"A state of permanent popular deliberation is indispensable": Debating and experimenting participation in British emigrant political culture in revolutionary Paris, 1792-1794

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When Robert Merry wrote his treatise on an ideal political system to be implemented in republican France in late 1792, he dwelled on the issue of who should be able to participate in the political life of the new nation henceforth free of monarchical constraint. Dismissing representative government as less a "masterpiece of perfection" than a specious form of political organisation which would lead to the compromising of all pretension to "equality, liberty and the rights of man," he went on to articulate a blueprint for a form of republican government dependent on the exercise of local popular deliberation, which would rely on a thorough and tireless shuttle between the legislature and primary assemblies (*Réflexions politiques* 6).

Merry's tract was one of a number of contributions to a debate which would animate the new nation over the course of late 1792 and early 1793, taking place against the backdrop of the trial of the king and the realignment of political interests between the Gironde and the Montagne.[1] The inauguration of the French National Convention on 21 September 1792, and the establishment of the constitutional committee in October, provided an opportunity for British residents of Paris to proffer their views to the Convention on their preferred system to replace constitutional monarchy and debate the merits of popular participation in national decision-making. Robert Merry was not the only British emigrant to be exercised by the scope of popular involvement in political affairs and to petition the committee. Many of Merry's compatriots in the French capital, frequently assembled at White's Hotel near the Palais Royal, the hub of emigrant political culture and sociability in the heart of Paris, discussed the desirability of delegating law-making powers to popular assemblies, the flaws and advantages of representative systems and the meaning and significance of the articulation of popular will, manifested during the August Days.[2] Merry and his compatriots made their views known to the Convention while simultaneously refining their

[1] For a clear explanation of the emergence and evolution of the notion of "Montagne" in the French public sphere, see Guermazi.

[2] For a discussion of the British community in revolutionary France, see Alger ("The British Colony in Paris"), Erdman, and Rogers ("White's Hotel").

political opinions through frequent contact with local district activism and section leaders, with whom they cultivated ties.[3]

Founded on the cusp of the new republic therefore, members of the emigrant political society *La Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme*, based at White's Hotel, also trialled their own participative structures in practice, using their nascent political organisation as a laboratory of rotating leadership, committee-driven collective decision-making and joint or polyvocal authorship, the experience of which may have gone some way to shaping their views on the form of republican government that the new nation should adopt in a future constitution. British contributors to the debate on the constitution emerge, in this portrait, as increasingly embedded in a Parisian public scene animated as much by deliberation in the Convention as local section militancy. Such a portrait also tends to support the view that British emigrants in Paris were drawn to defining their own positions in relation to the deepening schisms in French politics, diverging amongst themselves on the question of the role of the people in the new republic.[4]

British emigrants in Paris and popular participation in politics

It is no coincidence that a large number of British nationals arrived in Paris in the latter months of 1792 and formed at that juncture a pro-revolutionary political society which officially registered with the municipal authorities the following January.[5] Many of the visitors who took up temporary residence in the French capital from September 1792 had been, and maintained their role as, active members of reforming and Dissenting circles in Britain. They were drawn to observation of, and engagement with, the political experiments occurring across the Channel because of the new departure in the Revolution that the popular revolution of 10 August and the declaration of a republic entailed.[6] Some, though they were in the minority, had been pursued for seditious libel for their unabridged criticism of the British parliamentary model in their editorial work, printing

[3] See in particular Edwards, and Oswald.
[4] Some of the issues discussed in this article also feature in Rachel Rogers' forthcoming book, *Friends of the Revolution*.
[5] Early meetings of the society were recorded in *Le Moniteur Universel* with the paper announcing its official registration on Monday 7 January 1793 (volume 15): "France Commune de Paris, du 5 janvier : Des étrangers, pour la plupart Anglais, Écossais et Irlandais, résidant à Paris, se sont présentés au secrétariat de la municipalité, et ont déclaré, suivant la loi, qu'ils se réuniront tous les dimanches et jeudis, sous le nom de Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme, à l'hôtel anglais de White, no. 7, passage des Petits-Pères."
[6] At least thirteen members of the Paris-based society, including Robert Merry, George Edwards, John Frost, Henry Yorke, William Choppin, Francis Tweddell and Sampson Perry, were affiliates of the Society for Constitutional Information and some of its members maintained links with the Literary Fund. George Edwards also claimed to have been involved in an organization whose existence I have been unable to trace, called the Universal Society.

activities or writings and sought refuge and publishing outlets in France.[7] Many others combined a firm antipathy to what they saw as a decadent political system in Britain in urgent need of overhaul with a renewed enthusiasm for the potential of the French Revolution to stimulate wide-reaching European improvement. The fascination shown by some British emigrants for the turn of events in France, after the invasion of the Tuileries in August 1792 and the arrest and deposition of the king, was therefore inextricable from their hopes for transformation on home soil. It also provides further evidence of a trait common to a large number of British revolutionary sympathisers who took up residence in Paris in late 1792; a willingness to countenance a greater degree of popular participation in the political life of a country than was admitted—and widely desired—in the strictly delineated, property-based electoral system and parliamentary model of Great Britain.[8]

Carine Lounissi has recently argued, in her study of Thomas Paine's experience in France during the Revolution, that the British radical's republican preferences were already entrenched by the time he wrote *Rights of Man* Part One in 1791, yet that he held back from explicitly voicing his views in that pamphlet for strategic reasons.[9] It is difficult to gauge the underlying support for republicanism among other British residents of Paris before their arrival in France, yet the timing of their departures, and eagerness to take part in the debate over how to shape the new constitution, as well as their vocal anti-monarchism once in France, is perhaps testimony to their readiness to countenance republican solutions in the interests of reforming what they saw as regimes which were the antithesis of free and rational government. It may also point to evidence of their republican sympathies before departure. John Hurford Stone, writing from his post on the battlefield in North-East France in November 1792, hailed the assertion of popular sovereignty and the decision to bring the king to justice, celebrating "those patriots, re-clothed with power by the people, declaring the kingdom a republic, about to establish a still more popular constitution, and ordering the immediate trial of him whom they were to have felt as a tyrant, but who is now sunk into contempt with them as a traitor" (qtd. in Williams, *Letters from France* III 76). Popular involvement in the deposition of the king generated widespread assent among the British radicals

[7] The most notable cases of British residents seeking exile in France were those of Thomas Paine and Sampson Perry, both of whom were indicted for seditious libel. Paine was prosecuted for the publication of Part 2 of *Rights of Man* in February 1792, while Sampson Perry was indicted on three counts of libel over the course of 1791 and 1792 for criticism of the government and notable figures of the aristocracy which featured in his newspaper *The Argus*.
[8] For the earliest detailed explorations of the British emigrant community in revolutionary Paris, see the works of John G. Alger
[9] The first chapter of Part Two of Lounissi's book tackles the question of Paine's latent republicanism in *Rights of Man* and the implication for his later involvement in the debate over the emerging French republic.

in Paris and many were also inclined to tolerate, explain or even vindicate some of the more violent excesses which accompanied the passage from a monarchical to a republican regime, even though, Thomas Paine excepted, few expressly intervened in the debate over the fate of the king. Such support for the republican turn and the expansion of popular involvement in the political life of the nation inevitably exposed them to accusations within the British establishment of treason, class betrayal or the possession of an innate propensity to cruelty.[10]

Broadly speaking, therefore, British members of the pro-revolutionary society set up in Paris under the early republic were exercised by the dual issues of how to implement a republican constitution and government, and to what extent the people should have a role in that government, either through the franchise or through more direct means of popular acquiescence in the making and enacting of laws. They wrote about these issues from a theoretical perspective in their depositions to the constitutional committee at the turn of 1793, and they reflected on them, based on the tangible evidence and knowledge they acquired, while resident in the French capital, of the events of 10 August 1792 which constituted one of the first moments in the course of the Revolution defined by recourse to popular action. Yet they also considered such questions from an empirical perspective, having cultivated close links with local sections, witnessed section politics at first hand, and implemented some democratic measures in their own associational practices.[11] While, as Lounissi has shown, Thomas Paine directed his energies to the pursuit of equal suffrage as a goal to enhance the democratic basis of republican government, and while David Williams assumed an advisory role in the service of Jean-Marie Roland and Jacques Pierre Brissot, leading figures in the revolutionary administration, other British residents of Paris made their primary focus the promotion of an active role for the people in assenting to or opposing national legislation. Such expressions of support for popular involvement in the making of laws cannot be divorced from the context in which they were articulated. As Alexandre Guermazi has shown, the months between October 1792 and January 1793, the short period during which British residents petitioned the committee, were characterized by the gradual "conquering of the democratic public space" (18) by a much broader and unified conception of popular sovereignty, shaped by what had hitherto been seen as a factional grouping, the Montagne.

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[10] *The Gentleman's Magazine* (vol. 90, part 1, 1820, 336) concluded that Helen Maria Williams remained "unappalled by the dismal scenes of which she was a frequent witness," cementing the verdict that she was immune to, and even tolerant of, the violence that appeared to encapsulate the Revolution. To set the developing views of British residents on sovereignty, representation and the republican departure in the Revolution in the context of ongoing ideological struggles within the French nation, particularly in Jacobin discourse, an essential read is Dan Edelstein 2009.

[11] Ties were cultivated with the Place des Fédérés, Le Pelletier and Guillaume Tell sections.

Writing on popular sovereignty in a new republican constitution

British depositions to the constitutional committee varied in their scope and ideas. David Williams' contribution—dedicated to his friend Roland whose "principles" and "public conduct" he avowed to hold in high esteem—kept closely to the script of the 1791 monarchical constitution, while offering solutions for renewal under republican terms (Letter to Jean-Marie Roland 2). Robert Merry and John Oswald, however, expressed more virulent support for popular involvement in law-making, and denounced representative government as ill-adapted to the needs of a reformed republican administration.[12] An enthusiast of the French Revolution, veteran of the struggle for Florentine independence and the author of pro-revolutionary poetry, Robert Merry, went to France to witness the events of 1789 before returning again in 1791 and settling for a longer spell in 1792.[13] He was in Paris by the time of the arrest of the king, and he went on to join the *Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme* from its inception in November. Merry's tract begins with an explanation of how kingship emerged as a form of rule through "the strange remedy of sacrificing collective will and natural rights to favour one single man" and manifested itself ultimately in "destitution," "slavery" and "carnage," the result of having allowed these "crowned monsters" to exercise power over the many (*Réflexions politiques* 5). The author counsels against seeing representative government as the preferred alternative to a monarchical system, since, in his view, representatives will ultimately usurp the power of the people, and wrestle sovereignty away from the latter, unless the body of the people is alert and constantly active:

> The representatives of a nation can only be seen as servants with a duty to obey the will of the sovereign people in all ways; and if this sovereign does not watch over them constantly, to keep them within the limits of their duty, they will not fail to substitute their own ideas for those of the people, and the general interest will end up being sacrificed to factional violence and sly scheming. Then, therefore, absolute power associated with representation is destined to degenerate gradually into tyranny, unless the general will is constantly active in order to contain and rule, it follows that a state of permanent popular deliberation will become indispensable in order to oppose all the decrees that partiality and injustice could offer to the representative assembly with an efficient veto. (*Réflexions politiques* 7)[14]

[12] The manuscript of David Williams' treatise *On the late Constitution of France with a view to the formation of a new Constitution* (1793) is held at the National Library of Wales, MS 2.192. A French translation was published in Paris in 1793 : *Observations sur la dernière constitution de la France, avec des vues pour la formation de la nouvelle constitution.* For a comprehensive study of John Oswald's role in the French Revolution, see David V. Erdman.

[13] For further reading on Merry, see Jon Mee, "'Once a squire and now a Man.'"

[14] Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author.

The influence of ongoing debate in French national politics is palpable, given that Merry was writing at a time when the members of the Montagne in the Convention were positioning themselves as the guardians of the popular will, expressed in the events of August 1792, in the face of what was perceived as a Girondin threat to popular sovereignty. Merry, an eyewitness to the siege of the Tuileries, had written about the August Days in a tract entitled *A Circumstantial History of the Transactions at Paris on the Tenth of August*, drawn verbatim from the version of events published in the radical newspaper *Révolutions de Paris, dédiées à la nation et au district des petits-augustins* which Merry annotated with editorial notes.[15] In those notes, Merry had portrayed the people of Paris as brave, peaceable and devastated by the loss of loved ones culled by the cowardly and cruel Swiss Guards. His views on the new constitution, therefore, as expressed in his later tract, need to be set within the framework of his firm support for the involvement of the people in the deposition of the king and his mounting sympathy with the popular turn.

In *Réflexions politiques*, he contends that the citizenry must be vigilant and energetic, ratifying not only the new constitution once the Convention had agreed upon a draft, but also examining even the most minute pieces of statute. He sees this state of constant civic dynamism as manifesting itself in unstinting communication between a national legislative assembly and primary assemblies where the people, gathered once a year, would approve or vote down national laws:

> It should be the case therefore that each law which goes through the representative assembly be immediately printed, published and sent to the primary assemblies to be taken into consideration; and that at the end of each year, or at the moment set for the election of members, all the citizens of the districts should individually veto or approve each of the laws. (*Réflexions politiques* 7)

Merry goes on to argue that the implementation of laws should be simply delayed if agreement cannot be reached and no majority of opinion emerges in favour. He advocates the re-election of national assemblies on an annual basis and calls for frequent primary assemblies as a sort of training ground for citizens to help them acclimatise to the role as active members of the civic body. Such gatherings would "familiarise the people with the ease of debating and make them more conscious of the extent of their duties and their own significance" (*Réflexions politiques* 8). For Merry, the people have "the right to declare their will" while representatives should be thoroughly reined in and have the "power to act." As Yannick Bosc has shown, the power to control

[15] Evidence, set out in my doctoral thesis (Rogers, *Vectors of Revolution* 349-359), points to Merry being the probable author of *A Circumstantial History*. See also *Révolutions de Paris* 229-39.

and, if necessary, recall those with delegated authority to represent the sovereignty of the people was central to the Montagnard conception of democracy at all levels of decision-making, from the Convention to the sections. Merry states "it goes without saying that no man can delegate to another the right to think for himself; it is therefore impossible for a nation to be free unless all the individuals that make it up retain the right to think for themselves; otherwise, the whole is not governed by the whole" (*Réflexions politiques* 8).

This final passage from Merry's tract, which asserts the connection between individual liberty and national freedom, is strikingly similar to the views of fellow member of the *Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme,* John Oswald, also sympathetic to Montagnard claims to be the sole defenders of popular sovereignty and also of the view that prevailing forms of representative government—"a sham government of the people" in his terms—were tantamount to the abdication of an individual's right and ability to act and think for themselves (Oswald 9).

Oswald, a member of the *Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme* and a soldier in the French republican army who died fighting in the Vendée, also petitioned the constitutional committee with his tract entitled *The Government of the People; or a Sketch of a Constitution for the Universal Commonwealth* printed at John Hurford Stone's "English press" at rue Notre Dame des Champs. The text was also translated into French and published by the *Imprimerie des Révolutions de Paris* in 1793. Oswald was equally vociferous in his criticism of a model of government to replace monarchical rule which did not include a central element of popular "deliberation" on laws to determine the "will of the nation" (Oswald 4). He echoed Merry—with whom he undoubtedly conferred and concurred before publication—on the centrality of primary assemblies in "orbit" around a national executive assembly. For Oswald, the nation should "assemble," "deliberate" and then "decide," thus removing the threat of "despotism" and "political frauds" which flow from "the pretence of representation" (Oswald 5). He unpicks the myth of the balanced British constitution—the harmonious alliance of King, Lords and Commons—and at the same time condemns the efforts of the Constituent Assembly to establish a constitutional monarchy, which would deprive the people of their sovereignty. Oswald envisaged that decision-making in popular deliberative assemblies would take place in "knots of neighbourhoods"—or "townships"—whose approbation of or dissent from draft legislation would be inscribed on "standards" held among the people for all to see (Oswald 10-11). Oswald also favoured frequent elections to a National Executive Council whose delegates would be the "unequivocal choice of the People" (Oswald 14). After setting out his view of how the people could exercise their sovereignty in the making of laws and in the election of their public servants, the author counters potential

criticism of his framework in the final section of his treatise which includes a spirited denunciation of clerical attempts to stymie the ability of the people to gather in order to exercise their reason.

If such depositions testify to the depth of anti-monarchical feeling among a section of British residents in Paris at the turn of 1793, they also articulately display the readiness of such observers to acknowledge and embrace innovations in government and constitutional design which would allow for a greater degree of popular participation in the operation of law-making. While the focus in Britain was on universal manhood suffrage and the redrawing of the electoral map to reflect the growing importance of the industrial towns, British radicals, steeped in this culture but relocated to Paris, reassessed their stances as they monitored the course of the Revolution. One reason may have been that they were on the more radical fringe of the British reform movement, versed in a Commonwealth tradition which drew upon a long-standing republican heritage. Yet it was also without doubt inextricably linked to the fact that they were resident in France, profoundly disillusioned with political culture at home, and willing to accept and venerate some of the experiments and developments they heard about and witnessed in Paris, which were linked to the particular circumstances and events of the Revolution itself. The organs of the local press, the district activism of the Cordeliers Club and the journalism and publications of the Cercle Social—crucial agents of public opinion in the struggle to establish the legitimacy of popular sovereignty in the revolutionary years, as Raymond Monnier has shown—all exercised a degree of influence on British emigrants, many of whom were themselves editors, publishers and writers and fitted into these circles with ease. John Oswald worked closely with Nicolas de Bonneville at the *Chronique du Moi*s and Sampson Perry published his own prospectus for his newspaper, *The Argus*, in the same journal. As James Epstein has persuasively put it, "meanings, constructions of subjective identities, the very possibilities for representation cannot be understood outside historically specific practices and imaginings attached to spaces" (310).

Whether because of their own ideological meanderings, their journalistic partnerships, their reading of the works of men such as Camille Desmoulins or François Robert, or due to their political encounters at a local level in Paris and developments in the balance of power in the Convention which they observed closely, it would appear that British residents became intently sympathetic to the views on popular sovereignty articulated by members of the Cordeliers Club, whose mantle was taken on by members of the Montagne in the Convention, and appear to have leaned towards a preference for participative political structures favoured by district and sans-culotte activists, rather than the model of representative democracy advanced by figures such as

Brissot and other Girondin members of the Convention.[16] The similarities between the ideas put forward in the works of Merry and Oswald, and those of the Cordeliers, as identified by Rachel Hammersley—rejection of representative government, advocacy of a mixture of delegate and semi-direct democracy, requirement that a representative's term of office be short, a central role for the people in voting to sanction or reject every law, ratification by the people of all acts of legislative power—, are striking: they persuasively demonstrate that many British radicals resident in Paris were not automatically affiliated to the Girondin grouping, as has commonly been suggested, but developed a firm affinity with the views and democratic departures characteristic of local district activism which led them ultimately towards support for the Montagnards in the Convention during the latter months of 1792 and early 1793.

Reactions to popular involvement in the August Days, 10 August 1792

British support for popular involvement in political life was forged in part in response to the testimonies and reactions that emigrants were exposed to once they arrived in France—or that for some they witnessed first-hand—of the military backlash against the people of Paris who had invaded the Tuileries gardens and demanded the arrest of the king in August 1792. Several gruesome accounts of the confrontation were published and read in Britain, emphasizing the people's barbarity, although relatively few were written by British observers.[17] The ambassador of Genoa described how the Swiss guards were mutilated after their death, noting that, "it seems impossible to give a plausible explanation for the barbarity and insults their corpses were subject to" (qtd. in Reinhard 602-03). He also portrayed the popular militias as ruthless and pitiless, decapitating the Swiss guards even after they had surrendered.[18]

British residents' accounts of the August Days were written with the broad intention of correcting what they saw as the misinformation circulating in Britain about the behaviour of the people of Paris during this confrontation. Both the anonymous account entitled *A Circumstantial History of the Transactions at Paris on the Tenth of August*, which was likely to have been written by Robert Merry, and Sampson Perry's later description of the events in the second volume of *An Historical Sketch of the French Revolution*, seek to rehabilitate the people and lay the blame for

[16] Rachel Hammersley (2005) argues that members of the Cordeliers Club were themselves influenced by the thinking of British republican writers of the seventeenth century in their preference for more direct democratic practices.

[17] See for example *A genuine narrative of the proceedings at Paris*. I have not been able to verify if the "Mr Johnson" in question, author of the account, was William Johnson, a member of the *Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme*.

[18] *Annual Register For the Year 1792 Part I* 519-20

the confrontation on the king and his guards. Without denying the cruelties that were perpetrated, Merry sees them as "the effects of a just and *necessary* self-defence on the part of the people" rather than a manifestation of blind brutality (*A Circumstantial History* vii). The author considered that popular vengeance would not have been required had the enemies of the Revolution not plunged the country into civil war and had the privileged given up their titles willingly. Merry's fellow countryman and *Société* member Sampson Perry also reproached the king's guards with having carried out an unrelenting attack on the people at the Tuileries. He also imputes the people's fury to the failure of the Assembly to pass a petition demanding the deposition of the king, and subsequent anxiety that the royal family had been allowed to escape (Perry 206-11).

In volume IV of her *Letters from France*, fellow British resident and reformer Helen Maria Williams explained the outbreak of violence in the prisons on the following 2 September by reference to the sentiment of injustice that prevailed in the wake of the events of 10 August. Williams denies the portrait circulating in London of "a mere wanton and unprovoked effusion of the cruelty and ferociousness of the French populace," and sets out the rational basis of the actions as well as their place in the annals of human history. Rather than being proof of the unprecedented depravity of an entire population, the prison massacres were the explicable result of the "wrath and fury" of the victims of 10 August (*Letters from France* IV 191).[19] In a similar way to Perry, Williams emphasises what she sees as the understandable impatience of the people, who had been kept waiting too long for justice after the August Days, when husbands, brothers and fathers had been killed. One eighteen-year-old "had lost two brothers the tenth of August, and was resolved to revenge their death" (*Letters from France* IV 206). Williams drew the conclusion that the prison massacres could not be blamed on the perpetrators themselves, but on the chain of betrayals that preceded and prompted the actions: "I must believe that the treachery of the court made the tenth of August—the tenth of August made the foundation of the second of September—and the Duke of Brunswick provoked the execution of it" (*Letters from France* IV 207).

The clampdown by the royal guards against the people of Paris on 10 August made a lasting impression on British residents of the capital and governed many of their subsequent reactions to the next stages of the Revolution. In the wake of the clashes, four members of the *Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme*, including Robert Rayment and James Gamble, orchestrated a fundraising initiative—acknowledged and praised by the National Convention—to raise money for the widows

[19] Williams was critical also of leaders of the Paris Commune, who included members of what would later be termed the Montagne, who she considered gave their tacit consent to the killings.

and orphans of "the heroes of the *journée* of the 10th August."[20] The episode was recorded in Rayment's prison file, where it was noted that "on the fourth day after the memorable victory at the Tuileries, he appeared with other Englishmen, republicans at heart, at the bar of the national assembly to present their fraternal donations to the widows and orphans of the free men who died for their country on the 10th August."[21] One of the donors was Sir Robert Smith, former Member of Parliament for Colchester, who subsequently disclaimed his title, along with Lord Edward Fitzgerald, at a meeting of the emigrant society in November 1792. Smith, incarcerated under the emergency measures introduced against foreign residents of Paris in 1793, claimed in his prison deposition to have donated 1,910 *livres* to, among others, the cause of the victims of the Tuileries.[22]

British men and women, many of them from the lettered and professional classes, some of them, like Smith, having held high political office, did not fail to come to the attention of the British authorities monitoring the conduct of British emigrants in Paris through the dispatches of resident spy, George Monro, and by means of the letters received by the Home Office from formal ambassadors such as Earl Gower. Much of the criticism that was levelled at British residents of Paris from a domestic point of view was linked not only to their support for the French Revolution broadly speaking, but in particular to their embracing of the popular departures in the Revolution, the inroads made into the social hierarchy and the assault on the idea of property as the basis for political rights, manifested in the constitutional experiments of 1792-1793. Perry was posthumously accused of associating with the "riff-raff of all nations," possibly a reference to his willingness to associate with more radical revolutionary figures, but also an allusion to the associations forged between British emigrants and the local Parisian sections at the turn of 1793 (qtd. in Andrews 234).[23] An obituary of Robert Merry printed in the *Annual Register* in 1799 noted that the "change in his political opinions"—presumably towards advocacy of more popular participation in political life—"gave a sullen gloom to his character, which made him relinquish all his former connections, and unite with people far beneath his talents, and quite unsuitable to his habits" (*Annual Register 1799* 350). He was also accused of "associating with the last dregs of human nature" having "imbibed all the levelling principles of the most furious democrat," again perhaps a reference to the invitation extended to a speaker from the Place des Fédérés section on 16 December 1792, while Merry presided over club proceedings (qtd. in Mee, "The Magician No

[20] Robert Rayment refers to his support for the widows and children of the Tuileries in his prison declaration. See AN F7/4774/88.
[21] AN F7/4774/88.
[22] AN F7 4775/20/3: the file is recorded under the name of Smyth.
[23] Printed earlier in *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 110, 1857, 251.

Conjuror" 43). Petitioning his friend Jacques-Louis David for a passport in May 1793, Merry recalled his support for the popular departures in the Revolution. He wrote to David: "rest assured that I will remain until the last moments of my life a true sans-culotte. Long live the Montagne."[24]

British nationals, some of whom had seemingly allied themselves with Montagnard radicalism, were depicted by hostile commentators as treacherous and a threat to British security. Captain Monro, attempting to portray the characters of the British radicals he monitored during his stay in Paris, suggested that "their dispositions are such that I am however sure they would, with the assistance of France, put anything in execution that could injure their country" (Monro to Grenville, qtd. in Granville Leveson-Gower 263). One wonders whether this "injury" was as much a byword for social disruption as a forecast of the threat of a genuine armed invasion. This is corroborated by the fact that in the same dispatch Monro reports that British residents of White's Hotel had "cheerfully received" the "discourses" from five or six sections which contained "violent language." A shift in the social basis on which power was to be grounded—encapsulated by British emigrants' embracing of the representatives of local district politics and sans-culotte activism—was as much a threat to Britain's ruling elite and the premises of its parliamentary stability as a full-scale military landing.

Experimenting with participation in *La Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme*

British nationals not only supported political innovation at a state level, enacted by revolutionaries in France and with potential applications at home in Britain, but also actively engaged in political experiments within their own society, set up at White's Hotel in late 1792.[25] As Melvin Edelstein has argued, the clubs and sections of French towns were more pivotal in urging forward the expansion of political participation in late 1792 than the widely heralded municipal elections held on the basis of quasi-universal manhood suffrage from September of that year.[26] In many ways, the *Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme* took inspiration from the models of local activism that emigrants had witnessed on their arrival in Paris, and whose organs their own society drew upon for support, material aid and ideological nourishment. The Paris emigrant society can also be seen as a subsidiary of the Society for Constitutional Information

[24] AN F7/4412. Merry's letter to David, written from Calais on 9 May 1793. Although Merry's profession of support for the Montagne was perhaps contingent on his receiving a passport to leave the country, his words tally with what we know of his developing political views.
[25] The first recorded meetings of the society date to November 1792, and the society officially registered with the Paris authorities in January 1793.
[26] Edelstein shows that despite the advent of wide manhood suffrage in September 1792, it was the local sections and their influence through the club network, which had the greatest impact on ushering in more democratic participation in politics.

(SCI), which had begun to entertain a more democratic agenda with its endorsement of the second part of *Rights of Man*, published in February 1792, and its commitment to circulating it cheaply and widely across the country. Thirteen of the fifty principal signatories of early addresses to the French National Convention had been, or continued to be, members of the SCI in London despite their residence in Paris. The society was also closely influenced and populated by Irish members, which allowed for new synergies between radicals of the nations of Britain and Ireland on French soil.[27] Members of the *Société* ranged in age from eighteen to their early forties and most were members of the professional and lettered classes, with a background in journalism, publishing, medicine, commerce or law. Some came alone, while a number arrived in France with their families, children and servants.[28]

The sources which could allow scholars to access the precise nature of these associational gatherings are scarce and scattered, and there are no official minutes or records to testify to the nature of the society's activities. The reports sent by British agent George Monro are helpful yet must be treated with caution, in the same way as espionage reports on London Corresponding Society activities need to be verified against other evidence. We can glean information about the club from the addresses and petitions sent to the National Convention during the course of late 1792 and 1793, from the writings published by its members while in Paris or from the prison records held at the *Archives Nationales*, since many members of the society who remained in Paris after September 1793 were temporarily incarcerated. Letters also survive, as do some later references to the society in autobiographical writings, newspapers and obituaries. Occasionally the activities of the club are mentioned in tracts and treatises published by the members of the emigrant community, but these allusions are few and far between. Hazarding any firm assertions on the nature of the group, its organization and its functioning is a perilous endeavour therefore, and any offerings here are made with the caution that such a patchy record necessitates.

The first recorded meeting of the society was on 18 November 1792 when a group of British and Irish residents of Paris met to articulate their support for the French republican armies and selected a committee to draft an address to publicly endorse the new republican departure in the Revolution.[29] Monro suggests that D. E. MacDonnell of the *Morning Post* and Sir Robert Smith were key figures in the committee which retired from the main meeting to draw up the declaration

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[27] For further details of Irish involvement in the activities at White's Hotel see Ferradou. See also Rogers, "The Society of the Friends of the Rights of Man."
[28] Robert Rayment, Sir Robert Smith, Robert Merry and John Hurford Stone all settled with their families in Paris. For a broader history of transnational experience in the revolutionary world of the late eighteenth century, a useful source is Janet Polasky's book.
[29] The creation of the club was reported in *Le Moniteur Universel* on 26 November 1792.

the same evening to be presented to the National Convention by Irish resident Robert O'Reilly on 24 November.[30] Fifty individuals signed the address, expressing solidarity with the republican direction the nation was taking and celebrating the triumph of universal liberty this departure appeared to embody.[31] Further meetings apparently took place over the course of December, probably on a bi-weekly basis, on Sundays and Thursdays, though Helen Maria Williams suggested that at times the meetings were nightly. This regularity of assembly is confirmed in John Hurford Stone's letters where he described evenings spent with fellow British men and women reading the national papers and toasting the cause of liberty (Howell 1215). It is sometimes difficult however to clearly differentiate between what were considered the political activities of the society and those of a more sociable nature. In all probability the two were closely intertwined and fuelled each other. Women would have been admitted to informal meetings and dinner gatherings though not, it seems, entitled to sign the formal addresses. There were very likely different levels of formality, responsibility and access within the club and its wider orbit.

One feature of the society, as well as its preference for committee-driven initiatives by subsets of the broader membership, was its practice of rotating the presidency. While John Hurford Stone signed the November address as president, and most likely presided over the meeting on 18 November, it was Robert Merry who chaired a gathering on 16 December 1792. A key instrument of political influence exploited by the society was the official address, a form which, during the course of 1793, as British residents' status and legitimacy was put in doubt, could sometimes take the guise of a petition or a plea. Following the November 1792 text, a further address was presented to the Jacobin Club on 12 January, and another to the Convention on 22 January 1793. A joint petition from the "English, Irish and Scottish residents of Paris and its surroundings" was submitted to the Convention on 23 September 1793. While pledging continued support to the republic, it highlighted the difficulties that residents of Britain were facing, as measures were implemented against citizens of countries at war with France (archives qtd. in Constantine 70). The donations offered to the Assembly to provide pecuniary assistance to the victims of the Tuileries assault were perhaps also an early manifestation of this type of collective action. The architects of the scheme—Rayment, Gamble and Smith—would later help set up the *Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme*.

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[30] TNA TS 11/959. Monro mentioned a "Mr. McDonald," but since the club addresses were signed by D. E. MacDonnell, he probably made a mistake here.
[31] See AN C11/278/40 for the full text of the address and its signatories.

Monro's claim that the society welcomed delegations and presentations from local section activists is borne out by later reports. On 16 December 1792 the main event of the evening gathering was the presentation of an address from the president of the Place des Fédérés section to the foreign audience. Prison files also reinforce the view that the emigrant society was closely in touch with local political activists as well as national figures of the revolutionary administration. Both Robert Rayment and Robert Smith received glowing character references from local section leaders (Guillaume Tell and Le Pelletier sections respectively), which they then submitted in order to try to facilitate their release from prison in late 1793. This tends to indicate that British residents cultivated and called upon well-established local connections during their time in the capital and may have even drawn upon these models of local Parisian activism in their own political experiments. It also reinforces the argument that some British members of the emigrant political community in Paris developed a preference for ideas on political participation and direct appeals to popular assent for laws as manifested in Cordeliers writings and district activism, which would ultimately lead many of them to diverge from Girondin preferences for more representative forms of government.[32]

Dinners at White's Hotel would also be the occasion for socialising and the broadening of networks. An informant for the French authorities, Citizen Arthur, who denounced John Hurford Stone as a British spy on 8 March 1794, suggests that a man named Milne provided dinner at the hotel almost every week for British guests in what he describes as a sort of English tavern.[33] Lord Edward Fitzgerald, writing from White's Hotel on 30 October 1792, described his own sociable routine: "I lodge with my friend Paine,—we breakfast, dine, and sup together" (Moore 73-74). Sociable outings could also allow British residents to connect with each other outside the framework of political gatherings, for instance in trips to the theatre or opera. Helen Maria Williams lamented, however, the irregular attendance of her fellow countryfolk at the Lycée, where she attended lectures on philosophy, the arts, science, history and poetry, suggesting that in some quarters British guests were not seen as devoting the required zeal to enhancing their cultural knowledge (*Letters from France* II 133). Political encounters and sociable outings appear to have connected British residents of Paris, supporting the assertion that the emigrant society forged at White's hotel also served to provide a degree of solidarity, means of sociable introduction and mutual assistance for British guests recently settled in Paris.

[32] Haim Burstin (2005) illuminates this tension between initiatives of the revolutionary authorities and the gradual politicisation and radicalisation of this particular Paris district (faubourg Saint Marcel) after the August Days.
[33] AN F7/4775/23.

This sense of the society as being as much a hub of mutual aid—and financial relief—as a fully-fledged political society is corroborated by the evidence which emerges from the records of joint projects conducted by members of the emigrant community during their stays in Paris. There is much evidence to support the view that British members undertook business ventures together and worked together on joint writing or publishing projects. James Gamble, who was one of the men who put his name to the residents' address to the National Convention, set up a paper manufactory in Paris and may have assumed co-ownership of White's Hotel after the landlord, Christopher White, who had called on Gamble to be his guarantor, got into financial difficulties in 1793.[34] White allowed society member Stephen Sayre to set up a tobacco shop on the same premises as his hotel.[35] Sayre wrote to Lord Stanhope in October 1792 informing him, "I have a part of White's Hotel, his first floor is as yet unoccupied" (qtd. in Alden 173). White himself took on the legal guardianship of fellow society member and business associate Nicholas Joyce's children after the latter died in prison in February 1794, bringing an end to their shared investment in a cotton manufactory.[36] Both Robert Merry and John Hurford Stone also provided financial relief to compatriots in need during the course of 1793. Numerous other examples of joint business and publishing initiatives pepper the archive, many of them involving Stone who, as well as being an active property investor, also ran an English printing press in Paris, a venture documented in the work of Madeleine Stern ("The English Press in Paris" 307-359; "The Franco-American Book Trade" 47-54). As well as publishing his fellow British associates' writings, Stone also contributed to the volume of Helen Williams' letters, along with fellow British associate, Thomas Christie. These writing projects were often the fruit of collective encounters and initiatives, and their authors seem to have favoured allowing each author to provide their own reading of events without any requirement of agreement or consensus in their written production, editorial decisions or printing contracts. As mentioned before—given the concordance of their

[34] See Citizen Arthur's declaration, AN F7/4775/23: "Gamble, anglais imprimeur en taille, douze rue des piques, au coin du boulevard est copropriétaire de la maison With [sic] ...il n'a pris intérêt dans cette maison que depuis With, dont il était la caution, a fait la Banqueroute."
[35] George Monro, 6 Dec. 1792, TNA TS 11/959.
[36] Nicholas Joyce was probably a signatory to the emigrant society's address of 24 November 1792. Although David Erdman reads the first name on the address as "Rich" for Richard, the first four letters given could equally be "Nich" for Nicholas. This would make sense, considering that Nicholas Joyce was White's business partner and that I have found no records under the name of Richard Joyce. Christopher White's career in France is outlined in some detail in the submissions he made to the *Comité de Sûreté Générale* while imprisoned in the Luxembourg prison. See AN F7/4775/52, 70-81. White's depositions are made largely in support of an application for the freedom of Nicholas Joyce's orphaned children, one of whom, the eldest, was held in detention with the White family. Joyce had died in the Benedictine prison on 25 February 1794.

ideas on popular participation in government—Robert Merry and John Oswald probably conferred while writing their depositions to the constitutional committee.

In the face of the mounting diplomatic strain between their home country and France and given the heterogeneity of their ideological positions, the legitimacy of British residents' actions, acquisitions and even continued residence began to be put in doubt. The tension which characterised gatherings of the society in early 1793 was in part prompted by the fact that, as subjects of a nation at war with the French republic, and harbouring diverse political and ideological opinions, British residents were increasingly scrutinised for signs of counterrevolutionary design. Both Citizen Arthur and Captain Monro suggested that the discussions and meetings at White's Hotel were fraught with brimming animosity. Although both men were undercover agents and therefore may have had a private interest in portraying the club as populated by violent insurgents, we might not want to dismiss the possibility that the society was not simply a site of respectable gentlemanly discussion. Citizen Arthur recounts one evening when during one of the "orgies" of political debate, an argument broke out between Thomas Paine and another British resident. The latter punched Paine in the face and fled before later returning to bury the hatchet. Monro also depicted a group riven by dissension, contending that the members were "jealous of one another, differing in opinions." The proposal made by Paine and seconded by Robert Merry in mid-January 1793 to present a further address to the National Convention created such tension that "the debate nearly ended in blows" (Monro to Grenville, qtd. in Granville Leveson-Gower 268).[37] Once again physical violence, or the spectre of it, was in the foreground of proceedings. These physical confrontations may also provide further evidence of the club's diverse make-up. While some members might have seen the society as a place of enlightened conversation and enquiry, others might have entertained the possibility of allowing for more rowdy and unrestrained altercations which reflected the growing place of the ordinary people and democratic freedom in politics, an issue that of course some of them had also written about to the Convention. To a certain extent therefore, strains within the society mirrored tensions in wider French politics between so-called Girondins and Montagnards over the extent of popular participation in a future republic.

Monro recalls how the support of certain members for the more democratic turn of events in France had "occasioned Sir Rt. Smith to quit their party as well as many others" (Monro to Grenville, qtd. in Granville Leveson-Gower 263). Tensions also arose between American and British members with a motion being passed to expel members from America as subjects of

[37] See also Captain Monro's letters in TNA FO 27/40 Part 2.

another state, a gesture which went contrary to earlier celebrations of universal fraternity in the society's ranks (Monro to Grenville, qtd. in Granville Leveson-Gower 269). Such antagonism may be explained by the fact that American residents continued to enjoy full freedom to conduct their professional or business affairs, freedom which may have adversely affected those British speculators who had entered into partnership with their American acquaintances.[38] It may also have been provoked by the relative moderation of American Joel Barlow's deposition to the constitutional committee or perhaps by a shared sense that American speculators were less committed to the pursuit of the Revolution than to furthering their own economic interests.[39] Mary Wollstonecraft certainly deplored Gilbert Imlay's "commercial face" in her letters to him (265), while Richard Buel, Joel Barlow's biographer, argues that American residents of Paris, Stephen Sayre and Gilbert Imlay, "used the clichés of revolutionary republicanism to promote their own interests" (Buel 164), portraying their behaviour as the cynical exploitation of economic opportunities under a veneer of activism. Spies began to be suspected within the community gravitating round the hotel, and by mid to late January, Captain Monro had felt it prudent to withdraw, being "noticed and observed by his rascals of countrymen."[40] Henry Redhead Yorke apparently left the club after a "violent quarrel" with the Irish Sheares brothers over his objection to an assault on the British monarch and would later be denounced to the National Convention by fellow member, Robert Rayment (Yorke and Sykes 2).[41] Yorke himself, writing as a converted loyalist in 1802, describes how Robert O'Reilly quarrelled with two members of the club leading to their expulsion: "As citizen O'Reilly, in the year 1792, he succeeded in expelling two Englishmen from White's in the Rue des Petits Pères, because they opposed the manic Irish propositions of Citizen Lord Edward Fitzgerald and the two unhappy Sheares, all of whom met a tragic fate in Ireland" (Yorke and Sykes 228). The veracity of the supposed divide between more moderate British members and their allegedly more radical Irish counterparts is one that demands further

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[38] American resident Stephen Sayre was able to continue his snuff and tobacco enterprise, even though British residents came under suspicion and had their businesses closed down.

[39] Barlow's tract was published by Joseph Johnson in 1792 under the title *A letter to the National Convention of France: on the defects in the constitution of 1791, and the extent of the amendments which ought to be applied.* It was translated into French by Wilhelm Ludger and published as *Lettre à la Convention nationale de France sur les vices de la Constitution de 1791 et sur l'étendue des amendements à y porter* (1792). It was a more moderate offering than those of Merry and Oswald in that it praised the initial work of the Constituent Assembly in overturning the abuses of the Ancien Regime in the monarchical constitution of 1791.

[40] "My Lord [...] La situation de cette malheureuse ville est bien critique. Tellement que Mr Monro le juge prudent de se retirer [...] il est déjà remarqué et observé par des scélérats ses compatriotes [...] il se retire [...] j'aurai soin de vous instruire de tout, peut-être mieux que lui" (TNA FO 27/41 folio 82).

[41] This portrait of Yorke, a virulent democrat turned defender of royalty, denounced by a fellow British resident in Paris, seems exaggerated. There is little evidence to suggest that the club was planning any sort of coherent assault on George III, despite their reconnaissance missions to gather evidence of the readiness of the British people for a revolution.

investigation, yet it is highly probable that the portrait will need refining given the position adopted by British emigrants such as Merry and Oswald as shown in this study.

Sub-groups seemed to have formed within the society, although it is difficult to determine on which subjects members diverged, or the extent of these differences, particularly when the principal sources are reports from those inherently hostile to the activities of its members and intent on portraying them as revolutionary conspirators and enemies of the British kingdom. Members may have differed on the degree of intervention in French affairs, with some favouring greater activism and engagement with the Convention and others preferring a more moderate approach.[42] Latent in these circles was the fear of popular disruption of the codes of polite, refined society. Even if some members, such as John Oswald and Robert Merry, advocated a greater degree of popular involvement in politics, and were willing to accept the potential disruption of received codes of conduct that such departures would entail, some members and associates, including David Williams, feared the descent of enlightened discussion into popular anarchy. William Godwin himself warned in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, published in this turbulent year of 1793, that "we must therefore carefully distinguish between informing the people and inflaming them. Indignation, resentment and fury are to be deprecated; and all we should ask is sober thought, clear discernment and intrepid discussion" (203). At the heart of the emigrant society therefore brimmed discord over the prevailing question of the early republic: how far the involvement of the people in government could be sanctioned and to what extent the Revolution cautioned the disruption of elite codes of association and decision-making that such democratic developments prompted.

Conclusion

Developments underway in the French public sphere, particularly the establishment of a constitutional committee to examine blueprints for a new republican constitution, but also the growing influence and militancy of the Parisian sections after the August Days, had a considerable impact on the degree of political change countenanced by members of the British emigrant community, who arrived in France at this crossroads of the Revolution and who set up a political society in early republican Paris. If the prevailing question exercising French revolutionary leaders at a national level and activists in the sections was the extent of the democratic departure desired under the new republic, this question was equally at the heart of British residents' discussions and it influenced their associational practices in the French capital. Emigrants took

[42] Monro suggests that MacDonnell "is look'd up to by the party but is more moderate than many" (TNA TS 11/959).

up residence during a period of unprecedented political and constitutional experimentation and deliberation over the desirability of a greater degree of popular participation at all tiers of political organisation. This debate was perpetuated and played out in the emigrant society at White's Hotel, manifesting itself in the members' written production, in their collective initiatives and in the very mechanisms used to perpetuate and nourish this political entity. The *Société des Amis des Droits de l'Homme* drew on ideas and practices that were animating the local clubs and sections of revolutionary Paris, whose leaders spoke at society gatherings and whose members testified to the revolutionary devotion of British emigrants after their arrest in late 1793. Such close contact with, and observation of, local section activism may have had some impact on prompting some of the leading figures of this emigrant society to embrace a radical conception of governmental organisation; this included a more active and central place for popular political participation in the process of law-making than that advocated in reform societies at home or by the Girondin grouping in the Convention, a "faction" that British emigrants were often casually linked to. A study of the writings and political activities of key figures of this emigrant society such as Robert Merry, John Oswald, Sampson Perry, John Hurford Stone and Helen Williams, provides new insights into the nature of British political activism in the French capital during the early republic. It provides evidence of their proximity to French public affairs at all levels and their increasingly entrenched view that the people of Paris had been unfairly maligned in the press accounts circulating in Britain after the August revolution of 1792. Their views on the desirability of an active role for the ordinary citizen in the deliberation and ratification of new laws and the necessity to monitor and curb the powers of elected representatives resonated with the prevailing concerns of Cordeliers activists and, increasingly, over the latter months of 1792 and early 1793, those of the Montagnards in the Convention. While many British residents would go on to suffer under the Terror, often incarcerated as nationals of a state at war with the republic, some nevertheless remained steadfastly committed to the ongoing pursuit of the popular emancipation that they saw embodied in the Revolution.

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