook.⁴ The cult was so long-lived that, in 1864, Georges de Cadoudal could write: "Even today Franklin remains a demi-god . . . a model of all human virtues, classic simplicity, goodness and candor" (Cadoudal 24).

For French people and particularly Parisians, Franklin thus represented a mythical and legendary America, both perfect and almost divine in its perfection. The presence of Franklin, and thereafter the memory of his presence, served the revolutionary function of authenticating the American dream in the minds of those who, on the banks of the Seine, were dreaming of a more egalitarian and fraternal France. It was not merely by chance that he was (mis)taken for a Quaker and that his character was often adapted for the stage during the Revolution: through the image of the good Quaker and that of the "Américain de théâtre," *i.e.* the typical American as portrayed in the theater, the Revolution tried to arm itself with a particular image of the New World which, though failing to match reality, fitted its own oneiric or fantastical needs.

Kenneth McKee, who, as far as I know, has written the only reference article about the "Américain de theatre" of the period (McKee 479-91), seems to have made a serious error in interpreting the phenomenon. At any rate, his ideas clash in several places. "The Revolution," he says, "served to introduce the *real* [the emphasis is mine] American to the French theater, especially through the character and philosophy of Benjamin Franklin" (479). No, Mr. McKee, it was not the *real* American that was represented in the Paris theaters by the Quaker or by Franklin or even by George Washington (in a successful

⁴ 16 pluviôse an III. Archives nationales, F17 1331B, dossier 6, N° 167.

play by Sauvigny⁵): these were myths or symbols. The legendary Quaker, to whom every virtue was attributed and whose Philadelphia prototype was never to be discovered by genuine travellers, was mythical; mythical as well was the ethereal and allegorical Franklin whom no one ever perceived otherwise than through a voice or an image. How could these be true characters when they only served to convey a message or sway public opinion? The period called for idealized images and symbols—mirrors reflecting not American reality, but the French aspirations and fantasies of the time. In other words, what the “*Américain de théâtre*,” and more generally the American citizen, symbolized, at least for the Parisians of that period, was not so much an imagined America as a France dreaming itself away and dying to see its own reflection in the warped image of the model nation, America.

All in all, we can say that the Americans who most influenced the French Revolution were not those who resided in France, and in particular in Paris, for the longest time. On the contrary, it would seem that their influence was inversely proportional to their actual presence. Neither the nature of their characters nor their basic Americanness can explain the infatuation or fascination they aroused. Whether absent from the scene (like Jefferson), dead (like Franklin), or fallen from another planet (like the Quakers), it was their lack of reality which, lending itself so well to the illusions of the theater, had the most real impact on France—a France in need of fantasy and anxious to idealize the only model *then* at hand to create its own history.

Durand Echeverria rightly speaks of the American “dream” or “mirage” as a psychological necessity for the French in revolt. In resorting to an idealized representation of America, they could project their “aspirations upon a scene which was both accommodating and distant enough to blur the inconsistencies and contradictions” (Echeverria 140). But it is less the idealization that counts here than the projection, less the embellished image of a legendary America than the “frenchification” of that image for the sake of the cause. The Revolution did more than just “naturalize” the new America by adopting

⁵ Billardon de Sauvigny, *Vashington [sic] ou la liberté du Nouveau Monde* (1791).

some of her ideas and by bestowing the title of French citizen on several of her heroes (Washington, Hamilton, Madison, Paine, Barlow); it also “naturalized” the mythical image of the New World, and taking advantage of its vagueness, modified it so as to find in it an idealized image of itself.

Franklin, Freemasonry and the Revolution

Arriving in Paris in 1776, Franklin, who had been made a Mason when he was 25, and had then become the founding father of Freemasonry in Pennsylvania, was not long in being introduced into the Masonic circles of Paris. He even became the “Venerable” of the famous “Lodge of the Nine Sisters” in Paris where he was to preside over Voltaire’s initiation on April 7, 1778. And when Voltaire died, two months later, and was denied a regular funeral ceremony by the Catholic Church, it was Franklin who, *ex officio*, presided over the Masonic service.

Paris had then no less than 81 lodges. During the Revolution the French capital even had an “American Lodge” (known as “la loge des Américains”) which numbered 143 members.

The reality of Revolution is so complex that it would be an error to study Freemasonry as an isolated agent of change. Masonic lodges were part of a larger intellectual, institutional, and international phenomenon. They contributed to no, or very few, original ideas to the Age of Enlightenment whose ready-made philosophy catered to all their needs. It would be of little use, then, to analyze the Masonic discourse of the time because, as we shall see, the medium was in that instance the message, and it was through rites and social behavior that Masonic ideology was in fact produced. From an institutional point of view, lodges were one particular form amid a proliferation of clubs, salons, literary circles, reading associations, learned societies, scientific or philosophical academies—what we in French call “*sociétés de pensée*”: if we think of America, Franklin’s “Junto,” or the Philosophical Society, or the first Anti-Slavery Association in Philadelphia are well-known instances of this. In terms of social change, some of these active cells were more significant than others, and Robert

Palmer, author of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, was, I think, mistaken when he suggested that “reading clubs . . . were more important than Freemasonry as nurseries of pro-Revolutionary feeling.” At the time, instilling new attitudes was probably more subversive than propagating theories and doctrines. Palmer makes a good point, though, when he explains that the network of Masonry created across the Atlantic “an international and interclass sense of fellowship among men fired by ideas of liberty, progress, and reform.” The Masonic ties between France and America were particularly strong, and the fact that George Washington and most American leaders were Freemasons should not be overlooked or underestimated. On his arrival in Paris, one of the first things Franklin did to popularize the American Revolution was to join the already mentioned Lodge of the Nine Sisters; and what should be kept in mind is that, with perhaps the exception of Jefferson and Silas Deane, all of the American diplomats, envoys and negotiators in Paris were Masons, as were most of their French counterparts. In those years common membership of the Craft worked, among these Republicans and Royalists of two different countries, as a kind of political Esperanto, a higher language also understood and spoken in England by such illustrious Masons as Edmund Burke or Chatham or Wilkes.

In all lodges, whatever their affiliation, an extensive though orderly and ritualized liberty of expression and discussion was the rule—much on the model of British Parliament—together with a common practice of tolerance and open-mindedness. Therefore what Masonry actually contributed to the Revolutionary movement, in France as well as in America, was first and foremost an image of its own functioning, with its local cells operating as discreet schools of liberalism, as republics in miniature, as living laboratories of democratic and egalitarian values, as the palpable prefiguration of a new era. Belonging to a lodge was in itself a form of dissent, since the lodge worked, both *in vitro* and *in vivo*, as a social utopia experimented with against a background of universal tyranny and oppression.

If Masonry was important in the French as well as in the American Revolution, it was not as the instrument of a mythical plot, but

because, as François Furet (a well-known French historian) put it, it embodied more than anything else “the chemistry of the new power, with the social becoming political, and opinion turned into action.” By and large, Masons tended to belong to social groups that were not miles apart, so that their abstract equality within lodges was not too difficult to achieve; but what mattered politically and ideologically was the ritual itself as the living sign of a better world for all, with the lodges working in the dark as unseen vehicles of social change.

I don't want to play on words but, like all the American, British or French *Masons* with whom he used to mix, Franklin was a *builder*: the builder of a democratic system or ideal based on freedom, equality, social solidarity, and brotherhood. He is usually hailed in the United States as one of the Founding Fathers. Perhaps it would be more appropriate, especially today, especially here in Paris, to celebrate him as a “Founding Brother.”

Bernard Vincent ⁶

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⁶ Université d'Orléans, France.