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Ricerche/Articles

PATRICK LEECH

MIRABEAU: FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY AND COSMOPOLITAN TRANSLATOR

Count Mirabeau is remembered as the doyen of the early French Revolution. An aristocrat who had been repudiated by the nobility of his native Provence and elected to the Estates General as part of the Third Estate, Mirabeau came to the fore in the early months of the revolution through his defence of the National Assembly, and headed the group supporting a constitutional monarchy as a solution to the political crisis of the Ancien Régime. To posterity, he is remembered as an iconic representation of French-ness, to the extent that Thomas Carlyle, in his *The French Revolution*, describes him as the «Type-Frenchman of this epoch; as Voltaire was of the last. He is French in his aspirations, acquisitions, in his virtues, in his vices; perhaps more French than any other man» (Carlyle 1989 [1837]: 144). This portrayal, of course, is the product of a period which saw the dominance of a general "methodological nationalism" which Ulrich Beck (2007) sees as dominating Western categories of analysis even today: in contemporary studies of the French Revolution, the European reputation of Mirabeau, and with it the international framework within which he operated, is fully acknowledged (Israel 2014: 75-76).

From an exploration of his political writings before 1789, in fact, a distinctly cosmopolitan figure emerges. Although Mirabeau's principal focus of attention was consistently the political crisis of *ancien régime* France, his political and cultural reference points were strikingly cosmopolitan. As we shall see, Mirabeau intervened in a debate over the nature of privilege and hereditary titles raging in the new American republic, wrote a tract on questions of trade and tariffs in the United Provinces,

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published a four-volume work denouncing corruption at the Prussian court, and promoted a comparison with the British parliamentary procedure as a model for French institutions. Many of these interventions were published in collaboration with a radical young journalist from London, Samuel Romilly, whose *Memoirs*, published in 1840, throw some light on the nature of their collaboration, in which translation between English and French played a significant part. This activity on the part of Mirabeau in the period up to and including the outbreak of the French Revolution is illustrative of a cosmopolitan context of radicalism which should not be obscured by the way that Mirabeau came to be perceived as representing the birth of the French nation in the early period of the Revolution.

1. *Mirabeau: journalist and translator*

Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, Count Mirabeau (1749-1791), according to François Furet, had two lives, one under the Ancien Regime and the other during the French Revolution. Whereas the latter «covered him with glory», the first was a failure «though it did show flashes of genius» (Furet 1989: 265). Imprisoned a number of times in the 1770s through the intervention of his father for various financial and amorous misadventures, first in the Chateau d'If outside Marseilles, and later in the dungeon of Vincennes, he spent the 1780s writing erotic prose and political journalism for the growing market in these literary productions of the later years of the Ancien Regime. Many of the latter were originally drafted by others such as his Genevan friend Étienne Clavière or Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville, later to become the leader of the Girondin faction during the Revolution, and rewritten or at any rate published in Mirabeau's name, a characteristic of his writings which was to continue right down to his publication of the newspaper *Courrier de Provence* in the Revolutionary period.

The scope of this early journalism, far from being principally French, was decidedly cosmopolitan. One of his earliest works was a brief pamphlet entitled *Avis aux Hessois* (Amsterdam,

1777) which urged the German mercenaries to rebel against Frederic II, Landgrave of Hesse-Cassell, who had sold them to the British state to be used against the American rebels. In 1788, he published a four-volume history of Prussia, *De la monarchie prussienne* (1788), written in collaboration with a «M. Mauvillon» and following conversations with «les plus habiles hommes d'état, et les citoyens les plus éclairés de la Prusse» (Riqueti 1788)[1]. It was his *Considérations sur l'ordres de Cincinnatus* (1784), however, which best illustrates the extent to which Mirabeau's journalism was fully inserted into a transnational movement of radicalism.

William Doyle, in his *Aristocracy and its enemies in the age of revolution* (2009), has provided a full account of the origins of Mirabeau's *Considérations sur l'ordres de Cincinnatus*, what he has called the «first overt and direct attack on the principle of nobility in Europe itself» (Doyle 2009: 137). The *Considérations*, however, was not an original work but instead an amplified translation of an American pamphlet attacking Society of the Cincinnati which had been set up in the new American Republic in the spring of 1784. This Society was an attempt to give recognition to the pre-eminent generals and officers who had distinguished themselves during the War of Independence. Membership was to be exclusive, extended also to foreign generals (principally, of course, French), and crucially, it was proposed, should include a hereditary principle, that is, that membership could be handed down to descendants. This clause roused passionate opposition in America, particularly after its denunciation in a tract entitled *Considerations on the Society of the Cincinnati* published in Charleston by "Cassius" (in reality the South Carolina soldier and judge Aedanus Burke in 1783. The controversy was noted by Benjamin Franklin, the American ambassador to France at the time: the president of the Cincinnati, General Washington no less, had sent a letter to a number of people in France, including General Lafayette (who had played an important part in the success of the American rebellion), asking them to promote the society (Doyle 2009: 88-137).

[1] From prefatory material, with no page indication.

The issue of heredity was already a focus of attention for Franklin. He had recently published, in French and in English, his *Information to those who would remove to America* (1784), which indicated clearly that birth was not a useful or acceptable passport in the new republic. Now Franklin prepared a more explicit attack, with a denunciation of the Society of the Cincinnati in a letter to his daughter, which he had translated in readiness for publication by Abbé Morellet (Doyle 2009: 121; Echeverria 1953: 126). The letter was circulated clandestinely in manuscript form but never printed: Morellet dissuaded Franklin from publishing it as it would attract the attention of the French censor and because it would be considered inappropriate for an American ambassador to show so strongly his opposition to a society presided over by Washington (Doyle 2009: 121). Rather than publish his own denunciation, then, Franklin turned to Mirabeau for a translation of the original pamphlet. Mirabeau, with the help of his associate Nicolas de Chamfort (1741-1794), set about translating and amplifying this work, reading it to Franklin on 13 July 1784 (Doyle 2009: 122-123; Monnier 2011: 42-43) and publishing it with the indication «imitation d'un pamphlet Anglo-Américain» on the title page (Riqueti 1784).

The French edition, which was published with the title *Considérations sur l'Ordre de Cincinnatus* (1784), included other translations in the appendix, including a letter from the economist and former French minister Turgot to Richard Price, the Welsh radical and supporter of the American revolution and in the main text added not only elements relating to Europe but also a strident denunciation of Washington himself, missing in the original:

> Le jour ou l'adoption des membres honoraires a été votée, Washington, si grand quand il voulut redevenir un simple particulier, Washington, premier citoyen et bienfaiteur d'un peuple qu'il a rendu libre, a voulu se distinguer de ce peuple! Pourquoi n'a-t-il pas senti que son nom était au-dessus de toute distinction? Héros de la révolution qui brisait les fers de la moitié du monde, comment n'a-t-il

pas dédaigné l'Honneur coupable, dangereux, et vulgaire d'être le héros d'un parti! (Riqueti 1822 [1784]: 252; cfr. Doyle 2009: 124)[2]

As an attack on the principle of aristocracy, like other radical works before it, the *Considérations* was considered too risky for publication in France and Mirabeau turned to the radical and dissenting printer and publisher Joseph Johnson in London (Braithwaite 2003; 56-58). Publication of the text in French in London, however, was deemed to be a profitable venture only if it appeared alongside the translation of this amplified work back into English for an English readership, something which was carried out by Mirabeau's personal friend, the young lawyer Samuel Romilly (Doyle 2009: 128). This second English-language edition of the *Considerations* appeared first in London and was subsequently reprinted in Philadelphia in 1786, to the irritation of the author of the original pamphlet, Aedanus Burke (Israel 2017: 78).

The conditions under which the *Considérations* was published points us in the direction of another element substantiating the transnational and cosmopolitan nature of Mirabeau's journalism. The publication was, we have seen, the result of collaboration between a number of French, American, and English radicals: Franklin, Mirabeau, Chamfort, Romilly and the publisher Joseph Johnson. We may add that the publisher for the two translations was found through Franklin's friendship with the English journalist and radical Benjamin Vaughan, the translator of Turgot's *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses* (1770) (De Vivo and Sabbagh 2015), whom Franklin had introduced to Mirabeau (Doyle 2009: 122-23; Hammersley 2010: 175-175). The collaborative nature of the publication is an indication of a *de facto* cosmopolitan humus in which Mirabeau and his fellow radicals were operating.

On a more personal level, Romilly's own account of the process of translation of Mirabeau's *Considérations* in his *Memoirs* is illuminating with regard to the nature of the relations between himself and Mirabeau. The collaboration appears not to

[2] The inclusion of elaborations such as this enabled Chamfort, during the Terror, to claim that the most virulently anti-aristocratical parts, the "morceaux les plus vigoureux", were written by himself (Doyle 2009: 124).

have been commercial in nature. The translation of Mirabeau's own amplified version was probably the result of the desire on the young lawyer's part to promote his own writings and own opinions on the question of heredity to an English readership, and in any case was not considered to be a remunerative prospect. Indeed, Mirabeau had passed his own text to Romilly to translate as «he knew that it was impossible to expect anything tolerable from a translator that was to be paid» (Romilly 1840, vol. 1: 79). The young lawyer came to the conclusion that it would be a «useful exercise" and that he would do it also in consideration of the fact that he had «sufficient leisure on [his] hands» (*ibidem*). Romilly's account then emphasized the collaborative nature of the work of translation itself:

> The Count was difficult enough to please; he was sufficiently impressed with the beauties of the original. He went over every part of the translation with me; observed on every passage in which justice was not done to the thought, or the force of the expression was lost; and made many very useful criticisms (*Ibidem*).

The activity of translation, indeed, cemented the friendship between the two:

> During this occupation, we had occasion to see one another often, and became very intimate; and, as he had read much, had seen a great deal of the world, was acquainted with all the most distinguished persons who at that time, adorned either the royal court of the republic of letters in France, had a great knowledge of French and Italian literature, and possessed a very good taste, his conversation was extremely interesting and not a little instructive (*Ivi*: 79-80).

The collaboration between the two radicals, it emerges from the *Memoirs*, was not confined to the translation of the *Considérations*. On a trip to Paris in 1788, Romilly took part in a visit to the prison of Bicêtre in the company of Mirabeau and a group of fellow radicals including the writer Louis-Sebastian Mercier, the Genevan journalist Jacques Mallet du Pan, and their mutual friend, Étienne Dumont. The sight of the prisoners there left him «shocked and disgusted» (*Ivi*: 97). Romilly continues:

I saw Mirabeau the next day, and mentioned to him the impression they had made on me; he exhorted me earnestly to put down my observations in writing and, and to give them to him. I did so; and he soon afterwards translated them into French and published them in the form of a pamphlet, under the title of *Lettres d'un Voyager Anglais sur la Prison de la Bicêtre* (*Ibidem*).

This pamphlet included some of Mirabeau's own considerations on criminal law, which were, however, according to Romilly, «very nearly a translation from the little tract I had published on Madan's *Thoughts on Executive Justice.*»[3] Romilly's original letter was subsequently published in English in Benjamin Vaughan's review *The Repository*, but printed as a translation from Mirabeau's text, «although it was in truth the original» (*Ibidem*). As in other cases, Mirabeau did acknowledge an unspecified debt to an English precedent (if not original) in the full title which included the words «Imité de l'anglais».[4]

Romilly's work continued subsequently to be of interest to Mirabeau as originals to be translated and transformed for a French readership. Romilly was later commissioned by a certain Count de Sarsfield to prepare a handbook in English on the rules and orders of the English House of Commons, with the idea that it might be of assistance to the French Estates General in their deliberations in 1789. When finished, Sarsfield set about translating it into French. On Sarsfield's death, Mirabeau completed the translation and published it under his own name with the title *Règlements observés dans la Chambres des Comunes* (1789). In a letter to Dumont, Romilly notes that Mirabeau did acknowledge, in the preface, his debt to the original, although without mentioning his name: «Je dois ce travail, entrepris uniquement pour la France, à un Anglois qui, jeune encore, a mérité une haute reputation» (Romilly 1840, vol. 1: 357).

[3] Romilly's *Observations on a late publication, intituled, Thoughts on Executive Justice* had appeared in 1786.

[4] The full title was as follows: *Observations d'un voyageur anglais, sur la maison de force appellée Bicêtre; suivies de réflexions sur les effets de la sévérité des peines, & sur la législation criminelle de la Grande-Bretagne. Imité de l'anglais. Par le comte de Mirabeau; avec une lettre de M. Benjamin Franklin* (1788).

The parasitic nature of Mirabeau's reliance on the writings of others did provoke Romilly, on one occasion in his *Memoirs*, to open criticism of the great man:

> The eight octavo volumes which he published on the Prussian monarchy were entirely, as to everything but the style, the work of M. de Mauvillon. His tracts upon finance were Clavière's; the substance of his work on the Cincinnati was to be found in an American pamphlet; his pamphlet on the opening of the Scheldt was Benjamin Vaughan's… (Romilly 1840: 111).

For our present purposes, this method of composition reinforces a perception of a shared, transnational, radical context.

The reference to the opening of the Scheldt river was to another of Mirabeau's interventions in international politics, his *Doutes sur la liberté de l'Escaut* (*Doubts concerning the free navigation of the Scheldt* (1785) which again was published in London both in English and in French. This was an attack on Emperor Joseph II of Austria's policy to put pressure on the Dutch Republic to open the River Scheldt to free trade. Mirabeau, who spent a number of years in the Dutch Republic in the 1780s, opposed this as disadvantageous to the smaller economy of the country and beneficial to their old antagonists, the Austrian imperial state. He conceded that in theory international law should allow free trade but argued that small nations also had the right to govern their own commerce (see Wijffels 2002: 244-247).

As we have seen, most of this work was published outside France, in London, to avoid the censor. This is, of course, in line with the majority of publications critical of the Ancien Régime documented in particular by Robert Darnton (1996). The issue of the liberty of the press was thus a central point of controversy in the pre-Revolutionary period (Israel 2014: 30-53). It is interesting to note that Mirabeau's own intervention in favour of press freedom again took the form of an "imitation" of an English text. This was his *Sur la liberté de la press, imité de l'anglois de Milton* (1788), freely adapted and amplified from John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644) from a 1698 edition prepared by the English deist and republican John Toland. It was published alongside a more radical political work, Milton's defence

of the condemnation of Charles I by the Long Parliament, the *A Defence of the People of England,* taken from the same edition published by Toland. Mirabeau's free translation of the title, *Défense du Peuple Anglais, Sur le jugement et la condemnation de Charles Premier Roi d'Angleterre. Ouvrage propre à éclairir sur la circonstance actuelle où se trouve la France* (1792), made clear that his intentions were contemporary and not historical, as was his careful diluting of the Biblical and puritanical tone, «uncongenial to Parisian intellectual culture» (Davies 1995: 266; see also Monnier 2011: 43-45; Hammersley 2010: 176-182 and Tournu 2002).[5]

Mirabeau's activity as a journalist and revolutionary activist, then, in the period before the Revolution, appears to have been the fruit of an extended dialogue with ideas and experiences outside France: America, the United Provinces, and Britain. The texts he produced, often translations or pseudo-translations (Toury 1995: 48-59), were, it would appear, the fruit of ideas and expressions which had matured over a series of conversations and texts produced by a number of French, American, and English radicals and journalists: Mirabeau, Vaughan, Dumont, Franklin, Romilly and others. Romilly noted somewhat testily that his friend Dumont:

> …has done what few people could have the magnanimity enough to do; he has seen his compositions universally extolled as masterpieces of eloquence, and all the merit of them ascribed to persons who had not written a single word in them; and he has never discovered that he was the author of them but to those from whom it was impossible to conceal it. Of every thing that he has written, the advantages have been shared between Mirabeau and his bookseller, the one taking the glory, and the other the emolument (Romilly 1840: vol. 1: 386).

Mirabeau appears, even in eighteenth-century terms, to have had little regard for notions of fidelity or authority, conceived of as the individual "ownership" of a text: his well-known *Courrier de Provence,* mentioned here by Romilly, which relayed to his

[5] The text also appeared with title *La théorie de la royauté d'après les Principes de Milton avec sa Défence du people par Mirabeau.* It was printed three times in Paris in the period 1789-92, bearing the name also of Mirabeau's secretary J.B. Salaville (Serna 2009: 267; Monnier 2011: 46).

constituents the events in Paris, was in fact largely written by Étienne Dumont and his fellow Genevan exile Jacques-Antoine Duroveray (Israel 2014: 76).

2. *Mirabeau: cosmopolitan radical*

Mirabeau's polemical journalism was, according to Jonathan Israel, crucial in creating a consensus in public opinion for radical change in the years immediately prior to the French revolution. Israel emphasises, however, that the reputation he had acquired was not limited to France but was recognized throughout Europe (Israel 2014: 75). His writings focused on examples from outside France such as the freedom of the press during the English Civil War, anti-aristocratic polemics in the new American Republic, a controversy over the freedom of shipping in the Scheldt river in the Austrian Netherlands and no doubt many others. It was a journalism, as we have seen, heavily dependent on the writings of others which, when in English, Mirabeau translated or had translated. In other words, he was writing in a transnational context when a series of political upheavals in Geneva, the Dutch Republic and America constituted a shared cosmopolitan context of rebellion. In this context, translation enabled the easy shift and transfer of meanings from one realm to another, provided diachronic or synchronic analogies of use to polemicists and reformers and helped to create a shared climate of radicalism. This perspective fits well within the thesis of an "Atlantic Revolution" put forward many years ago by R.R. Palmer (1959) and Jacques Godechot (1965). In its strong form this perspective aimed to promote a view of a single "democratic" revolution articulated in various different national contexts across America, France, the Dutch Republic, Britain and Ireland; in more recent work, although in a modified form, it has continued to constitute a coherent overall framework (see in particular Israel 2017; Jacob 2007; 11-12; Albertone and de Francesco 2009).[6]

[6] J.C.D. Clark's recent biography of Thomas Paine, on the other hand, is a sustained argument against the "Atlantic Revolution" thesis. If there were links be-

If the notion of an "Atlantic Revolution" can provide us with the overall cosmopolitan historical background, the specific nature of Mirabeau's activity leads us towards a cosmopolitanism which is concrete, material, and quotidian. Cosmopolitanism is often perceived as an appeal to supra-national values, an orientation which attempts to formulate an attractive ethical and political universalism, one «rooted in seventeenth and eighteenth century rationalism with its ethical universalism» (Calhoun 2002a: 99; see also Belissa 1995; Scuccimarra 2006). Mirabeau's practice as journalist, politician and translator, if perhaps inspired by the lofty cosmopolitanism which for many characterises the late Enlightenment (see, for example, Schlereth 1977) shows a cosmopolitanism of a very different sort. Simon Schama has characterised it as a sort of «magpie cosmopolitanism» (Schama 1989: 342), a feverish, daily activity involving collaboration with other radicals and elaborating political positions with scant reference to overarching universal or general theoretical principles. In this sense, the activity of Mirabeau and others would appear more easily interpretable within a notion of cosmopolitanism consisting of the practical daily activities of people from different cultural, linguistic and national backgrounds in a variety of geographical and political contexts. Margaret Jacob has put forward a notion of an eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism which involved «practices, behaviors, social habits, mores» (Jacob 2007: 3-4) substantiated in the daily practice and interactions of subjects in a transnational world of intellectual exchange. She quotes, as an example, the English radical, textile entrepreneur, chemist and educator, Thomas Cooper, who, to justify his membership of the Manchester Constitutional Society, compared international political association, so frowned upon by the English authorities, with the natural transnationalism of science:

> Is there any impropriety in the *philosophical* societies of London, Paris or Stockholm, corresponding for the improvement of Chemistry, or experimental Philosophy? … Why then should societies instituted

tween the American and the French Revolutions, he argues, "their differences outweigh their similarities" (2018: 10).

for the promotion of *political* knowledge, be debarred from the common means of improvement? (quoted in Jacob 2007: 134)

This lived transnational cosmopolitanism can be glimpsed in the relations between Mirabeau and Romilly, as we have seen, but also in the multiple relations between them and other figures such as Benjamin Vaughan, Benjamin Franklin, and Joseph Johnson. Rubbing shoulders with other radicals from a variety of European backgrounds in a period of «intelligent roving» (Schama 1989: 342), Mirabeau seems to have lived a sort of cosmopolitanism based on «the primacy of practice», in the expression of Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006: 84).

To consider these relations as exemplification of cosmopolitan practice, it may be useful to mention three other, comparable cosmopolitan milieu in the eighteenth century. The first is the "Republic of Letters" of the earlier eighteenth century described in some detail by Anne Goldgar (1995), Elisabeth Eisenstein (1986, 1992) and others. The complex and rich interaction between publishers, editors, translators, writers, pamphleteers, and booksellers which emerges from these works is illustrative of exactly the cosmopolitanism of practice which we can see in the world of Mirabeau. The "fertile crescent" of Enlightenment publishing from the Low Countries to Geneva was, Eisenstein puts forward, a very particular transnational, cosmopolitan space of toleration where diverse figures, often of different religious and linguistic backgrounds, occupied the same city space in their common endeavour to publish literary, philosophical and scientific work. The French Revolution, with its absorption of these outlying border territories which had been hospitable to francophone publishing enterprises, saw the demise of this concrete cosmopolitan space (Eisenstein 1986: 22-23), but it was one within which Mirabeau himself was operating. The second is the example of the brief moments of cosmopolitanism within revolutionary Paris itself, in particular in the early period before the introduction of the law against aliens (Jacob 2007: 132-138; Kristeva 1991: 148-154). The figure of Anarcharsis Cloots, the Prussian cosmopolitan revolutionary and author of the *République universelle, Ou adresse aux tyrannicides* (1792) is well-known (Mortier 1995;

Labbé 1999). Less well-explored are examples of concrete sites of cosmopolitan sociability such as White's Hotel, the headquarters of the informal British Jacobin club frequented by a host of English radicals such as Thomas Paine, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Hurford Stone, Thomas Cooper, James Watt and Americans such as Joel Barlow (Rogers 2013; Ferradou 2015), or the activity in Paris of the German naturalist, travel writer, and translator Georg Forster (Gilli 1975; Goujard 2005). A third is the larger context of the Atlantic as an open transnational cosmopolitan space. In the historiography of the late eighteenth century, the "Atlantic Revolution" has given way to a more general "Atlantic history" in which the ocean is seen as an essential spatial unit for the study of subjects such as slavery, trade, and migration, none of which can be successfully studied within a national frame alone (see for example, Bernard Bailyn 2005). All of these point to a cosmopolitan transnational practice which, as Jacob points out, is a useful correlate to philosophical cosmopolitanism, and enables us to have a frame of reference within which to understand how and why «later in the eighteenth century reform and revolution became infectious, first gripping the American colonies in the 1770s, then in the late 1780s causing upheavals in the Atlantic world, in nations as different in political structure as the Dutch Republic, the Austrian Netherlands, and France» (Jacob 2007: 11).

Mirabeau's journalism falls neatly into this framework. His work, as we have seen, spanned all these different but related political environments and was the product of a series of relations with other writers and journalists working in the same context. If his primary focus was, or became, France, his initial frame was markedly cosmopolitan. Carlyle's judgment of Mirabeau as typically French was the product of a century in which the nation and the nation-state was uncontested in its dominance of cultural as well as political categories. But Mirabeau was not so far removed from Voltaire after all: both looked outside France, to Berlin and London as exemplars to put alongside the French experience. In this sense, rather than being in conflict, his patriotism and political journalism in France was a coherent development of his activities within the

cosmopolitan environment which has increasingly been appreciated as the crucial framework within which to interpret the revolutionary events of the 1790s.

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Abstract

MIRABEAU: FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY AND COSMOPOLITAN TRANSLATOR

Keywords: Mirabeau, cosmopolitanism, translation, Romilly, French Revolution.

Count Mirabeau is remembered in particular as a charismatic leader during the early period of the French Revolution and as such, in popular imagination, emblematic of Frenchness. In reality, by the time the revolution broke out, Mirabeau already had an international reputation, and his political and cultural reference points were strikingly cosmopolitan. Intervening in a number of international debates, he used translation, in particular, as a means promoting the causes that were dear to him, through a collaboration with a young English lawyer, Samuel Romilly. This paper will explore Mirabeau's work as a translator and propose a figure who was exemplary of the cosmopolitan environment of late eighteenth-century radicalism.

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