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A 'révolution ménagée': Mably's *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen*

Johnson Kent Wright

The faculty of reason bestowed on us by nature, the liberty in which she placed us, and the invincible desire for happiness she has fixed in our souls, are three titles to which all men may appeal in the face of the unjust government under which they live. I conclude therefore that a citizen is neither a conspirator nor a disturber of the peace, if he proposes to his compatriots a wiser form of government than that which they have adopted freely, or which events, passions, or circumstances have fashioned imperceptibly. ... I believe that revolutions are still possible: a good citizen must continue to hope, and is indeed obligated, according to his position, powers, and talents, to work towards rendering these revolutions useful to his country. ... I have told you my secret, added Milord with a smile, and perhaps, as an Englishman, I should not have revealed to you the sole conceivable remedy for your misfortunes. I have studied your government, your customs, your prejudices, your doctrines, and I defy you to tell me any other way to give your nation the spirit, character, and virtues that are necessary to it, and which will lead, gradually, to the destruction of despotism. By what other means can you avoid the shameful decline with which you are already menaced and to which your neighbouring nephew will certainly fall prey? Choose between a revolution and slavery: there is no middle ground. ... By contrast, a revolution, prepared and followed through in the way that I have recommended to you, will be all the more advantageous, in that a love of order and law, and not that of a licentious liberty, will be its guiding principle. I mistrust any liberty that requires soldiers to establish itself; if they suppress the tyrant, it is rare indeed that they do not also usurp the tyranny – Cromwell will always have his admirers. But the wisdom of your magistrates will indeed spread to all orders of the state and will dispose men to act with courage, but also with prudence and method.¹

Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen is in many ways the most remarkable work of the abbé Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, whose career as a writer extended from the start of the War of the Austrian Succession to virtually the eve of the French Revolution. Comprising eight letters, dated 12–21 August 1758, it records a series of conversations between an Englishman, ‘Milord Stanhope’, and an anonymous French narrator, as the two stroll through the royal gardens at Marly. The actual date of its composition remains uncertain. There is no surviving reference to its existence on Mably’s part before 1776; the dialogue was first published, posthumously, more than a decade later. But there is no internal evidence for any date later than 1758, and it is perfectly plausible that its author’s well-attested circumspection had long kept *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* from print. If so, the reasons for Mably’s caution are clear enough. For not only does the dialogue set forth a detailed scenario for toppling the Bourbon monarchy – an astonishingly clairvoyant anticipation of the actual course of events of 1787–9 – it also justifies the plan it recommends in incendiary terms, to the point of sanctioning ‘civil war’ itself. As the passages above make clear, central to both justification and plan was a specific conception of political ‘revolution’ – an idea waiting in the wings, as it were, a moment before stepping onto the stage of modern history.

The author of *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* was born in Grenoble in 1709, into the provincial *noblesse de robe*. An older brother became a magistrate in Lyon, where in 1740 he briefly hired a very young Jean-Jacques Rousseau as tutor in his household. Mably and his younger brother, who became the philosopher Condillac, secured modest sinecures within the ecclesiastical establishment, as precisely the sort of irreligious abbés excoriated by Voltaire. Mably in fact made his debut as a political thinker as a moderate royalist, very much in the mould of Voltaire. Around mid-century, however, he reversed course entirely, for reasons that remain obscure – although a season labouring in the bureaucracy of Foreign Affairs at Versailles seems to have played a role. By the early 1750s, he had published the works announcing his conversion to republicanism: twin observations on Ancient Greece and Rome, praising the constitutions of Sparta and the Roman Republic as the ‘masterpieces’ of human political design. If actually written in the late 1750s, *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* is likely to have been Mably’s first philosophical dialogue, the literary form to which he then returned a dozen more times over the next thirty years. Not that he abandoned philosophical history: the *chef-d’oeuvre* of Mably’s maturity was his three-volume *Observations sur l’histoire de France*, which traced the inexorable advance of ‘despotism’ in his native land. By the time it was completed, however,

Mably's earlier optimism about the prospects for overturning the Bourbon monarchy had vanished. The 'Maupeou' coup against the parlements, the end of the 'Age of Liberty' in Sweden, the First Partition of Poland, all suggested that, far from retreating, autocracy was advancing across Europe. The one bright spot was American independence. One of Mably's last works was a comparative study of the state constitutions. But at his death in 1785, the outlook for even the fledgling republics of North America looked bleak.

Scarcely two years later, the Bourbon monarchy began its slide into revolution. In the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* met with widespread acclaim when it was finally published late in 1788. Part of its success was doubtless owing to the dialogue form itself, which permitted Mably to make effective use of date, scene and characterization alike. The catastrophe of the Seven Years' War forms the largely tacit, but unmistakable, backdrop to the dialogue – by autumn 1758 the scale of French defeat was evident enough. The gardens of Marly, on the edge of Versailles, made famous by Saint-Simon's description but now in full decline, make an apposite setting for searching conversations with a distinguished English visitor. Who was 'Milord Stanhope'? One possibility is that the reference is to Philip Dormer Stanhope, Fourth Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773), author of the celebrated letters. Likelier still, however, is Philip Stanhope, Second Earl of Stanhope (1714–86), a more obscure figure but famed for his skill in mathematics and Greek and for the radical Whig principles he instilled in his son, Charles Stanhope, later a fervent admirer of the French Revolution; Mably alludes to both father and son in his correspondence. But whatever the precise referent, there is no doubt about the generic identity of Mably's Stanhope – here, the very model of a radical Commonwealthman, who bestows an eye-opening political education on his initially reluctant French acquaintance in two broad steps.

The first four letters of *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* are devoted largely to the question of political obligation and rights of resistance. The starting point is a confrontation between the two wings of modern natural rights theory, pitting Grotius, Hobbes and Pufendorf, the conservatives to whom the Frenchman appeals, against Stanhope's Locke, who is portrayed as justifying, not just a right to 'revolution', but also the duty of the citizen 'to work towards rendering these revolutions useful to his country'. Having clinched the argument, Stanhope moves on to destinations far more radical than anything in Locke. These include a ringing statement of inalienable popular sovereignty ('The people, to whom sovereign power originally belongs, the sole author of political government and bestower of power on magistrates, always retains the right to interpret its

contract, or rather its gifts, to modify its clauses, or to cancel them and establish an entirely new order of things', 76); expressions of warm appreciation for class struggle and civil war ('What benefits did not result from the eternal quarrels of the patricians and plebeians in the Roman Republic? If the people had preferred repose to everything else, they would have become enslaved to the nobility and the name of the Romans unknown to us today. ... Civil war is sometimes a great good', 59); and finally, a surprising icing on the cake, an avowal that 'private property is the principle source of all the misfortunes that afflict humanity' (103). The fourth letter of *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* indeed ends with a brief utopian reverie à la More, with Stanhope conjuring up an island republic founded on the *communauté des biens*.

This intermezzo concluded, Stanhope then turns in the second half of the dialogue to his plan for what is explicitly termed a French 'revolution'. The basic model is supplied by the Dutch Revolt, the English Civil War and the Revolution of 1688–9 – with the proviso that none represented a fully successful overthrow of absolute monarchy. The first and third, Stanhope argues, were marred by aiming too low, the second by self-defeating overreach. Even so, the Frenchman objects, dealing with the creeping hereditization of the Stadtholdership or the excessive prerogative power of the English Crown today was one thing: 'But matters are different in nations that have a legislative monarch armed with all the powers of the state, whose presence and activity is felt everywhere, by means of officials who are instruments of his will and who believe they can extend their own power by removing any limit to that of their master' (116). How exactly was Bourbon absolutism to be overthrown? In response, Stanhope sets forth a strategic plan, consisting of three interlinked steps. The first, he argues, has actually already been accomplished, in and through the confrontation between court and parlements that had unfolded over the past decade – the successful assertion of the right of the parlements, as a whole, to represent the French 'nation' in its dealings with its king. What was still in reach of the parlements – though just barely: the moment was fading fast – was to take a second, decisive step and use the right of representation just reclaimed in order to demand a convocation of the moribund Estates-General. Once the latter had met, thirdly and finally, the estates had to make it its 'fixed and determined object' to give itself a new form and a rigorous periodicity, such as to effect a permanent transfer of legislative sovereignty: 'Thus, before dispersing, the Estates must necessarily have announced a fundamental law, a PRAGMATIC SANCTION, by which it is ordered that the representatives of the nation, armed with all of its powers, will assemble every three years without meeting any impediment, and

without the need of some particular act for their convocation' (175). As to any further actions the remodelled Estates-General might take, Stanhope declines to speculate beyond urging caution. Certainly, a rigorous separation between legislative and executive power must be established, ensuring the supremacy of the former. But executive authority should be retained by a hereditary monarch, for the time being; nor should the estates make any moves to strip the nobility of its privileges, at least in the short term.

Such then was Mably's Commonwealthman's scenario for a French Revolution '*ménagée par la voie que je vous ai indiquée*', rendered above as 'a revolution, prepared and followed through in the way that I have recommended'. There is no exact equivalent in English for the verb '*ménager*': 'managed', 'organized', 'arranged', 'overseen' or 'guided' would be plausible alternatives. What is not in doubt is the aspiration to exert wilful control over the process by which a change of political regimes would be effected in France, by contrast with what Mably regarded as the haphazard and incomplete character of the Dutch Revolt and English Revolutions. Assuming the mask of an English sage, Mably called for what might be termed a Whig Revolution *évoluée* – to be made all the more glorious by achieving a more conclusive and irreversible transfer of sovereignty from monarch to representative assembly than the English had managed in 1689, while also avoiding the violence that had helped to defeat the earlier attempt at a Commonwealth. If the prerogative powers of the English Crown, in defiance of orthodox separation-of-powers theory, represented Scylla, the corresponding Charybdis, the citation above makes clear, was military dictatorship. It is hardly necessary to point out the degree of Mably's prescience in both respects. Thirty years before the fact, he had correctly grasped the potential for revolutionary leverage possessed by the parlements. Mably's own optimism did not survive the Maupeou 'coup' and its aftermath, which he wrongly thought had permanently robbed the parlements of this capacity. Nor did he grasp the wider dynamics of inter-state and imperial completion in this epoch – the fact that revolution in the New World was capable of detonating an even greater upheaval in the Old. But once the 'pre-Revolution' was underway, it turned out that Mably had predicted its course with uncanny precision. Just as 'Milord Stanhope' had suggested, parliamentary resistance, backed by both elite and popular support, led directly to a convocation of the Estates-General for the first time in a century and a half; and the estates, once convened, proceeded with equal dispatch to a revolutionary remodelling of the French state. At the same time, the various objections that Mably ascribed to Stanhope's French interlocutor, invoking the Dutch Revolt or the English Civil War to warn of the risks of popular violence or

Cromwellian dictatorship, demonstrate the other side of his foresight. It was one thing to launch a revolution ‘*ménagée par la voie*’ recommended by Stanhope, another to steer it to a successful conclusion.

But *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* represents more than just an accurate prediction of how the Bourbon monarchy would meet its end. Mably’s grasp of the likely shape of a French Revolution owed everything to the way in which his thought stood at the crossroads of traditions of political thought that had hitherto tended to develop at some distance from one another. At the end of the 1960s, in his widely influential set of lectures, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*, the great historian of eighteenth-century thought Franco Venturi suggested that the ‘republican ferment’ that gripped France at mid-century – a first premonition of the ideological upheaval to come – was the result of the French embrace of the English Commonwealth tradition, the distilled essence of the revolutionary republicanisms of the previous century.² It has taken a long time for scholars to act on Venturi’s suggestion. But we at last have a commanding history of the reception of Commonwealth ideas in France in Rachel Hammersley’s *The English Republican Tradition and Eighteenth-Century France: Between the Ancients and the Moderns*, which rightly gives pride of place to Mably and to *Des droits et devoirs du citoyen*.³ Indeed, the dialogue form permitted Mably to re-enact, in classically compact mimetic fashion, the very process of reception and domestication of foreign thought that Venturi hinted at and that Hammersley has analysed in depth. In it, a Commonwealthman in person treats a Frenchman to a set of tutorials, at the end of which he can declare, wily, ‘Why, you have become a republican as proud and zealous as any I know in England’ (501). Yet *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* is very far from representing merely a faithful reproduction of Commonwealth themes. Its very title, clearly intended to echo the title that Barbeyrac gave to his translation of Pufendorf’s *De officio hominis et civis* – *Les devoirs de l’homme et du citoyen*, as well as to amend it with the addition of a pivotal term, is a reminder that Mably’s was a hybrid republicanism, founded on an appeal to a theory of inalienable natural rights. This kind of compound was destined, of course, to become the ideological common coin of the cycle of ‘Atlantic’ revolutions, from Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* onwards. But here it appears in a clear and compact statement, nearly two decades before Paine – even slightly in advance, to all appearances, of the more idiosyncratic variant on offer in *Du contrat social*, which in any case owed rather more to Hobbes than it did to Locke.⁴ At the same time, there was a second unusual element in Mably’s amalgam, marginal to the main concerns of *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* but one with a grand future ahead of it. This is the gesture in the direction of

the utopian tradition and, specifically, to the *communauté des biens* at the very centre of the dialogue. As the names of Thomas More or Henry Neville indicate, the distance between the republican and the utopian traditions had never been infinite. But with Mably, the gap had suddenly narrowed considerably, bringing the idea of the abolition of private property into at least close proximity with that of political revolution. Babeuvism was only a short step away.⁵

The fate of the *Conjuration des Egaux* is a reminder that Mably's synthesis of themes from the natural rights, republican and utopian traditions was an unstable compound. The momentary fusion between classical republicanism and utopianism in Babeuf and his followers was not destined to survive the age of revolutions. The same age, however, made the amalgamation of republicanism with natural rights theory into a permanent fixture of the thought-world of modern politics. At all events, *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* points us, like no other political text among its contemporaries, to one of the great mysteries of the fifty-year period of the 'Atlantic' revolutions – its sheer ideological radicalism, by comparison both with what came before and what came after. This was a general feature of the American, French, Caribbean and Latin American Revolutions, which saw virtually the entire repertoire of modern political ideas emerge in recognizable form. Within the set, however, the French Revolution plainly stands apart. As its classical costume makes clear, Jacobinism was obviously not without roots in an earlier Atlantic republican tradition. Yet it just as clearly represented a major breach with that tradition, shifting it decisively in a 'levelling' direction. There were paler equivalents elsewhere in the Atlantic World – but Jacobinism alone became the *fons et origo* of the modern revolutionary tradition. It goes without saying that a full explanation of the radical turn taken by French republicanism cannot confine itself to the realm of ideology but has to be sought in a wider account of the political and social character of the Revolution. Still, it is scarcely surprising that in his *Sans-Culottes*, the most searching analysis we have of the ideological *origines lointaines* of French revolutionary republicanism, Michael Sonenscher should pay specific tribute to Mably as a more fitting precursor to Jacobinism than even Rousseau.⁶ It is possible that the abbé himself would not have been surprised. Mably enjoyed a reputation in his lifetime for skill at political prediction, later claiming that he had foreseen the coming of the American Revolution as early as 1764. Paying tribute to him in 1790, the abbé Barthélémy, author of the *Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce*, recalled that Mably frequently invoked the adage of Leibniz: 'the present age is pregnant with the future' – a fitting epigraph to *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* and the hope it expresses for a 'révolution ménagée'.

Further Reading

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