The “Non-Aligned Status” of French Emigrés and Refugees in Philadelphia, 1793-1798

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1 The key pieces of anti-émigré legislation, passed by the Convention on 28 March 1793 defined seven categories of émigrés but made little distinction between the intentions of nearly 150,000 French men and women that fled war, Terror, and political upheaval during the Revolution. All were deemed “traitors” and “unpatriotic” (impatriotes) and faced the death penalty upon return to France as well as the confiscation of their property along with other penalties borne by their families. Added to this was the 17 September 1793 legislation that defined the relatives of émigrés “suspects” before the law. In the Revolution’s own terms, the Counter-Revolution was a block (Soboul 411-413, Vidalenc 35-36).1

2 Yet, there were clear distinctions to be made, on the one hand, between the Counter-Revolution in the Vendée, the revolt of the refractory clergy, and noble defection to France’s military enemies; and, on the other hand, the 45,000 French nationals who had made a choice to flee from French territory to the United States and the uncharted American west. Within the “American” émigré cluster, a third of the French nationals were in fact refugees rather than émigrés fleeing the slave rebellions of St.-Domingue after 1791.2 As the census of 1790 counted 5 million men and women in the United States (neither enslaved nor Indian inhabitants were included), this meant that around 1% of the white population were émigrés or refugees taking flight from the French métropole or colonies. Five thousand alone made their homes in the capital city of the United States, Philadelphia, meaning that in a city that numbered 28,500 in 1790, over one in six Philadelphians were French nationals.3

3 Far from accurately reflecting the bad press these men and women received as reactionary and treasonous aristocrats, the émigrés had made the affirmed choice of embracing the only other national republic in existence at the end of the eighteenth
century. The French contingent viewed Federalist America as a compelling destination because of its non-aligned status towards the warring powers of Europe proclaimed in April 1793. In keeping with the American “struggle for neutrality,” George Washington’s controversial decision maintained the United States’ privileged position as a trading partner to all belligerent nations—until, that is, the 1794 Jay Treaty clearly tilted the young republic toward an Anglo-American commercial axis (Bowman). The émigrés’ political motivation was thus based in the image of the United States as the anti-Coblence, the Austrian border city where Comte d’Artois, Lafayette, Dumouriez and other counter-revolutionaries fled in order to join the monarchical forces engaged in war on France. By fleeing to America, the émigrés avoided all association with the 20,000 noble and bourgeois royalists that constituted the Counter-Revolutionary army of émigrés who took up arms, at one point or another, against the Republic (Boroumand).

The American émigrés who published their reflections on their sojourn were, in general, political moderates, committed to constitutional monarchy, foreshadowing what might be called Orleanism in France. Certain members of the American contingent had been active in the earliest period of the French Revolution. Among the most noteworthy were: Talleyrand (responsible for the Constitution civile du clergé and originator of the project to sell church property as biens nationaux); the Creole notable and representative from Martinique, Moreau de Saint-Mery; Louis-Marie Noailles (former representative and one of the earliest voices to call for the abolition of feudal privileges in 1789); and the former president of the Assemblée Nationale, Antoine Omer Talon. Also, La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt had been president of the Comité de Mendicité and responsible for putting in place a vast program of public works in Paris through 1790-91, which found work for tens of thousands of women and men in clearing lands and digging stone quarries. We might also add to the list of the leading “Americans” Démeunier, Beaumetz, Volney, and, departing later, Dupont de Nemours. What bound this diverse group to the United States during the Federalist period was their elite social status and prominent political roles during the liberal phase of the French Revolution. This had in the eyes of many powerful French revolutionaries deeply compromised their integrity during the radical phase.

This article examines the political identity of these French refugees and émigrés, and the place they occupied in the Atlantic revolution. It focuses, in particular, on their ideological uses of exile. The reflections of the French in America during the age of revolutions often emphasized their provisional status as residents in America. This is, indeed, hardly surprising: they had left as older individuals, when most displaced people tend to resist starting over in a new land. They arrived in dispersed order, often as individuals, not knowing other travelers to the new world. Their choices of where to live in America was dictated by the logic of pursuing former business contacts or for professional opportunity—as in the case of Creole planters in Charleston, South Carolina, and New Orleans or sailors in Boston and New York—rather than following other escapees to collectively found or join French communities. They rarely married Americans, and the few writings about women reveal a great deal of hostility and contempt for their lack of “moeurs & élegance.” (Hébert)⁴ They held out hopes of returning to a pacified France once the revolutionary turbulence had ended. Finally, the departure from France or the colonies had been traumatic, leading to the widespread use of a discourse of victimization, alienation, and persistent distress—surely, not a discourse that favored integration in a strange land. La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, for example, left France with scarcely any personal belongings abruptly upon learning of the brutal execution of his
cousin, the distinguished américanophile La Rochefoucauld-d'Enville, by a crowd inflamed by the Parisian prison massacres of September 1792. Little wonder, then, that his travels in the United States were generally those of an outside observer, a savant taking advantage of a forced and temporary exile to observe a new nation, rather than of a true immigrant to the New World (Ikni, La Rochefoucauld, Wolikow).

6 The French exiles, however, framed their experiences around a vast divide between the émigrés and their American hosts. This conspired to keep much of the United States a terra incognita for the French. Thus, the disaffiliation for American society was put in terms of the lack of cultivation and sophistication of a primitive people. As la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt concluded on his stay in Philadelphia:

L'esprit mercantile, si généralement répandu, produit nécessairement de l'égoïsme, isole celui qui en est atteint, et ne lui laisse ni goût ni temps pour la société. Aussi ce que nous appelons société n'existe pas dans cette ville. (.....) Voilà le véritable état de la société à Philadelphie: grands dîners, grands thés, pour les arrivants d'Europe, Anglais, Français, étrangers de tous pays, de toute classe, de tout caractère: philosophe, prêtre, homme de lettres, prince, arracheur de dents, homme d'esprits ou idiot. (1798, 6: 326)

7 The émigrés were not able to break with a discourse on their disillusionment with the American experience. The initial attraction for the United States as what we might anachronistically call a terre d'accueil, a politically neutral state protecting French émigrés and refugees from war and terror was short-lived. In journals, books, and newspapers, most French exiles kept a constant commentary upon the internal dynamics of the French Revolution—more absorbed by two month old news from Europe than the politics of their adapted nation. Whether their focus was on the factional and ideological rivalries between Jacobins (by which is meant, for the most part, the Montagnard faction organized around Robespierre) and the royalists (namely, counter-revolutionaries in favor of overthrowing the French Directory), or the European wars and the Vendée rebellion, the émigrés largely stood outside the Anglo-American political tradition. The larger diplomatic isolation of Revolutionary France scarcely seemed to surprise them, as they themselves remained isolated from Americans in the United States.

8 The politics of French exiles, from the métropole and colonies, in Northern America was often based on a strategy of a “third way,” an approach that was simultaneously critical of royalists and Jacobins in their patrie. The critique of extremes is a repeated leitmotif in their writings. La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, for example, fulminates against the “esprit de jacobinisme” that he assimilates to the crimes “du parti terroriste gouvernant.” Simultaneously, he never hesitates as well to praise the American Constitution which is “plus ennemi de la monarchie que de tout autre.” Thus, the United States was presented as politically representing a “juste milieu,” between the extremes of “radical” republicanism and monarchy, and therefore richly deserving of the presence of French elite members themselves in search of a political sphere that steers clear of excess. The incident that led to La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt’s definitive departure from Philadelphia followed the arrival of hundreds of French sailors, pro Jacobins all, who held a banquet to toast the second anniversary of the execution of Louis XVI on 21 January 1795. These banquets periodically rallied French radicals, mostly sailors at port, and pro-French Americans exalted by the spirit of what Ruth Bloch has called “Gallomania” (Bloch). But the anti-Jacobinism of la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt inspired the following condemnation: “L’horrible assassinat du Roi est aujourd’hui célébré par un dîner de patriotes français, quelle horreur, quelle barbarie infâme ! Je suis sorti de la ville d’indignation et de crainte

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de rencontrer aucune trace de cette exécration” (Liancourt 1940, 61-62). Extremism in the face of tyranny, at least to La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, was always a vice, one that overwhelmed any form of national solidarity. Despite a profound interest in the capital city, whose prison system was the subject of his first detailed study on the United States, he spent only a short time in Philadelphia (Liancourt 1795).

9 The politics of rejecting the left and the right of the French Revolution were of course hardly a true political stance. After all, what was real political moderation in the age of revolution? The Directory itself had maintained most laws condemning the émigrés, and they were, in fact, only partially abrogated by law in October 1800. But the stance of an honest broker standing between two extreme points seemed to have succeeded in creating a modicum of unity among the very select group of French exiles.

10 The émigré who best incarnated the “third way” of the French community—its coherence along with its confusions and contradictions—was the Creole Moreau de Saint-Méry. Born in 1750, he was a member of the Constituante as representative from Martinique. Deeply engaged, between 1789 to 1791, in the revolutionary debate relating to the colonies, he was active as a representative of a “colonialist party” and fervently opposed the Société des amis des noirs in their anti-slavery project. Moreau de Saint-Méry authored the project of suffrage for the colonists, by which a voter was required to own ten slaves and a colonial elected representative, twenty slaves. His conservative political stances nearly cost him his life. He was attacked and nearly beaten to death by a crowd of Fédérés in the summer of 1792. He left for the United States, with his wife and two children, from Le Havre in November 1793, shortly before an arrest order was served. Rough weather and various problems on the way led to a trip that lasted 119 days, arriving in Norfolk in March, 1794. After moving briefly to New York where he worked as a dock clerk, he opened a bookshop and printing house in Philadelphia from October 1794 until his definitive departure for France in 1798 (Moreau de Saint-Méry 1815).

11 The literati among the two thousand refugee St.-Domingue planters and three thousand émigrés in Philadelphia gravitated around Moreau de Saint-Méry’s atelier and shop. The Philadelphia circle included Talleyrand, de Noailles, Talon, le comte de Moré, de Beaumetz, Démeunier, La Colombe, the future Louis-Philippe, and, La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt. (Moreau de Saint-Méry even published the latter’s study on Philadelphia prisons in 1795) This community managed to paper over the deep hostility that reigned between émigrés from the métropole and the refugees from the colonies, resisting the bitter tensions between the French émigrés and Creoles that divided, for various reasons, the French community in Louisiana. Exile unity was such that Philadelphia became a rare United States city to feature a French non-political society. Two Franco-American citizens, Stephen Girard and Peter Duponceau, founded the French Benevolent Society of Philadelphia in February 1793 to aid destitute émigrés and refugees. The Society included members of the French consul in the Philadelphia legation, as well as French nationals from the métropole and the colonies (Ducellier).

12 Besides serving as a focal point for the literati, the collective voice that helped bring together the Philadelphia French community was a newspaper, published by Moreau de Saint-Méry and directed by the liberal noble journalist Gatereau. Quite active in the Atlantic world, Gatereau founded a total of five newspapers in St.-Domingue, the United States and France. The Courrier de la France et des Colonies, published between October 1795 and March 1796, was a weekly and occasionally bi-weekly newspaper consisting of four pages of reprinted articles from the international press and occasional editorials by
Gatereau. Above all, the Courrier reflected the anti-royalist and anti-Jacobin engagement of its publisher. For example; news that the British had successfully landed in St.-Domingue, in the edition of 4 February 1796, inspired a polemic against the French counter-revolutionaries from the Vendée. They had become manipulated by the British:

*faut-il davantage pour vous prouver que vous avez été, que vous ferez toujours le jouet du gouvernement britannique. Douterez-vous maintenant que vous avez été enfin conduits à ce point, qu'il vous faut ou mourir de honte en devenant sujets du roi d'Angleterre ou périr de misère en refusant de le devenir?* (quoted in Buckley 211)

The memories of the failed July 1795 invasion of hundreds of émigrés allied with thousands of Chouans under the protection of the British navy on the beaches of Brittany were still fresh. Having obliged the French navy to protect the Atlantic coast and the English Channel, according to Gatereau’s astute analysis, counter-revolutionary intriguers had fatally exposed the Caribbean Sea to British naval ascendancy. But the radicals are not spared criticism either for the loss of the island: “Et vous républicains français! Rendez grâce à l’arbitraire suprême des opinions politiques qui vous promet le pardon de vos erreurs, et qui vous offre des avantages auxquels votre gouvernement n’a pas su pourvoir.” While certainly not a part of the English plot to seize St.-Domingue, the Jacobins had helped destroy the national unity necessary to resist invasion. This example of the middle-of-the-road discourse of Moreau de Saint-Méry and Gatereau—evenhandedly casting poxes upon the houses of royalists and Jacobins—created a temporary political identity of the French community as castoff and misunderstood centrists in a polarized world. An ideological attachment to American neutrality and moderation, however, was strictly a discursive opportunity for these men of property. In practice, the French community also pursued lucrative activities in the new world, in particular, that of investment in commercial adventures, slave trading, and real estate speculation. This led to often bitter conflicts between the French (sometimes involving American intermediaries who inflamed personal rivalries). The Scioto affair, involving a land company, which in 1790 deceived Parisian royalists fleeing the Revolution into buying worthless options for property in southern Ohio was, in fact, a foreshadowing of a long series of speculative adventures. To found the very américanophile Société gallo-américaine, the future Girondins Brissot de Warville and Etienne Clavière, published a charter in January 1787 heralding the vast market opportunities opened for Franco-American relations after the 1778 Treaty for Amity and Commerce. They focused on the creation of a triumphant Atlantic free-trade zone reserved for republics and reformed monarchies. The “American farmer,” Saint-Jean Crèvecoeur, and Nicholas Bergasse were charter members. But behind the intellectual façade of cosmopolitan Enlightenment commercial discourse lay a base materialist cause. Brissot and Clavière were deeply involved in financial intrigues that would absorb the fortunes of some future émigrés. Brissot left for the United States in 1788 to represent the Société gallo-américaine, and to assess a project to found a French colony in America. Its principal contact would be a European company founded by Clavière exclusively dedicated to selling American real estate (Bouchary). When both actors became embroiled in fruitless efforts to buy out the American debt to France, the Société gallo-américaine disintegrated in a series of shady dealings whose results were unclear at the moment the Revolution broke out. Brissot returned to France in 1789 empty-handed, but, with the publication of two significant books extolling the virtues of Franco-American commerce, he had purposefully laid the groundwork for future French speculation (Brissot & Clavière 1787, Brissot 1791).
Despite the paltry results of the Société gallo-américaine, the epigones of this adventure also mixed high ideals with low, almost comic, speculative escapades. In 1793, several exiled planters of St.-Domingue conspired with the noble émigrés Noailles and Talon, actors in the opening chapter of the Revolution, to buy up thousands of acres in northeastern Pennsylvania along the Susquehanna River. With the collaboration of Governor Morris, the United-States Minister Plenipotentiary to France, and of French royalists in the métropole, the goal was to create an asylum for the royal family. The township of Azyle, now Asylum, Pennsylvania, promised, at its origin, to be an aristocratic predecessor of Fourier’s utopian socialist phalanges, with a rigorous division of labor and egalitarian sharing of land. But by the time La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt spent twelve days in 1795 in Azyle, the misery of Talon and Noailles and the hundreds of other French nationals was difficult to hide. La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt reports how the “débris de leur fortune” had been wasted on essentially worthless land far from civilization (1798, 1:151-170). The colony of Azyle was dependent on the Franco-American Asylum company which had bought hundreds of thousands of acres of surrounding land and went bankrupt for the sum of ten million dollars. Adding to the impoverishment of the community was the loss of all income flowing from France after the diplomatic crisis of 1795 following the publication of the secret Jay Treaty (Moreau-Zanelli, 60-64). La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt ironically remarks about his ruined compatriots: “On ne rencontre pas aujourd’hui un Français sans avoir à subir le récit de ses pertes, de ses malheurs, de son opinion et des haines qui en résultent.” (1798, 1: 36). Throughout his seven-volume journal, we find the author taking his compatriots to task for their materialistic land-hunger, which he viewed alternatively with apprehension, irony, and contempt.

Apart from the charity funds and ruinous real estate deals, there was much evidence of deep financial distress within the French community. In the métropole, the Convention was flooded with petitions with variations of what the historian Darrell Meadows has called “narratives of misfortune” that formed the basis for exiled planters’ requests for French government support (Darrell Meadows 2004, ch. 4: 156-202). The Courrier de la France et des Colonies featured occasional calls for contributions to the impoverished French cause in Philadelphia. Ten states created a list of 2,500 “refugees in distress” and put up $10,000 for their assistance. At the beginning of 1794, the United States Congress recognized the potentially catastrophic situation facing the waves of French nobles, merchants, planters, and military deserters, in voting for a fifteen thousand dollar relief fund to be deducted from the external debt to France (Childs 88-89, Potofsky).

The difficult material experiences of the French émigés and refugees no doubt confirmed a preexistent desire of returning to France once the French Revolution was “over.” But the ideological instrumentalization of material failure and challenge in the New World was reinforced by written memoirs whose primary objectives were exculpatory and opportunistic: they were published upon return to France, sometimes years after departure, to justify exile while the author sought a secure place in French politics or administration upon his homecoming. Thus, for example, Moreau de Saint-Méry, in the Voyage aux Etats-Unis, 1793-1798, heaps effusive praise upon Talleyrand, the future Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Directory. He recounts how Talleyrand had loaned the nearly destitute Martiniquais a thousand dollars to return from Philadelphia to Paris. Upon Moreau’s arrival in 1798, once he had reimbursed the loans with significant interest, Talleyrand intervened to help him find a post in the Naval Ministry. In light of the dense
social networks constructed around these influential men, the gratitude toward Talleyrand is a thinly-veiled tribute to shameless cronyism as often practiced by elites with one foot in the ancien régime (Moreau de Saint-Méry, 223-225).

The final straw were the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798, which were passed however after many émigrés had returned to Europe under the Directory’s more tolerant policies. This entire episode only added to French disaffiliation from the United States. The return to the métropole of thousands of former French émigrés and refugees fleeing—once again—the counter-revolutionary political environment that arose under the Adams administration in the context of the Quasi War reinforced the memory of difficulties in the United States (Bloch 152-54). Unsurprisingly, then, a certain bitterness and sense of let-down often characterize the narratives of this period. The disillusionment expressed in memoirs about travels in the United States was a generalized sentiment in French public opinion, prepared for the Quasi War against American shipping, in a context of growing trade between the United States and Britain. The American experience of French exiles was increasingly relegated to a distant memory of a largely unpleasant, accidental, and momentary departure from France in a time of domestic crisis. Necessity would be the mother of this invented narrative. The instrumentalization of discourses of exile assured the vast majority of returning exiles lucrative and prominent positions in the new regime. Following their narratives as victims of terror and war, and as survivors of hardship in the United States, they were well primed for the challenge of the Napoleonic Empire.

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NOTES DE FIN

1. To paraphrase Clémenceau's famous “Messieurs, que nous le voulions ou non, la Révolution française est un bloc” (January, 1891).
2. Perhaps up to 30,000 more French soldiers and Creole planters fled St.-Domingue, starting in the Fall of 1803 with the uprisings that eventually lead to the founding of Haiti in 1804 (Darrel Meadows 2000).
4. Examples of an older, sentimental literature on the émigrés: Childs, Wiener.
6. Talleyrand was a rare French émigré to profit from American real estate adventures as well documented in Nussbaum. See “Moreau de St. Méry,” in Soboul 766-767.

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