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ÉDOUARD LABOULAYE AND THE STATUE OF LIBERTY: FORGING THE DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE

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From the Treaty of Paris to Barack Obama's "bonjour" at the end of his first press conference, the United States and France have cast a friendship that has been at the heart of the democratic experience. The eminent French Historian, René Rémond, has outlined the three Frenchmen who, alongside the many great Americans, from Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Jefferson, were dedicated to this enduring friendship. From the 1770s to the 1830s, Franco-American relations were represented in France by the Marquis de Lafayette, the symbol of the France's direct support for the birth of the American Republic in the War of Independence. During the 1830s and 1840s, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840) generated a French fascination with the nature of political participation in a stable American democracy. It was then Édouard Laboulaye who began his courses on the American constitution at the illustrious *Collège de France* in 1849 and whose dedication to American democracy was finally realized through the towering achievement of the Statue of Liberty in 1886⁽¹⁾. Like his predecessors Lafayette and Tocqueville, Laboulaye was a great observer and supporter of American democracy. Lafayette had fought alongside Washington during the Revolutionary War, Tocqueville had revealed the potent power of democratic participation, and Laboulaye uncovered the constitutional heritage of the United States for changing democracies. "May [my] voice at least find echoes in the country of Lafayette, and prove to the United States that France has always remained faithful to America and to Liberty."⁽²⁾ This dedication to defending, observing and learning from American democracy

spanned over 100 years and each was a testimony to the common democratic project driving these two nations.

But if the Statue of Liberty remains the most visible testimony to the enduring friendship between these two democracies; a symbol not only of American democracy, but of the shared values that have driven that experience and the generosity that has nourished it, the individual at the heart of its creation is far less well-known. Édouard Laboulaye, Professor of Comparative Law, who specialized in American Constitutional History was, along with the sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, the key figure responsible for the Statue of Liberty as he used his position at the head of France's illustrious *Collège de France* (established in 1530) to bring forth a political symbol which remains to this day.

Laboulaye was born in 1811 and had an exemplary career rising to the highest academic and political positions in France. After an early career focusing on Ancient History, he was appointed to the *Collège de France* in 1849. The independence of the *Collège de France* from the French University system, and the intellectual freedom that has always been the institution's mark, allowed Laboulaye to develop a highly original fascination for the United States. His study of the United States was original in that until 1848, the chronological limit for all history courses in France was 1789 and in 1848 the limit was extended to 1814.⁽³⁾ Thus until the late 1840s, the United States were not even on the scholarly program. But, as soon as he was nominated to his position at the *Collège de France*,



Laboulaye took advantage of the liberty that the institution offered to begin teaching a subject that he was convinced was of the utmost importance for a French nation which had also been among the founders of the democratic experience at the end of the eighteenth century. “Once appointed professor, my duty was clear. It was to make America known to France,” he later remembered.⁽⁴⁾

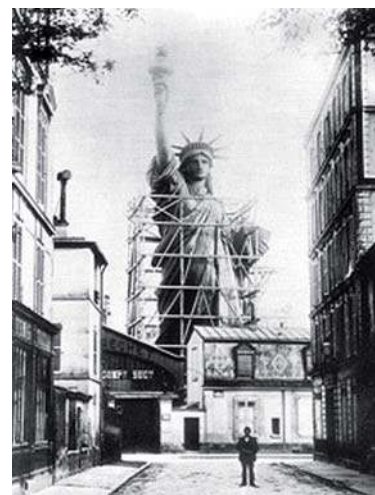
His first class at the *Collège de France* was entitled, “De la Constitution américaine et l'utilité de son étude” and was subsequently published as the first chapter of his *Histoire des Etats-Unis*. Through these efforts, Laboulaye was among the first French scholars to make a career of studying the United States. He generated a new interest in the United States as he attracted an unprecedented number of students to his classes in the 1860s. As his fame grew, Americans in Paris joined the French students and general public to hear his lectures - the seminar rooms of the *Collège de France* were often so full that attendees were forced to stand or wait outside. Laboulaye was responsible for transforming American history and politics into a fascinating subject in mid-nineteenth-century France.

Throughout the 1860s, he wrote on American history and especially the history of its constitution. Laboulaye was in contact with many of the most prominent American scholars of the period such as George Bancroft, Francis Lieber, William Channing, and Horace Mann. While he never actually visited the U.S. his imagination brought him to the shores of New England in one of his most widely read works during this period, the highly original, *Paris in America*. Inspired by Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* – Laboulaye was a tremendous reader of Montesquieu and played a key role in revealing Montesquieu's influence on the American Founding Fathers – the story recounts the imaginary voyage of a Parisian to New England. The work was a thinly veiled critique of French and Parisian politics and society from an American perspective. During these years, he received many honorary degrees from American

institutions such as Harvard University on July 20, 1864. He was also commended by the Loyal National League of New York. Upon reception of this award, he responded to Francis Lieber, the esteemed president of the League: “I have received many diplomas and degrees from academies and universities in my life but no testimony of esteem pleases or honors me more than the one that the Union League has just addressed to me. I will keep it as a legacy for my children so that they may know that the first article of faith for a Frenchman is to love France and the second is to love America.”⁽⁵⁾

Laboulaye was one of the greatest nineteenth-century historians of the American constitution. Like many of his counterparts, Laboulaye was convinced that France's dialectic between revolution and reaction could be brought to an end by a constitution founded on principles similar to those of the United States. Only such a written constitution, he argued, could offer an example for the French. At a moment when the democratic project was evolving by leaps and bounds in the nineteenth century with expanded citizenship and new forms of state power, Laboulaye offered a vision of American democracy which he hoped could serve as a potential model for French democracy. In 1865, Laboulaye hoped to use his notoriety at the *Collège de France* to build projects for the public. He therefore created the Franklin Society, an association built on the original project of Benjamin Franklin's idea of subscription libraries.

But Laboulaye was not content with these public activities. The project for the Statue of Liberty had its origins in a famous dinner at Laboulaye's house in Versailles in 1865. The timing of this dinner was no accident, for the Statue of Liberty was not only designed to celebrate the common democratic experience of France and the United States, it was also designed to commemorate the end of the Civil War and the hope for a new age of American democracy. “This monument to independence will be executed in common by the two nations, joined together in this fraternal work as they once were to achieve independence. We



Illustrations:

p. 55: portrait of Édouard Laboulaye, Collège de France.

p. 55 to 57: 'Liberty illuminating the world' by Auguste Bartholdi, situated in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, is the bronze model that was used for the statue in New York. Pictures taken in the Jardin d'Acclimation to which the statue was temporarily moved in April-May 2009 for the event 'Americans in Paris'.

Archive images: p. 56: the Statue of Liberty under construction, rue de Chazelles in Paris in 1885, before being transported to New York. © D.R.

p. 57: the Statue of Liberty in the Gaget-Gauthier studios, rue de Chazelles, by Victor Dargaud, XIX century, © CAG of the Carnavalet Museum, Paris.



will thus affirm by an enduring souvenir, the friendship; between the two nations that was sealed in a former time by the bloodshed of our fathers.”⁽⁶⁾ From the beginning, the Statue of Liberty was to attest to the common project that had begun with Lafayette during the War for Independence and been renewed every step of the nineteenth century. Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi who was already convinced by the project of a colossal statue saw this work as a material manifestation of Laboulaye’s vision of American democracy: “I have reread and am still rereading your works on the subject ‘liberty,’ and I hope to honor your friendship, which will subsidize me. I will endeavor to glorify the Republic and liberty over there.”⁽⁷⁾

While the project faltered due to the chaotic political situation at the end of the Second Empire and beginning of the Third Republic, the project was initiated once again by Laboulaye when he created the *Comité de l’Union Franco-Américaine* in 1875 to raise funds. Here, he brought together the families of those who had incarnated the Franco-American friendship. On the committee were the descendents of the prominent Frenchmen who had participated in the American Revolution, Lafayette, Rochambeau and Noailles as well as Alexis de Tocqueville’s brother. These figures incarnated the shared ideals that were to be cast in the Statue of Liberty. Laboulaye’s ambition was tremendous. France had just been sorely defeated in the Franco-Prussian War, had lost the large part of two of its wealthiest areas, Alsace and Lorraine, to Germany and was also forced to pay reparations to Germany throughout the early 1870s. As soon as the reparations were paid, Laboulaye set out on a fundraising campaign attempting to convince the French that they should participate in this gift to the United States and offer a testament to their common democratic vision. The initial goal was to raise

enough funds by 1876 in time to announce the project for the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Economic difficulties and the lack of a strong philanthropic tradition in France made fundraising in this context a Herculean task. The sums were only gathered in 1880 through Laboulaye’s perseverance. The project was thus solidified and the construction site near the *Arc de Triomphe* became a great tourist attraction. President Grant, one of many American visitors to the workshop, sent a letter of support to Laboulaye after his visit in 1877. Laboulaye responded to the president: “Votre visite a été une sorte de consécration du monument qui doit attester aux générations les plus lointaines l’amitié de la France et des Etats-Unis.”⁽⁸⁾

The image of “Liberty Enlightening the World” is drawn from a shared ideal, held by both Laboulaye and nineteenth-century American historians, that democracy is a shared vision. One of the founders of American history, and friend of Laboulaye, George Bancroft opened his own monumental multi-volume history of the United States with the statement: “The United States of America constitute an essential portion of a great political system, embracing all the civilized nations of the earth.”⁽⁹⁾ Laboulaye concurred when he argued for “studying the American Constitution, in detail, so as to penetrate its true character, to appreciate its spirit not only for purely speculative purposes, but in order to draw from it useful lessons.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Like Bancroft’s claim for a “great political system”, Laboulaye’s dedication to learning from the American model and his generosity in attesting to the shared experiment of democratic governance by supporting the Statue of Liberty suggested that neither Europe nor the United States could claim a monopoly on democratic experience. Then, as today, democracy was a common project to be built in concert. ■



1. René Rémond, *Les Etats-Unis devant l’opinion française, 1815-1852*, Paris, PUF, 1962.

2. E. Laboulaye, “Pourquoi le Nord ne peut accepter la séparation”, in E. Laboulaye, *L’État et ses limites*, p. 391, cited by Walter Dennis Gray, *Interpreting American Democracy in France: the Career of Édouard Laboulaye, 1811-1883*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1994, p. 83.

3. See Gray, p. 56.

4. E. Laboulaye, *Histoire des Etats-Unis, Première époque*, Preface, p. IV. (Cf. W. D. Gray, op. cit., p. 55).

5. Letter by E. Laboulaye to Francis Lieber, president of the Loyal National League of New York, Paris, 31 July 1863 (Correspondance of E. Laboulaye, Lieber Papers, Huntington Library). Cf. Walter Gray, op. cit., p. 86.

6. W. D. Gray, op. cit., p. 114.

7. Ibid, p. 129. (Correspondance of Laboulaye, Bartholdi to Laboulaye, Colmar, 8 May 1871).

8. Ibid, p. 132.

9. George Bancroft, *A History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent* (Boston: Little, Brown and company, 1855), p. I.

10. Ibid, p. 58. (“Extrait de la Leçon inaugurale de Laboulaye au Collège de France, 4 déc 1849”, in De la constitution américaine et de l’utilité de son étude : discours prononcé, le 4 décembre 1849, à l’ouverture du cours de législation comparée, M. Édouard Laboulaye, Paris, impr. de Hennuyer, 1850.)