

English Republicanism in Revolutionary France: The Case of the Cordelier Club

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Le public Français fut plus occupé qu'on ne pense de la révolution anglaise. (FRANÇOIS GUIZOT)

The free thought of the French Revolution which makes [Guizot] shudder so convulsively, was imported into France from no other country than England. (KARL MARX)

Introduction

The last few decades of the twentieth century saw an explosion of interest in the notion of a republican tradition, and particularly in the intellectual legacy of the short-lived English Republic of the 1650s. Republican works by John Milton, Marchamont Nedham, James Harrington, Edmund Ludlow, Algernon Sidney, and Henry Neville, as well as by their lesser-known contemporaries, have received a great deal of attention in recent years.¹ Research has also focused on the republication of many

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¹ Z. Fink, *The Classical Republicans: An Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of Thought in Seventeenth-Century England* (Evanston, Ill., 1962); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J., 1975); B. Worden, "Classical Republicanism and the Puritan Revolution," in *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper*, ed. H. Lloyd-Jones,

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of these works during the eighteenth century, and on the uses to which republican ideas were put in Britain and North America.² Much less attention has, however, been paid to the reception and uses of English republican works and ideas in eighteenth-century France, or to possible links between French revolutionary republicanism and the broader republican tradition.³

V. Pearl, and B. Worden (London, 1981), pp. 182–200; B. Worden, “The Commonwealth Kidney of Algernon Sidney,” *Journal of British Studies* 24 (1985): 1–40; J. Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the English Republic, 1623–1677* (Cambridge, 1988), and *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis, 1677–1683* (Cambridge, 1991); B. Worden, “English Republicanism,” in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1750*, ed. J. Burns and M. Goldie (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 443–75, and “Marchamont Nedham and the Beginnings of English Republicanism, 1649–56,” “James Harrington and *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, 1656,” “Harrington’s *Oceana*: Origins and Aftermath, 1651–1660,” and “Republicanism and the Restoration, 1660–1683,” in *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649–1776*, ed. D. Wootton (Stanford, Calif., 1994), pp. 45–193; Q. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998); D. Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric, and Politics, 1627–1660* (Cambridge, 1999).

² C. A. Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959); B. Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); G. S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969); Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*; A. C. Houston, *Algernon Sidney and the Republican Inheritance in England and America* (Princeton, N.J., 1991).

³ Nevertheless, several useful French articles have appeared since the 1980s: O. Lutaud, “Des révolutions d’Angleterre à la Révolution Française: L’exemple de la liberté de presse ou comment Milton ‘ouvrit’ les Etats généraux,” in *Colloque international sur la Révolution Française* (Clermont-Ferrand, June 1986), pp. 115–25, and “Emprunts de la Révolution française à la première Révolution anglaise,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 37 (1990): 589–607; A. Thomson, “La Référence à l’Angleterre dans le débat autour de la République,” in *Révolution et République: L’exception française*, ed. M. Vovelle (Paris, 1994), pp. 133–44. (I am grateful to Olivier Lutaud and to Ann Thomson for providing me with copies of their articles.) R. Monnier, “‘Démocratie Représentative’ ou ‘République Démocratique’: De la Querelle des Mots (République) à la Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 3 (2001) 1–21, and “Républicanisme et Révolution Française,” *French Historical Studies* 26 (2003): 87–118. In addition, several recent Anglophone articles have addressed this issue: K. M. Baker, “Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001): 32–53; J. K. Wright, “The Idea of a Republican Constitution in Old Regime France,” in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, vol. 1, *Republicanism and Constitutionalism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Q. Skinner and M. Van Gelderen (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 289–306; M. Sonenscher, “Republicanism, State Finances and the Emergence of Commercial Society in Eighteenth-Century France—or from Royal to Ancient Republicanism and Back,” in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, vol. 2, *The Values of Republicanism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Q. Skinner and M. Van Gelderen (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 275–92; and A. Jainchill, “The Constitution of the Year III and the Persistence of Classical Republicanism,” *French Historical Studies*, 26 (2003): 399–435. (I am grateful to Kent Wright and Michael Sonenscher for allowing me to see copies of their articles prior to publication.) Keith Baker also provided some support for this approach in his *Inventing the French Revolution. Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990).

In fact, a number of individuals and groups in eighteenth-century France did demonstrate an interest in English republicanism. Many republican works were translated into French during the course of the eighteenth century, including Ludlow's *Memoirs*, Sidney's *Discourses Concerning Government*, and Nedham's *The Excellency of a Free State*.⁴ Even works that were not translated were the subject of detailed reviews in francophone Huguenot journals.⁵ Several eighteenth-century neo-Harringtonian or Commonwealth works were also translated into French. These included Thomas Gordon's *Discourses on Tacitus* and *Discourses on Sallust*; the *Independent Whig*, which Gordon had produced together with John Trenchard; and a whole collection of works by Viscount Bolingbroke, who had spent a number of years living in France.⁶ Moreover, several eighteenth-century French writers—including Henri de Boulainvilliers, the abbé Mably, and Jean-Paul Marat—produced works which have been described as having been written in a Commonwealth style.⁷

⁴ E. Ludlow, *Les Mémoires d'Edmond Ludlow, . . . contenant ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable sous le règne de Charles I jusqu'à Charles II . . . Traduit de l'anglois* (Amsterdam, 1699); A. Sidney, *Discours sur le gouvernement, par Algernon Sidney, . . . publiez sur l'original manuscrit de l'auteur, traduits de l'anglois par P.A. Samson* (La Haye, 1702; reprinted 1755); "De L'Excellence d'un État Libre, ouvrage traduit de l'Anglois," in *Les Loisirs du Chevalier d'Eon de Beaumont Ancien Ministre Plénipotentiaire de France, sur divers sujets importants d'Administration, &c. pendant son séjour en Angleterre*, 13 vols. (Amsterdam, 1774), 6:137–399.

⁵ J. Bernard, *Nouvelles de la République* (Amsterdam, 1700), "Discourses concerning Government by Algernon Sidney" (March–May 1700): 243–69, 426–56, 553–79, and "Harrington's Oceana and other works by Toland" (September 1700): 243–63; *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans par M. Monsr B*** Docteur en Droit* (Rotterdam, 1702): (1698) 15:271 and (1699) 15:521–533 (Ludlow), (1699) 16:78–88, and (1699) 16:242–48 (Milton), (1702) 19:63–75 (Sidney); P. Kemp et al, "Oceana and other works of Harrington by Toland plus an appendix containing those works omitted by Toland," *Bibliothèque Britannique* (July–September 1737): 408–30. On the French language Huguenot press see H. J. Reesink, *L'Angleterre dans les périodiques français de Hollande, 1684–1709* (Paris, 1931). On the Huguenots and their connections with the English republican tradition see M. C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London, 1981).

⁶ T. Gordon, *Discours historiques et politiques sur Tacite*, [ed. P. Daudé], 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1742; reprinted 1749 and 1751), and *Discours historiques et politiques sur Salluste; par feu Mr Gordon, traduits de l'Anglois, par un de ses amis*, [ed. P. Daudé], 2 vols. (Paris, 1759); [Baron P. H. D. von Holbach], *L'Esprit du Clergé, ou le Christianisme primitif vengé des entreprises & des excès de nos prêtres modernes. Traduit de l'anglois*, 2 vols. (London [Amsterdam?], 1767).

⁷ On Boulainvilliers see H. Ellis, *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988). Mably, *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen*, ed. J. L. Cercle (Paris, 1972); see also Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, pp. 86–106, and J. K., Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably* (Stanford, Calif., 1997). [J.-P. Marat], *The Chains of Slavery, A Work wherein the Clandestine and Villainous Attempts of Princes to Ruin Liberty are pointed out, and the Dreadful Scenes of Despotism Disclosed, to which is prefixed, An Address to the Electors of Great Britain, in order to draw their Timely Attention to the Choice of Proper Representatives in the Next Parliament* (London, 1774). A French translation was published in Paris in 1793. Marat figures in

The Revolution brought a surge of fresh interest in these ideas. Those works that had already been translated were republished, including Bolingbroke's *The Idea of a Patriot King*, Sidney's *Discourses Concerning Government*, and Gordon's *Discourses on Tacitus and Sallust*.⁸ New translations also appeared. French versions of Milton's *Areopagitica* and *A Defense of the People of England* were published under the name of the comte de Mirabeau.⁹ Though Mirabeau himself did not push the republican implications of these works, those implications were made evident when his translation of *A Defense of the People of England* was republished in 1792, by the Council of the Department of Drôme, in the context of debates over what should be done with Louis XVI.¹⁰ Mirabeau was also behind the translation of Catharine Macaulay's republican *History of England*.¹¹ In addition to the translations, a number of works appeared that drew on English republican texts and ideas. Algernon Sidney was invoked in an anonymous work of 1789, while in 1794 a history of the

Baker, "Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France" (pp. 43–47). More generally see M. Sonenscher, *Work and Wages* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 333–61 and Wright, "The Idea of a Republican Constitution in Old Regime France." I am currently engaged in research, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, examining this prerevolutionary French interest in English republican and commonwealth ideas.

⁸ Henry St. John, viscount Bolingbroke, *Des Devoirs d'un Roi patriote et portrait des ministres de tous les temps, Ouvrage traduit de l'Anglois de Bolingbroke* (Paris, 1790); A. Sidney, *Discours sur le gouvernement, par Algernon Sidney, traduits de l'anglais par P.-A. Samson. Nouvelle édition conforme à celle de 1702* (Paris, 1793); T. Gordon, *Discourses historiques, critiques et politiques... sur Tacite et sur Salluste; traduits de l'Anglois [ed. P. Daudé]. Nouvelle édition, corrigée*, 3 vols. (Paris, l'An II [1794]).

⁹ H.G., comte de Mirabeau, *Sur la liberté de la Presse, Imité de l'Anglois de Milton* (Londres [Paris], 1788). The 1792 second edition of this translation has recently been reproduced in C. Tournu, *Milton et Mirabeau Rencontre révolutionnaire* (2002), pp. 55–92; H.G., comte de Mirabeau, *Théorie de la Royauté, d'après la doctrine de Milton* (Paris, 1789). On Mirabeau and his circle see J. Bénétruy, *L'Atelier de Mirabeau: Quatre proscrits Genevois dans la tourmente révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1962). Several articles have appeared that deal specifically with Mirabeau's interest in Milton: D. M. Wolfe, "Milton and Mirabeau," *Publications of the Modern Languages Association* 49 (1934): 1116–28; Lutaud, "Des révolutions d'Angleterre à la Révolution Française"; and T. Davies, "Borrowed Language: Milton, Jefferson, Mirabeau," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. D. Armitage, A. Himy, and Q. Skinner (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 254–71. Harrington's works were also translated during the Revolution: J. Harrington, *Oeuvres Politiques de James Harrington*, trans. P. F. Henry (Paris: l'An III [1795]), and *Aphorisms Politiques*, trans. P. F. Aubin (Paris, 1795).

¹⁰ *Défense du peuple anglais, sur le jugement et la condamnation de Charles premier, roi d'Angleterre, par Milton. Ouvrage propre à éclairer sur la circonstance actuelle où se trouve la France* (Valence, 1792). This translation also appears in Tournu, *Milton et Mirabeau*, pp. 93–158.

¹¹ H.G., comte de Mirabeau, *Histoire de l'Angleterre, Depuis l'Avènement de Jacques Ier Jusqu'à la Révolution, Par Catharine Macaulay Graham. Traduit en Français et Augmentée d'un Discours Préliminaire, Contenant un Précis de l'Histoire de l'Angleterre, jusqu'à l'Avènement de Jacques I, et enrichie de(s) notes*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1791–92). Mirabeau's translation of Macaulay's *History* is mentioned in B. Hill, *The Republican Virago: The Life and Times of Catharine Macaulay, Historian* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 214–18.

English Republic appeared that was explicitly based on Ludlow's *Memoirs*.¹² There is further evidence to suggest that English republican works were read by certain revolutionaries who employed at least some of what they learnt in their own speeches and writings. The abbé Sieyès is perhaps the best-known example of this phenomenon—much has been written on his use of ideas drawn from Harrington's *Oceana*.¹³

While these translations and borrowings are certainly of interest, there remains the problem of coherence. English republican ideas were made use of by all kinds of revolutionaries, in various different ways, to justify a number of different political positions. Moreover, in many cases English republicanism was just one of many sources drawn upon. There was, however, one group of revolutionaries—associated with the radical, Paris-based Cordelier Club—who made extensive use of a substantial number of English republican works during the early 1790s. These Cordeliers used the ideas and arguments of English Republicans, and in particular Harrington and Nedham, in order to develop, justify, and support a distinctive republican vision.

The Cordelier District and Club

The area in which the Cordelier Club was situated, on the Left Bank of the Seine around what is now l'Odéon, had long been a meeting place for radical thinkers and writers. As Camille Desmoulins, who was both a local resident and later a member of the Cordelier Club, commented: "It is clear that this [area of Paris] feels the effects of being in the neighbourhood of the café Procope. . . . It is true that one no longer has the pleasure of hearing Piron, Voltaire, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, but the patriots sustain its reputation still. . . . It has the unique fame that the language of servitude has never been heard there; that the royal patrols have never entered there; and it is the only sanctuary where liberty has not been violated."¹⁴

¹² *Lettre de Felicitacion de Milord Sidney aux Parisiens et à la Nation Française, ou Résurrection de Milord Sidney second Coup de Griffé aux Renards de toute Couleur* (Paris, 1789); *Histoire de la République D'Angleterre d'après Les Mémoires d'Edmond Ludlow l'un des Principaux Chefs des Républicains Anglais Contenant: La Narration des Faits qui ont Précédé Accompagné et suivi ces Momens Lucides de la Nation Anglaise. Par un Républicain* (Paris, l'An II [1794]).

¹³ See J. H. Clapham, *The Abbé Sieyès* (Westminster, 1912); H. Russell Smith, *Harrington and His Oceana* (Cambridge, 1914), pp. 205–15; S. B. Liljegren, ed., *A French Draft Constitution of 1792 Modelled on James Harrington's Oceana* (Lund, 1932), pp. 44–79; D. Trevor, "Some Sources of the Constitutional Theory of the Abbé Sieyès: Harrington and Spinoza," *Politica* 1 (1935): 325–42 and 443–69; and M. Forsyth, *Reason and Revolution: The Political Thought of the Abbé Sieyès* (Leicester, 1987).

¹⁴ Quoted in F.-A. Aulard, "Danton au District des Cordeliers et à la Commune de Paris," in *Etudes et Leçons sur la Révolution Française*, ed. F.-A. Aulard, 4th series (Paris, 1904), p. 117. The translations throughout are my own. On the Cordeliers see also A. Bougeart, *Les*

Between April 1789 and July 1790 this area constituted the Cordelier District. Originally instituted to facilitate the election of deputies to the Estates-General, the sixty districts of Paris came to enjoy a more significant role during the early months of the Revolution. The Cordelier District developed a reputation both for protecting the victims of arbitrary authority and for promoting extremely democratic ideas. With the abolition of the Paris districts in July 1790, it was left to the Cordelier Club (also known as the Société des amis des droits de l'homme et du citoyen) to continue these functions. Though there is evidence to suggest that some kind of forerunner to the Cordelier Club was already in existence prior to the abolition of the districts, members of the Club themselves traced its origins back to that event.¹⁵ In an "Adresse aux Parisiens," written in August 1791, the Cordelier Club provided its own account of its origins: "It is to the dissolution of the Cordelier District that the Society of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen owes its origin. It was natural that citizens who since the revolution had been meeting daily to watch over the public good, and who had contracted in these assemblies the habit of seeing each other, of closely observing each other, and of esteeming each other: it was natural, I say, to these fellow citizens to reunite under another name; they agreed therefore to substitute for the word District, which they could not keep, that of Cordelier Club."¹⁶

In its actions and ideology the Club did follow the tradition established by the District. As the formal title of the Club suggests, its members placed great emphasis on the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du*

Cordeliers: Documents pour servir à l'histoire de la Révolution Française (Caen, 1891); F.-A. Aulard, "Danton au Club des Cordeliers et au département de Paris," in Aulard, ed., *Études et Leçons sur la Révolution Française*, pp. 128–52; A. Mathiez, *Le Club des Cordeliers Pendant la Crise de Varennes et le Massacre du Champ de Mars* (Paris, 1910); G. M. Robertson, "The Society of the Cordeliers and the French Revolution, 1790–1794" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1972); P. Gueniffey, "Girondins and Cordeliers: A Prehistory of the Republic?" trans. L. Mason, in *The Invention of the Modern Republic*, ed. B. Fontana (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 86–106; J. Guilhaumou and R. Monnier, "Les Cordeliers et la République de 1793," in Vovelle, ed., *Révolution et République: L'exception française*, pp. 200–12; R. Monnier, "Cordeliers, Sans-culottes et Jacobins," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* (1995), pp. 249–60; J. De Cock, *Les Cordeliers dans la Révolution française*, vol. 1, *Lineaments* (Lyon, 2001); R. Hammersley, "The Influence of English Republican Ideas on the Political Thought of the Cordelier Club" (D.Phil. diss., University of Sussex, 2002). This thesis is forthcoming under the title *French Revolutionaries and English Republicans: The Cordeliers Club, 1790–1794* (Woodbridge).

¹⁵ On the earlier incarnation of the club see *Moniteur universel, Réimpression de l'ancien Moniteur; seule histoire authentique et inaltérée de la Révolution française; depuis la réunion des États-Généraux jusqu'au Consulat (mai 1789-novembre 1799)*, 32 vols. (Paris, 1847–79) 4:279; Mathiez, *Le Club des Cordeliers*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁶ "Adresse aux Parisiens," in *Journal du Club des Cordeliers*, ed. A. F. Momoro (Paris, 1791), no. 10, pp. 87–88.

citoyen, which had been proclaimed by the National Assembly on 26 August 1789. The Cordeliers were concerned that the declaration was not being fulfilled in practice. With this in mind, they presented themselves as a body of surveillance (the emblem of the Club was an open eye), the task of which was to keep watch over the authorities at all levels, and to publicize and take a stand against any encroachments on the rights of man as laid down in the *Déclaration des droits*. In addition, they provided support and relief for the victims of oppression and injustice. Again, the Club summarized its self-perception of this aspect of its work in its “Adresse aux Parisiens”: “Each and every day the members of this society are active, some visiting the prisons and consoling the unfortunate, others defending them in the courts, others appealing in their favour before the committees of the national assembly, . . . and . . . in [addition], all members take part in acts of charity through frequent financial contributions.”¹⁷ As well as seeking to ameliorate and correct the abuses of the existing system, the Cordeliers used their oratorical and literary skills to develop and promote the establishment of a new and fairer system of government. The first step toward improvement, according to many leading members of the Club, was the abolition of the French monarchy and its replacement by a republic.

Cordelier Republicanism

Members of the Cordelier Club were among the first French revolutionaries to call for the establishment of a republic. As early as July 1789, Desmoulins was already voicing republican ideas: “Do the facts not cry out that Monarchy is a detestable form of government?”¹⁸ By contrast, he described popular government as “the only one which suits men, and moreover the only one that is wise.”¹⁹ By the autumn of 1790, Desmoulins’ republican writings were being joined by others, also written by members of the Cordelier Club. These included *Du Peuple et des Rois*, by Louis de la Vicomterie de Saint-Samson, and Pierre François Joseph Robert’s *Républicanisme adapté à la France*.²⁰ These writers were just as vehement in their antimonarchical sentiments as Desmoulins. As Robert explained:

Any [form of government] other than a republic is a crime of leze-nation . . . and that the apostles of royalty are either traitors or men stupidly misled, which society must regard as its enemies.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁸ C. Desmoulins, *La France Libre* (Paris, 1789), p. 38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁰ L. de la Vicomterie de Saint Samson, *Du Peuple et des Rois* (Paris, 1790); F. Robert, *Républicanisme adapté à la France* (Paris, 1790).

It is said at this time that France is free; what, France is free! and she is a monarchy? We must not deceive ourselves; if France is free, she is not a monarchy, and if she is a monarchy, she is not free.²¹

Not only were the Cordeliers among the first revolutionaries to advocate republicanism, but the form of republican government that they advocated was of an extremely democratic nature.

In *La France Libre*, Desmoulins was not ashamed to admit, "I therefore loudly declare myself to be in favour of democracy."²² Similarly, La Vicomterie, writing in 1790, defended democracy against its critics. The agents of tyranny, he admitted, had declared democracy to be the worst form of government, but, he explained, "They . . . confound confusion or anarchy with the power of the people duly represented in the exercise of their rights."²³

Despite their enthusiasm, the Cordeliers were not ignorant of the problems associated with establishing a democracy in a large modern state. As Robert explained in *Républicanisme adapté à la France*: "It would be physically impossible for the 25 million men who make up France to gather in a single place to make their will heard and to have it drawn up; one would be foolish to propose such a mode of government."²⁴ Yet Robert was insistent that one should not dismiss the idea of democracy altogether. He and his fellow Cordeliers firmly rejected the conventional form of representative government, accepted by many of their contemporaries, on the grounds that it gave representatives too much power. They thus sought various means by which the actions and decisions of elected deputies could be placed firmly under the control of those who had elected them. Imperative mandates, short terms of office, and the ratification of laws by the citizens gathered in local assemblies, were all means advocated by individual members and by the Club as a whole.

Desmoulins spoke in favour of the idea of imperative mandates in his newspaper *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*: "it must be recognised that the powers of our legislative body are only the powers of delegates, of representatives, and that . . . mandates are in this question the essence of the matter."²⁵ On the question of short terms of office, Robert explained that, by allowing the representatives to hold power for only a short period of time, their decisions would automatically be controlled through their knowledge that they themselves would have to live under the laws that

²¹ Robert, *Républicanisme adapté à la France*, pp. 1–2.

²² Desmoulins, *La France Libre*, p. 46.

²³ La Vicomterie, *Du Peuple et des Rois*, p. 23.

²⁴ Robert, *Républicanisme adapté à la France*, p. 87.

²⁵ C. Desmoulins, *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, 7 vols. (Paris, 1789–91) 7:108.

they had made.²⁶ Robert also took the radical step of suggesting that the people themselves should vote to accept or reject every law.²⁷ Responding to the conventional objection of size in relation to this point, Robert argued that with the division of France into departments, districts, cantons, municipalities, and sections it would be no more difficult to assemble people for the purposes of sanctioning laws than it was to assemble them to name their representatives: “From this point of view, I say that there is nothing easier than to make all French citizens take part in the making of the law, as they take part in the election of their representatives, and if they once take part in making the laws, they will be free, and France will be happily changed into a republic.”²⁸ The most detailed call for the popular ratification of laws was René Girardin’s *Discours sur la nécessité de la ratification de la loi par la volonté générale*.²⁹ This speech was presented to the Cordelier Club on 7 June 1791. Girardin was unequivocal in demanding the popular ratification of laws and presented it as necessary to the fulfilment of the Cordeliers’ sacred document, the *Déclaration des droits*. Having heard the speech, the Club voted that it be printed and distributed to other patriotic societies. Moreover, the published version of Girardin’s speech was followed by the Club’s own endorsement of its main idea.

While advocating the use of imperative mandates, short terms of office, and the popular ratification of laws, the Cordeliers also looked both for other means of implementing a democratic republic in a large modern state and for justifications of this kind of government. It was for precisely this reason that members of the Cordelier Club turned to the writings of seventeenth-century English republicans.

Cordelier Interest in English Republicanism

In a letter dated 2 September 1790 the future secretary of the Cordelier Club, Théophile Mandar, described his first encounter with Marchamont Nedham’s *The Excellency of a Free State*: “From this day [14 July 1789], my friend, I devoted myself, more than ever, to the reading of works which have contributed towards enlightening men on their

²⁶ Robert, *Républicanisme adapté à la France*, p. 90.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–94.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁹ R. Girardin, *Discours de René Girardin sur la nécessité de la ratification de la loi par la volonté générale* (Paris, [1791]). Girardin had been a friend of Jean Jacques Rousseau. It was he who offered Rousseau a retreat on his land at Ermenonville, and it was also Girardin who, after his friend’s death, set about producing an edition of his collected works. Girardin survived the Revolution and died in 1808.

interests. The first to which I gave my attention, was that of Nedham.”³⁰ So struck was Mandar by the importance of Nedham’s ideas, and by their relevance to revolutionary France, that he decided to produce a French translation of Nedham’s book.³¹ That translation was published in 1790, under the title *De la souveraineté du peuple, et de l’excellence d’un état libre*. The translation was reviewed in the *Journal du Club des Cordeliers* the following year. The reviewer acknowledged Mandar as being one of their own and expressed great enthusiasm for the work.³²

Nedham’s work seems to have appealed to Mandar for two main reasons. In general terms, it set out an antimonarchical and potentially democratic definition of a free state which was supported by a wealth of arguments drawn from both classical and biblical material. More specifically it provided, in the practice of rotation of office, a means of maximizing the participation of citizens in the political process; thereby addressing the problem of establishing a democratic republic in a large modern state.

The translation of Nedham’s *The Excellency of a Free State* was not the only work by Mandar to demonstrate his knowledge of, and interest in, English republican ideas. In 1793 he published *Des Insurrections, ouvrage philosophique et politique sur les rapports des insurrections avec la prospérité des empires*, which he described as his political profession of faith.³³ The purpose of the work was to consider whether insurrections could ever be justified; and to set out how, and by what means, they should be carried out. As in his translation of Nedham’s text, Mandar made reference to a number of English republican writers from whom the French could learn:

It was during the reign of Charles II [*sic*] that one saw these great writers appear whose genius forged the power of the people out of the debris of . . . crowns. Nedham published this immortal work which earned him a reputation as a profound political thinker, if one considers the epoch during which he wrote. [Then there was] Algernon Sidney who sealed with his blood the cause of the liberty of the people: his book about monarchy brought him the immortal honour of having been the first to die in the name of the rights of the people. Harrington, so little known among the French,

³⁰ Théophile Mandar to Guillaume Tibbatts, 2 September 1790, in T. Mandar, *De la souveraineté du peuple et de l’excellence d’un état libre, par Marchamont Nédham, traduit de l’anglais, et enrichi de notes de J.J. Rousseau, Mably, Bossuet, Condillac, Montesquieu, Letrosne, Raynal etc. etc.*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1790), 2:228.

³¹ Mandar does not appear to have been aware of the earlier translation by the Chevalier D’Eon de Beaumont.

³² Momoro, ed., *Journal du Club des Cordeliers*, no. 4, pp. 31–34.

³³ T. Mandar, *Des Insurrections, ouvrage philosophique et politique sur les rapports des insurrections avec la prospérité des empires* (Paris, 1793), p. 579.

consoled the world with his works when Milton gave up political arguments for [poetry].³⁴

Of the seventeenth-century English republicans it was Sidney who received the most attention from Mandar in *Des Insurrections*. Indeed the last six chapters of the work were extracted from Sidney's *Discourses Concerning Government*.

Mandar was not the only secretary of the Cordelier Club to display an interest in seventeenth-century English republican ideas. Jean Jacques Rutledge also held that office in 1791, and he had a long-standing interest in the works of Harrington.³⁵ In the mid-1780s Rutledge had made reference to Harrington's *Oceana* in two separate works. In his *Éloge de Montesquieu* of 1786 he drew a parallel between the ideas of Montesquieu and those of Harrington.³⁶ That work also made reference back to two issues of Rutledge's newspaper—*Calypso, ou les Babillards*—which had appeared the previous year and had been devoted to Harrington, his life, and works.³⁷ Having summarized the latter's ideas, Rutledge urged his readers to read Harrington for themselves. The value of Harrington's works, in Rutledge's view, was that they provided advice as to how to establish stable and successful democratic government: "M. Mably is well placed to feel strongly, and to recognise, that the genius of the unfortunate Harrington was solidly founded with an intrepid hand, and offers the base on which all Philosophical Legislators, from whatever government, can solidly set down and raise the Edifice of the most equal and the most durable democratic constitution."³⁸ Given this interpretation, it is not surprising that Rutledge returned to Harrington in 1791 when he had become a prominent member of the Cordelier Club.

On 3 January 1791 Rutledge began publishing the newspaper *Le Creuset, Ouvrage Politique et Critique*, which is generally seen as having been closely connected to the Cordelier Club.³⁹ In contrast to the approach

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211n.

³⁵ There are various spellings of Rutledge. I have adopted this form throughout, but Rutledge is also commonly used. A biography of Rutledge was published in France in the early twentieth century: R. Las Vergnas, *Chevalier Rutledge "Gentilhomme Anglais," 1742–1794* (Paris, 1932). See also J. G. Alger, *Englishmen in the French Revolution* (London, 1889), pp. 19–21, and "Rutledge, James or John James," *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. L. Stephen and S. Lee (London, 1908–9; reprint of 1895–1900 ed.), 50:518–19; P. Peyronnet, "J. J. Rutledge," *Revue d'histoire du théâtre* 4 (1992): 330–59, and "Rutledge," in *Dictionnaire des Journalistes, 1600–1789*, ed. J. Sgard, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1999), 2: 891–93.

³⁶ J. J. Rutledge, *Éloge de Montesquieu* (Londres, 1786).

³⁷ [J. J. Rutledge], *Calypso, ou les Babillards, Par Une Société de Gens du Monde et de Gens de Lettres*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1785), 3:313–359.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:221.

³⁹ J. J. Rutledge, *Le Creuset, Ouvrage Politique et Critique*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1791).

he had adopted in *Calypso, ou les Babillards*, Rutledge was not explicit in *Le Creuset* in his use of Harrington's ideas. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt, for anyone familiar with Harrington's works, that they were the major source behind the political theory in *Le Creuset*. Rutledge adopted Harrington's axiom that political power follows directly from landed power, and employed it to analyze the origins of the French Revolution. He made use of the distinctive analogy from *Oceana* of the two girls dividing a cake—designed to illustrate the need to separate discussion of policy from decision making. Finally, beginning in the fifth issue of *Le Creuset*, without admitting that the ideas were not his own, Rutledge embarked on a translation of the first six chapters of Harrington's *A System of Politics*.

The Cordelier interest in English republican ideas survived the establishment of the first French Republic in September 1792. In the autumn of that year, one of Rutledge's friends, Théodore Le Sueur, who was also a member of the Cordelier Club, submitted a pamphlet to Jérôme Pétion, one of the Paris deputies to the new National Convention. This pamphlet was entitled *Idées sur l'espèce de gouvernement populaire qui pourrait convenir à un pays de l'étendue et de la population présumée de la France*.⁴⁰ It took the form of a draft constitution for the new French Republic and, as the Scandinavian scholar S. B. Liljegren was the first to observe when he came across a copy in the British Museum, it bore a striking resemblance to Harrington's *Oceana*.⁴¹ The work opened, as *Oceana* had, with an order to divide the citizens of the nation according to their place of habitation, age, and wealth. Moreover, detailed descriptions of two key Harringtonian features—the agrarian law and an electoral system on the Venetian model—frame the French work.

Two months later, in November 1792, Le Sueur presented two further works to the National Convention: *Essai d'une déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* and *Quelques pensées sur l'unité du législateur*. These works reflected the same interests and concerns as *Idées sur l'espèce de gouvernement populaire*; and once again there is evidence of borrowings from the works of Harrington. *Quelques pensées sur l'unité du législateur* focused on the need for a single legislator to draw up a constitution. It can thus be viewed as a direct attack on the appointment

⁴⁰ *Idées sur l'espèce de gouvernement populaire qui pourrait convenir à un pays de l'étendue et de la population présumée de la France* (Paris, 1792). A copy of the work appears in the *Archives Parlementaires* for 17 April 1793. M. Madival and E. Laurent, *Archives Parlementaires, 1787–1860*, 1st series, 99 vols. (vols. 1–82, Paris, 1879–1914; vols. 83–99, Paris, 1961–95), 62:548–65. It has also been reproduced in Liljegren, *A French Draft Constitution*, pp. 103–76. All quotations will be from the *Archives Parlementaires* version, since it is the most accessible.

⁴¹ Liljegren, *A French Draft Constitution*, p. 80.

of the National Convention as a constitution-building body. Literary and musical analogies were employed to demonstrate the superiority of a single over a multiple or conciliar legislator:

FIRST EXAMPLE: Twelve poets, each better than Homer and Virgil, could each write a Poem superior to the Iliad or the Aeneid, but these twelve Poets, working together, could write neither an Iliad, nor an Aeneid.

SECOND EXAMPLE: Forty musicians more skilful than Gluck, could each compose an overture richer in harmony than that of Iphigenia, but these forty musicians, together, could never compose the overture to Iphigenia.

THIRD EXAMPLE: Twelve or forty Legislators more skilful than Moses, could each draw up a Constitution more perfect than that of the Hebrews; but these twelve or forty could never invent together the Mosaic Constitution.⁴²

The ultimate source of these analogies was the fifth chapter of Harrington's *A System of Politics*:

18. A parliament of physicians would never have found out the circulation of the blood, nor could a parliament of poets have written Virgil's *Aeneis*; of this kind therefore in the formation of government is the proceeding of a sole legislator. But if the people, without a legislator, set upon such work by a certain instinct that is in them, they never go further than to choose a council; not considering that the formation of government is well a work of invention as of judgement, and that a council, though in matters laid before them they may excel in judgement, yet invention is as contrary to the nature of a council as it is to musicians in consort, who can play and judge of any air that is laid before them, though to invent a part of music they can never well agree.⁴³

These references to and uses of English republican works and ideas were not simply isolated borrowings by eccentric Anglophiles. Mandar, Rutledge, and Le Sueur shared the predilection of their fellow Cordelier Club members for democratic republican government. They drew on the works of Nedham and Harrington precisely because they seemed to offer some guidance as to how one could establish this kind of government in a large modern state such as England or France. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that these men were not simply members of the same Club, but that there were also closer connections between them. They appear to have

⁴² *Essai d'une déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen et Quelques pensées sur l'unité du Législateur, Par l'auteur des Idées sur la Constitution Populaire etc.* (Paris: l'An I [1792]), p. 12.

⁴³ J. Harrington, *The Political Works of James Harrington*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1977), p. 842. A more detailed account of these borrowings, together with a discussion of the authorship of the works presented by Le Sueur to the National Convention, can be found in Hammersley, "The Influence of English Republican Ideas," pp. 159–90.

known each other personally, they referred to each other in their works, and several of them even collaborated on a number of projects.⁴⁴

The fact that members of a radical political club in Paris in the 1790s were interested in works that had been written on the other side of the Channel almost one hundred and fifty years earlier is itself remarkable. But the particular way in which the Cordeliers interpreted and made use of these English ideas makes the whole story fascinating. For the Cordeliers did not simply draw on what they saw as “democratic” works; rather, they adapted and altered those works so as to render them far more democratic than the original authors had intended.

The Democratization of English Republicanism

In *The Excellency of a Free State*, Nedham explained how oppression and tyranny would be avoided in a free state owing to the equal, though not too equal, condition of its citizens: “The thirteenth reason, to prove the excellency of a free state above any other form, is, because in free-states there are fewer opportunities of oppression and tyranny, than in the other forms. And this appears in that it is most part, to preserve, not an *equality*, (*which were irrational and odious*) but an *equability of condition among all the members*; so that no particular man or men shall be permitted to grow over-great in power; nor any rank of men be allowed above the ordinary standard, to assume unto themselves the state and title of nobility.”⁴⁵

Mandar, in his translation, placed no such limit on equality: “Les états libre offrent moins d’occasions d’opprimer et de tyranniser le peuple, que toutes les autres formes de gouvernement. Dans un état libre, *le premier objet est de mettre la plus grande égalité entre tous les citoyens*, afin d’empêcher qu’un ou plusieurs individus ne puissent acquérir un trop grand pouvoir, et que qui que ce soit ne puisse usurper des droits et une autorité qui détruiraient cette harmonie si nécessaire *au maintien et à la conservation d’une parfaite égalité, sans laquelle la liberté n’est qu’un nom*.” [Free states offer fewer opportunities to oppress and tyrannize the people, than all other forms of government. In a free state, *the first aim is to establish the greatest equality among all the citizens*, in order to prevent one or many individuals from acquiring too great a power, and to ensure

⁴⁴ Desmoulins himself published a newspaper in 1793–94, that explicitly referred back to early Cordelier ideas and that drew directly on Thomas Gordon’s *Discourses on Tacitus*, itself a Commonwealth work. C. Desmoulins, *Le Vieux Cordelier* (Paris, 1793–94). See also R. Hammersley, “Camille Desmoulins’s *Le Vieux Cordelier*: A Link between English and French Republicanism,” *History of European Ideas* 27 (2001): 115–32.

⁴⁵ M. Nedham, *The Excellency of a Free State* (London, 1767), pp. 38–39. Italics added.

that no-one can usurp the rights nor any authority destroy this harmony so necessary to the maintenance and conservation of a perfect equality, without which liberty is only a name.]⁴⁶ Similarly, later on Nedham had insisted that the people must not “suffer particular persons to grandise, or greaten themselves more than ordinary.”⁴⁷ In his translation Mandar made his own significant addition to Nedham’s point, claiming that the people must oppose “à ce qu’aucun citoyen ne s’éleve avec fierté, qu’il ne puisse acquérir plus de crédit, et ne paroisse avec un éclat qui insulte à l’égalité des citoyens” [any citizen raised up with pride, so that he cannot acquire more credit or appear with a splendor that insults the equality of citizens].⁴⁸

Moreover, Mandar’s sense of who ought to be included among the voting public also extended beyond that of his English mentor. Nedham’s original had included the following passage:

Let this serve to manifest, that a government by a free election and consent of the people, settled in a due and orderly succession of their supreme assemblies, is more consonant to the light of nature and reason; and consequently, much more excellent than any hereditary standing power what so ever. *To take off all mis-constructions; when we mention the people, observe all along, that we do not mean the confused promiscuous body of the people, nor any part of the people who have forfeited their rights by delinquency, neutrality, or apostasy, &c. in relation to the divided state of any nation; for they are not to be reckoned within the lists of the people.*⁴⁹

Mandar cut this entire passage from his translation, implying that he entertained no such restrictions on who was to be included among “the people.”

A similar adaptation of the original into a more democratic form can be found in *Idées sur l’espèce de gouvernement populaire*. The author of the French work introduced a number of adaptations to Harrington’s original which increased the involvement of the people, and of the less well off in particular, in the political process.

In line with *Oceana* the French work embodied the practice of separating discussion of policy from decision making. However, whereas in *Oceana* the whole process was carried out at the national level, with the Senate discussing the issues and the Prerogative Tribe (popular assembly) voting to accept or reject the Senate’s proposals, in *Idées sur l’espèce de gouvernement populaire* it was a national body (the Grand National Legislative Council) that was to debate the issues and put forward

⁴⁶ Mandar, *De la Souveraineté du Peuple*, 1:98. Italics added.

⁴⁷ Nedham, *The Excellency of a Free State*, p. 106.

⁴⁸ Mandar, *De la Souveraineté du Peuple*, 2:61. Italics added.

⁴⁹ Nedham, *The Excellency of a Free State*, p. 38. Italics added.

proposals, but those proposals would then be accepted or rejected, not by another national body, but by the citizens gathered in their primary assemblies: “Art. 3. Final *Ratification* or *sanction* of the law, *first proposed*, then *discussed* and *finally* presented by the great national legislative council, belongs exclusively to the nation represented legally: 1. in its *centuries civiques*; 2. in its *tribus politiques*; 3. in its *assemblées de cercles*, where this sanction must be expressed on the presentation of the laws discussed, by *yes* for the *affirmative*, and by *no*, for the negative.”⁵⁰ The parallels between this and the calls for the popular ratification of laws made by Cordeliers such as Robert and Girardin are striking. Moreover, the ratification of laws was not the only role that the citizens, gathered in their local assemblies, could play in the political process. They were also given the right to propose issues and potential laws to be placed before the Grand National Legislative Council for discussion, and they were to participate in the selection of officeholders.⁵¹

The composition of the National Councils themselves also reflects a striking adaptation of Harrington’s original ideas. At the beginning of *Oceana* Harrington divided the citizens into those owning over one hundred pounds per annum in goods and land and those owning less. At this point Harrington’s division was ostensibly to separate the citizens into the cavalry and the infantry; the wealth distinction being justified on the grounds that those in the cavalry would require the money to provide themselves with a horse and other relevant equipment. Later in *Oceana*, however, it becomes clear that Harrington also intended to use this division to ensure that at the highest level of government it was the wealthier who would be dominant. The election of the national representatives was to be carried out at a regional level.⁵² In each region two knights and three deputies would be elected from among members of the cavalry and four deputies from the infantry. The knights would come together to form the Senate and the deputies the Prerogative Tribe (popular assembly). Thus the wealthier (cavalry) would completely control the Senate (and therefore also the councils of the Commonwealth—members of which were to be elected from among the Senate) and in addition would enjoy a sizeable minority within the Prerogative Tribe. Moreover, it would be the wealthy who would control political debate, since only members of the Senate would be allowed to debate political issues, the Prerogative Tribe being simply a silent assembly of resolution.

Like Harrington, the author of *Idées sur l’espèce de gouvernement populaire* also proposed the division of the population on the basis of

⁵⁰ Madival and Laurent, *Archives Parlementaires*, 62:553.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 62:553–54.

⁵² Harrington, *The Political Works of James Harrington*, pp. 226–27.

wealth. Here the threshold was set at one thousand five hundred livres annual revenue from land (sufficient to keep three individuals) or a net industrial revenue of three thousand livres (sufficient for six individuals). Citizens earning less than this figure were to be placed in the class of the first order of proprietors or “minus-possidentes,” those worth more fell into the second order of proprietors or “plus-possidentes.”⁵³ However, in contrast with Harrington’s model this division was not used to determine cavalry and infantry members, who instead were simply chosen from the men aged between eighteen and thirty. Moreover, where the distinction of wealth was brought into play, it was used to weight power not in favour of the wealthy (the plus-possidentes) but in favour of those who were less well off (the minus-possidentes). The Grand National Legislative Council was to be composed of three quarters minus-possidentes to one quarter plus-possidentes. The Grand National Executive Council was to be made up solely of minus possidentes.⁵⁴ Thus the author of the later work reversed Harrington’s bias, giving greater political power at a national level to the less well off.

By expanding both the number of people directly participating in the political process and the number of political tasks in which the people could participate, and by weighting power in favour of the less well off, the author of *Idées sur l’espèce de gouvernement populaire* succeeded in democratizing Harrington’s text, just as Mandar had done with that of Nedham.

Conclusion

This account of the republicanism of the Cordelier Club has implications for our understanding of both the French Revolution and the republican tradition. Until very recently the historiography of the Revolution, and particularly of revolutionary republicanism, has been dominated by a preoccupation with the Jacobins.⁵⁵ The Jacobin “republic of virtue” has been analyzed in detail and emphasis has been placed on the importance of the ideas of Rousseau, and to a lesser extent of Montesquieu and Mably, in providing the foundations of Jacobin theory and practice.⁵⁶ The last few years have seen the emergence of a welcome additional

⁵³ Madival and Laurent, *Archives Parlementaires*, 62:549.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 62:552.

⁵⁵ The Jacobin domination of recent accounts of revolutionary republicanism is particularly evident in F. Furet and M. Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1989). See also F. Furet, “Revolution française et tradition jacobine,” in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 2, *The Political Culture of the French Revolution*, ed. C. Lucas (Oxford, 1988), pp. 329–39.

⁵⁶ See, in particular, C. Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986).

dimension to the debate in accounts of the development of “modern republicanism” in revolutionary France. In his *Republicanism and the French Revolution*, Richard Whatmore focuses on Jean-Baptiste Say and his associates—including Etienne Clavière and Jacques-Pierre Brissot.⁵⁷ He demonstrates their opposition to the ancient republicanism of Mably and the Jacobins, and their attempt to create a form of modern republicanism, which drew both on their own Genevan experiences and on the American republican model. This version of republicanism was designed to be suited to the large states of the modern world and compatible with both commerce and civilization. A similar story is told in James Livesey’s *Making Democracy in the French Revolution*, though Livesey focuses on the much neglected period of the Directory and on the Ministry of François de Neufchâteau.⁵⁸ Livesey describes the development of a new form of democratic republicanism between 1795 and 1800, one adapted to commercial society and resting on the notion of a happy and industrious citizenry able to combine acting for the public good with the pursuit of their own private interests. In both accounts the need to bring about a transformation of manners is treated as both the essential foundation of modern republicanism and its stumbling block.

The case of the Cordelier Club—their development of a democratic version of republicanism that owed much to the English republican and commonwealth traditions—should be seen to provide another dimension to this complex story. The French Revolution did not simply mark the defeat of the ancient republican tradition—through the Jacobin association between virtue and terror—and its replacement by modern republicanism. Rather, that period witnessed a series of profound and complex debates concerning the best kind of republicanism for the circumstances, and the means by which such a system could be implemented.

Against both the ancient republicanism of the Jacobins, and the modern republicanism of Brissot and others, members of the Cordelier Club asserted their own French version of the early modern republican tradition that had proved to be such a pervasive force in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain. In many respects, the French Revolution witnessed the apogee of this early modern republican tradition, a tradition that has conventionally been seen as having left Europe for North America in the 1770s and 1780s.

⁵⁷ R. Whatmore, *Republicanism and the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say’s Political Economy* (Oxford, 2000).

⁵⁸ J. Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).