

The Origins of the French Revolution

The outbreak of the French Revolution in the summer of 1789 stirred the imagination of nearly all Europeans. The French revolutionaries - that is, those men and women who made conscious choices - sensed in their hearts and minds that they were witnessing the birth of a new age. And if the revolutionaries of Paris, Bordeaux, Lyons or Toulouse knew they were innovating, knew they were helping to usher in the dawn of a New Jerusalem, so too did observers in London, Berlin, Philadelphia, Moscow, Manchester, Geneva, Amsterdam or Boston. The English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was living in Paris during the heady days of 1789. He was, at the time, only nineteen years of age. In his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, he revealed his experience of the first days of the Revolution:

*O pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
For mighty were the auxiliars which then
stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in
love;
Bliss was it that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven: O
times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding
ways
Of custom, law, and statute took at once
The attraction of a Country in Romance;
When Reason seem'd the most to assert
her rights
When most intent on making of herself
A prime enchantress -- to assist the work,
Which then was going forward in her
name.
Not favor'd spots alone, but the whole
Earth!*



Upon the ruins of the *ANCIEN REGIME* - that is, the old order - a new era appeared which seemed to realize the lofty ideals of the Enlightenment. The ideals were genuine and they were optimistic through and through. Man had entered a stage in human history characterized by his emancipation from superstition, prejudice, cruelty and enthusiasm. Liberty had triumphed over tyranny. New institutions were created on the foundations of Reason and justice and not authority or blind faith. The barriers to freedom, liberty, equality and brotherhood were torn down. Man had been released from other-worldly torment and was now making history!

For the revolutionary generation, it seemed as if the natural, inalienable rights of man had become an instant reality. The forces of oppression, tyranny and misery needed to be overcome. So, 1789 stands as the pivotal year - a watershed - in which these forces came to their abrupt and necessary end. So believed the revolutionaries. . . .

The future would be one of moral and intellectual improvement. Human happiness would be found in the here and now not in the City of God. Such optimism, perhaps, could only have been possible in an age which its spokesmen proudly proclaimed to be an Age of Enlightenment. The enthusiasm with which this dawn of a New Jerusalem was announced was often clouded with religious zeal. And so, on November 4th, 1789, the Protestant minister, Richard Price (1723-1791), stood at the pulpit at the Meeting-House in the Old Jewry in London. He was about to address a crowd of about fifty members of the "Society for the Commemoration of the Revolution in Great Britain." His address was, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, and it was intended as the keynote address of the Society's celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Here is an excerpt from Price's address:

What an eventful period this is! I am thankful that I have lived to see it; and I could almost say, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation. I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge, which has undermined superstition and error -- I have lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever; and nations panting for liberty, which seem to have lost the idea of it. I have lived to see 30 MILLIONS of people, indignant and resolute, spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice; their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects. -- After sharing in the benefits of one revolution, I have been spared to be witness to two other revolutions, both glorious. And

now methinks I see the love for liberty catching and spreading, a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.

Be encouraged, all ye friends of freedom, and writers in its defense! The times are auspicious. Your labours have not been in vain. Behold kingdoms, admonished by you, starting from sleep, breaking their fetters, and claiming justice from their oppressors! Behold, the light you have struck out, after setting America free, reflected to France, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms and illuminates

EUROPE!

*Tremble all ye oppressors of the world! Take warning all ye supporters of slavish governments. . . . Call no more reformation, innovation. You cannot hold the world in darkness. Struggle no longer against increasing light and liberality. Restore to mankind their rights; and consent to the correction of abuses, before they and you are destroyed together. [Source: Marilyn Butler, ed., *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 31-32.]*

The language is certainly inflammatory. The message is passionate and quite clear. "Tremble all ye oppressors of the world!"

The causes of the French Revolution are complicated, so complicated that a debate still rages among historians regarding origins, causes and results. In general, the real causes of the Revolution must be located in the rigid social structure of French society during the *ancien regime*. As it had been for centuries, French society was divided into three Estates or Orders. The First Estate consisted of the clergy and the Second Estate the nobility. Together, these two Estates accounted for approximately 500,000 individuals. At the bottom of this hierarchy was the vast Third Estate which basically meant everybody else, or about 25 million people. This social structure was based on custom and tradition, but more important, it was also based on inequalities which were sanctioned by the force of law. So, we must look at these three Estates more carefully.

The First Estate

The Clergy From the outset, the clergy was established as a privileged Estate. The French Catholic Church maintained a wide scope of powers - it literally constituted a state within a state and it had sustained this position for more than 800 years. The clergy was divided into the lower and upper clergy. Members of the lower clergy were

usually humble, poorly-paid and overworked village priests. As a group, they resented the wealth and arrogance of the upper clergy. The bishops and abbots filled the ranks of the upper clergy, men who regarded their office as a way of securing a larger income and the landed property that went with it. Most of the upper clergy sold their offices to subordinates, kept the revenue, and lived in Paris or at the seat of royal government at Versailles. Well, what did the clergy do? Or, I suppose, a better way of framing the question is this: what were they supposed to be doing? Their responsibilities included: the registration of births, marriages and deaths; they collected the tithe (usually 10%); they censored books; served as moral police; operated schools and hospitals; and distributed relief to the poor. They also owned 10-15% of all the land in France. This land, of course, was all held tax-free.



The Second Estate

The Nobility Like the clergy, the nobility represented another privileged Estate. The nobility held the highest positions in the Church, the army and the government. As an order, they were virtually exempt from paying taxes of any kind. They collected rent from the peasant population who lived on their lands. They also collected an extraordinary amount of customary dues from the peasantry. There were labor dues (the *corvée*), as well as dues on salt, cloth, bread, wine and the use mills, granaries, presses and ovens. Collectively, the nobility owned about 30% of the land. By the 18th century, they were also becoming involved in banking, finance, shipping, insurance and manufacturing. They were also the leading patrons of the arts. It is interesting that the nobility would offer their homes and their salons to the likes of Voltaire, Gibbon, Diderot and Rousseau After all, these were the men who would end up criticizing the Second Estate. Of course, it must also be that the *philosophes* could not have existed without their aristocratic patrons.

There were, like the clergy, two levels of the nobility (c.350,000 individuals in total). The Nobility of the Sword carried the most prestige. The served their King at his court in Versailles. Many members of this order were of ancient lineage - their family history could be traced back hundreds of years. But there were also members of this estate who were relative newcomers. The Nobility of the Robe also had prestige but much less than did the Nobility of the Sword. Numerous members of the Nobility of the Robe had been created by the monarchy in the past. French kings needed money so it seemed logical to offer position and status to those men who were willing to pay enough money

for it. But more important, perhaps, was that by giving these men royal positions, the king could keep an eye on their behavior. In many ways, this is one reason why Louis XIV built Versailles in the first place. Originally a vast hunting lodge, Louis built up Versailles in order to house his generals, ministers and other court suck-ups.

Some of the lesser nobility were partial to the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment and during the early days of the Revolution would be considered "liberal nobles." They wished to see an end to royal absolutism but not necessarily the end of the monarchy. These liberal nobles tended to look to France's traditional enemy, England, as a model for what France ought to become, a limited or constitutional monarchy.

The Third Estate

This estate ostensibly consisted of every one who was not a member of either the First or Second Estates. Totalling approximately 25 million souls, the Third Estate was composed of the bourgeoisie, the peasantry and the urban artisans. As a class, the bourgeoisie - merchants, manufacturers, bankers, doctors, lawyers, intellectuals - had wealth. In some cases, enormous wealth. But, wealth in the *ancien regime* did not mean status or privilege and it should be clear by now that "success" in 18th century France meant status and privilege. Wealth was nothing without status. The bourgeoisie were influenced by the nobility and tried to imitate them whenever possible. So, they tried to improve their status by becoming land owners themselves. By 1789, the bourgeoisie controlled 20% of all the land. They were upwardly mobile, but they felt frustrated and blocked by the aristocracy, an aristocracy whose only interest was that everyone maintain their place in society.

By 1789, the bourgeoisie had numerous grievances they wished addressed. They wanted all Church, army and government positions open to men of talent and merit. They sought a Parliament that would make all the laws for the nation. They desired a constitution that would limit the king's powers. They also desired fair trials, religious toleration and vast administrative reforms. These are all liberal ideas that would certainly emerge after the summer of 1789.

The peasantry consisted of at least twenty-one million individuals during the 18th century. Their standard of living was perhaps better than the European peasantry in general. However, the French peasant continued to live in utmost poverty. Collectively, the peasantry owned 30-40% of the available land but mostly in small, semi-feudal plots. Most peasants did not own their land but rented it from those peasants who were wealthier or from the nobility. They tried to supplement their income by hiring

themselves out as day laborers, textile workers or manual laborers. Peasants were victimized by heavy taxation - taxes were necessary to pay for the costs of war, something that had already consumed the French government for an entire century. So, the peasants paid taxes to the king, taxes to the church, taxes and dues to the lord of the manor, as well as numerous indirect taxes on wine, salt, and bread. Furthermore, the peasants also owed their lord a labor obligation. And throughout the 18th century, the price of rent was always increasing, as did the duties levied on goods sold in markets and fairs. By 1789, the plight of the French peasant was obvious. Taxes were increased as was rent. Peasants continued to use antiquated methods of agriculture. The price of bread soared and overall, prices continued to rise at a quicker rate than wages. To make matters worse, there was the poor harvest of 1788/89. The urban workers or artisans, as a group, consisted of all journeymen, factory workers and wage earners. The urban poor also lived in poverty, a poverty that was intensified by 1789. By that time, wages had increased by 22% while the cost of living increased 62%.

These, then, are the social causes that acted as a breeding ground for the grievances and passions the Revolution would unleash. But there are a few other causes, equally important, that are also worth our attention.

Royal Absolutism

Eighteenth century France was, in theory, an absolute monarchy. Royal absolutism was produced as a result of the Hundred Years' War. By the early 18th century, French kings had nearly succeeded in wresting all power from the nobility. Thanks in part to the effort of Louis XIV, absolute monarchy was, in both theory and practice, a reality. France had no Parliament. France did have an Estates General which was a semi-representative institution in that it was composed of representatives from each of the Three Estates. The last time the Estates General had been convened was in 1614! Was the Estates General a truly representative body? Hardly. The way the French administered the country was through a bloated bureaucracy of officials. By 1750, the bureaucracy had overgrown itself - it was large, corrupt and inefficient. Too many officials had bought and sold their offices over the years. Furthermore, despite the efforts of Charlemagne (742-814) in the 9th century, France had no single, unified system of law. Each region determined its own laws based on the rule of the local *Parliament*.

Law

There were thirteen distinct regions in France before 1789 and each was under the jurisdiction of a *Parlement*. Each *Parlement* contained between fifty and 130 members. They were the local judges and legal elites. They tried cases for theft, murder, forgery, sedition and libel. They also served as public censors and sometimes were responsible for fixing the price of bread. They were hated by almost everyone, including the king. Of course, the king also had his royal lackeys, the intendants. The *intendants* were even more hated than the *Parlement*. Created to help curb the power of the nobility, the intendants became known for their habit of arbitrary taxation and arrest of the peasantry. Such a situation made for the inefficient operation of Europe's largest and strongest country.

Finances

By 1789, France was bankrupt. The country could no longer pay its debts, debts that were all the result of war. One example says a great deal about this situation. By 1789, France was still paying off debts incurred by the wars of Louis XIV, that is, wars of the late 17th and early 18th century. Furthermore, a number of social groups and institutions did not pay taxes of any kind. Many universities were exempt from taxation as were the thirteen *Parlements*, cities like Paris, the Church and the clergy, the aristocracy and numerous members of the bourgeoisie. And of course, it was simply brilliant planning to continue to tax the peasants - peasants who, having nothing to contribute were, over the course of the century, forced to contribute even more.

The Enlightenment

The effect of the Enlightenment on the French Revolution has created a debate which will not soon be resolved. But, in general, it can be said that there is no causal relationship between the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment and the outbreak of the French Revolution. Few *philosophes*, if any, advocated revolution and the reason is fairly clear. No *philosophe* advocated the violent overthrow of the existing order of things because violence was contrary to human reason. But because the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment attacked the established order together with authority of any kind, their ideas helped to produce what can only be called a revolutionary mentality. One modern historian has correctly observed that:

*18th century philosophy taught the Frenchman to find his condition wretched, unjust and illogical and made him disinclined to the patient resignation to his troubles that had long characterized his ancestors The propaganda of the philosophes perhaps more than any other factor accounted for the fulfillment of the preliminary condition of the French Revolution, namely discontent with the existing state of things. (Henri Peyre, "The Influence of Eighteenth Century Ideas on the French Revolution," *Journal of the History of Ideas* vol. 10, No. 1 (January 1949).*

I suppose what I mean is this: the *philosophes* advocated the use of Reason in all human affairs. They knew that Reason, together with its sister, criticism, could effect change: a change in morals, a change in human knowledge, a change in human happiness. Voltaire, of course, was a case in point. He had few problems with monarchy. All he wanted was an enlightened monarch. Was Voltaire a liberal? Or a republican? Hardly. And for all his talk about representative governments, social contracts and civil society, Rousseau had more to do with the origins of totalitarian society than he did with democracy. Still, two people can read Rousseau and leave with two different perspectives. And Rousseau's thought certainly led to divergent opinions as to what really mattered. The point is this: the 18th century had no Karl Marx (1818-1883). The 18th century had no prophet of revolution. Why? Because the prophets of revolution, like Marx, were made by the French Revolution. The French Revolution was not made by prophets.

The American Revolution

Lastly, there is little doubt that the American Revolution of the 1770s and the formation of a republic in the 1780s served as a profound example to all European observers. Hundreds of books, pamphlets and public lectures analyzed, romanticized and criticized the American rebellion against Great Britain. For instance, in 1783 the Venetian ambassador to Paris wrote that "it is reasonable to expect that, with the favourable effects of time, and of European arts and sciences, [America] will become the most formidable power in the world." American independence fired the imagination of aristocrats who were unsure of their status while at the same time giving the promise of ever greater equality to the common man. The Enlightenment preached the steady and inevitable progress of man's moral and intellectual nature. The American example served as a great lesson - tyranny could be challenged. Man did have inalienable rights. New governments could be constructed. The American example then, shed a brilliant light. As one French observer remarked in 1789, "This vast continent which the seas surround will soon change Europe and the universe."

Those Europeans who dreamed about the dawn of a New Jerusalem were fascinated by the American political experiment. The thirteen colonies began with a defensive revolution against tyrannical oppression and they were victorious. The Americans showed how rational men could assemble together to exercise control over their own lives by choosing their own form of government, a government sanctified by the force of a written constitution. With this in mind, liberty, equality, private property and representative government began to make more sense to European observers. If anything, the American Revolution gave proof to that great Enlightenment idea - the idea that a better world was possible if it was created by men using Reason. As R. R. Palmer put it in 1959 (*The Age of Democratic Revolution: The Challenge*):

The effects of the American Revolution, as a revolution, were imponderable but very great. It inspired the sense of a new era. It added a new content to the conception of progress. It gave a whole new dimension to ideas of liberty and equality made familiar by the Enlightenment. It got people into the habit of thinking more concretely about political questions, and made them more readily critical of their own governments and society. It dethroned England, and set up America, as a model for those seeking a better world. It brought written constitutions, declarations of rights, and constituent conventions into the realm of the possible. The apparition on the other side of the Atlantic of certain ideas already familiar in Europe made such ideas seem more truly universal, and confirmed the habit of thinking in terms of humanity at large. Whether fantastically idealized or seen in a factual way, whether as mirage or as reality, America made Europe seem unsatisfactory to many people of the middle and lower classes, and to those of the upper classes who wished them well. It made a good many Europeans feel sorry for themselves, and induced a kind of spiritual flight from the Old Regime. (p. 282)