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The Social Impact of Freemasonry on the Modern Western World

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The social impact of French Freemasonry over three centuries: a global approach

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One of the most important debates in French masonic historiography, concerns Freemasonry's contribution to the broader development of French social and political life. As a large number of masons were active in French politics between 1880 and 1940, historians and the general public in France have tended to assume that masonry has been, and still is, deeply involved with social and political affairs. It is therefore necessary to enquire, when did French Freemasonry first develop this image and to what extent did Freemasonry's many political adherents carry their masonic ideals into the public arena? Was this the outcome of historical development brought about by historical circumstance, or is there something more deeply rooted within the French craft, inherited from its earliest years?

For historians the movement's origins and subsequent development in the eighteenth century have been heavily over shadowed by the French Revolution. The main question repeatedly asked is, 'did the lodges play a major role in Enlightenment and what were the attitudes of the masons during the Revolution of 1789?' The second question most commonly asked is, 'when did the lodges begin to discuss new social ideas such as Fourierism or other types of early socialism; what Karl Marx referred to as "utopian"?' And thirdly, 'what was the contribution of Freemasonry towards the construction of modern French democracy and the welfare state in the late nineteenth century?' These are the three central issues that need to be examined if we are to have a better understanding of the integral role played by Freemasonry in French history.

French Freemasonry in the eighteenth century

The long shadow of the enlightenment and the French Revolution have heavily affected the study of eighteenth-century Freemasonry. The argument that the French masonic lodges were conduits for enlightenment ideals, and as such, prepared the ground for revolution, was first put forward in two anti-masonic publications of the 1790s. The first of these was a thesis by the abbé Lefranc in *The veil withdrawer or the secret of the French Revolution explained by the help of Free Masonry,* which was published in London in 1791, and subsequently underwent many editions.[1] This was soon followed by the abbé Barruel's

[1] Lefranc, Abbé, *The veil withdrawer or the secret of the French Revolution explained by the help of Free Masonry* (London, 1791); *Le Voile levé pour les curieux ou le secret de la révolution révélé à laide de la Francmaçonnerie* (Paris, 1792); *Il velo alzato per dei*

Memoires pour servir a l'histoire du Jacobinisme published in London in 1797. An English version of this voluminous work appeared later the same year.[2] Augustin Barruel was a French priest who had witnessed the revolution at first hand and concluded that these events were not merely the result of a series of hap hazard events, but were in fact the result of a radical 'masonic plot'. This conspiracy thesis was duly repeated by many writers until the end of the nineteenth century, by which time many masons were republicans and were only too keen to claim a major role for themselves in the revolution. As a consequence, the notion that Freemasonry was a central instigator of social change, became firmly established in the study of French social and political historiography. The early twentieth-century historian Gaston Martin, himself a dignitary of the Grand Orient de France, wrote that Freemasonry was 'the soul of all the popular movements, the sum of which produced the revolution.'[3] It was not until a more dispassionate and rigorous historical methodology emerged, that this one-sided view was duly modified.

During the 1950s and 1960s, historians such as Alain Le Bihan and Pierre Chevallier began to study Freemasonry scientifically and challenged many of the widely held assumptions regarding the supposed social and political influence of

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curiosi o sia il segreto della rivoluzione di Francia manifestato col mezzo della setta dei liberi muratori (Roma, 1792 & 1794); *La conjuration contre la religion Catholique et les souverains dont le projet jut conçu en France pour etre êxécuté dans l'univers: Ouvrage qui acheve de démasquer les Franc-Maçons, et de confondre les Philosophes et les Sectaires de tous les genres* (Paris, 1792); *Conguire contra la religione cattolica ed I sovrani il cui progetto fu concepito in Francia per esser eseguito nell'universo* (Roma, 1794).

[2] Abbé Augustin Barruel, *Memoirs illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (London, 1797-8); *Memoires illustrating the antichristian conspiracy* (Dublin, 1798); *Memoirs illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (New York, 1799); *Abrege des mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme* (London, 1798-99); *Memorie per servire alla storia del giacobinismo,* 13 vols. (Venice, 1799-1800, & 1802, 5 vols.); *Ristretto di momorie per servire all'istoria del Giacobinismo* (Biblioteca anti-democratica, 1800); *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme* (Hambourg, 1798-99; Hambourg, 1803); *Segredo revelado ou manifestaçao do systema dos Pedreiros-livres e Illuminados e sus influencia ne fatal Revoluçao Françesa* (Lisboa, 1810-12); *Historia del Jacobinismo. Compendio de las Memorias para servir a dicha historia. Al final, Cuadro Georgrafico y Politico de las logias alemanas iluminados,* por el M. S. Sr. D. Simon de Renteria, (Villafranca del Bierzo, 1812); *Memorias para servir a la Historia del Jacobinismo* (Mallorca, 1813-14; Santiago, 1814; Madrid, 1814); *Historia de la persecucion del clero de Francia en tiempo de la revolucion - Continuacion de las Memorias para la Historia del Jacobinismo o Conspiracion de los sofistas de la Impiedad* (Madrid, 1814); *Il Giacobinismo svelato, ouvero risposta dell'abate *** al Senatore Gregoire* (Genova, 1814); *Memorie per servire alla storia del giacobinismo,* 5 vols. (Napoli, 1822-24; Roma, 1887, 3 vols.); *Memorias para servir a la Historia del Jacobinismo* (Vich, Catalunya, 1873).

[3] Gaston Martin, *La Franc-maçonnerie française et le preparation de la Revolution* (Paris, 1926), p. 295. Gaston Martin (1886 - 1960), Professor at Toulouse & Faculty de Lettres de Bordeaux and member of loge La Vraie Fraternitié Orient de Clairac. *See* also his *Manuel d'histoire de la Franc-Maçonnerie française* (Paris, 1929).

the Order.[4] These two eminent historians began their researches by returning to the original documents, something rarely done by their predecessors, with the possible exceptions of Mathiez or Lesueur. Their works cogently and lucidly demonstrated that masonic membership can be found throughout the entire political spectrum of late eighteenth-century France, except perhaps among the more radical groupings of the revolution.[5] Lodges were generally prevented from working or were simply shut down during the revolution, to such an extent that by 1795 French Freemasonry was in a ruinous state. Furthermore, this revisionary historiography also showed that in the lead up to the storming of the Bastille, one of the principal leaders of the Grand Orient of France, who was supposed to have organised the alleged 'plot', was in fact the first Christian Baron of France, the Duke of Montmorency-Luxembourg. He had chaired the noble conservative wing at the Estates-General before emigrating on 15 July 1789, making his involvement in such a conspiracy unlikely.

Yet in spite of such evidence, many conservative historians continued to maintain that Freemasonry had participated in the preparation of the revolt and refused to accept the findings of the new historiographers. One such historian was Pierre Gaxotte. Frustrated at not having found any evidence of a masonic conspiracy, he criticised Pierre Chevallier for his three-volume *Histoire de la Franc-maçonnerie Française* when it was published in 1973, commenting, 'three big books and nothing said'.

During the 1960s, as historians began to evaluate the social impact of the movement, one of the first problems they encountered was how modern Freemasonry had emerged in Britain during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, before it was exported to France around 1725. Initially the movement's popularity in the regency period was due to the *Lettres sur l'Angle*terre of Voltaire and the social influence of British emigres who enthused French Anglophiles with tea-drinking and the wearing of tweed. As Pierre Chevallier has convincingly shown in his seminal study *Les Ducs sous l'Acacia*, the vast majority of lodge members tended to come from the aristocracy and ruling classes. Yet paradoxically, the movement was at first located in an area of Paris predominantly inhabited by artisans, although it was not to remain there. From the 1740s onwards the movement quickly grew and by 1770 there were over five

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[4] For the main works of Alain Le Bihan *see*, *Francs-Maçons Parisiens du Grand Orient de France, fin du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1966); *Loges et Chapitres de la Grande Loge et du Grand Orient de France* (Paris, 1968); *Francs-Maçons et ateliers parisiens de la Grande Loge de France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1973). For Pierre Chevallier *see*, *Les Ducs Sous L'Acacia ou Les premiers pas de la Franc-Maçonnerie française, 1725-1743* (Paris, 1964); *La Première Profanation du Temple Maçonnique ou Louis XV et la Fraternitié 1737 - 1755* (Paris, 1968); *Histoire de la Franc-Maçonnerie en France, 3 vols.: I. La Maçonnerie: École de l'Egalite, 1725-1799;* II. *La Maçonnerie: Missionaire du Liberalisme, 1800-1877*; III. *La Maçonnerie: Eglise de la Republique, 1877-1944* (Paris, 1974-5); *Le Sceptre, la crosse et L'equerre, Sous Louis XV et Louis XVI, 1725-1789* (Paris, 1996).

[5] For instance, during the years of 'the terror', there were one or two active masons such as Jean Paul Marat (1743 - 1793), who, interestingly, had been initiated in London in October 1769, in the lodge that met at the King's Head, Gerrard Street, Soho. He was raised a master mason on 15 July 1774 and later joined Lodge La Bien Aimee in Amsterdam.

hundred lodges throughout all of France. With this rapid expansion came a new class of member - the petty bourgeoisie, and the lodges ceased to be the preserve of the nobility. Therefore historians began to realise that the real question of masonic influence, concerned the movement's involvement with the Enlightenment rather than the Revolution itself. However, as with much of the early historiography on the revolution, there have been a number of flawed investigations on this theme. One particular study of this genre was the work of Louis Amiable. In 1897, he tried to show how Voltaire's Parisian lodge Les Neuf Soeurs, together with such notorious figures as Mirabeau and the Marquis de Sade, acted as a sort of academy that propagated the works of the 'Philosophes'.[6] Certainly, in the years preceding the Revolution, the Parisian lodges such as Les Neufs Sœurs, Les Amis Réunis, La Candeur or L'Encyclopédique (the latter met in Toulouse), harvested social elites of the 'parti philosophique', but this trend was not replicated through the other six hundred lodges of the Grand Orient.

Of the hundreds of masonic records that have been preserved from this period, it is clear that many lodges were not necessarily preoccupied with advanced philosophical debates. Many were more concerned with ritual workings or the formulation of their by-laws, which would often be laboriously discussed for months at a time, before finally being committed to print. Yet, behind many of these rather pedantic internal dialectics, traces of a new way thinking is occasionally evident, and talks on virtue, equality or the brotherhood of man were becoming more commonplace at masonic gatherings. In recent years, historians such as Ran Halévy in *Les Loges maçonniques dans la France d'Ancien Régime aux origines de la sociabilité démocratique* and Margaret Jacob in her work *Living the Enlightenment*, have explored the relationship between Freemasonry and the eighteenth-century philosophes.[7] According to Margaret Jacob, although Freemasonry was not responsible for the revolution, as had been argued by anti-masonic authors and radical socialists a century before, it was one of the principal organisations that spread a liberal sociability which culminated in the 'droits de l'homme et du citoyen'. It was a culture that sought to create representative institutions which could operate on a national level among men who believed themselves to be equals and who sought to practise virtues relevant to the needs and interests of the state.[8] Jacob's theory has been challenged by many writers and does appear to have been formulated somewhat prematurely. Moreover, her universal approach is difficult to sustain as there are not a sufficient number of detailed studies yet available that might enable historians to impartially examine masonic influence at a local level.

However, from what is currently known of French masonic archives of the eighteenth century, there is certainly some validity in her arguments. Lodges proved to be ideal forums where the latest ideas could be discussed and, as the

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[6] Louis Amiable, *Une loge maçonnique d'avant 1789. La R. Loge les Neuf Soeurs* (Paris, 1897).

[7] Ran Halévi, *Les Loges maçonniques dans la France d'Ancien Régime aux origines de la sociabilité démocratique* (Cahiers des Annales, Armand Colin, 1984); Margaret Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment, Freemasonry and Politics in eighteenth-century Europe* (Oxford, 1991).

[8] Margaret C. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

historian Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire has shown, they had the potential to awaken their members to broader social concerns. The new forms of sociability that expressed ideals of virtue and equality, undoubtedly benefitted from the network of lodges that were spread throughout much of the country. Additionally, it was commonplace for a single lodge to maintain a correspondence with as many as fifteen other lodges and some of these were based outside France.

In 1773 at the time of the reform of the first Grand Lodge of France, this new masonic sociability found expression in the statutes of the newly formed Grand Orient of France. These new statutes espoused two fundamental principles:

- That lodge officers were to be democratically elected
- That each lodge was to be equally represented at the Grand Lodge or national level

This step towards a greater egalitarianism was a remarkable innovation, as it contrasted starkly with the practices of the Ancien Régime and its rigid adherence to a system of hierarchical feudalism. These new principles meant that democratically elected lodge officials represented their lodges for the first time at both provincial and national masonic conventions. In all, some seventeen plenary sessions ended in the formation and development of the Grand Orient de France, which was headed by Duke of Chartres, who became its first Grand Master. Second in charge was the Duke of Montmorency-Luxembourg who was appointed as 'Administrateur Général', and the new body was divided into three administrative chambers which housed the representatives of its various lodges. The spirit of the new Grand Lodge is perhaps best reflected in the words of a decree issued in 1788: 'The working of the Grand Orient is essentially democratic', and approximately ninety per cent of the lodges in France decided to join the new body.

During this cathartic period of French masonic history, the new sociability undoubtedly influenced the internal working of the lodges, who based their activities on debates and ballots, and in turn, most probably contributed to the diffusion of new ideas. On 20 November 1790, the 'Écossaise' Mother Lodge wrote to the lodges of her jurisdiction:

> Many centuries before Rousseau, Mably and Raynal had written on the rights of the people and dispersed their ideas throughout the whole of Europe, the light of their work and the principles of a real sociability; Equality, Freedom and Brotherhood, we already practised in our lodges.[9]

New ideas in the lodges

[9] 'Circulaire de la Mère Loge Ecossaise de France du 20 novembre 1790', cité in Benjamin Fabre, *Fransiscus Eques a capite Galeato*... (Paris, 1913), p. 29.

Between 1800 and 1815 masonry was favoured and yet strictly controlled. The influence of Freemasonry during the Empire was very possibly even more of a political force than during the Third Republic, when the Grand Orient of France largely consisted of the middle classes and bourgeoisie. Perhaps the French middle classes saw Napoleon as a bastion against the worst excesses of revolutionary fervour, who could prevent the country from sliding back into chaos. The bourgeois elite who held power after the Revolution and Empire were very often figures who had been masons during the ancien régime and who had remained faithful to the Order. Of the twenty-five 'Marshals of the Empire' seventeen were already Freemasons, including Bernadotte, Brune, Kellerman, Lannes, MacDonald, Masséna, Mortier, Murat, Ney, and Oudinot. The brother of the Emperor, Joseph Bonaparte, was the Grand Master of the Grand Orient, although the lodges were effectively governed by Cambacérès, who was second in charge of the regime and also a dedicated mason. As a consequence, the Grand Orient played an important role in the development of the 139 departments at a time when Imperial France was its height.

It is perhaps an irony, that a masonic lodge was also one of the few places where moderate critics of the Empire were tolerated. 'Idéologues' such as Cabanis, Destutt de Tracy and Garat, attempted to establish a Republic during the so-called 'Directorate' based along American lines and actually worked for this in their respective lodges. Throughout the whole of Napoleonic Europe, this form of 'Imperial masonry' was in fact an ideal conduit for propagating and maintaining the original ideals of the revolution. For instance, during the French occupation, Jews were admitted into German lodges for the first time and when the French military left, masonry was generally forbidden as an unwanted auxiliary of liberalism. Furthermore the philosophical and religious principles of the Revolution were upheld in many of the lodges, as masons very often professed the same sort of rational deism that had been espoused by Voltaire a generation earlier. The only matter generally regarded as taboo and therefore not discussed was party politics. Indeed, French Freemasonry was so heavily intertwined with the Empire, that when the Imperial system collapsed, masonry was very nearly swept away with it.

At the Restoration some of the premier lodges adopted a more progressive stance and began to view themselves as potential architects of social change. A good example of this was the Lodge Les Amis de la Vérité, which attracted many student members who utilised any opportunity to oppose the Bourbons. However the majority of lodges were still not socially committed, preferring instead to adopt a rather amorphous philosophical and humanitarian liberalism, but in the reactionary environment of the Restoration era, they did stand by the basic tenets of the 1789 revolution. In general, most masons were content to demonstrate their social awareness by philanthropic acts and the establishment of a number of locally based charities. In Lyons local masons founded a 'society for primary instruction', while in Strasbourg they founded a 'society for the moral improvement of young prisoners', and in Angers a 'society of patronage' was formed 'for the pupils of mutual schools'. Elsewhere in towns such as Rouen, Dunkirk and L'Orient, lodges helped to establish free schools which catered for both children and adults.

In 1830 many masons were heavily involved with the 'Trois Glorieuses' and the 'Parti du Mouvement', which included the towering figure of Lafayette, and over the next few years the lodges flirted with a new form of liberalism. In 1836 the Lodge Les Elus de Sully which met at Brest, asked the Grand Orient if they could change their name to 'Les Disciples de Fourier' and in Paris the Lodge La Clémente Amitié organised a seminar on 'Fouriérisme'. By the end of the decade, lodges that had an interest in social or political affairs were no longer an exception, and in *La Revue Maçonnique* of 1844, this was reflected in the statement that masonry should help provide solutions for 'the vital problems that face the nation'. Proposals flooded in and the Grand Orient was soon inundated with a variety of lodge initiatives.

Predictably the authorities became uneasy, to the extent that the Prefect of the Paris Police demanded the dissolution of the Lodges La Clémente Amitié and L'Honneur Français, who it was claimed, were staging 'speeches hostile to the government.' Much of this political commentary emanated from conferences organised by masonic lodges, who discussed subjects such as, parental authority, children's education, the organisation of banks for the poor, and the establishment of orphanages as well as various labour initiatives. Members of the Lodge La Rose du Parfait Silence are even recorded as paying an official visit to their 'orateur', who had been imprisoned in the Sainte-Pélagie jail for social and republican activities.

By 1848 a new generation of masonic lodges had begun to emerge who were far more socially and politically active. This change towards a wider social awareness is reflected in the large number of politically active masons who served in the short-lived second Republic. These included Auguste Ferdinand Flocon, Gaston Isaac Crémieux, Louis Antoine Garnier-Pagès, Laurent Pagnerre, Lazare Carnot and Victor Schœlcher; the latter famously fought for the abolition of slavery. This new tendency within French Freemasonry undoubtedly alarmed many, to the extent that the rather conservative prefect of the Yonne department is recorded to have complained that the Le Phoénix Lodge of the Orient of Joigny, initiated its members 'into the disastrous doctrines of socialism'. At Montereau the master of Lodge Unanimité was one of the 'leaders of the revolutionary party', where the lodge consisted almost entirely of 'exciteable men' who it was claimed, 'associated with anarchists'. During a banquet the familiar sentiments of 'Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood' were espoused, together with the cry, 'Long live Christ's Republic!'.

From 1815 to 1865, French Freemasonry lived through a series of regimes and social transformations, and consequently changed as a result. The relative poverty and the repetitive character of the masonic speeches during the nineteenth century, is perhaps a reflection of the movement's recruitment from the ranks of the popular middle class, which tended to alienate the social or intellectual elite. However, from the middle of the 1860s, masonic lodges began to attract a new type of member, drawn from the social and intellectual elite, who were destined to hold the reigns of political power in France until the turn of the century. Under the liberal Empire lodges managed to attract the elite of the republican youth, but with the fall of Napoleon III, the democrats divided over the best way to establish the Republic. Faced with the conservative government of Thiers, the majority of

republican enthusiasts proclaimed 'La Commune de Paris', even though Leon Gambetta and Jules Ferry, both leading masons, believed that the Republic would only be established with the full support of the people, in what they termed 'la France profonde'.

During this period masonry repeatedly acted as a conciliatory force in order to try and avoid a civil war. Nevertheless, on 29 April 1871, after a series of fruitless attempts at mediation, more than 6000 masons demonstrated on the streets of Paris to support the 'Commune' and manned the barricades to prevent the army from assaulting the city. After the fall of the city, once it again it was masons such as Leon Gambetta, Jules Ferry and Jules Simon who pleaded indefatigably for a grant of amnesty to be awarded to the Communards. In fact during the 1870s most of the major figures of the Third Republic who helped construct a number of durable democratic institutions were also Freemasons. Masons like Jules Ferry actively worked for and promoted the concept of free compulsory schooling for all, which was to be lay or secular, while Jean Macé with help of various lodges, helped to create the French 'League of Education'.

This masonic policy of laïcité (laicism), which removed religious institutions from their age-old control of schooling the young, was vehemently opposed by the Roman Catholic Church, who denounced democracy as contrary to God's order on earth. Significantly, it was not until 1892 that the Vatican issued an encyclical letter entitled, 'Inter sollicitudines', which recognised the French Republic. Between 1880 and 1914, the fight for laicism became virtually inseparable from the fight for democratic and republican values and is viewed by many as the Golden age of masonry's social involvement. Indeed, the uninhibited Grand Orient of France went so far as to consider itself as 'the Church of the Republic' and even attempted to lead the reformation of French society. Consequently it became a major political force and during the ministry of Léon Bourgeois (1895), he, together with the many other government ministers, were all active masons. In the masonic conventions and in the council of the order of the Grand Orient of France, elaborate social bills were discussed which helped lay the first foundations of the French welfare state. In the masonic convention of 1896, a bill on workers pensions was debated and the Ministry of Employment was created, together with requirements for compulsory arbitration in the event of strikes. This convention also produced the first 'Code du Travail', which still governs social relations in France to this day. For instance, the lodges were invited to study the question of the employers' responsibility in the event of an accident in the work place and to make recommendations accordingly. French social laws that involved the masonic deliberation or promulgation also included: the freedom of association (1881); compulsory primary education (1882); legalisation regarding unions and divorce (1884); and legislation concerning women and children in the work place (1892).

Masonry's involvement in the wider society was clearly no longer diffuse, as its members were now prepared to contribute to the sociability of a republican France, despite vehement opposition from conservative forces. They organised lay educational community services for children, balls and evening classes for young adults, together with libraries and leisure centres for all. Yet the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 marked the end of this so-called golden age of

French masonry's social influence. This disasterous and costly conflict, in which two of the most socially developed countries in Europe, France and Germany, needlessly sacrificed their youth, shook many mason's faith in social progress. Consequently, in the aftermath the war, French Freemasonry gradually changed its orientation and embarked on a new era of its existence, however it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss this new direction.

In conclusion

Soon after its establishment in France at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Freemasonry clearly developed in a different way to the lodges elsewhere. Perhaps from the outset, there was a tendency within French Freemasonry that set it apart from the Freemasonry of Anglo-Saxon countries, as is evident from the famous oration delivered by the Scottish Jacobite émigré, Andrew Michael Ramsay, on 26 December 1736.

> Men are not essentially distinguished by the different languages they speak, the clothes they wear, or by the respective countries from which they originate. The whole world is nothing but a huge republic, of which each nation is a family and each individual a child. It was, gentlemen, for the purpose of reviving and spreading these ancient maxims borrowed from the nature of man, that our Society was established.

From the time of this seminal oration, the internal development of French Freemasonry, in many ways appears to have mirrored the wider changes occuring within French society, though the level of masonic influence which can be attributed to them, will no doubt continue to be hotly debated. Over a century after Ramsay's oration, it is also perhaps a paradox that French Freemasonry, at the height of its involvement with social and political affairs, also displayed a renewed interest in esoteric and antiquarian matters.[10] Yet perhaps this was merely a distant echo of the words uttered during a masonic ritual performed in 1738, when the junior warden is reported to have cautioned the candidates three times: 'Remember this is more serious than it seems!'

[10] For instance, the symbolic revival around writers such as Oswald Wirth and René Guénon.