

RETHINKING SOVEREIGNTY AND THE STATE: THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, THE  
INTERNATIONAL PRESS, AND THE FRENCH POLITICAL IMAGINATION

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## ABSTRACT

Steven Weber: Rethinking Sovereignty and the State: The American Revolution, the International Press, and the French Political Imagination  
(Under the direction of Jay Smith)

This paper examines the ideological content and implications of texts from Britain and North America translated and published in France during the American Revolution and situates them in political dialogues already underway in the French public sphere by the 1770s. Focused on popular sovereignty, representation in government, and public control of state finances, the paper shows how documents from America and Britain reinforced radical political arguments in France that would ultimately undermine the absolutist old regime. These texts, circulated legally in newspapers and the state-run periodical *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, communicated numerous arguments in favor of populism and public action to French readers. This thesis places those texts into the cannon of subversive writings that circulated in the French public sphere in the years before the revolution, and thus places the American Revolution into the narrative of the buildup to France's own political upheaval in 1789.

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The French political community and reading public experienced a tumultuous first half of the 1770s. In 1771, the French Chancellor Maupeou began his efforts to suppress the Parlements, the traditional legal courts of France, and centralize crown control of justice and law-making. The event became a national crisis, immortalized as the Maupeou coup. The coup ended with his dismissal and the reinstatement of the Parlements in 1774, after the death of his patron Louis XV and the rise of Louis XVI to the throne. While he did briefly calm the political scene, the new Louis also ushered in the tumultuous ministry of Turgot. While technically Minister of the Navy, he used his influence to push his more famous economic ideas. The French state under Turgot led an assault on traditional economic privileges such as guild protections and other feudal dues and unsurprisingly elicited extensive backlash. By 1776 he too found himself rapidly dismissed. For six years, the Maupeou Coup, the end of Louis XV's often disastrous attempts to navigate French political culture, the rise of a new crown, and Turgot's experiments dominated the minds of politically aware and literate Frenchmen and inspired numerous publications on economy, politics, and royal governance.

Yet by the end of 1776, the domestic crises had briefly quieted and many French readers found a new fascination: the outbreak of civil war in the British colonies. The crises in North America had already garnered significant attention from the francophone international press in the years leading up to open hostility, but from 1776 until the close of the war it appeared in almost every issue of most major papers. Chief among these were two of the most widely circulated international papers sold in France, the *Gazette de Leyde*, published in Leiden in the

Netherlands, and the *Courrier d'Avignon*, produced in the Papal state in Avignon.<sup>1</sup> The domestically produced *Gazette de France*, reformed to focus on international news in 1762, covered the war extensively as well. Eager to see the British lose valuable territory but fearful of the public reaction should France embark on an expensive war to help the American rebels, the French state also founded their own periodical, the *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, to provide information on the war and convince French readers to support the colonists. Books and pamphlets on North America erupted in this era, and published material on the topic almost doubled in France between 1775 and 1776.<sup>2</sup> Americans in France became celebrities during the war. Benjamin Franklin's stay in Paris was the most famous, but any Bostonian or Philadelphian who made the passage across the Atlantic drew attention.<sup>3</sup> The French public could not get enough.

Few have fully appreciated the intellectual depth of the Francophone print culture inspired by the American revolt, however. The newspapers, journals, pamphlets, and books on the war did not only communicate war news or details of celebrity figures like Washington and Adams. They reprinted hundreds if not thousands of pages of debate about the legitimacy of colonists' actions. Often intensely philosophical or ideological, these texts made a variety of abstract and concrete claims about the nature of government, popular action, and political economy. As they covered the American crisis, the press of the later 1770s did not give readers a respite from public discourse on government after the close of the turbulent Maupeou and Turgot

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<sup>1</sup> For an idea of the focus on Britain and its colonies, in 1776 the biweekly *Gazette de Leyde* and *Courrier d'Avignon* 1776 had only eight and three issues, respectively, that did not have a subheading for Britain or an American city.

<sup>2</sup> See Durand Echeverria, *Mirage in the West* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 39-45. Also see Durand Echeverria and Everett C. Wilkie, *The French Image of America: A Chronological and Subject Bibliography of French Books Printed before 1816 Relating to the British North American Colonies and the United States*, Vol 1 (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 312-331 for amount published just in 1776.

<sup>3</sup> Echeverria, *Mirage in the West*, see chapter 2 and particularly 38-40.

ministries. Rather, they injected American and British voices into a public dialogue on the nature of government, and often allowed for extremely radical writings to be read alongside French authors, all of which helped to reshape how French readers understood their relationship with the state.

Already by 1776 a variety of texts on economics, law, and government had begun to argue for a government whose power derived from its subjects. Subsequently, in thought and action, French people had begun to imagine themselves as a part of their state in new ways. Grounded in the idea of popular sovereignty, they argued that the power of the government came from the people and some had articulated the idea that subjects held a right to influence their state. American and British texts reprinted by the press fit into and likely bolstered this ongoing discourse. As the French press put radical American texts on sovereignty and government into this conversation among French writers and readers, they contributed to the process whereby French readers imagined themselves as the foundation for a government they had a right to influence.

The historiography of eighteenth century France has extensively explored the trend towards a French people that imagined themselves with an active role in the state. Historians like Keith Baker, Sarah Maza, and Michael Kwass have all pointed to ways in which the French people came to see themselves as involved in politics, whether or not they tangibly were.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, historians have identified various ways in which French people actively played out

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<sup>4</sup> Keith Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and Michael Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France: Liberté, Egalité, Fiscaleté*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and David Bell, *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

this imagined right. Perhaps this is most prominent in the study of French courts and legal cases. While most notable in studies of the Parlement of Paris by historians like Durand Echeverria, Julian Swann, and Dale Van Kley, many historians including Rafe Blaufarb and Amalia Kessler have demonstrated how French people used courts and legal recourse to assert their perceived right to influence state policy.<sup>5</sup> Overall, it is clear that historians have recognized the eighteenth century as a time of shifting conceptions of the relationship between citizen and state in France.

The American Revolution's role in the transformation of French political culture has been neglected in recent historiography. Older works, exemplified by the classic R. R. Palmer's *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, fit the American Revolution into an era of Atlantic fermentations culminating in the French Revolution. The way in which this occurred was unspecified, but the spirit of revolution swept the region and birthed some form of modern democracy.<sup>6</sup> Other classic studies like Echeverria's *Mirage in the West* focused on influential interpersonal experiences of Parisians who interacted with Americans during the conflict and French soldiers who participated in the war. His exploration of the influence of America on French intellectual history neglects the 1770s altogether.<sup>7</sup> More recent works have generally

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<sup>5</sup> Dale Van Kley, *Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Ancien Regime, 1750-1770*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), Julian Swann, *Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754-1774*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Durand Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution: A Study in the History of Libertarianism in France, 1770-1774*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985). Rafe Blaufarb, *The Politics of Fiscal Privilege in Provence, 1530s-1830s*, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), and Amanda Kessler, *A Revolution in Commerce: The Parisian Merchant Court and The Rise of Commercial Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Also see Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2014), Chaps 4 and 5, for use of illegal activity and popular rebellion as political acts.

<sup>6</sup> R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959). For a rare contemporary reworking of his thesis, see Jonathan Israel, *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1776-1848*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), particularly the introduction and pages 8-12 discussing Palmer.

<sup>7</sup> Echeverria, *Mirage in the West*, the second and third chapters address France and the Revolutionary War. Also see François Furet, "De l'homme sauvage à l'homme historique : l'expérience américaine dans la culture française," in *La Révolution Américain et l'Europe* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1979), 91-108, which outlines the relationship between Philosophes and an idealized America. Also see Susan Dunn, *Sister*



downplayed the importance of the American Revolution in influencing its French counterpart, though they do acknowledge the importance of America to philosophes along with the French public's fascination with American events.<sup>8</sup> This study places the American Revolution back into the narrative of the buildup to France's own revolt. It offers a nuanced look at the specific texts and stories disseminated during the revolution that reached French readers and how they fit into other trends in French literature in the period. In doing so, it illuminates the contributions of events in America and Britain during the 1770s to French dialogues on government that would, in time, undermine the old regime.

### Sources of Information

The primary way that French readers acquired news and documents related to the American revolt was through newspapers and periodicals. This study will primarily focus on *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, supported by the French Foreign Ministry, along with two important foreign newspapers, the *Courrier d'Avignon* and the *Gazette de Leyde*. The *Affaires* reprinted complete British and American texts and extensive accounts of the war in a long-form periodical, while the *Courrier* and *Gazette* had wider circulations and greater frequency of publication but provided shorter stories and excerpts from key texts and letters. All

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*Revolutions: French Lightning, American Light*, (New York: Faber & Faber, 1999) which implies the importance of interpersonal experience of men like Lafayette during the revolution in influencing the French. She also acknowledges the American Revolution as a sort of model for France. For a more thorough study of Lafayette and the revolution, see Lloyd Kramer, *Lafayette in Two Worlds: Public Cultures and Personal Identities in an Age of Revolutions*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> See Pierre Nora and Alain Clement, "L'Amérique et la France: deux révolutions et deux mondes," in *La Revolution American et l'Europe*, 329-346, as exemplary of the inherent difference between the revolutions and lack of influence by America. Also see Claude Fohlen, "The Impact of the American Revolution on France," in *The Impact of the American Revolution Abroad*, (Washington, Library of Congress, 1976), 21-40 for a brief discussion of some broad intellectual influences, but limited in depth analysis of potential influences. One notable exception to the lack of quality analysis is Julia Osman, *Citizen Soldiers and the Key to the Bastille: War, Culture and Society, 1750-1850*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), Chapter 4, 80-107, which analyzes how news reports and descriptions of the American "citizen army" influenced how the French saw their own military.

three made American and British stories and voices available to French readers throughout the course of the war.

The *Affaires* was founded in 1776 expressly to cover the war for French readers. The French foreign ministry commissioned the periodical, though the foreign minister at the time, the Comtes de Vergennes, appears to have had very limited involvement.<sup>9</sup> Edmé-Jacques Genêt, a head clerk for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and their chief English translator, served as the major figure in its production. His efforts were likely aided by various other Parisians including Jean-Baptiste Robinet and Antoine Court de Gebelin, along with foreign correspondents in Britain and America. Foreign contributions most famously came from Benjamin Franklin and John Adams while they served in Paris, but this occurred only a few times throughout the journal's print run.<sup>10</sup> The periodical likely had a healthy circulation, with one historian estimating its regular print run at over 1,000 issues (in an era where most respectable periodicals printed between hundreds and a few thousand copies).<sup>11</sup> It was produced in Paris, likely from the same print houses as other state approved papers. The city of publication is printed on each issue

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<sup>9</sup> Given the often radically republican subject matter, it seems unlikely that he directed the publication. He is considered to be mostly anti-American and never displayed enthusiasm for supporting them and sought only to harm the British. See Jacob Osinga, "The Myth of the Treaties of February 6, 1778: A Case of Beautification of the Reality," in *Le Révolution Américain et l'Europe*, 371-384.

<sup>10</sup> For the likeliness of Genêt as the sole producer with some contributions from Adams and Franklin, see Peter Ascoli, "American Propaganda in the French Language Press during the American Revolution," in *La Révolution Américain et l'Europe* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1979), 291-308. For example of earlier assumptions of contributors, see Paul Leicester Ford, "Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 13, no. 2 (1889). With this lack of agreed upon authorship, this paper will refer to "the editor" and not assume Genêt as the author or translator of each piece of text.

<sup>11</sup> Ascoli, "American Propaganda in the French Language," 294. For an idea of respectable circulation totals, see Pierre Rétat, "La Diffusion du Journal en France en 1789," in *La Diffusion et la Lecture des Journaux de Langue Française sous l'Ancien Régime*, (Amsterdam: Holland University Press, 1987), 117-120.

as Antwerp, however, likely in an attempt to mimic the legitimacy of other Dutch printed papers like the *Gazette de Leyde*.<sup>12</sup>

The *Affaires* was unique in style compared to an average paper. An issue could run from sixty to one hundred pages, often without any editorial voice. The editor translated materials that supported the American cause and often printed them in full. He also sought to demonstrate the inner turmoil in Britain and reprinted long excerpts of Parliamentary debates from the Lords and Commons. The format of each individual issue was extremely unpredictable and remains ambiguous. Now collected in volumes, each new section lacks a date of publication or issue number. No section or issue specifies names of contributors to each translation or section. The early volumes of *Affaires* had clearly distinguished issues that followed a similar format. They began for some number of pages with reprinted news, usually speeches and debates from the British Parliament or accounts from American newspapers of the happenings on the North American continent. The second section generally presented a letter from an alleged “London Banker” to someone in Antwerp. These letters often provided the writer a place to insert an editorial, pro-American voice.<sup>13</sup> Later volumes occasionally contained nothing but letters, or hundreds of pages of text without letters, but likely continued to print and circulate regularly.<sup>14</sup>

The *Gazette de Leyde* and *Courrier d’Avignon* had similar formats as more conventional newspapers. Both published twice per week, generally Tuesdays and Fridays. Each paper was four pages in their standard section, though the *Gazette de Leyde* also included a four-page

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<sup>12</sup> See Osman, *Citizen Soldiers*, 87-88.

<sup>13</sup> This letter was once believed to be written by Benjamin Franklin’s secretary Edward Bancroft, but little evidence exists to support this. See Ascoli, “American Propaganda in the French Language,” 292, footnote 1. Also Ford, “Affaires de l’Angleterre” for assumption that Bancroft had been the author.

<sup>14</sup> See Edmé Jacques Genet to John Adams, July 9, 1778, Massachusetts Historical Society, Adams Papers Digital Editions, in which Genet referenced *Affaires* “No. 47” which had just been released. This implies that after the first three volumes, the texts were still subdivided and released as issues.

supplement. They printed stories, official documents or declarations, and excerpts from political speeches. During the 1770s, both papers maintained an obvious pro-American tilt. The editor of the *Gazette de Leyde* at the time was known to sympathize with the American cause and his paper reflected it.<sup>15</sup> Less is known about the feelings of the editor of the *Courrier*, but his coverage made it clear that his sympathies were with the American rebels.<sup>16</sup>

Both newspapers enjoyed a fair amount of flexibility with what they could print. The editors of these papers lived outside of French jurisdiction in the Netherlands or Papal States, which offered some freedom. As francophone presses dependent on the French market, however, they did require extensive mediation with French officials to sell in the hexagon. The French Foreign Ministry held the authority to police foreign journals entering the country and a variety of officials could play an important role in determining what made the cut to appear in the paper.<sup>17</sup> In the Netherlands, the French ambassador often took an active role in the process and pushed printers to keep stories in line with France's desired image.<sup>18</sup> Even in times of repression, however, press censorship had a long history of questionable efficacy and cursory oversight,

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<sup>15</sup> Jeremy Popkin, *News and Politics in the Age of Revolution: Jean Luzac's Gazette de Leyde*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 150-157.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, *Courrier d'Avignon* January 5, 1776, which provided an overview of the previous year. It described the "injustices" done to the colonists, the "despotism" of the British, and the way in which the colonists were taxed "without their participation." Also see René Moulinas, *L'Imprimerie, la Librairie, et la Presse à Avignon au XVIIIe Siècle*, (Grenoble; Presse Universitaires de Grenoble, 1974), especially part 2, chapter 4 for an overview of the operator of the paper, Joachim LaBlanc, during the years of the American Revolution. He had recently revived the paper in 1775 at the end of a brief French occupation of Avignon, and constantly negotiated with Vergennes and the French ambassador to secure better publishing rights in France. This may have influenced his ardent support for the American cause, but this remains unclear.

<sup>17</sup> See Carla Hesse, *Publishing and Cultural Politics in Revolutionary Paris*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), Chapter 1 and especially the chart on page 15.

<sup>18</sup> See Popkin, *News and Politics*, 140-142, and Pierre Rétat, *La Gazette d'Amsterdam Mirroir de l'Europe au XVIIIe Siècle*, (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2001), 52 for example of earlier involvement of the French ambassador in Dutch francophone printing.

particularly for foreign journals.<sup>19</sup>As the American cause also aligned with French interests, it appears the *Gazette* and *Courrier* had wide latitude to publish on America.

The crown of course more explicitly supported the ability of the *Affaires* to print radical texts as a French state-supported journal. The French state had for years carefully watched what domestic printers could publish and circulate about contemporary events. It permitted only three regular French papers the right to publish on politics: *The Gazette de France*, *Journal de Paris*, and the *Mercure de France*. Keeping their monopolistic license required staying in the state's good graces, which allowed for control of the press through self-censorship.<sup>20</sup> The Maupeou Ministry in particular had severely repressed print culture, but his fall and the rise of Turgot saw a more open policy to printing that remained in place throughout the 1770s.<sup>21</sup> Further, printers always held more flexibility on the publication of foreign news. So long as a text did not explicitly assail France, authors had significant liberty to comment on foreign events. Historian Raymond Birn acknowledges that the American Revolution was a particularly salient time for radical interpretations of international news.<sup>22</sup> What this amounted to was a muddled regime of censorship by 1776 in which a text that did not directly attack France could largely get by unchecked. And it appears the *Affaires* fell neatly into this gap with its radical publications.

The combination of lax censorship, the French desire to keep public opinion tilted against Britain and open to war, and the pro-American sentiments of these periodical editors brought a

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<sup>19</sup> Popkin, *News and Politics*, 36-37, 144-145.

<sup>20</sup> Hesse, *Publishing and Cultural Politics*, 25. Also see Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press*, 65-66.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopedie 1775-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 66-67, Popkin, *News and Politics*, 138-150, Raymond Birn, *Royal Censorship of Books in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 31, and Bob Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press: Britain and France, 1620-1800* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 68-72.

<sup>22</sup> Birn, *Royal Censorship of Books*, 73, 100.

host of radical British and American texts to French readers during the revolt. French readers likely consumed them alongside other French works that were part of the trend of French writers who had come to imagine themselves as participants in national politics. These foreign texts could bolster and support the arguments already present in the French public sphere.

Specifically, they reflected three related topics that had become particularly important in French political debates by 1776. First, they addressed the issue of sovereignty and the question of what invested a legitimate government with its power. Second, they addressed the nature of and necessity for representation in government decision-making. Third, they addressed how sovereignty and representation mattered particularly for issues of finance and taxation. Further, their arguments about these topics were often even more radical than those of most legally circulated French texts and provided readers with extensive arguments that the power of the state derived from its subjects, and that those subjects retained the right to influence that state's government.

## **Justifying the Revolt and Popular Sovereignty**

By the outbreak of the American crisis, the French public were already steeped in a robust conversation about the nature of sovereignty and the foundations of their state. As this discussion progressed, its participants produced various conceptions of a state that derived its authority from its subjects. French thinkers developed populist or contract-based notions of sovereignty, albeit without any united or standardized definition. A similar and often interwoven debate over what invested government with its authority drove the events in America, which was reflected in the francophone press coverage of the revolt. The press frequently republished texts that justified American actions with arguments reliant on popular sovereignty. As they did, the ideas from these texts became part of a wider conversation among French thinkers and readers that undermined royal conceptions of absolute sovereignty and moved towards some sort of popular basis for state power.

The crown's clear understanding of sovereign power loomed over this conversation and held firm among court elites for much of the eighteenth century. The state-sanctioned dictionary of the Académie Française from 1762 clearly demonstrated the royal view. It defined sovereignty as the "quality and authority of a sovereign prince" and added that the word also referred to the lands he ruled (i.e. his sovereign territory).<sup>23</sup> Sovereignty meant only the power that a king held over all of the lands in his domain. This definition included no formal checks on that authority. The Bourbon monarchs and their advisors took that absolutist conception of monarchical

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<sup>23</sup> *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*. 4th Edition. s.v. "souveraineté." Published in 1762, digitized by University of Chicago for *Dictionnaires d'Autrefois*.

authority to heart in their writings and actions. As noted by historian David Bell, the jurist and royal minister Henri Francois d'Aguesseau in the 1730s dismissed the idea of an imagined contract that created monarchical authority and thus any power inherent in the citizens or nobles of France. He once wrote that such an idea would "invite revolt and rebellion against all legitimate forms of power."<sup>24</sup> Legitimate power of course meant the absolute right of the king to rule over his territories. The aforementioned Maupeou assaults on the Parlements in the 1770s likewise followed the logic of the king's absolute right to rule, as he sought to remove all authorities who claimed to share the power of the state. Both in practice and in the public discourse, the crown's agents pushed an idea of an absolutely sovereign crown without formal checks on its authority.

Writers from all over the French public sphere had begun to challenge or undercut absolute conceptions of sovereignty by the 1770s. Most famously, elite intellectuals like Jean Jacques Rousseau and other philosophes made arguments for sovereignty derived from the people. Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social* described "the sovereign" as a collective power of the people to rule their society, not the right of one man to do so.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Louis de Jaucourt's entry to the *Encyclopédie* on sovereignty followed the logic of the populace as the basis for government. He defined sovereignty as the right to rule in any given political community, something "the members of that society deferred to one or a group of persons."<sup>26</sup> Jaucourt's definition made sovereignty a product of the populace rather than a power of a monarchy. Language of popular sovereignty had only intensified by the 1770s. Guillaume-Joseph de Saige's

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<sup>24</sup> See David Bell, *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1 for quote and entire introduction for use of royal sovereignty.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* trans Donald Cress, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 23-26 and Book 1 Chapters VI and VII.

<sup>26</sup> *Encyclopédie*. s.v. "souveraineté." digitized by University of Chicago.



*Catéchisme du citoyen*, written in 1775 in response to Maupeou's assault on the Parlements, was deeply grounded in radical notions of popular sovereignty.<sup>27</sup> Rousseau, Jaucourt, and Saige all wrote as part of an ever-widening challenge to absolute royal sovereignty in the French public sphere.

As they reprinted justifications for the American revolt, the French press inadvertently joined this debate over sovereignty in the second half of the 1770s. They likely had no intention to answer Maupeou or Jaucourt on the nature of government. For the largely pro-American francophone press, their real task was to present the American cause as reasonable and explain why the colonies could and should separate from Britain. But to achieve this, the papers reprinted works by Americans and Britons which frequently relied on ideas of popular sovereignty. As they did, the papers placed those works in conversation between French writers and readers that challenged the crown's absolute authority and furthered the idea that the populace held a stake in their government.

When the *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique* used translations from Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* in its first two issues, the paper's editor began his inadvertent challenge to absolute sovereignty. In their quotations of Paine, the first significant challenge to royal absolutism came from the idea that Britain and America were "foreign" countries, which justified the formation of different governments. In the first "Letter from a London Banker," the most common way the editor inserted pro-American editorials into the periodical, the banker quoted Paine's assertions that the British could not legitimately govern a territory they were so removed from. He explained that it was "loath to reason... to suppose that the American

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<sup>27</sup> Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, 109-153. In particular see page 129 for Guillaume-Joseph Saige putting "into grasp of the most simple and inept a doctrine" so difficult to understand in elite philosophy, referring to popular sovereignty and republicanism.

continent could stay long in submission to a foreign power” and the Americans would naturally have to separate.<sup>28</sup> While a straightforward enough argument, Paine’s statement of foreignness offered significant challenges to traditional royal sovereignty. To a monarch in the French style of royal absolutism, the American colonies would not have been foreign but simply another territory where he held sovereign power. The right to govern such a territory would rest with the monarch through his ownership of all the territories in his realm, geographically contiguous or not. The paper’s editor would have understood this, yet his “banker” continued to quote Paine as he claimed that the separation between colonial subjects and royal territory made it “impossible to govern (them).”<sup>29</sup>

The “banker” further reinforced the importance of separateness as he wrote in the same letter about an attack in *Common Sense* on the British royal veto over American legislation. He quoted Paine as he sarcastically asked about the veto, “do they forget that England is the home of the King, and America is not? This difference entirely changes the nature of the matter.”<sup>30</sup> In the idea of sovereignty actively promoted by the crown, such a difference would not change the king’s rights. As the king can legitimately rule all of his territories, he should hold the right to veto legislation anywhere in his realm. Yet the editor of the *Affaires* pushed Paine’s argument that the king’s separation from Americans diminished his power over them.

The more regular circulation papers the *Gazette de Leyde* and the *Courrier d’Avignon* also provided French readers a form of this foreignness argument through a language of “us” and “them” in American sources. These papers frequently quoted colonial documents that claimed a

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<sup>28</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, I, 1, 87.

<sup>29</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, I, 1, 87.

<sup>30</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, I, 1, 85.

natural separation of the British government and American colonists that inhibited Britain's right to govern its colonies. One resolution from Rhode Island on commerce, reprinted in the *Gazette de Leyde* in February of 1776, referred to "reconciliation between us and Great Britain."<sup>31</sup> A resolution from North Carolina printed just two weeks later in the *Gazette* referred to "our commerce," "our goods," and "our internal policing." The text did not even argue for independence, but rather proposed a negotiated reconciliation between "us" and the "mother-country."<sup>32</sup> Even when they did not call for complete separation, these texts built an idea that separate peoples must negotiate political settlement. These documents represented the colonists as a foreign entity and separate "we" that held their own political rights. Even as it did not explicitly claim popular sovereignty, the idea of separation pushed by the francophone press to justify American resistance undercut absolutist notions of royal sovereignty.

The editor of the *Affaires* did only so much to avoid the most radical conclusions of foreignness as he continued to present Paine to French readers. In the same "Letter from a London Banker," his quotations of Paine took the idea of foreignness and the rhetoric of "us" and "them" one step further, as he directly asserted the need for a government derived from the populace. The banker quoted his straightforward claim that "the privilege of governing ourselves is a natural right."<sup>33</sup> Paine argued for the power of "ourselves," the American colonists as a political community, to determine state policy rather than a royal figure or another state apparatus. Such an argument placed the power of the state squarely in the abstract notion of the

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<sup>31</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, February 9, 1776, 5-6.

<sup>32</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, February 20, 1776, 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, I, 1, 87.

people. For French readers who had actively or passively taken part in the wider dialogue about sovereignty, it would be all but impossible to miss the implications of Paine's statement.

As the French press attempted to justify American actions, they continued to introduce radical texts to French readers. These excerpts from Paine's *Common Sense* arrived before the French reading public alongside many American and British texts that forwarded radical ideas about sovereignty and its consequences. For a public already steeped in a debate over how to understand the relationship between the state and the people, these texts could bolster the more radical ideas in that ongoing public dialogue. French readers could conceivably have read the quotations of Paine and the letters from America in the same years they read ideas from the *Eyclopédie* or Rousseau and experienced increased assertions of public influence over the state. These publications put American texts into a conversation on sovereignty and the tenor of their coverage would only continue to become more radical as the events unfolded.

One of the most radical arguments for popular sovereignty came out of the decision of the *Affaires*' editor to fully translate and reprint Richard Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*. The *Affaires* included a complete translation of the treatise with limited textual notes from the editor, presumably written by Gênet. Price, an Englishman, wrote the *Observations* to argue for a reconciliation agreement favorable to the American colonists.<sup>34</sup> It combined overt support for the American rebels with a theoretical tract on legitimate government. To develop the theoretical portion of his argument he outlined four kinds of liberty necessary to have a legitimate and free state, the most central being the civil liberty of the

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<sup>34</sup> Also note that French readers would have been very familiar with the existence of Price's *Observations* and its notoriety. Both the *Gazette* and *Courrier* mention the text's publication and the controversy it caused. See *Gazette de Leyde*, March 29, 1776 and *Courrier d'Avignon*, April 5, 1776.

treatise's title.<sup>35</sup> Price defined civil liberty as "the power of... a society or a civil state to govern itself by its own will, or by the laws that it makes." In essence, civil liberty meant the right to popular sovereignty, as in a free state the people formed their government. And Price did not mince words about the significance of this right; "without... civil liberty, man is a poor and vile animal, without rights, without property," and should be considered enslaved.<sup>36</sup> More so than the banker's quotation of Paine, the inclusion of Price's work laid a direct challenge to the royal idea of the state and undermined any idea of absolutism. In Price's text, any people whose state does not draw its power from its people should be considered enslaved, not legitimately governed. Certainly, many French readers could see their nation failing this test.

The *Affaires* presented Price's work in a way that often allowed for French readers to easily draw parallels to their own situation. Ironically, it was the editor's attempt to downplay Price's attacks on monarchy that most obviously applied his notion of sovereignty to the French context. When Price attacked monarchies as unjust and not built on the people, the editor, presumably Gênet, retorted in an added italicized commentary, that "all government is the work of the people" and everyone consents to their state in monarchical systems.<sup>37</sup> The editor did not refute Price's basis of attack, he simply claimed that his notion of popular consent to government applied to monarchies as well. The editor even used the phrase, "Vox Populi, Vox Dei," (the voice of the people is the voice of God) to describe this, which did not appear in Price's original

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<sup>35</sup> The others were physical, moral, and religious liberty. Physical was literal liberty to act independently and moral was the liberty to act in accordance with our understanding of right and wrong. Of particular note to French readers, though less important to the argument of this paper, was the fact that religious liberty was included and described as the right to follow the kind of religion a person deemed best, and he included that without religious liberty the person or state was enslaved. This was translated in full and without objections by the editor.

<sup>36</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, III, 12, 52.

<sup>37</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, III, 12, 54-55. He interestingly chose Denmark as his example country for this kind of consent, not France.

text.<sup>38</sup> He perhaps hoped that the readers would realize the implication was that the people's voices were collected in God and realized in the king. Of course, "Vox Populi" featured far more prominently in the rhetoric of populism and popular sovereignty, especially in England, and French readers would have been familiar with its Latin and English connotations.<sup>39</sup> Whatever the intention or hoped outcome, the presentation reaffirmed Price's emphasis on the importance of the people as the basis for government and his insistence on the people having a right to govern themselves. The editor effectively argued that the people formed the basis of the French king's authority. In reality his attempts to defend the crown undercut the absolutist conception of its power and integrated commentary on the American experience into the French political world.

Even when the editors of these papers did not seek to make editorial statements on the war, their translations of official American documents provided French readers with a radical rhetoric of sovereignty. State constitutions from America, translated by the *Affaires* and later compiled into a separate tome more widely published in France, often presented abstract arguments about government formed from the people.<sup>40</sup> The constitutions often began with preambles which established as a first principle the right of a people to govern themselves. The constitution of Pennsylvania, the first translated by the *Affaires*, asserted that their new government had "the authority of the people" as its "only source and foundation."<sup>41</sup> Likewise,

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<sup>38</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, III, 12, 67.

<sup>39</sup> For evidence that the phrase normally connoted democratic politics, see similar phrasing in *Coup-D'Oeil Sur la Grande Bretagne*, (London, 1776), 2-3. The author uses the French "la voix de la Peuple est la voix de Dieu" and identifies it with the Whig notions of democracy.

<sup>40</sup> See Wilkes and Echeverria, *The French Image of America*, 367, which notes the printing of *Recueil des Loix Constitutives des Colonies Angloises* in 1778 which included all of the constitutions and bills of rights in the *Affaires*.

<sup>41</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, V, lxii. After the third book in the collected *Affaires* (Vol. III) the text ceases to have regular title pages, so it is not possible with certainty to determine the issue number. I will list the issue number for the first three volumes, but for later volumes I will list only the book and page number. Also note that page "iii" is not page "3," as when the book transitions from reprinted papers and Parliamentary debate to letters

the constitution of Delaware equally explicitly stated that “all government draws its right from the people.”<sup>42</sup> These claims within official constitutions both continued the wide dissemination of the rhetoric of popular sovereignty to the French public, and also moved the idea from an abstraction and into the world of practical politics.

The constitutions also used language that allowed the French reader to further integrate the American critiques of British monarchy into their own context. New Jersey’s constitution stated that “all constitutional authority that the King of Great Britain ever possessed in the colonies... emanated from the people, and is held by them”<sup>43</sup> In this claim, the idea of a government formed by the people retroactively applied to the British monarchy. Some French authors had taken part in a similar revisionist history and imagined that their monarchy that had always been based in popular sovereignty, and readers would clearly be able to see the parallels in American claims about Britain’s crown.<sup>44</sup> At the same time that French readers had exposure to texts that reimagined their government as formed from the consent of the governed, these American documents built arguments for both popular sovereignty as the basis for new governments and existing monarchies.

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from the “London Banker” the page numbers switch from Arabic to Roman numerals. The constitutions are within the letters, so the Pennsylvania Constitution is on page 216 of the entire book but starts on the page “lx.” This style of pagination only applies after volume three.

<sup>42</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, V, iii. Also note that the original text’s “government of right” was translated to “derives its right from” (“*tous gouvernement tire son doit du peuple*”), which unintentionally emphasized popular sovereignty.

<sup>43</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, V, clxxviii.

<sup>44</sup> For the most prominent instance of an author reimagining France’s past to fit contract based popular sovereignty, see Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, 86-108 on Gabriel Bonnot de Mably and his work *Observations sur l’histoire de France*.

## **Representation and the Case for American Self-Government**

The American and British texts reprinted by the francophone press also justified the colonial revolt by invoking the need for representation in government, a vital implication of popular sovereignty. In a conflict where so much tension rested on the issue of representation, the topic was a common theme of the translated documents. The papers relayed texts on both American demands for representation and British debates about whether American complaints had validity. As in the case of sovereignty, these reprinted sources fit into an already vibrant dialogue in French writing on representation and echoed some of the more radical opinions of that debate. Although the editors surely did not intend it, these royally approved texts reflected and reinforced some of the most radical positions in the French public sphere.

French political writings and debates had produced a host of ideas about how the people were represented in the state. For the crown's supporters, the king himself represented the interests of all his subjects. As Louis XV himself stated, "the rights and interests of the nation...are necessarily united with my rights and interests," and the crown withheld for itself the right to pursue what it saw best for its subjects.<sup>45</sup> This view of absolutist representation within the crown had come under intense scrutiny in print by 1776. Keith Baker broadly identified three major ways Frenchmen had begun to lay claims to representation. First, the Parlement of Paris presented itself as the people's representatives with the ability to check royal power. Beyond its formal role as a legal court, many members publically fashioned themselves

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<sup>45</sup> "Session of the Scourging," trans. John Rothney in *The Brittany Affair and the Crisis of the Ancien Regime*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 175-178.



as the embodiment of the people's will that could check the crown through their right to register royal acts. Second, many argued for what Baker termed social representation, representation by the three social orders of France. These authors called for the long-awaited return of the Estates General where France's orders could all make their wills collectively known to the crown. Third, and most radically, came the later developing notion of representation of all men equally, couched in a Rousseauian desire to represent the general will of all citizens.<sup>46</sup> This extreme notion of equal and direct representation had not reached wide-scale use by the 1770s, but had made its presence felt. Through the many texts which made up this debate, French readers were well aware of calls for public involvement in government by the time of the American revolt. As American and British texts on representation became available in the French public sphere, they reinforced many of the most radical arguments available in France.

The texts that addressed the nature of sovereignty inevitably touched on the connection between sovereignty and representation. Richard Price's *Observations* argued that in accordance with a society's right to govern itself, it must have the ability to consent to its laws. He stated in the *Observations* that "if the law is made by one man or by an assembly of men in the state, and not with the *unanimous consent of the nation*, the state is enslaved."<sup>47</sup> It is important to note that an "assembly of men in the state" implied an oligarchic, unelected body. Price's text clearly articulated that no king or small subset of the populace ought to make laws on behalf of the

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<sup>46</sup> See Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, chap 10 on the rise of Rousseau-inspired representative theory. Also see William Sewell, *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and What is the Third Estate*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), particularly pages 46-51, for how Rousseauian general will could become a model for representation. Rousseau, as Sewell notes, was "suspicious of representative government" (also see Book 3 Chapter 15 of Rousseau's *Social Contract* for his assertion that "the will cannot be represented"), but the Sieyès is able to use his ideas of general will to fashion a theory of representative government.

<sup>47</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, III, 12, 53-54. The translation uses the phrase "Assembly" rather than the original Paine term "Junto," which admittedly waters down Paine's harsh tone. Italicization is from the *Affaires* text.

people without their expressed consent. Further, consent must be given to the elected body that made the laws, which the Americans had been denied.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, in the *Affaires*' quotations from *Common Sense*, Paine's lament of British attempts to rule from afar led him to rhetorically ask "if representation and election do not form together too great a power to be possessed by one and the same body."<sup>49</sup> Paine's text specifically complained that the British had denied Americans elected representatives in the process of making laws. These texts intrinsically tied self-governance to representation as they argued for popular sovereignty.

The translated state constitutions from America also explicitly connected popular sovereignty to actual representation in government. The Virginia Constitution stated that "all authority arises from the people," and thus "Magistrates are their agents, their servants, and are accountable to them at all times."<sup>50</sup> Because government comes from the people, the agents of the government must actually represent them. The Maryland Constitution asserted that "the people's enjoyment of the right to actively participate in legislating is the best security to assure liberty, and the foundation of all free governments."<sup>51</sup> As in Price, a legitimate free state required representative legislatures. Further, as all of these sources tied legitimate government to representation, they frequently made abstract arguments that could reinforce domestic conversations about representation in France.

Other translated American texts published in the *Gazette de Leyde* and *Courrier d'Avignon* also reinforced the tie between sovereignty and representation. Reprinted resolutions

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<sup>48</sup> See *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, III, 12, 54-55 for Price's language of legislatures and representative bodies connected to popular consent.

<sup>49</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, I, 4, 81.

<sup>50</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, V, 5, lix.

<sup>51</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, V, 6, lxii.

of the Continental Congress frequently communicated that connection. One such resolution, published in the *Gazette de Leyde* in July of 1776, asserted that “all the powers of government are exercised under the authority of the people of these colonies.”<sup>52</sup> In an issue one month later, following their publication of the Declaration of Independence, the *Gazette* printed a statement the congress sent out with the declarations of war and independence. It asserted that “this is why we, the representatives of the United States of America, assembled in Congress...publish and declare solely, in the name and the authority of the people of the colonies,” our independence.<sup>53</sup> As the Continental Congress made idealized claims to act on behalf of the people, they demonstrated the abstract argument for representation as a realization of popular sovereignty. The congress, which the papers had made clear was an elected body, always spoke on behalf of their populace and acted with their authority. Although less directly applicable to France than abstractions, these claims made calls for representation of the populace tangible in an active institution.

British sources reprinted in the coverage of the American revolt frequently argued about the nature of Parliamentary representation alongside texts focused on the lack of American representation. Hundreds of pages of Parliamentary discourses, legislation, letters, and petitions brought much of the spectrum of debate in and around Parliament to French readers. Three central positions came through clearly throughout the pages of the *Affaires* and other papers. First, the anti-American conservatives emphasized the absolute legislative authority of the combination of crown and Parliament. Second, pro-American moderates despaired that British repression of America violated the principles of legitimate representation fundamental to British

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<sup>52</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, July 16, 1776, 7-8.

<sup>53</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, August 20, 1776, 8.

governance. Third, and only tangentially related to the war but surprisingly prominent throughout its coverage in the francophone press, the more radical wing of British politics fought for wider representation for the bourgeois of Britain and presented the war as an extension of Parliament's denial of equal representation. Each of these perspectives took for granted the importance of representation to the state and the fundamental place of Parliament in legitimate British governance.

The French press did not present the Parliamentarians opposed to American independence as heroes by any means, but their voices still prominently appeared across their pages. In speeches to the Lords or Commons in favor of the war, these men frequently relied on Parliament and thus representation to make their case against American independence. For instance, Lord Talbot's flat rejection of the legitimacy of the Continental Congress did not deny that people should have representation in government. Rather, he only rejected radical claims to absolute legislative rights of an assembled people. He claimed that the idea that a legislature alone could produce law was absurd and came from the radicals of the English Civil War, and "not a true Parliament."<sup>54</sup> Legitimate British governance rested in the "three branches of legislation," the King, Lords and Commons.<sup>55</sup> Representative legislatures could not rule alone, but nonetheless formed a vital two thirds of the governing process. His speech, quoted in full in the *Affaires*, was followed by a speech from Lord Temple. He too asserted the absolute power of legislation produced by the combination of Parliament and the crown. The combination of king, Lords, and Commons gave Britain "supreme and legislative authority over the colonies."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, I, 1, 63.

<sup>55</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, 1, 63.

<sup>56</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, I, 1, 64.

Talbot, Temple, and others claimed that Britain could legitimately force American submission because of the combination of royal power with Parliamentary approval.

The idea that Parliamentary involvement legitimized the forced submission of the colonies even appeared when the papers published official British documents. The *Affaires* reprinted one piece of legislation from 1776 produced by the House of Lords to punish the city of Boston. The act began with the phrase “the power and authority of His Majesty, by act, and the consent of the Lords spiritual and temporal, and by the Commons assembled in Parliament.”<sup>57</sup> Likewise, in a reprinted public letter in the *Affaires* King George invoked “the just dependency of the colonies to the crown and the Parliament of Great Britain.”<sup>58</sup> The *Gazette de Leyde* published a similar public letter to the king from the Lords which defended the effort to force colonial submission in order to “defend the honor of your crown and the just rights of Parliament.”<sup>59</sup> Even those who opposed the Americans highlighted the general importance of representative government. The authority of the crown remained central, but only in conjunction with representative bodies that granted it legitimacy. For a French populace familiar with the arguments for Parlement or the Estates to co-rule with the crown, such a system would have appeared far from foreign.

Opposing Parliamentarians also prominently featured representation in their arguments against the war, albeit often in different ways. In a letter against the Treason Act which punished American rebels, famously pro-American Edmund Burke claimed that the purpose of government was to represent the will of its populace. He acknowledged that “no one would

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<sup>57</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, III, 12, 262.

<sup>58</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, IV, 18.

<sup>59</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, November 15, 1776, 6-7.

doubt that Parliament is the most complete legislative authority” in Britain, yet none of this power can “support absolute injustice... which is contrary to the opinions and sentiments of the people.”<sup>60</sup> He went on to assert that “the true object of the legislature is to follow, not to compel, the will of the people.”<sup>61</sup> Even as Burke argued against the supremacy of Britain’s representative body, he grounded his arguments in the need for representation of the popular will.

The Duke of Grafton, another openly pro-American Parliamentarian, made similar arguments about the nature of the public and representation. In a speech from March of 1776 against an ultimatum to the colonists, Grafton also argued for a Parliament that reflected the will of the people. He frequently explained how “the British” would oppose the measure and that the shortcomings of the plan were evident “in the eyes of the public.”<sup>62</sup> Grafton further hoped that Parliament would both reflect the will of the populace and protect those it represented, which included Americans. Amidst a long appeal to his fellow Lords, Grafton stated his hope that “Parliament, in concert with His Majesty” would “assure the hopes of the English and the constitutional rights of the Americans to which they are subordinate.” To Grafton and many who opposed the war, popular involvement in government ought to reflect the will of the people and protect their interests. Despite the technical legality of Parliament’s war with Americans, they still grounded their opposition to such actions in ideas of representation.

These periodicals did not exclusively focus on Britain’s relationship to the war, and its coverage of their domestic debates further reinforced arguments for participatory government. This was best exemplified in the surprisingly extensive coverage of radical John Wilkes. An

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<sup>60</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, V, cxlix.

<sup>61</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, V, cl. It was directly translated as “le gout des peuples.”

<sup>62</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, I, 3, 22-26.

infamously rabbleroising Parliamentarian who strove relentlessly to expand suffrage rights in Britain, several of his speeches and letters received a full translation in the *Affaires* and weekly papers. His first appearance in the *Affaires* gave French readers a taste of his idealized vision of representative government. “The idea the most natural and most perfect in a free government,” Wilkes explained, “is, for me, that of a people assembled to determine which laws they prefer to be governed by, and establishing the rules that they believe necessary for the protection of their property and liberty.”<sup>63</sup> What Wilkes added, however, was that Britain did not allow for that ideal due to the “inequality in the representation of the people in Parliament.”<sup>64</sup> Wilkes, both in this speech and another reprinted in the *Courrier d’Avignon*, went on to explain the specific failures of representation: the so called ‘rotten boroughs’ so central to British political reform in this era. These areas were overrepresented in Parliament and compromised the true representation of the people in government, in Wilkes’ eyes. In the *Courrier* he lamented that “the influence and weight of Banbury,” a traditionally powerful but at the time sparsely populated area, “is often able to prevail over the united forces of London, Bristol, and many other of our Provinces of a greater (number of) people.”<sup>65</sup> In these translations and speeches, Wilkes made clear that the foundation of a free state was equal and elected representation. And as the *Affaires* and other newspapers reprinted his words, his radical arguments became widely available to French readers.

The reprinted tracts, speeches, letters, and acts from Britain and America reflected and reinforced many of the debates already actively occurring in the French public sphere. These

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<sup>63</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, I, 4, 10-11.

<sup>64</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, I, 4, 10.

<sup>65</sup> *Courrier d’Avignon*, April 16, 1776, 1.

sources brought a variety of voices that argued for the necessity of representation in a government based in popular sovereignty, the importance of representation in validating royal action, and the benefits of having representative bodies for the populace. And like in the case of sovereignty, the texts brought even more radical voices into French conversations on government. While the French people read about and debated the nature of sovereignty and representation in government, the *Affaires* and the wider press provided extensive contributions more radical than any French author could publish.



## Taking Action

Even more significant than the arguments these texts made about government was what those arguments sought to justify. All of the American and most of the British texts reprinted by the French press sought to not only support the ideas that American rebels believed about sovereignty and representation, but to legitimize their rebellious actions. Despite the fact that the French state treated these documents as propaganda rather than political treatises, their authors made a genuinely subversive argument: legitimate states derived their power from the consent of the governed, the government required representative institutions, and the public should legitimately claim these rights. If they had to rebel to stake that claim, so be it.

The French press often used American letters that argued that the need for self-government justified a war against Britain.<sup>66</sup> A letter from “Mr. Adams,” presumably John or Samuel, reprinted by the *Courrier d’Avignon* in November of 1776 glorified the American revolt as a justifiable political action of the masses. Adams waxed poetically of the revolt as “the spectacle of millions of free men who by their true will formed a community for the common defense and the general happiness.”<sup>67</sup> If the idea of forming a political community sounds like seizing on the ideals of popular sovereignty based in social contract theory, Adams deliberately framed it that way. He celebrated the “immortal spirits of Hampden, Locke, and Sydney” and

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<sup>66</sup> For instance, see *Gazette de Leyde*, February 9, 1776, 5, *Gazette de Leyde*, April 25, 1777, 3-4, and *Courrier d’Avignon*, March 5, 1776, 2.

<sup>67</sup> *Courrier d’Avignon* November 8, 1776, 1.

believed Americans could “realize all that they imagined.”<sup>68</sup> This Adams letter explicitly characterized the revolution as a popular political action to achieve the ideals of self-government. He made a democratic government created by a political community not only an abstract justification for war, but a goal that could be achieved through political action of a people.

Perhaps the most famous document to call for radical action was the Declaration of Independence, reprinted in the *Affaires* and in the *Gazette de Leyde*. The text of the Declaration may now have become so pervasive that analyzing it seems unnecessary, but it is worth recounting its claims in the context of these French political debates. The basis of the entire document lay in the ideals of political action to claim representation and popular sovereignty. The text of course began with the bold claim that a political community had the right to “dissolve the political bonds which tied them to one another” and take the powers they are entitled to in shaping a new government.<sup>69</sup> It claimed that if any government does not protect the famous rights enshrined in the document, then the “people have a right to alter or abolish it.”<sup>70</sup> Worse yet, if the government devolved into “absolute despotism,” then it is both their “right” and their “duty” to “throw off the yoke of such a government.” Though the document focused on American actions to separate from Britain, it supported the general right of men to alter their government when it ceased to serve their best interest.

For French readers, the assertion of a right to be involved in politics had precedents in word and action. By the 1770s, authors like Mably had begun to write about the need for revolutionary events to alter the structure of their government.<sup>71</sup> French lawyers and jurists had

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<sup>68</sup> *Courrier d’Avignon*, November 8, 1776, 1.

<sup>69</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, August 30, 1776.

<sup>70</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, August 30, 1776.

<sup>71</sup> Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, chaps 4 and 9.

challenged the crown's authority in the courts and in their legal writings. Parisian barristers had begun to carve out their own "political" sphere apart from the crown where they challenged the crown's ability to rule independently of the people's opinions and desires.<sup>72</sup> The Parlements of Paris, through various crises, had begun to claim a perceived right to take part in the governance of France. They moved beyond old claims of administering royal justice and attempted to actively check royal power.<sup>73</sup> Lower quality publications, famously termed "grub street," also actively undermined the authority of the crown. These popular underground texts took the liberty to judge government figures and decisions in the public sphere. In these actions they took part in a sort of popular political involvement.<sup>74</sup> French people had already by 1776 found ways to actively claim political rights, and a flood of texts that argued for the public's right to do so could only bolster their confidence.

Almost all of the texts printed in these papers tried to present American actions as legitimate. As American and British texts laid out principles related to sovereignty and representation in government, they also argued that people should actively claim and live out these ideals. The French press translated these texts and brought their arguments for American independence to the French public sphere, and the American and British arguments became available to many Frenchmen already prepared to pursue political activity. Those readers could scarcely miss the clear calls to action.

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<sup>72</sup> Bell, *Lawyers into Citizens*.

<sup>73</sup> See Dale Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Ancien Regime, 1750-1770*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), and Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution*.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), "The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France," *Past & Present*, 51 (1971): 81-115, and *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, (New York: Fontana Press, 1996).

## Finance, Sovereignty, and Representation

Money stood at the forefront of both the French political discourse in the second half of the eighteenth century and the publications from the American revolt. Writers in France, Britain, and the American colonies wrote tirelessly about the state's ability to legitimately collect taxes, regulate trade, and spend state funds. The subject of finance also brought together all of the constitutional issues that commentators on the American war addressed, with taxation in particular a central focus of discussions about representation and sovereignty. Given the importance of financial matters to the French public and its prominent presence in the coverage of the revolt, American and British writings most clearly resonated with French political debates when they discussed taxation and government finance.

The first and most prominent fiscal issue the francophone papers addressed was legitimate taxation. The French tax system had transformed in the century before the 1770s and had sparked lively debate in educated circles about legitimate taxation. The crown had for centuries collected taxes as seigneurial dues to the king as a feudal lord, principally in the *taille*, a tax on land theoretically owned by the king and distributed to his lords.<sup>75</sup> That system never formally ended, but in practice had almost completely transformed. Louis XIV financed his many wars and projects with new forms of more direct and regular taxation, most famously the *capitation*, an income tax of sorts, and the *dixième*, a tax on a tenth of what a person's land

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<sup>75</sup> For overview of this system, see Martin Wolfe, *The Fiscal System of Renaissance France*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), and Elizabeth Brown, *Customary Aids and Royal Finance in Capetian France*, (Cambridge: The Medieval Academy of America, 1992).

produced. These taxes theoretically disregarded social status, and thus noble groups contested the taxes for decades before some form of these taxes became the standard.<sup>76</sup>

These more direct taxes, with less regard for feudal status and founded in the “absolutist” regime of Louis XIV, reformulated the relationship between taxpayer and taxed. As nobles contested their requirement to pay the new taxes, they sparked a nationwide debate on the nature of privilege and the state. The relations between social groups became increasingly strained throughout the eighteenth century, with wealthy taxpayers who did not receive privileged status more aware of their situation, and more resentful of their noble counterparts. In one extreme instance, documented by Rafe Blaufarb, third estate lawyers in Provence sued for exemption from the *taille* in a series of trials that lasted over two hundred years, with the most intense conflicts in the eighteenth century.<sup>77</sup> Michael Kwass also demonstrated how elite contestation of regular direct taxation developed new rhetoric, where nobles and bourgeois alike used the language of citizenship and nation to contest arbitrary and despotic taxation. All of these arguments were premised on the notion that the nation should consent to its taxes. As taxation became more regular, and more consistently challenged, French people began seeing themselves as a nation of taxpayers, and questioned what that meant for their relationship with society and the state.<sup>78</sup>

Famous philosophes and prominent courts both played a major role in this new rhetoric. Mirabeau’s 1760 work *Théorie de l’impôt* remains among the most cited texts of the Enlightenment response to taxation. In it, he argued for the ideal of consent to all taxation by the

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<sup>76</sup> For overview of Louis XIV system, see Richard Bonney, *Economic Systems and State Finance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), chap 11 and 13, and Gary McCollum, *Louis XIV’s Assault on Privilege: Nicolas Desmaretz and the Tax on Wealth*, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012).

<sup>77</sup> Blaufarb, *The Politics of Fiscal Privilege*, see the introduction in particular.

<sup>78</sup> Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation*, see the introduction in particular.

populace. Diderot's *Encyclopédie* also followed in this spirit. It included several articles on taxes that supported the right to consent to taxation.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, members of the Parlements defended their right to check the king's ability to tax arbitrarily in publicly circulated remonstrances. Their statements consistently relied on the language of the "nation" and "citizens" to check despotism and defend the people.<sup>80</sup> These increasingly tense discourses around taxation had only increased in the years of Maupeou in the early 1770s and still weighed on the French reading public by 1776. As Americans and Britons argued about legitimate taxation and tied it to representation and consent, their words would unquestionably resonate with French readers with a century of taxation debates behind them.

Rhetoric of taxation figured prominently in the reprinted objections to British policy in America. Richard Price's *Observations on Civil Liberty* built one of its foundational statements on popular sovereignty through complaints about British taxation. After he claimed that the British could not govern the Americans while remaining separate from them, Price specifically took issue with the separation of the taxpayer and the tax collector. He complained that in America "the people taxed and those who tax have separate interests." As they do not have the same interests and the taxed have no say in taxation policy, the system leaves "nothing" to serve as "a barrier to oppression."<sup>81</sup> In the spirit of popular sovereignty, Price argued that the government must be tied to the populace for government and thus taxation to be legitimate. If they remained separate, the government could not legitimately draw money from the populace.

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<sup>79</sup> Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation*, chap 5.

<sup>80</sup> Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation*, chap 4.

<sup>81</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, III, 12, 119-120.

Benjamin Franklin used similar lines of argument to demand representation for American colonists. In a dialogue with a Parliamentary commission, reprinted in the *Affaires*, he argued against the Stamp Act on the basis that only representation could legitimize taxation. He described this in terms of “interior” and “exterior” taxation. Franklin accepted exterior taxation, which he described as the British right to regulate their commerce through tariffs on foreign trade. What drew his ire before Parliament was “interior taxation” drawn from the colonial population and embodied in the Stamp Act.<sup>82</sup> He did not object to all interior taxation, though, but only to interior taxation imposed on those who cannot consent through representative bodies. He explained to Parliament that “an interior tax is extracted from the inhabitants without their consent... if they are not given their proper representation.”<sup>83</sup> He explained that “I believe that an interior tax... which is based in the legislative power of England over the American people, will be rejected, seeing as there are not any of their representatives among the members that form that legislative power.”<sup>84</sup> The Americans’ lack of representation in a legislative body delegitimized the taxes that Britain imposed.

While Franklin was unquestionably the most famous American to tie taxation to representation, Lord Camden in Britain made equally clear arguments for this idea. Camden was famously tied to the phrase “no taxation without representation” after a much publicized speech in 1768 against new taxes on American colonists on the basis of their lack of seats in Parliament.<sup>85</sup> The *Affaires* reprinted a full speech to the House of Lords in 1776 where he made

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<sup>82</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, VII, ccxx.

<sup>83</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, VII, ccxxvi.

<sup>84</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, VII, ccxlv.

<sup>85</sup> See *The London Magazine* from February 1768, which headlined his “Speech on the Declaratory Bill of the Sovereignty of Great Britain over the Colonies” with “No Taxation without Representation.”

that same argument. He straightforwardly stated that “we cannot, without injustice, force the Americans to pay taxes when they are not represented in our Parliament.” Doing so “would violate... the privileges the inhabitants of the colonies have as British subject and the inalienable rights of humanity.”<sup>86</sup> Camden even extended this requirement beyond British citizens, and labeled it an inalienable right, shared by any potential reader.

Richard Price went even further than Camden in allowing French readers to see themselves in the American situation. As he explained in the *Observations* why American taxes were illegitimate, Price presented the counter example of the British, who did pay legitimate taxes. In Britain “all the freeholders and bourgeois inhabitants of town are represented” so they must accept the taxes their representative bodies create. In the colonies, on the other hand, “neither the freeholders, nor any other inhabitant... is represented.”<sup>87</sup> To Price, as for Franklin and Camden, if all free citizens have representation then they must accept their taxes. Price continued to explain that relationship by continuing in the same paragraph that “the relationship between one country to another, where representatives (of only one country) have the power to tax the other country ...is exactly the same as the relation between a country and a sole despot” with taxation power.<sup>88</sup> As Camden had claimed consent to taxes as a human right, Price explained how it applied to other monarchical systems like that of France.

Another excerpt from Franklin argued that not only did representation make taxation legitimate, but also more effective. He had presented the list of objections to new British taxes to the British Governor Shirley of Massachusetts in 1754, though the *Courrier* printed it as context

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<sup>86</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, I, 3, 89.

<sup>87</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, III, 12,119.

<sup>88</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, III, 12,119.



for the current war. The first of his reasons echoed previous points about representation, as he complained that colonists “always support most of the burden” of new taxes, yet “these public measures are not approved by the people.”<sup>89</sup> He then followed with a long list of related complaints, all of which could be rectified if Americans had a say in their public finances. He argued that “the people... can better judge that which is necessary for their defense and the means which ought to be employed to raise the money” to do so.<sup>90</sup> The colonists would happily “contribute a necessary sum for their own defense,” but the British redirected their money to other useless projects.<sup>91</sup> Franklin believed that the colonial representative bodies could solve these issues, but Parliament had rendered them “useless.”<sup>92</sup> He believed it far more legitimate and effective to allow the populace to dictate their taxes and finances.

It was also crucial that American and British writers used these financial issues to justify political action. When the *Courrier* presented Franklin’s letter to Governor Shirley of Massachusetts, they claimed that his objections to colonial taxation formed “the principles of the current war,” with which they obviously sympathized. When Price complained that “the people who are taxed and those who tax have separate interests,” he went on to explain that as a result of the separation “nothing can be a barrier to oppression besides the courage of the taxed people or the humanity of the taxer.”<sup>93</sup> Price had clearly displayed no faith in the elite who taxed and instead praised the “courage” of the Americans who acted to bring their taxation under their own

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<sup>89</sup> *Courrier d’Avignon*, February 3, 1778, 2.

<sup>90</sup> *Courrier d’Avignon*, February 3, 1778, 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Courrier d’Avignon*, February 3, 1778, 2.

<sup>92</sup> *Courrier d’Avignon*, February 3, 1778, 2.

<sup>93</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, III, 12, 119-120. It is important to note that the original *Observations* in English referred to the “abilities of the people taxed,” yet the *Affaires* translated this as “courage,” only making it more radical in language.

control. The many authors reprinted in the francophone press not only supported the idea that taxation required popular sovereignty and representative bodies, but that the people ought to act to claim that right.

## Depicting Representation and Legislative Governance

The francophone press also served a related and vital role in the course of the American crisis as they provided French readers with concrete examples of representative bodies. As mentioned earlier, the *Affaires* reprinted hundreds of pages of Parliamentary debate and commentary. The weekly papers provided regular updates and quotations from Parliamentary matters as well. All of these periodicals also explored the legislative bodies in America during the war effort. Debates from Parliament not only mattered for the arguments they contained, but also that fact that readers experienced the debate. Likewise, any American claim to representation and self-government came with examples of how a congress or legislature carried out those ideals. The papers showed how these legislatures could serve as a check on the monarchy, how they could manage financial affairs, and overall how viable democratic institutions could be. Further, the French lacked any analogous representative institution to read reports of, and the proceedings of Parliament were printed for the first time in the 1770s. While earlier papers reprinted accounts of Parliament and the Dutch States General, these issues in the 1770s brought the most in depth look into a legislative body a French reader would have had available to them. The ability to experience debate and democratic institutions through newspapers was both novel and a reinforcement of the arguments for popular involvement in government.

Perhaps the most widely covered instance of a legislative debate over the ambitions of the crown came in the 1777 Parliamentary debate over the Treason Act. The ministry intended the

bill to further limit any right to habeas corpus in the colonies and vastly expand royal power in detention of rebels. The *Affaires* printed some objections to the act, but the most extensive coverage of the process around the bill came in the weekly papers. The February 18, 1777 issue of the *Gazette de Leyde* laid out the legislative agenda for the newly reconvened Parliament, which included a bill introduced to the Commons to “authorize the king to seize and detain in prisons all persons accused or suspected of high treason,” without their rights guaranteed by the Habeas Corpus Act of 1679.<sup>94</sup> The bill sent the legislature into a frenzied debate over English rights and demonstrated how Parliament could serve as a voice of the people against government overreach.

Parliamentary opposition to the bill came swiftly, and the supplement to that same issue of the *Gazette* included the many opposition speeches. John Johnstone argued that the bill expanded the “power of the Crown already considerable” and opposed the bill in order to “restrain” further expansion. The *Gazette* noted other famous names like Fox and Townsend as they joined the list of opponents. The issue described how they “demonstrate[d] the injustice, the danger, and the ineffectiveness of the bill in question.”<sup>95</sup> The *Affaires* and *Gazette* both recorded the extensive opposition of Edmund Burke to the bill. He described it in writing as different than other bills simply in the “calamities that it would produce” and opposed its oversteps by the Parliament.<sup>96</sup> John Wilkes also appeared throughout the debate and both argued for greater respect for American independence and against the threat of the extension of monarchical power

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<sup>94</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, February 17, 1777, 3.

<sup>95</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, February 17, 1777, 7-8.

<sup>96</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, V cxxxi-clv.

over British rights.<sup>97</sup> In the end, the bill would pass, but not without extensive press coverage of the opposition in government freely allowed by the British system.

The *Affaires* also offered an extensive example of legislative involvement in royal financial planning and governing. The first issue opened with Parliamentary debate over two British military treaties and the debate on their approval. The first, with the Duke of Brunswick, would send 3,964 infantrymen and 336 cavalymen to the American continent in exchange for a subsidy of 64,500 rijksdaalders per year. The second treaty, which secured the British their well-remembered Hessian mercenaries, secured 668 infantrymen in exchange for a subsidy of 25,000 rijksdaalders. The *Affaires* printed the treaties in full, as they were presented to Parliament, and even included the dates of the troop movements and what kinds of units they secured.<sup>98</sup> The inclusion of detailed numbers may seem pedantic, but they created a very clear picture of the Parliamentary debate at hand, and offered a level of transparency foreign to French readers. Neither the French public nor any assembly of elites received such details on their own state's fiscal policy. The experience of British financial planning came alive to the reader in all of its dull and detail-oriented reality.

The *Affaires* also included extensive debate and dissent over the finances of the proposed treaties. After the text of the treaties, the issue recounted how the first minister Lord North set out a plan of attack for debate on the treaties and offered his own support. He reminded his fellow peers of the just nature of their cause and the advantageous terms on which they had secured the troops.<sup>99</sup> The Lords Cavendish and Cornwall followed him, and quickly questioned

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<sup>97</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, March 18, 1777, 3.

<sup>98</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, I, 1, 1-3. The currency rijksdaalders was translated as "rixdales."

<sup>99</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, I, 1, 3-4.

his pride in the treaty. Cavendish took issue with the financial terms and pointed out that should the war end quickly, they would continue paying the troops “for two years, after they have returned to their homes.” Lord Cornwall also took issue with the terms. He had “no doubt” that the war would end in 1776 and the two years of payments and subsidies would become wasted money.<sup>100</sup> More attacks followed, included the noted abolitionist David Hartley, who feared such payments to foreign states would degrade Britain as a major power.<sup>101</sup> After comments from “other member of the opposition,” the *Affaires* reported that “the proposition of the Lord North passed with the plurality of two hundred and forty two votes against eighty eight.”<sup>102</sup> Yet despite the treaty’s passage, the reader experienced open debate and scrutiny of the crown’s fiscal proposals.

Similar instances of financial debates in Parliament frequently appeared in the weekly papers. Detailed breakdowns of budgets and royal subsidies appeared whenever Parliament was in session, almost too often to list. The May 10, 1776 issue of the *Gazette de Leyde* discussed the “Chamber of Commons Committee on Subsidy” along with the payments they had discussed that week. Those included 1,000,000 pounds sterling for naval debt, 44,096 pounds sterling and change for “sinking funds” on debts from the previous year, and another 37,348 pounds for regular interest on debts from 1775. As usual, debate and dissent followed these proposed figures with extensive quotations from Parliamentarians.<sup>103</sup> An issue of the *Courrier d’Avignon* from April of 1777 included a back and forth with the crown to raise funds to create new lords and to

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<sup>100</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, I, 1, 5-6.

<sup>101</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, I, 1, 6-15.

<sup>102</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, I, 1, 16.

<sup>103</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, May10, 1776, 2-3.

pay the “civil list,” those who received payment from the state.<sup>104</sup> Other issues even included debates about who the civil list could include and whether to raise the crown’s requested funds.<sup>105</sup> The papers consistently demonstrated to French readers how legislative representation in royal finances operated on a detailed level.

The papers allowed the reader a look into the American colonial governments as well. They often tried to demonstrate the viability of the colonies as an opposition force worthy of French support. In doing so, they also represented the vitality of a democratic body which could conduct both domestic policy and a war effort. The *Affaires* included one letter that described the establishment of society to advance agriculture and commerce. The letter described how “the Congress” ordered the creation of societies to promote particular kinds of manufactures and the movement of the goods. The societies were to exist “under the authority of the government” but “for the benefit of their inhabitants.”<sup>106</sup> The same effort to boost the economy returned in a later issue, with the Congress further promoting the development of domestic manufactures.<sup>107</sup> The repeated attempts to promote economic growth gave the reader a sense of an organized and effective legislature.

The stories of a viable democratic system came out most clearly in the relentless description of the colonial war effort. One issue of the *Affaires* in particular delved into the planning efforts of the Congress. One extract detailed how the Congress “named a committee of five person to handle the muskets and bayonets for use in the United Colonies...and encouraging

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<sup>104</sup> *Courrier d’Avignon*, April 29, 1777, 1-2.

<sup>105</sup> *Gazette de Leyde*, April 25, 1777, 2-3, and April 29, 1777, 3-4.

<sup>106</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, II, 8, 34.

<sup>107</sup> *Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique*, II, 10, 55-56.

the manufacture of firearms.”<sup>108</sup> They later detailed the body “ordering the raising of several regiments and the arming of a great number of ships.”<sup>109</sup> These are not isolated examples from that particular issue either. The editor spent page after page detailing the congressional efforts to set up a military capable of confronting the British on land and at sea. They detailed their manufacturing efforts to produce and acquire supplies alongside their ability to actually organize the troops to use them. The war efforts continued to represent a highly competent Congress that functioned ably in a military environment.

These American and British examples offered French readers a rare look into functioning legislatures and representative bodies, and simultaneously reinforced the arguments found throughout the press coverage in favor of popular involvement in government. As French people gained exposure to radical arguments for representation or popular involvement in finance, they simultaneously read accounts of Britons and Americans who appeared to achieve these ideals. These detailed accounts thus provided readers a template to imagine their arguments, and an immediate example of their viability.

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<sup>108</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, II, 8, 20.

<sup>109</sup> *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, II, 8, 27.



## Conclusion

In 1781, with the frenzy over the American Revolution near its close, a different printing phenomenon arose for the French reading public. In February of that year, finance minister Jacques Necker issued the first public report on the French state finances. The details of the French public debt and treasury had long been well-guarded secrets, but Necker hoped to inspire reforms and confidence by making them public knowledge. In the preface to his *Compte Rendu au Roi*, he argued that the stellar credit of England did not exist because of national superiority, but because of public scrutiny. He wrote that “the public notoriety to which the state of their finances is submitted” allowed them better credit.<sup>110</sup> Perhaps more important than Necker’s decision to print the text was the reception it received. The text became a sensation, with thousands of copies circulated.<sup>111</sup> The French public was ready and eager to be involved in the finances of their state.

Necker’s sensational report reflects the rise of a French public ready to be involved in their state, and perhaps more importantly a public who believed that they deserved to be. French readers had spent years reading about ideas of sovereignty derived from the people and of the necessity for wider involvement in government. The reports and translations of texts from America provided these French actors even more radical arguments to support these ideas. And throughout the 1780s the French would act on them more and more.

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<sup>110</sup> Jacques Necker, *Compte Rendu au Roi*, (Paris, 1781), 2-3.

<sup>111</sup> Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation*, 214-215.

The presence of these American texts helps to make sense of the rise of the French public in the late eighteenth century, while simultaneously raising a host of further areas of exploration. Three conclusions are particularly significant. First, the publishing on popular involvement in the state was not purely an underground movement of banned philosophy texts and scandalous pamphlets. The *Affaires* had state backing as they reprinted the rhetoric of populism in state constitutions and the radical arguments for action of Paine, Price, and Franklin. The *Gazette de Leyde* published the entire Declaration of Independence while the *Courrier d'Avignon* circulated a letter that called for the fulfillment of Enlightenment contract theory through revolt. They had state sanction or support as they printed these messages clearly in opposition to monarchical ideals. The legal presence of these American texts both adds to the material that historians should consider in studying the public sphere. It also raises the larger question of the French state's ideas and strategies of censorship in the 1770s and 1780s. The fact that they cared enough about public opinion to allow the publication of such subversive texts to sway their readers to support foreign wars could help to understand the monarchy and court in the years before their fall.

Second, in considering what ideas and texts French thinkers and readers reacted to and integrated into their ideologies, the trove of American texts available and widely read by that public adds to the list of potentialities. The texts from America often communicated conceptions of sovereignty heavily reliant on English tradition. Often, they did not even precisely agree in their arguments, as demonstrated by the debates between Britons over the proper method of representation. Certainly, neither the trinity of king, Lords, and Commons of Britain nor the Continental Congress and state governments of the United States perfectly resembled what the revolutionaries in France would form in the decades to come. Historians have traditionally focused on the ideas that would inform revolutionary actions, but obviously a wider swath of

ideas existed and circulated amongst readers and thinkers in their dialogues on government. These texts both represent ideas that did not specifically manifest in French action and potentially how even ideas that do not become dominant can still have an impact. Certainly the broad ideas of popular sovereignty and representation were key to French political developments in the 1780s and 1790s. These texts from America and Britain may have helped to normalize the concepts even if their particular styles were not adopted.

Third, and most importantly, these texts serve to remind and reinforce that the rethinking of government in the eighteenth century did not occur in a purely national arena. The trope that heavily censored French thinkers wrote about foreign places as a sort of allegory for France to avoid the wrath of the state, the most famous example being Voltaire's *Letters on England*, often dilutes the significance of how writers and thinkers looked abroad both for inspiration and to rethink their own situation. This is not to say the censorship idea is incorrect, of course. But as French readers and authors alike took part in rethinking their relationship with the state, it is all but inconceivable that the host of information from and about Britain, America, and other nations did not impact their thoughts. Paine, Price, Adams, Franklin, and the many anonymous texts reprinted in the 1770s all spoke to the issues the French readers faced domestically. These American and British texts argued for popular sovereignty, representation in government, and financial self-management circulated in the public sphere likely contributed to interrelated and transnational developments related to those issues across the Atlantic. Their presence also raises the all-important question of how French readers reacted to them and how these British and American ideas became integrated or rejected into French intellectual culture.

While the American Revolution may still not be a direct cause of the French Revolution, it did have a significant, if undefined, impact on the French public. The events in America

brought a flood of radical texts to readers in France. Rather than inspire them to revolt or teach them new ideas they had never encountered, these texts made arguments that reinforced subversive sides of debates already raging in France in the 1770s. Despite the fact that their authors wrote in a different context and without a thought to how they might impact French readers, a coalescence of forces brought their texts to the French public. Once arrived, those who translated and published these texts put them in conversation with a host of other texts that would continue to shape popular thought, inspire political debates, and lead towards a people who saw themselves as citizens with a right to shape their political futures.

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