Election, Representation, and Democracy: Debates Surrounding the Organization of the Grand Orient de France (1773-1789)

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The position of the lodges during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution is a classic question in the eighteenth-century historiography. Initially denounced by certain counterrevolutionaries, the connection of Freemasonry to the events of 1789–1793 was later claimed by the Republican Brothers at the end of the nineteenth century. However, from Mathiez to Alain Le Bihan and Pierre Chevallier, the professional historians of the twentieth century ultimately challenged the idea that Freemasonry had played any real role in the revolutionary storm, dismissing the lodges as simple societies of banquets and festivities. The debate has been taken up again over the last 20 years with the works of Ran Halévy[2] and Margaret Jacob.[3] According to slightly different modalities, both give it an important role in the implementation and spread of a democratic social practice that prepared the way for political modernity. Thus, in *Living the Enlightenment*, Margaret Jacob emphasizes all the work the lodges undertook concerning their own organization. She shows how a group's collective reflection concerning the authority it submits to and the rules it applies to itself signal a different conception of public space and thus dissimulates a social work that is in fact political. Her research is based on a series of case studies in several European countries, and critics have at times underscored the selective nature of her examples. Thus *a contrario*, how can we analyze the phenomenon of the Templar Strict Observance, if not as a reaction by the nobility, which would seem to be a far cry from any democratic learning process? In this article, we would like to examine an episode of French Masonic history during which the success of the concept of "democratic social practice" seems particularly ripe for analysis. It involves debates on the statutes and rules of the Grand Orient de France that took place in Paris between 1773 and 1789. This study of a case which until now has remained in the shadows offers several advantages. First, it does not simply involve one Masonic group among others, but is the reflection of a body that brought together almost all French Freemasons. Second, throughout those 20 years, the officials of the Grand Orient would be led to clarify, modify, and make changes to these internal rules depending on the circumstances. We are thus able to witness how a collective rule is debated and constructed over time during the last decades of the *Ancien Régime*. Finally, since all of the archives have been preserved, we have a very large set of documents on the development of rules

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[2] Ran Halévi, *Les Loges maçonniques dans la France d'Ancien Régime aux origines de la sociabilité démocratique* (Paris: Cahier des Annales, Librairie Armand Colin, 1984).

[3] Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment, Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-century Europe* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

as well as on their later implementation in the different bodies. An additional interest, aside from the persons and individual futures in the *bourgeoisie de robe*s or the liberal nobility, is that the officials of the Grand Orient undoubtedly belonged to the social classes that would launch the Revolution. Given the breadth of the topic, in this article we will limit ourselves to drawing attention to this veritable mine for historiography, present points of reference, and suggest a few directions for future work.

1728–1773: French Masonic Authority Struggles to Organize

From its introduction to Paris around 1725 until the end of the 1760s, French Freemasonry would repeatedly endeavor to organize itself. It first recognized the authority of a Grand Master for France in 1728,[4] thereby freeing itself from English tutelage. In 1735, it endowed itself with statutes, establishing a Grand Lodge for the first time.[5] However, this First Grand Lodge did not seem to hold much authority over the lodges of the Kingdom. At regular intervals—June 24, 1745; July 4, 1755; May 19, 1760; and April 17, 1763[6] —it would try to establish its supremacy by promulgating statutes. Each of these texts insists on the authority it claims to have over the lodges of the kingdom, but to little effect. Until the 1760s, the lodges existed in semi-independence. Older lodges established newer ones and each corresponded with various others, depending on the circumstances. The unity of French Freemasonry could only be found in the fact that all recognized the Grand Master. From 1743 to 1771, he would be a prominent figure in Louis XV's France, namely, the Count of Clermont, a *prince du sang*. However, the rule of Louis de Bourbon-Condé was only a symbolic patronage and relatively distant, as was the custom during the *Ancien Régime*; the Grand Master never intervened in the management of the Order. It was, however, in his name that, in 1761, the first real attempt was made to establish a central authority over the lodges. Through a substitute appointed by the Grand Master, Augustin Chaillon de Jonville, the Grand Lodge came to life and the lodges of the kingdom were informed that they would then have to pledge allegiance to it. However, the "awoken" Grand Lodge was populated solely by Parisians, and the provinces complained about recognizing the "Grand Lodge of Masters of Paris said to be of France,[7] according to the brothers from Lyon. It was challenged and quickly split into different factions, and again interrupted its work in 1766. The death of the Count of Clermont in 1771 and the need to elect a successor brought about a new meeting of the Grand Lodge.

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[4] See Alain Le Bihan, "Paris: 1728, Les maçons et les Grands Maîtres jacobites ou la reconnaissance du premier d'entre eux: le Duc de Wharton," in *Les plus belles pages de la Franc-maçonnerie française* (Paris: Dervy, 2003), 36-37.

[5] See Etienne Fournial, *Les plus anciens devoirs et règlements de la Franc-maçonnerie française, Annales du Grand Orient de France—Supplément au n°48 du Bulletin du G.·.O.·.X de France* (Paris: n.p., 1964); new edition, *Renaissance Traditionnelle* 134 (April 2003).

[6] These texts are published in: *Alain Le Bihan, Francs-maçons et ateliers parisiens de la Grande Loge de France au XVIIIe siècle* (1760–1795) (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1973).

[7] BnF, FM[1] 111 a, folio 35, cited by René Désaguliers in "La Grande Loge de Paris dite de France et les "autres grades" de 1756 à 1766," *Renaissance Traditionnelle* 89 (January 1992): 14.

The Formation of the Grand Orient: A Crisis in Representation?

The events that would lead to the formation of the Grand Orient de France thus begin like a classic episode of the *Ancien Régime*—with the gathering of notable figures to solicit a protector—and would in a few weeks be transformed into a "National Assembly" of elected deputies.[8] After the death of the Count of Clermont, a minority faction of the former Grand Lodge attempted to reestablish its audience and skillfully offered the leadership of the order to the Duke of Montmorency-Luxembourg. It was also agreed that the Grand Mastership would be offered to the Duke of Chartre, cousin of the King, future head of the house of Orléans and thus the noble with the highest rank in the kingdom after his father; a candidate who could not be contested. He accepted, which made any real opposition to the process that began impossible. It would be delayed, however, for a few months due to the momentary disgrace of Philippe d'Orléans, who was removed from the Court for opposing parliamentary reform. Parisian Masonic circles began to agitate and a group reunited around the new "Administrator General" (such is the title adopted by the Duke of Montmorency-Luxembourg) proposed a long list of reforms to finally give French Freemasonry a truly shared organization.

The main obstacle remained the majority faction of the former Grand Lodge that was not associated with these events. Montmorency-Luxembourg's entire strategy would be to marginalize it by challenging its representativeness; traditional authority would be countered with representative authority. For this, principles would be proposed whose application would go well beyond the scope of Freemasonry. The replacement of officials and the implementation of a new Masonic administration implied the adoption of new statutes. The rules of 1763 appeared obsolete and the former Grand Lodge had itself changed its reference texts several times. New statutes were thus prepared by a commission in close collaboration with Montmorency-Luxembourg. Officially, of course, it was simply a question of "*reforming abuses returning the royal art to its former splendor and luster*."[9] The challenge for the different assemblies would be to adopt these new statutes which would validate the reform orchestrated by the Administrator General. Beginning in Chapter 1, two articles point to a small revolution in terms of the customs of the former Grand Lodge. Article 4 of Section 1 states: "*The Grand Orient de France will forthwith only recognize as Lodge Worshipful Master [president] the Master raised to this rank by the free choice of the Members of the Lodge.*" This marked the end of the "irremovable" Worshipful Master who held their presidency "for life," which was how any particular office was held at the time. Election became the norm and would be applied to all Masonic functions. The Grand Master and the Administrator General set the example by vacating their initial

[8] For a presentation that is both specific and inclusive of the fairly complex process that would lead to the formation of the Grand Orient de France, see Pierre Chevallier, *Histoire de la Franc-maçonnerie, I—La Maçonnerie Ecole de l'Egalité (1725–1799)* (Paris: Fayard, 1974), 151–176. To follow the details of these operations see *Constitution du Grand Orient de France par la Grande Loge Nationale*—1773, introduction by Arthur Groussier (Paris: Gloton, 1931), which transcribes all the minutes of the meetings and several appendices; and Daniel Kerjan, *Les Débuts de la franc-maçonnerie française, de la Grande Loge au Grand Orient, 1688–1793* (Paris: Devy, 2013).

[9] Assembly of known deputies of the LL.∴ of Province on March 8, 1773 in *Constitution du Grand Orient de France*, 47.

appointment by the officials of the Grand Lodge, and by presenting themselves for election, bringing together representatives from all the lodges. Not only did the Administrator General, the First Christian Baron of France, submit to the election, but he also agreed to enter into the debate arena with the good bourgeois of the former Grand Lodge, who were decided to ask high price for their sacrifice. The second key innovation: "*The Grand Orient de France shall be constituted of [...] all the current Worshipful Master or Deputies of the Lodges, both in Paris and in the Provinces*" (Chapter 1, Section 2, Article 1). All the lodges would thus be represented in the new administration of the Order. Seeing that they were offered a share of power, the delegates of the provincial lodges, who had been somewhat distrustful at first, in the end rallied to the reform and became its main supporters. The members from Lyon who 10 years earlier had chastised "*the Grand Lodge of the Masters of Paris said to be of France*" hailed the "*National Assembly*"[10] of Lodges. This expression was used several times during the discussions in Paris. The debates, followed by the gradual adoption of the new statutes by the deputies of the lodges in Paris and the provinces, established the legitimacy of the new Grand Orient and the authority of the Duke of Montmorency-Luxembourg over the Order. It also gave French Freemasonry a new organization. The "Government of the Order" depended on three chambers: the Chamber of Administration, the Chamber of Paris, and the Chamber of the Provinces. As their names suggest, the first guaranteed the management of the central organization and especially finances, while the other two managed the lodges in terms of their respective constituencies (Constitutions, certificates, various disputes...). The members of these bodies were all elected from within the assembly of the deputies of the lodges because:

> *"The forty-five current officers shall always be up for the election of the Grand Orient; one-third shall be renewed every year [...] and chosen in the Grand Orient."*[11]

In a few months, these meetings bringing together representatives of the enlightened bourgeoisie—such as Lalande or Guillotin—and the liberal nobility—such as Montmorency-Luxembourg and his friends—would set up an organization that was radically different from the former Grand Lodge. Principles in place at the new Grand Orient de France, such as the relative separation of powers,[12] elections, and representation at all levels, were no doubt inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment which were for the first time applied within the eighteenth-century France. Pierre Chevallier shrewdly remarked:

> "*The Masonic Constituent Assembly that was the National Grand Lodge would end its sessions on September 1, 1773. Without seeking to make an excessive comparison with the General Assemblies of 1789, one cannot, however, help but take note of the similarities that reveal a shared mindset*."[13]

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[10] Letter from the lodges of Lyon to their deputy Bacon de la Chevalerie, *Constitution du Grand Orient de France*, 174.

[11] Statute of the Royal Order of Freemasonry, Chapter 2, Section 2, Article 1, in *Constitution du Grand Orient de France*, 238.

[12] Finally, we could also point out the decisions concerning the different chambers, especially in matters of dispute, by a "Managing Board."

[13] Chevallier, *Histoire de la Franc-maçonnerie*, 166.

The "Democratic" Life of the Grand Orient from 1773 to 1793

Texts are one thing, but practices are something else. How would these "statutes of the Enlightenment" be applied in the daily operation of the Grand Orient? Numerous registers of the minutes of the various bodies of the Order show that the dignitaries really played the game of their liberal, predemocratic rules. There are many examples, but here are just a few. At the opening of the assembly of the Grand Orient that took place 10 times a year, the president asks:

> "*…whether some deputies [have] requests to make for the LL∴ they represent.*"[14]

Persons regularly had to be appointed to vacant positions and the election always seemed fairly open. Such was the case on May 19, 1786, for the important positions of First Grand Surveillants:

> "*The T∴C∴F∴ Duke de Crussol was appointed by a plurality of twenty-eight votes, the V∴F∴ Marquis de Vichy received six, and the F∴ Count de Roure one. Three were found to be blank."*[15]

The nobility, dukes, marquis, and counts submitted to the election of Brothers Sue, Carrel, Martin, Robin, etc.—all bourgeois.

As "policy" documents, the statutes of 1773 first aimed at unifying the lodges around a few principles and a new team. In the daily existence of the association, over the years and as problems arose, a certain number of clarifications would have to be made to the operations of the bodies of the Order. The chambers of the Grand Orient were thus led to develop supplementary rules. All these regulatory changes were not simply technical adjustments—far from it. Thus, beginning in 1775, it was decided that the two main leaders of the Grand Orient, the Administrator General and the Grand Conservator, would be subject to election: previously, the individuals in these roles had held them permanently once initially elected. In addition, in the very language of the article, it was emphasized that the point was to reintegrate them into the common law. Thus, they are "*removable after 3 years and their appointment will be carried out in the same way as the other officers of the G.O.*"[16] In a magnanimous gesture, the Grand Master himself would offer to renounce his irremovability and also be subject to election every three years, but the Brothers refused.

For the vote to be fair, it had to be done in full knowledge of the facts, so during the 122nd assembly of the Grand Orient —February 15, 1782—it was decided after the debates that all deputies of the lodges would be able to ask for disclosures from the secretariat of the Grand Orient.[17] Also, all the members would have access to the files, as long as they were commissioned by a lodge. It was also decided that, as far as possible, agendas would always be announced ahead of time. One subject that would occupy the bodies of the association for a long time was the establishment of a specific procedure for electing the officers

[14] For example, during the 162nd assembly of the G∴O∴ on August 19, 1785, BnF FM[1] 16, folio 181.

[15] 169th assembly of the G∴O∴, May 19, 1786, BnF FM[1] 16, folio 251, back.

[16] FM[1] 98, folio 11, back.

[17] 122nd assembly of the G∴O∴, February 15, 1782, BnF FM[1] 16, folio 186, back.

of the different chambers. Indeed, they were the ones who, with the assistance of the secretariat, ensured the daily administration of the Grand Orient, which indicates the importance of the challenge. In August 1785, the voting procedure was presented in great detail:

> "*The first expert shall count the voters and shall give to each a ballot. Each voter shall write on this ballot the name, surname, statuses, age, and residence of the brother he believes should be nominated. The first expert shall collect the ballots. The Brothers who have no one to nominate shall submit blank ballots. The ballots shall be given to the President who shall count them in the presence of two experts. If the number of ballots is not equal to the number of voters, the operation shall begin again. The President shall open the ballots and shall read what they contain. The ballots that nominate the same names shall be gathered and there shall be as many stacks as there are different names. Each stack shall be counted and the President shall appoint all the Brothers nominated beginning with the one who received the most votes....*"[18]

Is this not an example of the learning process of democracy? Several other examples of procedural votes of this kind can be found in the internal rules of the Grand Orient. But we should be wary of models that seem too perfect. While they focus much attention on the rigor of the elective procedure, the managers of the Grand Orient simultaneously try to limit access to the offices by introducing some measure of cooptation. This raises the opposition of the Brother Desjunquières who argues against:

> "*…the rule of August 17, 1785 [which] tends to completely separate the officers of the Grand Orient from the deputies of the lodges and make it a distinct body. I have never considered the Grand Orient except as the lodge of deputies who have the right to elect from within it, officers to preside over, conduct, and clarify the work, as well as administrate more specifically the Order's affairs and prepare the documents to be brought before the G. O.*"[19]

Tellingly, the examples he then gives to legitimize respect for the democratic spirit are classic cases of the most traditional social practices of the Ancien Régime:

> "*If we want to take civil societies as a model, nothing exists any longer or nothing comparable is practiced unless we look to the first finance companies or to the latest corporations of arts and crafts.*"

This shows how the connections between traditional and new social practices were more complex than the simple opposition of ancient and modern! Brother Desjunquière's argument won the day and the rule that had been approved was annulled. All the deputies from the lodges at the Grand Orient became again eligible for the various offices. What is interesting about this episode is that it illustrates the complexity of the development of this new democratic social practice and also shows how it is connected to older forms of social

[18] Archives of the GODF, BnF FM[1] 16, folio 246.

[19] Archives of the GODF, BnF FM[1] 16, folio 247.

relationships. The 15 years between the formation of the Grand Orient and 1789 would witness several similar episodes. In each case, the details of the debates, the constant back and forth between the various bodies, and the frequent repetitions all make the reading of these long minutes particularly tedious. Nevertheless, our hope is that eighteenth-century specialists will take note of how relevant the documentation contained in the archives of the Grand Orient of France is for the study of the formation of democratic social practices in the years preceding the Revolution.

During the early days of 1789, the Grand Orient sent a circular to all the lodges it corresponded with to report on its activity. The introduction of this text is particularly interesting. It reads:

> "*Enlightened concerning their true interests, the LL∴ felt it necessary to be governed in a uniform way, and to submit to rules drawn from the very essence of their association: this motive led them to unite to form a common center, and they decreed that the body that would regulate them would be composed of their representatives; therefore, they attributed legislative power to this body, and established it as judge of their differences.*
> *The constitution of the G∴O∴, TT∴CC∴FF∴, is thus purely democratic: nothing shall be decided except according to the will of the LLs∴, brought before the General Assemblies by their representatives.*"

Of course, the general atmosphere that began to affect French society at the beginning of 1789 may not be entirely absent from what was written here; but it can clearly be concluded that this text was in line with what had been the doctrine of the Grand Orient since 1773.

[20] Circular of the 19th day of the eleventh month 5788 (January 19, 1789).