

For a Social Contract that Cares:

Nicolas de Bonneville's *La Bouche de fer* (1790-1791)

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In 1790, Nicolas de Bonneville (1760-1828) and Claude Fauchet (1744-1793) founded in Paris the Cercle Social and reported on its meetings in a short-lived periodical *La Bouche de Fer* (1790-1791).¹ The name came from a letterbox shaped as a lion's mouth set up at the printing press, where citizens could drop off letters. *La Bouche de Fer* captured the activities and politics of the National Assembly in the hectic two years that followed the *Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen). Besides its great interest as a source covering the era's current events, *La Bouche de Fer* deserves attention for its "voices": the public contributions that ranged from letters expressing *vox populi* to emphatic speeches on freedom and Fauchet's exegesis of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. This unusual periodical served as a fourth power, the organ of a progressive think tank to promote social reform and shape public opinion. Having explored Bonneville's rhetoric in an article, I continue to study the periodical as a whole to complement the only existing book on the topic, Gary Kate's *The Cercle Social, the Girondins, and the French Revolution* (1985).²

By shifting the focus from political history to a social history written by and for citizens, I wish to explore how a sense of communal responsibility took shape through caring for and about others. Four priorities emerged in the periodical. First among these was implementing Rousseau's *Contrat social*. Claude Fauchet's detailed, close readings of Rousseau's 1762 text were reprinted and dominate the early issues of *La Bouche de Fer*. The goal was to understand the *Contrat social*, opening a discussion about how its principles could be applied. Fauchet's discourse in many ways served to frame the proposals, concrete and utopian, sent by contributors. Second, *La Bouche de Fer* became a mouthpiece for activist women who wanted to participate in social and cultural rejuvenation as patriot citizens. My paper analyzes Etta Palm d'Aelders's proposal for "une société patriotique de citoyennes, amies de la vérité" (a "Patriotic Society of Female Citizens, Friends of Truth") and the various tasks it aspired to accomplish, in particular: supervising wet nurses who came from the countryside; supervising public education; overseeing the care of indigents. With calls for "secours,"³ "aide," and "assistance" to the young and the weak, the proposal was a powerful and hopeful translation of social-contract language into a practice that cares. I find strong echoes here of Louis-Sébastien Mercier's discussion of the care of orphans, the plight of women and children, and the role of institutions (Les Enfants-Trouvés, l'Hotel-Dieu, la Pitié) in *Le Tableau de Paris* (1781-88) and *Le Nouveau Paris* (1798). Bonneville and Mercier were close friends.

¹ *La Bouche de fer* (1790-91). 7 vols. Paris: Edhis, 1981.

² Fabienne Moore, "The Poetry of the Super-Enlightenment. The Theories and Practices of Cazotte, Chassignon, Mercier, Saint-Martin and Bonneville." *SVEC* 2010: 01 (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation). p.137-166.

La Bouche de Fer also made slave emancipation a priority. It gave voice to the “Amis des Noirs” (“Friends of the Blacks”) and abolitionists. By printing news from England advocating for “la cause des Nègres” and publishing the letters of an “American correspondent” (Claude Milscent) on the topic of slavery, the periodical confronted the issue of rights for free people of color and enslaved blacks in the colonies. My paper focuses on the arguments developed by Milscent—Bonneville’s friend and editor of the *Créole patriote*. Though he eventually argued for the abolition of slavery, he came to this position only gradually and first argued that free persons of color were actually worse off than slaves. Milscent reminds us that the Revolution, so often interpreted in terms of “Terror,” also had an earlier, generous, and caring dimension.

The *Bouche de Fer*’s fourth priority was to reach out to the provinces. It sponsored other publications meant specifically for the provinces, to educate and inform workers, peasants and farmers. Letters from the provinces, such as the complaint of a worker from Lyon about unfairly high postage rates sometimes read like excerpts from the pre-Revolutionary *cahiers de doléances*. I wish to bring into the debate caring for the provinces, so often eclipsed by a focus on Paris. As a background to this conversation, I lean on Mercier’s detailed portraits of provincial workers (for example Auvergnats and Savoyards) in specific trades within the capital.

³ “Secours” seems the closest translation of “care,” with the same etymological root in the Latin *succurrere*. Interestingly, the French “secours” always resonates with the expression “au secours!” the call for “help!” I’m still pondering a French translation/adaptation for my paper title and might opt for an ellipsis: “Pour un Contrat social au secours de...?”