
H-France Review Vol. 9 (May 2009), No. 67

Robert Alderson Response to Frey Review of Robert J. Alderson, Jr., *This Bright Era of Happy Revolutions: French Consul Michel-Ange-Bernard Mangourit and International Republicanism in Charleston, 1792-1794*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008.

Professors Linda and Marsha Frey's review of my book raises important questions about my grasp of many issues, especially the characters of Genet and Mangourit. I thank Michael Wolfe for asking the Freys to review my book and inviting me to respond.

The Freys take issue with the title of the book. "This Bright Era of Happy Revolutions" does not deny the atrocities of the French Revolution, but points out one of the major themes of the book, namely, that Americans who were discontented with the results of the American Revolution looked to France for inspiration. The Freys dispute my assertion that there was a span of approximately two years in which France and the United States could work together on behalf of international revolution. However limited the time, there was a window of opportunity for cooperation. Two years or two weeks, it makes no difference. What makes a difference is how the actors took advantage of the opportunity. Additionally, the Freys are no strangers to the use of irony in their titles. One of their articles, in which Mangourit and Genet play roles as exemplars of all that was wrong with revolutionary diplomacy, is entitled "The Reign of the Charlatans is Over," which posits that "the charlatans of Bourbon France had been replaced by the charlatans of the new revolutionary order." Naivety, arrogance, and unleavened idealism inform the Freys' portrayal of revolutionary diplomats. What emerges is less a critical appraisal than a series of caricatures.[1]

Also in line for criticism is my use of Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere. To be sure, the concept has generated some controversy.[2] However, the Freys' conclusion that my use of Habermas' model "fails as a viable construct" because of my alleged "misunderstanding of the significance of both [Mangourit and Genet]" is a non sequitur. The Freys have acknowledged that "revolutionaries attempted to transform the public sphere by radically altering the insignia, dress, and rhetoric so inextricably associated with the Old Regime." Either one rejects my use of the paradigm or at least partially accepts that Mangourit and Genet were part of a radical public sphere. Genet was feted throughout his overland trip to Philadelphia and was active in at least one democratic-republican society, which rendered him less a representative of a foreign power than a leader of an American opposition group. Mangourit made his own journey into the radical public sphere when he formed a Masonic lodge that included members of the lower orders, founded one of the first revolutionary journals, and took part in the conquest of the Bastille. Mangourit's commitment to the radical public sphere and the lower classes is one constant in his public life.

The Freys take issue with my treatment of American neutrality and French treaty rights. They disagree with my statement that the right to outfit French privateers in American ports was "implied" (p. 24). Without going into the niceties of the Franco-American Treaties of 1778, the treaties "implicitly permitted France certain rights," including the use of American ports by French privateers.[4] What remained at issue was the recruiting of Americans for French service. When I mention that Mangourit foresaw American frontiersmen were to be "ostensibly recruited from outside South Carolina to avoid any violation of neutrality," the Freys are correct (at least according to the

Washington administration) in pointing out that “would not recruiting any Americans have been a violation of neutrality?” However, Americans who supported the invasions held that the right of expatriation was a right granted under the Constitution.^[5] Neutrality was “not a legitimate exercise of executive power but an attack on popular sovereignty” (p. 158).

The Freys refute my interpretation of the Genet mission as a Constitutional crisis, although I caution that it was closer to “something akin to America’s first Constitutional crisis” (p. 20). Perhaps the phrase “clash of constitutional interpretations” is more to the point, but it seems clumsy. Nevertheless, the nature of the U.S. Constitution played an important role. The Freys’ assertion that “it strains credulity” that Genet’s mission hinged on overturning “the Americans’ interpretation of their own constitution” (p. 25) overlooks the farcical exchange that took place between Jefferson and Genet just before that quote. Genet, having received a lecture on the American Constitution from Jefferson, bowed to the secretary of state and refused to accept Jefferson’s explanation of the Constitution. Genet determined to appeal to the people through Congress. As the Freys point out, the Girondin faction did not instruct Genet to conduct a seminar on the Constitution, but the instructions set the scene for the confrontation by allowing Genet to commission American volunteers regardless of the American government’s opinion. Genet’s credentials were addressed to Congress, not the president. Thus the Girondins labored under the same misapprehension Genet did: the president was the servant of the sovereign people as assembled in Congress. Genet’s actions were a natural, if deranged, outcome of this attitude. The challenge posed by Genet started as soon as he landed in Charleston instead of sailing on to Philadelphia. His overland trip from Charleston “was a triumphant procession.”^[6] The American administration, at least the Federalists among them, did see him as a threat to their control of domestic politics; “in the popular enthusiasm he [Genet] aroused...he posed a threat to Federalist political ascendancy.”^[7]

I am not an apologist for either Genet or Mangourit. I assert, among other things, that Genet “was impolitic and impetuous” (p. 26), he was “wrong about the nature of American institutions” (p. 32); and “had Genet been adept at the diplomatic arts of subtlety and stalling and had he been more successful over the issues of the debt, privateers, and the fleet mutiny, the expeditions that had been entrusted to Mangourit might have come to pass” (p. 36). As for Mangourit, I note that charges of misconduct in office, if true, “show, at the very least, that Mangourit was capable of tampering with records to further his own ends” (p. 38). I am careful to seek confirmation from other sources for what Mangourit writes. I acknowledge probable exaggerations and obfuscations (pp. 50, 167, 168) and note “he was even willing to lie if it was in France’s national interest” (p. 174). I freely admit that, after examining the records, it appears that Mangourit did all that was possible to execute his instructions.

The Freys contend that Genet and Mangourit were “tactless and confrontational,” citing Genet’s expulsion from Russia and Mangourit’s short tenure in Spain. Although I did not go into detail about Genet’s Russian misadventures, the essence is true; he was expelled for his republican views. As for Mangourit, the only evidence the Freys present of Mangourit’s tactlessness in Charleston is Mangourit’s analysis that “American liberty was a sham and the American presidency a monarchy,” which appeared only in Mangourit’s confidential correspondence, not in any statement made to Americans. When Governor Moultrie accused Mangourit of being involved in a rumored slave revolt, Mangourit contained his indignation to maintain good relations with the governor. When he tried to ban slavery in a conquered Florida, he acquiesced in the face of opposition from his American allies. However, all of these men Mangourit considered good republicans. When he was in Spain, he consorted with similar men. He “associated with Spanish republicans and helped form political societies” (p. 172). He also met with Spanish Freemasons, as he did in South Carolina. When placed in the context of his life, Mangourit’s tenure in Spain is comprehensible. Mangourit can be seen as tactless, but he can also be seen as a man who defiantly lived according to his own principles. As R. R. Palmer pointed out, Mangourit “was a hardy sort, adept at planning, organizing and intriguing, a political busybody, putting his talents wholly at the service of the Revolution, sharing its democratic mystique, impatient and

contemptuous of the old ruling classes wherever he found them.”[8] The Freys see this as a drawback. In a royal court, his zeal made Mangourit a liability. In an area leaning towards republicanism, his character made him an asset. After his failure in Spain, Mangourit was “named chargé d’affaires to a Swiss canton and wrote a constitution for the region. When he was recalled in 1798, he was heralded by the Swiss as he had been by his friends in South Carolina” (p. 172).

The Freys express doubt that Mangourit was more successful than Genet. Genet alienated Thomas Jefferson, France’s most important ally on the national level, while Mangourit maintained good relations with South Carolina governor William Moultrie. Likewise, Genet did not have much to show for his exertions, whereas the invasion of East Florida was at the point of starting when Mangourit was recalled. When the Freys argue that “one cannot but doubt his statement that ‘signs were strong that a French invasion of Spanish territory would have succeeded’ (p. xi),” not only do they not offer any reasons for their allegation, they do not cite information from the relevant chapters, only the preface. The chapter does indicate that the invasion of East Florida could have succeeded.

When the Freys get to what is at the heart of the study, the local elements, they often make erroneous statements and ask the wrong questions. I did not “dub” Charleston “the Holy City.” Charleston is known as the “Holy City” because of its large number of churches, including a French Huguenot Church. The “wedding” of the French and American women was, as far as I can tell, a unique occurrence, although the Freys would prefer to call it a “social aberration.” The Freys demand to know “what does it really tell us about the transatlantic community?” The more telling question is what does it tell us about how Charlestonians saw themselves as part of a larger transatlantic community, which the “wedding” and other expressions of transatlantic solidarity explore. In noting the dissolution of the democratic-republican societies, they claim I “do not note that these societies declined because of the erosion of popular support for France.” I argue that the democratic-republican societies declined because “the cause of international revolution waned” (p. 175). The two are analogous; they diminished simultaneously, which I investigate (pp. 175-177, 181-182). The Freys argue that I note that the local elite’s support for France declined without explaining why. I do not link it to specific events in France, but I do explain it was because the elite “hoped for a rapprochement with Great Britain and slipped in a subtle condemnation of the increasingly radical French Revolution” (p. 59) and “excoriated the French revolutionaries as godless barbarians” (p. 79), which the elite linked to a character flaw of the French character.

The Freys’ critique is weakened by a number of inaccuracies. Contrary to what they report, I allude to Jefferson’s pro-French stance a number of times, including: Jefferson...was sympathetic towards the French Revolution” (p. 50). The Freys incorrectly accuse me of not mentioning the American debt to France: “President Washington refused Genet’s request for advances on the debt owed by the United States to France” (p. 27). When the Freys write that I need to explore the charges against the Girondins more, they overlook that I do sketch those reasons out on page ten. The Freys point out that “egalitarian titles used in France were citizen and citizeness not citess.” I am not referring to the titles as used in France, but what Americans used. “Citess” appears to have been the preferred usage in the U.S. (p. 85). The statement “French vessels fared no better” (p. 113) does not refer to French ships being attacked as the Freys assert, but rather that British sailors plundered innocent French passengers on both American and French vessels. There is a chapter dedicated to, among other things, the struggle between British and French warships that the Freys ignore. When I state that “character assassination seemed to be something of a sport among French diplomatic officials” (p. 39), I am referring to sniping between French consular officials, not necessarily the distrust of diplomats by revolutionaries. The sniping happened regardless of whether the officials were royal or revolutionary; “usually, consuls came to their posts damning their predecessors for having left behind a disarray of garbled accounts, lost documents, and incompetent staff” as well as outright corruption.[9]

The Freys' statement that "Alderson notes how Mangourit manipulated the crowd by limiting access to many revolutionary celebrations in the United States through the issuance of tickets" is incorrect on a number of counts. Mangourit was not manipulating anyone by issuing tickets, the Republican Society of South Carolina issued tickets. Next, it was not at "many revolutionary celebrations," but one. Finally, if Mangourit manipulated his allies, they were just as guilty of manipulating the French to obtain their own goals.

What do the Freys mean when they write that I say "nothing" about Mangourit urging Genet to return to France? It is covered in pages 165-168. Mangourit formulated a defense for himself and Genet and was "adamant that Genet should return to France to vindicate himself" (p. 165). The Freys write that "only later" do I acknowledge that "such a return would have been tantamount to a death sentence." They are mistaken: Mangourit's defense was "enough to guarantee his trip to the guillotine" (p. 167). What the Freys see as "criminally naive," I prefer to see as "defiantly courageous," although one may argue where bravery and naivety part ways.

The Freys note some of the primary sources I consulted, but strangely miss one of the most important: the two volumes of the Correspondance Consulaire of the Charleston consulate. It is amusing to note that included in the Freys' list of sources I should have examined is a book for which I wrote a chapter, David P. Geggus' *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*.

There may come a time when my interpretation of the events and people portrayed in this book comes to resemble the Freys'. However, to assert that my interpretation has no basis in fact or the literature is incorrect. If I am guilty of a surfeit of naivety, then the Freys are culpable of an excess of cynicism. Perhaps the ever-elusive truth lies somewhere in-between.

NOTES

[1] Linda and Marsha Frey, "The Reign of the Charlatans is Over': The French Revolutionary Attack on Diplomatic Practice," *The Journal of Modern History* 65 (December 1993): 706-744. This article provides much of the basis for the brief chapter on revolutionary diplomacy (47-55) in the Freys *The French Revolution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), although their appraisal had hardened to conclude, among other things, that the French "harbored the dangerous illusion" that others would "willingly embrace revolutionary ideals." International revolution was predicated on an "unrealistic appraisal of French military capabilities and an unwarranted contempt for their foes coupled with an ingenuous conviction that others would embrace their ideals" (quotes on 53).

[2] See for example: David Waldstreicher, "Two Cheers for the 'Public Sphere'... and One for Historians' Skepticism," *The William and Mary Quarterly* (January 2005): 107-112; and Amanda B. Moniz's review of Albrecht Koschnik's *"Let a Common Interest Bind Us Together": Associations, Partisanship, and Culture in Philadelphia, 1775-1840* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2007.) in H-SHEAR, dated 10 February 2009.

[3] Linda and Marsha Frey, "The Reign of the Charlatans is Over," 707.

[4] Harry Ammon, *The Genet Mission* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973), 75.

[5] See for example pp. 140, 149, 150-151.

[6] Alexander DeConde, *Entangling Alliance: Politics and Diplomacy under George Washington* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1958), 201.

[7] DeConde, 202-203.

[8] R. R. Palmer, "A Revolutionary Republican: M.A.B. Mangourit," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3 (1952), 486.

[9] See Peter P. Hill, *French Perceptions of the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988), 1-21, the quote is on 6-7.

Robert Alderson
Georgia Perimeter College
Robert.Alderson@gpc.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172