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Francesca Genesio

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Philip Mazzei, the Pragmatic Propagandist

Francesca Genesio Aix Marseille Université, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France

When I embarked on the fascinating project of discovering Philip Mazzei, I was presented with the four volumes of his *Recherches Historiques et Politiques sur les Etats-Unis de l'Amérique Septentrionale*, which constitute his most ambitious work. Written in Italian between 1785 and 1787 during Mazzei's second stay in Paris and translated into French for publication in 1788¹, the *Recherches* were originally intended as a refutation of Mably's *Observations sur le gouvernement et les loix des Etats-Unis d'Amérique* (1784) which Mazzei had already attacked in an earlier essay criticizing the Abbé's lack of familiarity with all things American². Mably had never been to America but was writing about the nascent republic's history and constitutional laws with an air of authority that Mazzei had trouble accepting. His similar criticism of Raynal's analysis of American history and institutions in his *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* brought Mazzei to extend his refutation to the work of the second Abbot as well. The necessity of 'setting the record straight' so as to provide European readers with what he believed to be an accurate account of America's call for freedom expanded the work to include another two volumes dedicated to retracing the history of colonial America from its establishment to independence, and to discussing the state of affairs in contemporary American society by addressing a number of key issues such as paper money, national debt, commerce, immigration, slavery, the new Federal Constitution etc³.

As I tried to define my approach towards the study of Mazzei's work and influence, it appeared natural for me to begin with the *Recherches*, looking at how they relate to Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*; at how they fit in with the issue of the "Dispute of the New World" theorized by Gerbi⁴; at how they may have contributed to explain Mazzei's vision of "republicanism", seemingly close to the spirit of "1776"; and finally at how, through them, Mazzei may have played a role in the flow of revolutionary ideas across the "Atlantic Space" as theorized by scholars like Godechot, Palmer, Bailyn, Wood and Polasky⁵.

¹ Filippo Mazzei, *Recherches Historiques et Politiques sur les Etats-Unis de l'Amérique septentrionale* (Paris : Froullé, 1788). Mazzei entrusted the translation of his *Recherches* to Louis Joseph Faure, a lawyer from Normandy. In his *Memorie della vita e delle peregrinazioni del Fiorentino Filippo Mazzei*, ed. Alberto Aquarone (Milano: Marzorati, 1970) 307, he recalls that Sophie Condorcet was not satisfied with the translation and asked Mazzei to allow her to rework on some chapters with her husband. The original Italian manuscript was never published and has been lost.

² In a letter to James Madison, Mazzei mentions having written a confutation of Mably's thinking for the press, but the document is not available. Filippo Mazzei, "To James Madison," 14 August 1786, document 264 of *Philip Mazzei: Selected Writings and Correspondence*, ed. Margherita Marchione, vol.1 (Prato: Edizioni del Palazzo, 1983) 530. Mazzei retraces the genesis of his refutations of Mably in his *Memorie* as well. Mazzei, *Memorie* 302-305.

³ Mazzei, *Recherches*, vol. 4.

⁴ Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750-1900*, trans. Jeremy Moyle (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973).

⁵ Jacques Léon Godechot, *Les révolutions (1770-1799)*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963) ; Robert R. Palmer and David Armitage, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014); Bernard Bailyn. *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Janet Polasky, *Revolutions without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).

Having advanced in my research, I find that my approach has shifted, mostly owing to the realization that while the *Recherches* remain Mazzei's most important work, the essence of the man and his contribution to the spread of ideas to and from America or Europe cannot be understood by focusing on the *Recherches* alone. This is because, more than a theorist, Mazzei was actually a propagandist, which means that the intrinsic value of any one of his writings is inferior to the cumulative worth of his lifelong undertakings to defend and promote both the American cause and his own. To say it differently, there is both more and less to Mazzei than one might initially suspect. He is at once less of an original thinker and philosopher, and more of an impressively dedicated communicator; a worker ant or spider, tirelessly spinning a web of international connections across the Atlantic and using those ties in a very practical way both to advocate the political cause he had embraced upon settling in Virginia and to further his own position as a credible businessman, revolutionary patriot, intellectual, political analyst and diplomat.

Using the prism of Mazzei as a "pragmatic propagandist", I therefore plan to widen the scope of my research to Mazzei's other writings, consisting of numerous gazette articles (often translated in different languages), of pamphlets and essays on different topics, as well as of his massive correspondence with notables on both sides of the Atlantic. In his later years, Mazzei also wrote his memoirs (in Italian), providing us with an autobiographical restaging of his life that can be confronted and compared with the more immediate and piecemeal staging of his correspondence, conveniently collected and published chronologically by Margherita Marchione in the 3 volumes of her *Philip Mazzei: Selected Writings and Correspondence*⁶. Looking at these document, what I propose to do is offer three layers of analysis and interpretation.

The first layer focuses on Mazzei's contribution to the spread of enlightenment ideas as a "pragmatic propagandist". In this section, I will argue that Mazzei was more of an Americanist than a universalist, meaning that his efforts at propaganda were aimed at upholding the American cause at different stages of its development rather than supporting revolutionary ideology at large. This will call attention to Mazzei's preference for constitutional monarchy in Europe at the same time as he embraced a zealously republican stance in America. It will also lead me to draw a parallel with the other great "citizen of the world" of his time, Thomas Paine, whose attachment to the values advocated in his *Rights of Man* knew no borders or frontiers.

A second level of analysis calls attention to Mazzei's pragmatic furthering of his own position in the world. Associated with propaganda for the American cause is Mazzei's propaganda of "self", dictated by the necessity of establishing his credibility in the intellectual and diplomatic circles that his modest birth had not intended he should ever evolve in. Mazzei's daily struggle for recognition on the revolutionary stage of the Atlantic world is also a daily struggle for economic and social survival, which gives the observer a precious insight into the experience of lived modernity from the point of view of an XVIIIth century 'self-made' diplomat.

A third more tentative reading will try to look at the limits of Mazzei's successful integration into the young republic's political élite, underscoring his inability to move *beyond* the status of propagandist. While Mazzei's own abilities could be partly at stake, it appears from several elements of his correspondence that the Florentine may have hit a sort of nativist glass ceiling, preventing him from occupying any position of diplomatic significance because of his foreign birth and status. One could then be tempted to question the extent of the United States' commitment to the very principles of

⁶ Marchione's collection, cited above, is non-exhaustive, but she also compiled a more exhaustive microform edition of Mazzei's writings Margherita Marchione and Barbara Oberg, *Philip Mazzei: The Comprehensive Microform Edition of His Papers, 1730-1816: Guide and Index* (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus International Publications, 1982).

equality, inclusion and social mobility which people like Mazzei had ironically voiced their admiration for.

For the purpose of today's paper, I will focus on the first level of analysis, trying to define the notion of "pragmatic propagandist" and illustrate its relevance as a central narrative thread in Mazzei's life and works. I will then present my preliminary ideas for the second and third levels of analysis, for which my research is still work in progress.

The idea of presenting Mazzei as a propagandist is not new, and I certainly cannot claim ownership of it. Most scholars having dedicated some time to Mazzei have come to similar conclusions, expressed in different ways. In his book *Les Révolutions*, Godechot refers to Mazzei as one of the important European propagandists who, like La Fayette and Kosciusko, participated in the War of Independence, later returning to Europe to advocate the American cause⁷. In her 1965 publication *Tra Riformismo Illuminato e Dispotismo Napoleonico*, Sara Tognetti Burigana described Mazzei as a "knowledgeable organizer of an intense propaganda campaign in favor of the United States of America"⁸. Similarly, in the introduction to her monumental edition of Mazzei's selected writings, Margherita Marchione writes, "Propaganda written from different points of view was an important part of the prerevolutionary debate, and Mazzei's participation cannot be ignored." She later adds, "Throughout the war and the peace negotiations Mazzei was a propagandist and a pamphleteer, and his exposition and translation of American ideals for a wide European readership was a contributing factor to the success of the American cause".

As such, Mazzei is presented as being "part of [the] process" of transmission of American ideals to Europe⁹. The notion of Mazzei as a translator or interpreter of the American revolutionary experience for European audiences is also elaborated by Edoardo Tortarolo in his book *Illuminismo e Rivoluzioni. Biografia politica di Filippo Mazzei*. Tortarolo addresses the issue again in a recently published article entitled "Filippo Mazzei e la costruzione della memoria rivoluzionaria," in which he argues that one of Mazzei's main achievements was his hand in contributing to the multifaceted construction of the 18th century revolutionary narrative¹⁰.

Mazzei's support for the American cause is strongly ideological. Having left his native Tuscany at an early age, the former Florentine physician established himself in London from 1756 to 1772, attracted by the aura of liberty supposedly guaranteed by the English constitution. If we are to believe Mazzei's retrospective autobiography, the illusion was short-lived, and Mazzei soon came to consider English society and institutions as falling short of their reputation. In considering whether to remain in England or not, Mazzei noted, "I hesitated to set up my own house because I was not certain I wanted to settle in England. I had travelled there with the idea that I would find perfect liberty, because that was the opinion people had of it in Florence, fostered also by the accounts of many English travelers (since

⁷ « Les européens qui prirent part à la guerre d'Indépendance se firent, à leur retour, des agents de propagande : La Fayette, Kosciusko, Filippo Mazzei, Italien établi en Virginie, plus tard chargé de mission en Toscane, puis en Pologne. » Godechot 122.

⁸ "...savio organizzatore d'una intensa campagna di propaganda in favore degli Stati Uniti d'America." Sara Tognetti Burigana, *Tra riformismo illuminato e dispotismo napoleonico: esperienze del « cittadino americano » Filippo Mazzei* (Ed. di Storia e Letteratura, 1965) 31. My translation.

⁹ Marchione, xx-xxii.

¹⁰ Edoardo Tortarolo, *Illuminismo e rivoluzioni biografia politica di Filippo Mazzei* (Milano: F. Angeli, 1986); also Edoardo Tortarolo, "Filippo Mazzei e la costruzione della memoria rivoluzionaria," in Renato Pasta (ed.), *Agli Albori delle Democrazie Moderne: Filippo Mazzei 1730-1816* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2018) 3-20.

at the time only the wealthiest and most educated people travelled, often remaining in Florence longer than in any other part of Italy)¹¹.”

Early criticism in his *Memorie* addresses issues such as impressment and excessive concentration of powers in the hands of the government. On the subject of impressment, Mazzei indignantly writes: “In that country, where it is said that everybody enjoys full freedom, sailors are forcefully taken from merchant ships (when war preparations are being made, and for the duration of the war) and from any other place, including from their wives’ sides in their own beds, and often other people who have never been at sea are also taken¹².” On arbitrary power and the absence of checks on the government Mazzei writes,

Not long after my arrival I learnt that the government enjoyed a plurality of voices in both houses of Parliament, and I ascertained that myself by going to listen to the debates several times. This reality was so well established that the opposition party was universally known as *the minority*¹³.

While news of a certain Lord Ferres’ sentencing to death for the murder of one of his servants convinced Mazzei to stay by proving that “personal liberty” in England was ultimately well-established¹⁴, Wilkes’ eviction from parliament in 1769 persuaded him of the opposite. Wilkes, a member of parliament and journalist, openly supportive of the American cause, had written a satirical article about Lord Bute, former Prime Minister and favorite of George III’s and his mother’s. Excluded from participating in the next election in the Westminster constituency he had previously held, he was elected in Middlesex, where he enjoyed popular support as a radical. To Mazzei’s dismay, when parliament was called into session it declared Wilkes’ election null and void, depriving Middlesex citizens of their right to free representation. According to Mazzei, the tyrannical dismissal was akin to delving “a fatal blow to the solid and sacrosanct fundamental law of a free country, which is the people’s perfect freedom to choose their representatives¹⁵.” Considering the parliament’s actions as an arbitrary modification of constitutional safeguards, he commented, “There is no constitution, and it has no stable basis, if men elected to exercise ordinary legislative functions for a given time, can claim the right to cancel, or alter a fundamental law¹⁶.”

Mazzei’s support for the American cause is therefore built largely *in opposition* to the British model, which the Florentine grew to despise, accusing it of being elitist, despotic and hypocritical. The

¹¹ Mazzei, *Memorie* 115.

¹² Mazzei, *Memorie* 112. My translation. “In quel paese, dove si dice che ognuno vi gode un’intiera libertà, si prendono per forza (quando si fanno I preparative per la Guerra e finché dura) I marinara dei bastimenti mercantile, e da qualunque altro luogo, spesso d’accanto alle loro mogli nel proprio letto, e non di rado anche persone, che non sonstate mai sul mare.”

¹³ Mazzei, *Memorie* 116. « Non molto dopo il moi arrivo intesi che la pluralità dei voti in ambedue le camere del parlamento era alla disposizione del governo, e me ne assicurai essendo andato più volte a sentirne le discussioni. Questo era tanto noto, che il partito opposto si chiamava universalmente *the minority, la minorità*.”

¹⁴ Mazzei, *Memorie* 116. Lord Ferres had been found guilty of the murder of one of his servants by a jury of his peers. Irrespective of class differences, he had been sentenced to death. Mazzei reflects that in any other European country, an aristocrat guilty of murdering a simple servant would have received a much lighter penalty, showing that equality of basic rights to life and liberty was better respected in Britain than elsewhere. “Riflettendo allora, che nel maggior numero degli Stati europei un gran signore, che avesse commesso l’istesso delitto sarebbe stato relegato per qualche tempo a una sua villa, ciò m’indusse a far delle riflessioni sulla libertà personale, e veddi che in Inghilterra era stabilita su basi anche più solide che in Olanda”. “La libertà personale per un individuo è di molto maggior’ importanza della pubblica, onde mi determinai a restare, e presi casa.”

¹⁵ Mazzei, *Memorie* 192. My translation. “...un colpo mortale alla solida e sacrosanta legge fondamentale d’un paese libero, che è la perfetta libertà nell’elezione dei rappresentanti del popolo.”

¹⁶ Mazzei, *Memorie* 192. The theme of the need to separate ordinary legislative from constitutive powers will be a recurrent one in Mazzei’s writings.

link of cause and effect is made explicit in the *Memorie*, where, following the narrative of the Wilkes incident, Mazzei says he resolved to move to America.

It had been some time already since my new American friends, and especially Dr. Franklin and Mr. Thomas Adams, had suggested I should go and live among them. I was worried that their government might be a bad copy of the English one, and consequently that the bases of freedom would be even looser; but both Franklin and Adams demonstrated to me that there was no aristocracy; that the people were not blinded by the splendor of the throne; that every family man could cast his vote in elections and could be elected; that they had their municipal laws; and that they had only adopted those English laws that suited them¹⁷.

As early as April 1772, in his correspondence with Thomas Adams, Mazzei was already referring to Virginia as “our” country¹⁸, despite never having set foot on the American soil. Mazzei’s embracing of his American identity was therefore profoundly ideological, in a way that makes me think of De Crèvecoeur’s famous words: “Americans were once scattered all over Europe¹⁹”. There is a measure of secular predestination in these words, suggesting that not everybody in Europe had the potential of becoming American, and that those who did and felt the “calling” were attracted by the desire of participating in the experiment of building a new society, grounded in enlightenment values of liberty and equality. Mazzei’s claim to American nationality rested in his wholehearted adherence to this ideal. Again quoting de Crèvecoeur, “*He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds²⁰.”

Somewhat ironically, the statement applies more to Mazzei than to its author. De Crèvecoeur’s reluctance to embrace the cause of American independence is well known. Mazzei, on the contrary, embraced it passionately and profoundly, becoming one of its most ardent naturalized advocates, both in Virginia, where he settled, and abroad.

Mazzei’s promulgation of the American cause can be divided into several phases, three of which stand out most clearly as being directly linked with the different stages of the revolutionary struggle. The first phase is that of his stay in Virginia from 1773-1779, coinciding with the build-up of tensions between Britain and the Colonies and with the early years of the war. In a way, these can be seen as politically formative years for the Florentine, who – having been introduced to the cream of Virginian society by way of his commercial endeavour to introduce Italian silk, wine and olives into North America – was immersed in revolutionary talk. His friends and interlocutors included Jefferson, Madison, Washington, George Mason, John Page, Patrick Henry, John Hancock, John Bannister, John Blair, Payton and Edmund Randolph, Benjamin Harrison etc. Unsurprisingly, Mazzei’s commercial and agricultural venture dwindled and his political implication grew. He was elected to local government and parish positions, where he took care of the poor. Most importantly, however, he started writing numerous essays, letters and newspaper articles promoting American independence and expressing his

¹⁷ Mazzei, *Memorie* 192. “Era già da tempo che i miei nuovi amici Americani, specialmente il dott. Franklin e il sig. Tommaso Adams, mi consigliavano d’andare a viver tra loro. Io dubitavo che il loro governo fosse una cattiva copia dell’inglese, e conseguentemente che le basi della libertà fossero ancora meno solide: ma tanto Franklin che Adams mi dimostrarono, che non vi era aristocrazia; che il popolo non aveva la vista abbagliata dallo splendor del trono; che ogni capo famiglia dava il voto per l’elezioni e poteva esser eletto; che avevano le loro leggi municipali; e che dalle leggi inglesi avevano adottate quelle sole, che lor convenivano.”

¹⁸ Filippo Mazzei, “To Thomas Adams,” 4 April 1772, document 22 of *Philip Mazzei: Selected Writings and Correspondence*, ed. Margherita Marchione, vol.1 (Prato: Edizioni del Palazzo, 1983) 37.

¹⁹ J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from An American Farmer*, ed. Warren Barton Blake (Mineola : Dover, 2005) 26.

²⁰ Crèvecoeur, *Letters* 26.

criticism and disavowal of everything British: from claims to sovereignty over the colonies, to affirmations of the superiority of their constitution.

Mazzei's propaganda during this first phase of the war looked both inwards and outwards, trying to mobilize support for the cause both domestically and abroad. In words very similar to Thomas Paine's, for example, Mazzei addressed his "dear fellow citizens" as follows:

In order to achieve our end ... we must discuss man's natural rights and the grounds of a free government. Such a discussion will clearly show us that the British government has never been free at the peak of its perfection, and that our own was nothing more than a bad copy of it, with in addition such handicaps as to render it barely above a state of slavery.

Rather than as a theorist and a thinker, Mazzei presents himself as a "translator" or interpreter of revolutionary ideas for the benefit of the common man:

This matter has been so amply treated by several prestigious writers that I seek no other merit than that of treating it in familiar and simple forms in order to be easily understood. Practitioners of fine writing will forgive me. They need no one to write for them. I write for people who, endowed with good common sense, did not acquire book learning²¹.

Similar articles and letters were written for foreign audiences, mostly Italian, and sent to Tuscan newspapers like *Notizie del Mondo* and *Gazzetta Universale* in an early effort to counterbalance English anti-American propaganda²². Mazzei's desire was to influence and inform the world about the American endeavour. In sending articles about America across the ocean, Mazzei was literally translating the revolution into Italian and interpreting it for Tuscan audiences, his main target being Peter Leopold I, Grand Duke of Tuscany (Later known as Leopold II upon succeeding to Joseph II as Emperor). In 1776, Mazzei translated a copy of the *Declaration of Independence* and sent it to the Tuscan Gazettes, again wishing to spread the ideals of the revolution to his native country.

Mazzei's zeal in defending the American cause from Virginia earned him the opportunity of advocating it from abroad during the second phase of the war and of his efforts as a propagandist. In 1779, the sometimes self-proclaimed "citizen of the world" was entrusted with an official commission to act as Virginia's agent in Europe, with the objectives of securing a loan to support the war effort and of purchasing needed supplies for the militia. While Mazzei's diplomatic mission failed miserably owing to a series of unfavourable circumstances, his time in Europe was spent tirelessly lobbying both individuals and governments in favour of the nascent states. Again, Mazzei wrote several letters and pamphlets to that avail, addressing them to the key government figures he knew such as Peter Leopold of Tuscany, but also to those he did not know yet, such the French foreign minister, the Count de Vergennes.

The chief aims of these writings were to convince European leaders that the American states had the capacity to win the war if adequately financed and supported by foreign loans and military help. To do so, Mazzei emphasized the solidity of the American economy, in spite of temporary problems with paper money. Looking at the longer term, Mazzei was also trying to establish profitable commercial partnerships with Europe, arguing that European powers would benefit from early agreements with America that would end up supplanting traditional trading ties with England if undertaken before the war's end.

To Peter Leopold, Mazzei wrote no less than 11 letters in which he very insistently but unsuccessfully tried to influence the Grand Duke's opinion of the Anglo-American struggle in favour

²¹ Filippo Mazzei, "Fragments published on the principles of the American Revolution by a Citizen of Virginia," 1774-1775, document 40 in Margherita Marchione, *Philip Mazzei: Selected Writings and Correspondence*, ed. Margherita Marchione, vol. I (Prato: Edizioni del Palazzo, 1983) 68. Translation of the original by Marchione.

²² Marchione, xx-xxi.

of the American States by giving him intelligence of overseas events and accurately predicting the outcome of battles and key negotiations. The sovereign remained unimpressed. Reading Mazzei's letters to the Grand Duke one after the other, one quickly notices Mazzei's growing frustration at Leopold's indifference, which betrayed his position as an anglophile. In his *Memorie*, Mazzei later recalls

... I wrote the Grand Duke my 11th and last letter on March 16, 1783 [...] no longer in the hope of producing any effect, but so as not to have to blame myself for not making every possible effort to produce one, and also to vent my feelings a little regarding the silly and childish behaviour shown me by that sovereign, whose character (viewed too favourably by various individuals of merit in Tuscany) came to be perfectly and universally known in Germany, as soon as he came into possession of the House of Austria²³.

In 1781, even before leaving Florence to return to France and later to Virginia, Mazzei had already attempted to maximize the impact of his propagandist writings by sending them to the French foreign ministry in an unsolicited letter to Vergennes. Enclosed in the letter were copies of four of his political pamphlets as well as of a letter to his friend Marquis Caracciolo, who had served as Neapolitan Ambassador to France and was then Viceroy of Sicily. The pamphlets enclosed were his "Observations of a Citizen of the World in Answer to an American", written from Virginia in 1776 for the Grand Duke of Tuscany; his "Reasons why the American States cannot be accused of having rebelled" (1781) – aimed at reassuring European monarchs that the American revolution could not be reproduced in Europe; his "Reflections tending to predict the outcome of the present war" (April 1781), and an essay composed specifically for Vergennes entitled "Arguments purposing to show by what means France could derive the greatest and most permanent benefits from the current American Revolution". As I would like to argue in a second part of my thesis, aside from promoting the American cause, these different writings clearly served the purpose of establishing Mazzei's credentials as a diplomat as well, thereby furthering his personal ambitions.

The third phase of Mazzei's propaganda is associated with his second stay in Europe after the end of the war. Having returned to Europe on private business after a short stay in Virginia from 1783 to 1785, Mazzei found himself in Paris, hoping to obtain a diplomatic posting on account of Congress, and spending his time among the liberal intellectuals and aristocrats of the time. This third phase of propaganda corresponds with the writing of his *Recherches*, which he undertook between 1785 and 1788, upon realizing that Europeans had a superficial and piecemeal understanding of American society and institutions, as well as of the causes that had led to the war. After encouraging Americans to rebel while in Virginia and seeking support for the rebellion abroad during his first trip to Europe, Mazzei was therefore returning to the topic of the promotion of the American ideal by offering a rereading of the country's history in the aftermath of its revolution and completing it with an empirical study of the nascent republic's contemporary realities and challenges. Written for a readership of Europeans, Mazzei's writing of the *Recherches* was another attempt at translating the American experience for people on the other side of the Atlantic. In doing so, however, Mazzei was not unambiguously proposing the American model as one to be followed in a European context. Much the opposite, he showed significant reservations in admitting that the model of the American revolution could be transferred to Europe, raising a number of fundamental questions regarding Mazzei's status both as a revolutionary and as a "universalist" enlightenment thinker, which introduces the concept of pragmatism that I referred to in my title.

²³ Mazzei, *Memorie* 276. My translation. "[...] scrissi al granduca Leopoldo l'11ma e ultima lettera il 16 marzo 1783 coll'aggiunta del foglio, che principia: Filippo Mazzei era stato, ecc., non più colla speranza che producesse alcuno effetto, ma per non potermi rimproverare di non aver fatto tutti i miei sforzi per produrlo, come pure per isfogarmi un poco, riguardo allo sciocco e pueril contegno tenuto meco da quel sovrano, il cui carattere (troppo vantaggiosamente interpretato da vari soggetti di merito in Toscana) fu perfettamente ed universalmente conosciuto in Germania, subito che giunse al possesso dei beni della casa d'Austria."

Mazzei was not just a propagandist. He appears to me as a “pragmatic propagandist”, because rather than embarking on a systematic, universal defense of republican principles, his political writings, for the most part remain centered on the advocacy of the American cause. In his 1989 article on Mazzei, Jack P. Greene concludes, “With Franklin and Crèvecoeur, among many others, Mazzei was thus an early exponent of the concept of American exceptionalism,” pointing out that “... his primary message to Europeans about America was that the American republics were different from anything encompassed within their experience²⁴.”

The reference to exceptionalism needs to be qualified and defined. One has a tendency to associate the idea to early images of the “city upon the hill,” but as Tortarolo makes clear in his recent article, there is no trace of religious exceptionalism in Mazzei’s writings: “For Mazzei, like for Jefferson, colonial identity is civil, secular. There is no mention of the city upon the hill, nor of any enactment of a providential mission to influence history by divine will”²⁵. Rather, the exceptionality can be found in the particular territorial, cultural and historical specificities that set the North American colonies - and later states - apart from any other country in Europe. Again quoting Greene,

What made them different was the extensive space and opportunity they provided for their free inhabitants; the industry and incitement to industry, activity, and schemes of improvement produced by that space and opportunity; the absence of aristocracy and a society organized into legally established ranks; the broad popular base of government, the political enlightenment of the citizenry, the citizenry’s intense preoccupation with the pursuit of domestic happiness; and the laudably small scope of the public realm²⁶.

Nor is this exceptionalism tainted by fanaticism. Mazzei does not depict America as a promised land and joins Franklin in his attempts at dissuading Europeans from perceiving it as such and being tempted to emigrate massively²⁷. In his *Dispute of the New World*, Gerbi describes Mazzei as “a man full of good sense, careful, assured, and as alien to the idealization of America as he is critical of the continent’s slanderers.” Further on, he continues, “... Mazzei shows himself so averse to any Americanistic fanaticism that his own position becomes correspondingly stronger, both in arguing with the critics of the newborn United States and ... with those of the physical nature of the American continent²⁸.” Far from being delirious, Mazzei’s portrait of the United States is grounded in the empiricism of experience (his own!)²⁹. Again, Mazzei’s outlook is pragmatic. To him, American society is not perfect, but engaged in a noble experiment both well worth defending and not easily transferable to any other context in precisely the same shape or form.

This is why Mazzei does not appear to me as a “universalist,” but rather as a careful realist. A non-fanatical “Americanist”. This does not mean he didn’t believe in universal principles of freedom and equality. Much the opposite, the Florentine’s political philosophy is strongly grounded in Enlightenment ideology and Mazzei is a vocal advocate of inalienable rights like freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of representation, freedom of trade, universal suffrage etc. While he militates to promote the spread of these ideals, however, he does not believe them to be equally applicable to every context on the same time-frame without running the risk of disrupting the fabric of

²⁴ Jack P. Greene, “Philip Mazzei: Cultural Broker in America and Europe in the age of Enlightenment and Revolution”, in Jack P. Greene (ed.), *Understanding the American Revolution: Issues and Actors* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995) 309-28.

²⁵ Tortarolo, “Filippo Mazzei,” 8. “Per Mazzei, come per Jefferson, l’identità delle colonie è civile, secolare. Non c’è menzione della città sulla collina, né di una missione provvidenziale in atto nella storia per volontà divina.”

²⁶ Greene, 327.

²⁷ Mazzei, *Recherches*, vol 4, 76-102.

²⁸ Gerbi, 272-3.

²⁹ Gerbi, 272-3.

society. It is this very disruption that makes him particularly critical of the later phases of the French revolution, alienating him from some of his more radical friends like Mr. and Mrs. Condorcet.

Was Mazzei a revolutionary? Not really. Or at least not in every circumstance. In a letter dated January 19th, 1782, Mazzei's lifelong friend Pietro Paolo Celesia wrote him, "Lord Cornwallis Burgoyne at York looks to me like a decisive event for the destiny of North America. I congratulate Your Lordship because I know how much you love republics in that part of the world and monarchies in our Europe. The fact is that the character and talents of the men making up a government are more decisive with reference to its good or bad condition than the fundamental laws of its constitution³⁰." While the tone of Celesia's message is teasing, and the assertion that Mazzei loved monarchies in Europe is an obvious exaggeration, it does highlight the fact that circumstances mattered a lot for Mazzei and that his outlook on social evolution was more reformist than revolutionary.

Even in terms of his narrative of the American revolution, Mazzei appears conservative. In the first book of his *Recherches*, like in his previous pamphlet "Reasons why the American States cannot be accused of having rebelled," Mazzei highlights the fact that the American revolution was not really a revolution at all, but rather a legitimate assertion of the colonial inhabitants' historical right to freedom and self-government. In the opening lines of his "Reasons", one can read, "Of the many and powerful reasons the American States had to oppose the unjust demands of Great Britain, the foremost, strongest, least equivocal, and such as to corroborate all the others, is the right of sovereignty enjoyed since the earliest settlements, which can in no way be disputed³¹." Rather than a rejection of the monarchical model and a subversion of social hierarchies, Mazzei presents the War of Independence as a fight against British usurpation of power in America, for which he blames parliament the most. As such, he echoes previous writings by Franklin and Jefferson; most notably Jefferson's *Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774), which builds a similar case for independence. In highlighting the continuity of the revolution with the American past, Mazzei seems to flirt with Burkean whiggism more than with Paine-like radicalism.

Nowhere is Mazzei's political moderation more apparent than in his attitude towards France in the context of its revolution. Originally enthusiastic about the spread of enlightenment ideas and the questioning of absolutism, Mazzei ended up profoundly disappointed by the radical turn of events in the aftermath of the deposition of the king. In his *Memorie*, one can read "But what was dearest to me at the time was the great cause that was being agitated in France, a favorable outcome of which would surely have brought about the happiness of Europe and probably of humankind in general³²." In a similar hope to Paine's he went as far as predicting the establishment of a supranational community, regulating relations among countries for the purpose of establishing permanent international peace.

There was no longer any doubt, that France, England and the Republic of the United States would convene to have a single currency, a single unit of measure, and of weight; and it was seriously believed that the flail of war could be prevented, by forming a tribunal of deputies of all civilized nations, with the power to settle controversies, and of obliging the different parties to abide by its decisions³³.

³⁰ ³⁰ Pietro Paolo Celesia, "To Filippo Mazzei," 19 January 1782, document 151 in, *Philip Mazzei: Selected Writings and Correspondence*, ed. Margherita Marchione, vol.1 (Prato: Edizioni del Palazzo, 1983) 330-331. In a footnote, Marchione explains that "Cornwallis' capture at Yooktown is compared to Burgoyne's capture at Saratoga four years earlier." 331.

³¹ Filippo Mazzei, "Reasons why the American States cannot be accused of having rebelled", 1781, document 140 in Marchione, 293.

³² Mazzei, *Memorie*, vol. 2, 349. « Ma quel che di più di tutto mi stava a cuore a quell'epoca era la gran causa che si agitava in Francia, il cui buono evento avrebbe sicuramente prodotto la felicità dell'Europa e probabilmente di tutto il genere umano.»

³³ Mazzei, *Memorie* 349. "Non vi era più dubbio, che la Francia, l'Inghilterra e la repubblica degli Stati Uniti convenivano di avere un'istessa moneta, un'istessa misura, e un'istesso peso; e si trattava seriamente d'impedire il

Progress in France, however, was not to be achieved through the forceful deposition of the King, but rather through the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. “You might not know, that the good king Louis XVI himself desired the reforms that were justly being demanded by the nation; reforms which would have established on solid grounds the true greatness and happiness of his successors³⁴.” It was in opposition to the Jacobins that Mazzei joined and helped found the “opposition” *Club de 1789* and was charged with its foreign correspondence. In comparing the two clubs, Mazzei wrote, “The club of the Jacobins tended to ignite fires everywhere, ours to procure unity and calm³⁵.” By 1791, Mazzei had become profoundly disillusioned in the outcome of the revolution and had fallen out with his very close friend Condorcet over the issue of republicanism, his friendship having been replaced by Thomas Paine’s. In an act of desperation over turn events had taken, Mazzei went as far as advocating the political murder of a number of top revolutionaries whom he perceived as particularly dangerous for France, among whom were the Lameth brothers, Barnave, Robespierre, Danton, Desmoulins, Marat, and more surprisingly Dupont, Menou et Noailles...³⁶ Confronted by La Rochefoucauld’s indignation at his suggestion, Mazzei reports to have answered « Voilà la cause de la France, que dis-je de la France! Du monde entier ruiné à jamais ; et chaque goutte de sang que vous épargnez ce soir, doit vous en coûter des barriques. » He then concluded “I left mortified to the extreme and couldn’t think of anything else but leaving France as soon as possible³⁷.”

Mazzei’s radical opposition to the establishment of a republic in France highlights the extent of his intellectual difference from Paine, whom he may also have been personally jealous of. It is interesting to note that while Mazzei entertained a florid correspondence with many of the American revolutionaries of his time, he seemed to have had no direct contact with Paine, whom he most certainly knew and whose criticism on Quakers he had approved seconded in his *Recherches*³⁸. Together with Condorcet, and Achille du Chastellet, Paine had formed *La société Républicaine* in 1791. They had also set up a paper known as *le Républicain*, voicing the radical ideas that Mazzei was opposed to.

In comparing the two “citizens of the world”, one could advance that Paine was a universalist political thinker and an idealist, while Mazzei remained more of a moderate and pragmatic analyst and observer. Paine’s advocacy of freedom in his *Rights of Man*, had no frontiers, either geographical or of circumstance. Mazzei – more of a reformist - thought the opposite and believed that enlightenment ideals had to be applied gradually if they were to succeed over time. In terms of their writing, while Paine contributed major theoretical works of revolutionary literature to the enlightenment legacy, Mazzei, aside from the *Recherches* and his contributions to American constitutional theory³⁹ limited himself to writing pamphlets offering piecemeal practical advice, which he believed could be exported from the American experience. In advancing this, I am referring to essays such as his 1790 “Au peuple français sur les assignats, par un Citoyen des Etats-Unis d’Amérique”, his “Reflections on the evils of Mendicacy”, written in 1782 and published in 1799, his “Reflections on the Nature of Exchange and of

flagello della guerra, formando un tribunale composto di deputati di tutte le nazioni culte, con potere di decidere le controversie, e di obbligar le parti a starsene alla decisione.”

³⁴ Mazzei, *Memorie* 350. “Voi forse non saprete, che il buon luigi XVI bramava egli stesso le riforme giustamente richieste dalla nazione; le quali avrebbero stabilita su fondamenti solidi la vera grandezza e felicità sua e dei suoi successori.”

³⁵ Mazzei, *Memorie* 362. “Il club dei Giacobini tendeva a metter tutto in combustione, il nostro a procurar l’unione e la quiete.”

³⁶ Mazzei, *Memorie* 382.

³⁷ Ibid. “Me n’andai mortificato all’estremo, e non pensai più che a partir di Francia il più presto possibile.”

³⁸ Mazzei, *Recherches*, vol.3, 61-9.

³⁹ Mazzei was particularly interested in constitutional debates. He was one of the main founder of the *Virginia Constitutional Society*. He had also called for constitutional reform in Virginia in 1776 in a pamphlet entitled “Instructions of the Freeholders of Albemarle County to their Delegates in Convention”, which can be found in Marchione, 90-103.

Money” (1803), along with the previously cited pamphlets aimed at encouraging trade and commercial cooperation between the several European states and America.

While sound, Mazzei’s pragmatic advice never really took off. Neither did the *Recherches*, although they did end up landing Mazzei a diplomatic position as the Polish agent in Paris. A few commentators have noted that one of the major contributions of the *Recherches* was that of bringing intellectuals closer together across the Atlantic, as the work contained several essays written by people other than Mazzei, and most notably Turgot and Condorcet. It was by reading Mazzei’s *Recherches* that Madison became acquainted with Condorcet’s ideas for the first time, for example⁴⁰.

Mazzei’s role as a “connecting agent”, or “cultural broker”, as Greene labels him, therefore appears as his major and lifelong contribution, and one that he was naturally good at. In establishing ways of bringing people and ideas together, Mazzei was constantly thinking ahead. Before traveling to Virginia for the first time, for example, he had thought of establishing ties between the major Italian academies (like Bologna) and the *American Philosophical Society*, by sending copies of the *Transactions* of the Philosophical Society to the deans of the Italian institutions. In a letter to Mazzei dated 1773, Sebastiano Canterzani of the Academy of Bologna, wrote “I thank you, Sir, both for the trouble you took to get us the gift and the kindness with which you offer yourself as the intermediary for the correspondence and exchange which in the future may take place between the two Societies⁴¹.” Upon settling in Virginia, besides importing agricultural goods and products, Mazzei also made a point of importing relevant books and political pamphlets, contributing to the spread of Italian political thought in America. It is through Mazzei that Jefferson first came to know Cesare Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishments*, which is one of the earliest works philosophically opposing the idea of the death penalty.

Before returning to Europe for the second time, Mazzei took time to translate the statutes of the *Virginia Constitutional Society*, of which he was a primary founding member, into Italian and French, to keep people on the other side of the Atlantic informed. In a letter to John Blair – president of the *Constitutional Society* - dated May 12th 1785, Mazzei also asks him to propose the admission of foreign honorary members such as La Rochefoucauld, Marquis Beccaria (Milan), Mr. Fontana (Florence) and Mr. Spallanzani (Bologna), again in an effort to keep intellectuals on the two sides of the Atlantic connected⁴².

These are only some examples of the tireless networking efforts that Mazzei engaged in throughout his life, efforts which seem to have contributed in reducing the distance between Transatlantic revolutionary stages.

While looking at the way Mazzei played the role as a “pragmatic propagandist” of the American cause and more generally of enlightenment ideals is one way of understanding the concept, I am also intrigued by the way in which the idiom could be used to explore Mazzei’s life at a more personal level. Shifting points of view from the “macro” sphere to the “micro” one of Mazzei’s experience of modernity, what I’d like to do in the context of my research is also to look at how Mazzei may have used his analytical and communicational skills to ensure his own status and economic survival. Besides furthering the American cause and spreading enlightenment values, Mazzei’s literature also served the more immediate and pragmatic purpose of enabling him to make his way in life, establishing the credibility he needed to be able to evolve in political and social spheres much higher than his own. This bottom-up approach to history, mixing personal narratives with vaster revolutionary ones on both sides of the Atlantic world, appears to me as an interesting one, and one that historians like Janet Polasky

⁴⁰ David Williams, *Condorcet and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 24.

⁴¹ Sebastiano Canterzani, “From Sebastiano Canterzani”, 28 June 1773, document 29 in Marchione, 45.

⁴² Filippo Mazzei, “To John Blair”, 12 May 1785, document 230 in Marchione, 470.

have started exploring. By following the adventures of Mazzei - the man - one can hope to achieve a better understanding both of the workings of XVIII century revolutionary society, where people of lower birth could nurture the hope of making their way up the social ladder, and of their limits. In Mazzei's case, these limits seemed to have applied to American society as well, wherein the Florentine - who called himself a Virginian - ultimately seems to have remained a foreigner, having been refused the honor of a diplomatic posting, thus failing to make it past the status of loyal propagandist.

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