

Carlsbad 1819

Like another Chouannerie

Geneva 1782

December 24, 2017 by Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur

Bertrand de Jouvenel, in his *Pure Theory of Politics*, recounts a general state of optimism during the fin-de-siecle of the 18th century, a time when enlightened absolutism had begun to settle in a state of rest, and cabinet wars (Kabinettskriege) were the predominant form.

He specifically quotes (<https://archive.org/stream/puretheoryofpoli00jouv#page/200/mode/2up/>) from a 1792 work by French revolutionary Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Étienne, quite fittingly enough published months before the beginning of the French Revolutionary Wars proper...

We see already that wars are milder than among savage and ignorant populations. Legions shoot each other with politeness; heroes salute each other before fighting; soldiers of the opposite camps visit each other before battle, as people sup together before a game of cards. It is no more nations which are locked in battle, nor even kings, but only armies, and mercenaries at that; these are games with limited stakes; at last wars, which were frenzies, have shrunk to nonsense. We, who are only people . . . we shall not tire of telling the kings that the wars are meaningful only to them... The stupid hatreds of nations will wear out when kings no more excite them one against the other...

We can rigorously forecast the progress of reason. If the robust body of France digests its revolution, we shall never more see these so great armies, with which so little is accomplished. The example of the French will be imitated ; and from this angle as from so many others, the revolution of France will have achieved a saving in human blood.

Rabaut Saint-Etienne was guillotined on the December of 1793.

A decade prior, the centripetal forces of enlightened public opinion would produce an epic tale of burgher revolts for the vote, of industrious Calvinist immigrants, Irish colonization, correspondence with Thomas Jefferson and other links to the American Revolution, and eventual disillusionment.

In brief: come June 1782, disenfranchised burghers (many of them watchmakers) of Geneva with their emerging political consciousness as *representants* take over the city council before being repelled by a joint French-Bernese-Savoyard intervention that restored the status quo, lead by Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes. The representants flee to Neuchâtel, after which the leaders, especially Francois d'Ivernois, starts writing to English nobility regarding migration. Their main patrons for a colony of "New Geneva" would end up being Charles Stanhope, Lord Mahon and William Petty, 2nd Earl of

Shelburne, who chose to settle them in Ireland with initial royal approval, partially as an anti-Catholic measure. The project would ultimately fail due to foreign diplomatic pressure and loss of interest on part of the representants due to the Genevan government's increasingly conciliatory stance — granting general amnesty, for instance. The houses that were built for New Geneva would end up being used as prisons for Irish nationalists.

D'Ivernois faulted England for failing to “rescue Geneva from the interposition of France,” and that she ought to have “declared that she would watch over that independence, and cover the liberty of this small state with her powerful protection.”

But by no means did he harbor any resentment toward France. In fact, he quite liked Louis XVI. In his *Tableau historique et politique des revolutions de Geneve dans le dix-huitieme siecle*, he described him as “a monarch who since the beginning of his reign has been an object of veneration to true republican.”

D'Ivernois cried out like so in the aftermath of the Genevan revolution:

Ye jealous Americans, and ye patriots of Ireland, survey the ruins of the constitution of Geneva, and interrogate her dispersed citizens; they all will inform you that the interference of foreigners in the internal divisions of an independent state is death to public liberty, and that the assistance of a despotic power must be ever attended with perfidy and danger. Believe the words of a citizen, banished from a country that he idolized, by three foreign sovereigns, who, whilst they destroy her vitals, call themselves her benefactors. Believe the words of a citizen, who daily sheds the tears of bitterness over the iniquity of those who subverted the constitution of his country, and reproaches them, not so much for having deprived him of the right to inhabit there, as for having rendered it unworthy to be inhabited.

The Genevan representants generally held to a liberal view of commerce, a distrust of aristocracy and a preference for small states. Above all else, however, was their strong insistence on independence in internal affairs. Dynastic politics were repugnant to them.

The *Morning Herald and Advertiser* would announce the Genevan colony on October 8, 1782 by stating that “some most respectable citizens of that oppressed republic have been soliciting an asylum in this rising land of liberty, for a number of their inhabitants give the preference to Ireland, and propose to bring with them the arts and manufactures that have long rendered that city the envy of Europe and the continued object of the jealousy of France.”

Not only the English offered refuge to the Genevans. Carl Theodore, Elector of Bavaria expressed his willingness “to have the glory of opening a refuge to an enlightened, industrious and oppressed people” by offering settlement in Mannheim in the Palatinate. Furthermore, invitations had been received from the Landgrave of Hesse-Homburg, from the Countess of Neustadt at Dresden, from the Grand Duke of Tuscany (Leopold) and from his brother the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II, who wanted the exiles to settle in the imperial city of Konstanz or at Brussels. None of these plans would come to fruition.

The will of King George III being “to induce the said merchants, artists, and manufacturers, citizens, or inhabitants of Geneva, to settle in Ireland, under the conviction, that by their civil and religious principles, their industry, and their loyalty, they would materially contribute to the advantage of this kingdom,” a starting fund of £50,000 was allocated for the first thousand migrants. They were to be naturalized, given land, and supported in establishing manufactures. Mirabeau was apparently genuinely afraid that Ireland might become “the most free country on earth and the most desirable

abode for men who know the value of liberty,” complaining to the comte de Vergennes about this. Brissot, too, said of Ireland that it was “perhaps the only asylum of liberty at present, the only place where remarkable enterprises could fruitfully be taken forward.”

England itself was off limits due to English goldsmiths’ refusal to compete with Genevan settlers, and also due to mercantile reasons of encouraging exportation.

It’s worth noting that British newspapers were initially hostile to the Genevan representants, as documented by Richard Whatmore (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-229X.12418/pdf>):

The British papers reported that matters quickly came to a head. The Marquis de Jaucourt opened trenches around the walls on Saturday 29 June, raised his canons onto batteries, and prepared to give the order for thousands of troops from three nations to attack. After granting delays to the defenders, at 2 o’clock on the morning of Monday 1 July, de Jaucourt received a letter from the magistrates stating that they were once more in control and that the city was open to the soldiers. The representants had capitulated. The bridges that had been broken down to prevent entry were restored and troops entered Geneva. **It was discovered that the representants had put gunpowder in the houses of their enemies, and in the cathedral of Saint-Pierre. Enough gunpowder was discovered to have entirely destroyed the city as soon as the first mortar bomb caused a fire. ...** Thirty representants escaped by boat to the nearby village of Versoix. They were chased by an armed bark, and only reached the shore by swimming. Papers belonging to one of the leaders of the insurgency were found in the boat. The victors, having restored all of the old magistrates, took control of the city and left 1,400 troops within its walls. Most of the garrison was French.

Not particularly sympathetic.

Shelburne and Stanhope managed to overcome this both by exploiting the Irish Catholic issue, but also by their advocacy of cosmopolitan ideas of liberal trade, then in vogue. Furthermore, the British defeat at Yorktown and the winding down of the American Revolutionary War in favor of the Americans invited a growing skepticism about the empire, and a zeal for economic reform.

Shelburne actively endorsed the American cause, prophesized an “era of Protestantism in trade” (his words) and declared on the podium that “all Europe appears enlightened, and eager to throw off the vile shackles of oppressive ignorant monopoly, of that unmanly and illiberal principle, which is at once ungenerous and deceitful.” New Geneva was a pet project for him to confirm Smith and Turgot’s economic principles that he held so dear.

Stanhope, on the other hand, majored in the University of Geneva and had been a correspondent of the *representants* for years, including Jacques Antoine du Roveray, to whom he sent a copy of Blackstone’s Commentaries. His parliamentary speeches included subjects as peace with North America, proposals for greater parliamentary control over the army and the civil list, a militia in Scotland and the right of the people to petition the crown. He also joined the Society for Constitutional Information, a parliamentary reform group.

New Geneva fell as quickly as it began, and d’Ivernois would later become a counterrevolutionary on the question of the French Revolution (though by no means an anti-republican).

Here is what Thomas Jefferson wrote to d’Ivernois in 1795 (<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-28-02-0196>):

The grosser absurdities, such as hereditary magistracies we shall see exploded in our day, long experience having already pronounced condemnation against them. But what is to be the substitute? This our children or grandchildren will answer.

Unfortunately, their children and grandchildren never did come up with that answer.

Jefferson also confidently asserts that he “suspect[s] that the doctrine that small states alone are fitted to be republics will be exploded by experience with some other brilliant fallacies accredited by Montesquieu and other political writers,” again dubious in retrospect.

Recall D’Ivernois’ Calvinist beliefs and his commitment to national independence. The secularism and bellicose nature of the French Revolution were what put him off to it more than anything else. Brissot, who had once been a supporter of D’Ivernois, would later be condemned by the latter. D’Ivernois had thought that Geneva’s recognition of the French Republic and its opening of its corn granaries would mean independence, but was bitterly disappointed to learn otherwise.

He strongly insisted that the Genevan constitution never acknowledged nobility: “There was not however in that small and interesting Republic, either abuses to correct or reforms to operate, nor even privileged Classes to excite jealousy, since the Genevan Laws at no time acknowledged nobility, even among families the most ancient and the most opulent.”

On September 23, 1794, he described the internal state of Geneva (<https://founders.archives.gov/?q=Correspondent%3A%22Ivernois%2C%20Fran%3A%20A7ois%20d%27%22%20Correspondent%3A%22Jefferson%2C%20Thomas%22&s=1111311111&r=5>), as the following:

Geneva is lost without resource in respect to Religion, to morals, to the sciences, to the fine arts, to trade—to liberty, and above all to internal peace. Its convulsions can have no other term than that of those of France to the fate of which it has had the criminal imprudence irremissibly to attach itself, and of which it will suffer more or less all the shocks. For the fall of the Genevese montagnards is evidently nothing more than the rebounding blow of that of the partisans of Robespierre in France. That power is now the only ally which remains to the feeble Geneva, and she would lose it and irritate it beyond the hope of reconciliation, should her citizens attempt, as already they desire it, to revert to the wise laws and the well tempered liberty which they have sacrificed for these two years past on the altar of the Revolutionary Doctrine.

“Wise laws” and “well tempered liberty” in 1782 leading to Montagnard encirclement in 1792. No relation between the two, we are told.

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3 thoughts on “Geneva 1782”

1. Pingback: [Geneva 1782 | Reaction Times](#)
2. Michael Rothblatt says:
[January 1, 2018 at 4:11 pm](#)

Are you familiar with Hugh Trevor-Roper's "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century"? He demolishes Max Weber, showing that there was, in reality, no "Protestant ethic." Rather, the same bunch of people were moving around the block. More importantly, he explains the reasons why the merchants, that had hitherto been the church party, went Calvinist. And the answer is, of course, that Counter-Reformation necessitated alliance of altar with the throne, which, in short, was bad for business.

It appears that Turgot foresaw what was to come. In his farewell letter to king Louis XVI he wrote: "Mon désir, Sire, est que vous puissiez croire que j'avais mal vu et que je vous montrais des dangers chimériques. Je souhaite que le temps ne me justifie pas, et que votre règne soit aussi heureux, aussi tranquille, et pour vous, et pour vos peuples."

Reply.

3. Pingback: Lally-Tollendal's defense of the royalist emigres | Carlsbad 1819

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