

1 The Legacy of the French Revolution

Europe in the last two hundred years, but especially in the first part of the nineteenth century, lived in the shadow of the French Revolution. That upheaval's remarkable accomplishments, as well as its destructiveness and shocking cruelties, influenced every European country and left many unfinished agendas: on the left, altruistic hopes and dreams; on the right, bitter resentments and fears.

France's Preeminence

In the century before 1789, France had already exercised a pervasive influence over the rest of Europe. The ruling orders of many countries spoke French in preference to their native tongues, and French literature, art, and fashions were in demand everywhere. France was *la grande nation* (the large/great nation), with the largest population in Europe, around 26 million by the eve of the Revolution. Prussia's population at that time was under 4 million, Britain's around 8 million, the Habsburg Empire's around 11 million, and Russia's perhaps 20 million. Paris was widely understood to be the cultural and intellectual capital of Europe.

Any development in such an influential nation was bound to have important repercussions for the rest of Europe. As the Habsburg statesman Metternich once quipped, "When France sneezes, Europe catches a cold." In the summer of 1789, France sneezed mightily. Thereafter, it overthrew its existing institutions with astonishing resolve, executing its king and queen, and perhaps 40,000 others, with the new guillotine. It launched a series of military campaigns that before long routed the armies of Europe's leading powers. In the process, France annexed sizeable stretches of neighboring territory and created French-dominated states along those much-expanded frontiers. Although forced back in

1815 into borders roughly similar to those existing before the Revolution, France had by then ruled for about two decades over a large percentage of Europe's population. Even those not formally annexed into the French Empire were obliged to adjust to laws and institutions fashioned in the French Revolution. The legacy of the Revolution in that sense was particularly enduring. Even in those areas that never experienced direct French rule, the revolutionary legacy was significant, in part because the leaders of most countries found it necessary to copy at least some French institutions in order to survive.

The Changes Made by the Revolution

Politically, the revolutionary period, 1789–1815, is one of daunting complexity, with sudden, violent shifts in revolutionary leadership. By 1795 three succeeding constitutions had already been adopted and then found wanting. Beginning in 1789, a massive, often chaotic shift in the relative power of various elements of France's population occurred, away from the monarch and the privileged orders toward the common people (the Third Estate, which constituted about 95 percent of the total population; the First Estate was the Church, the Second Estate the nobility). By late 1791, revolutionaries had introduced a new constitution as well as a ringing revolutionary statement of the "Rights of Man and the Citizen."

Much confusion and uncertainty marked these first years, but the beginnings of a long-lasting administrative system were being put into place, one that sought to rationalize and centralize the tottering maze of the Old Regime's administration. The agenda of reform included a new system of weights and measures (the metric system), a new calendar with ten-day weeks, new national holidays, and a new monetary system. Not all of these innovations survived, and most took some time to be implemented. The new calendar was especially confusing, and it turned out to be more than the general population could absorb – so unpopular that it was abandoned after a few years. Today the names of the new months are remembered primarily in the way that the events of the Revolution have been recorded. For example, what is now known as *Thermidor*, the "hot" month corresponding to July/August 1794, was when the Revolution began a rightward swing, in reaction to the excesses of the Terror. The modern political terms "right," "left," "reactionary," and "thermidorean" all originated in this period.

The Revolutionary Mystique

What is usually meant by the legacy of the French Revolution includes less palpable matters: ideals, goals, visions – and nightmares. The revolutionary mystique gripped a significant part of the intellectual elite of Europe with an intoxicating intensity. The shining vision of a transformed human condition affected some Europeans in ways that recall the messianic dreams – and the religious fanaticism – of past centuries. The selfless, heroic revolutionary became a model for significant parts of the restless youth of Europe, in paradoxical ways replicating the idealized Christian saint or crusading knight. The words of the late nineteenth-century anarchist revolutionary Alexander Kropotkin had obvious parallels to Christian symbolism: "The blood shed [in the French Revolution] was shed for

the whole human race.” Even those less profoundly affected by revolutionary ardor tended to venerate the Revolution; many believed that its undeniable failures would be rectified in revolutions to come. The usage of the term “revolution” became, again, reminiscent of so many religious terms, oddly nebulous and inclusive, referring not only to measurable political events but also to a vast historical process, beginning in 1789 and marching ever onward. Much of the political life of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came down to the question “the Revolution, for or against?” (For a guide to the pronunciation of foreign names, such as Péguy, and foreign-language terms, see their index entries, as well as the opening note to the index. One of many organizing themes of this volume is the way that European political life may be seen as alternating between what French author Charles Péguy in the early twentieth century famously termed *mystique* and *politique*: selfless and courageous idealism vs. disabused political calculation and cynical careerism, the one following the other inexorably. Péguy is further discussed in Chapter 11.)

Revolutionary reforms played a role in rendering European institutions more efficient and in making the lives of Europe’s common people freer and materially more secure – at least eventually, though not immediately. However, the mystique of revolution turned out to have a ghastly dark side. Political revolutions repeatedly awakened not only benevolent reasonableness but also the vilest instincts of the human heart, both in revolutionaries and in their opponents. Political revolutions have produced, from the guillotine of the French Revolution to the concentration camps of the Soviet Union, oceans of blood and unimaginable human suffering.

There was something eerily kindred, in both positive and negative ways, about the mystique of revolution and the mystique of religion. And what an irony – that the carnage of the wars of religion in the seventeenth century turned many, especially among the educated elites, away from religious faith and toward a belief in the power of reason, a belief that seemed to bear fruit, by the early twentieth century, in even more horrific brutalities than religious passion had produced in the seventeenth.

Whatever its similarities to a religious phenomenon, the French Revolution turned against organized religion, the Catholic Church in particular, and against most Christian dogma. Revolutionaries sought to replace the bigotry and superstition of the Church with more tolerant and rational beliefs. They also took the fateful step of expropriating the lands owned by the Church and using the sale of them to help finance the Revolution. That step further alienated elements of an already deeply divided general population, a large part of which held on to its Christian faith and remained firmly attached to traditional ways of doing things.

The Opening Stages of the Revolution

Each year of revolution brought dramatic, unanticipated developments, but the explicit goals of all revolutionaries were to put into practice the ideals of the Enlightenment, which in turn meant abolishing the privileged or “feudal” estates, considered corrupt, unjust, and inefficient. A general guide or motto for revolutionaries was the revolutionary trinity: liberty, equality, fraternity. Each was full of promise – and endless ambiguity. Initially, what rallied a significant part of the French people in 1789 was a thirst for “liberty” against “royal despotism.” Yet that goal proved vague and the unity associated

with it fragile, based on hopelessly contradictory and self-serving definitions of liberty among the various ranks of the French population. Still, no one expected, let alone planned, what actually happened once the king's will had been successfully challenged and he had agreed to call the Estates General (a legislative assembly of France's "estates" or branches of feudal society) for the first time since 1614. The Revolution (a term only later used) emerged haltingly out of a series of poorly coordinated and contradictory protests against the king's efforts to reform taxation before 1789.

Once the Estates General had met in the early summer of 1789, a process resembling a chain reaction began. Expectations were awakened and various interest groups energized, all facilitated by the king's indecisiveness and incompetence. A potent mix of angry urban mobs, panic in the countryside, and intellectuals intoxicated by Enlightened ideals – soon intensified by the fear of invasion by foreign powers – produced a series of changes that, even in retrospect, are astonishing in their scope and ambition.

The Causes of the Revolution: Precedents

In the following century, a number of observers, among them Karl Marx, argued that, behind the fog and flurry of events, the Revolution had been the expression of conflict between social classes, with an emerging class of bourgeois capitalists vanquishing the feudal nobility, in the process establishing a new legal order that would allow capitalism to grow unimpeded. Recent historians have substantially qualified or flatly rejected the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution, in part because the Marxist concept of social class tends to fall apart under rigorous analysis. However, providing a more satisfactory general theory to explain just how and why it all happened has proven a continuing challenge. Unquestionably, profound shifts in opinion in France had occurred over the past several centuries; practices and beliefs that had been acceptable in 1614 were widely considered unjust and irrational by 1789. One notion in particular had spread into large parts of the population: Sovereignty, or the right to rule, properly derived from the consent of the people rather than from God's will expressed through anointed kings. In a related way, the intricate network of special rights and corporate privileges characteristic of the Old Regime was losing much of the popular acceptance or veneration it had once enjoyed.

These inchoate feelings about political sovereignty, justice, and rationality had found focus and a model of a sort in the preceding American Revolution, which had evoked much discussion in France and Europe as a whole. The British colonies in North America had successfully fought for liberty against what they denounced as British tyranny. The Declaration of Independence was an eloquent expression of the ideals of the Enlightenment. The Americans, moreover, had adopted a constitution that put those ideals into action. The revolutionaries in America seemed to have demonstrated that a constitutional republic based on popular sovereignty and the protection of individual rights was feasible, in stark opposition to the prevailing belief in Europe that the republican form of government was possible only in a city-state or very small country. Even what came to be termed "the right to revolution," the legitimacy of violent opposition to tyranny, gained increasing support, though that notion had roots in Christian political philosophy, itself looking back to the thought of the Greeks and Romans.

However, the extent to which the American precedent was relevant for France remained open to question. The British colonies in North America were a remote outpost, with a small if rapidly growing population (about 2 million by the last years of the eighteenth century) that was culturally and linguistically homogeneous (excluding its slaves and the native Indian population). *La grande nation* was ten times as populous as the British colonies, and it faced a range of historically rooted problems that the colonists did not, prominent among them what to do about feudal privileges. Feudalism violated not only individual liberty but also the second element of the revolutionary trinity: equality, a word that meant remarkably different things to different people, although the meaning that seemed most widely agreed upon in 1789 was civil equality, or the equality of the individual citizen under a single legal system. That notion was fundamentally different from the Old Regime's recognition, and sanctification, of legal or civil inequality, according to membership in a hierarchy of corporate entities, involving often great differences in material wealth, social prestige, and political power.

The Ambiguous Ideal of Equality

The Old Regime, buttressed as it was by Christian universalism, did recognize equality in one major regard – that is, equality before God, or the equal worth of the human soul in God's eyes – even if such equality found only the faintest expression in the legal rights of the lowest orders. The universalism of the Enlightenment was perhaps most famously expressed in Thomas Jefferson's "all men are created equal," although that, too, must be considered a somewhat cryptic pronouncement, one that stressed a metaphysical equality in "creation" but definitely was not meant to imply a belief in the desirability of social or economic equality. For Jefferson, a wealthy slaveholder, "equality" also did not mean physical or intellectual equality, since he harbored substantial doubts about the equality of those members of the human family coming from Africa.

The civil equality introduced by the French Revolution, for all its seeming radicalism at the time, also had definite and revealing limits. The constitution of 1791, while establishing one law for all adult male citizens, introduced the significant qualification of "active" and "passive" citizenship, with wealth determining who was eligible for active citizenship. Only a small percentage of the male population was finally given the vote. An even smaller percentage were to enjoy the right to hold public office. Ironically, the electoral procedures of the Old Regime in practice engaged a wider part of the population than did the first revolutionary constitution.

Even when the Revolution moved in a more egalitarian direction, as reflected in the constitution of 1793, which introduced universal manhood suffrage, few revolutionaries contemplated measures designed to encourage economic or social equality. Price controls were introduced for a brief period, under the duress of war, as a way to protect the poor, but when François Babeuf, in his notorious Conspiracy of the Equals (August 1796), plotted to seize power and introduce a regime that would actively pursue economic equality by distributing private wealth to aid the poor, he was imprisoned and sentenced to death. The notion of giving equal rights to women also found very few defenders during the years of the Revolution. The ideal of equality, then, even more than that of liberty, remained uncertain in meaning and application, an unfulfilled

legacy for the following years, one that radical leftists believed “the Revolution” would ultimately clarify in the direction of greater social and economic equality.

It would be anachronistic to speak of the ideal of racial equality in the 1790s; the meaning of the word “race” was still vague compared to the highly charged connotations it would later acquire, but nonetheless most revolutionaries, imbued as they were with Enlightened ideals, professed a belief in human equality, in the sense of the equal *worth* of humanity’s many varieties or “races.” However, this metaphysical faith did not typically involve a belief in the equal mental and physical *abilities* of all peoples. Attitudes closely resembling what would later be termed racism unquestionably existed among even the most radical of revolutionaries, but nonetheless the Revolution’s benevolent and optimistic universalism stood out: The “Rights of Man and the Citizen” were proclaimed during the Revolution, not simply the rights of French citizens (or of the French race). Revolutionaries generally opposed the enslavement of black Africans, and non-Europeans born in France could at least in principle become citizens.

Civil Equality for Jews?

There was one non-European group or “race,” the Jews, that might be considered an exception, and the issue of its status attracted much attention. Jews constituted only around 0.1 percent of the population of France, concentrated in the northeast of the country, but whether Jews should be granted civil equality was the source of an extended and rancorous debate. Jews of the day were considered a separate corporate body or “nation,” ruled by separate laws and customs. However, unlike the Protestant population in France (around 1 percent of the total), the Jews were not considered European, let alone French, and of course by definition were not part of Christendom.

Many in France, including Jews themselves, also thought of Jews as physically and psychically different in essential, unchangeable ways (basically what “race” would come to mean by the late nineteenth century), consistent with their foreign origin, different religious beliefs, distinct culture, and separate language. Nonetheless, after deliberations lasting over a year, Jews were included among those granted civil equality in the constitution of 1791. The majority in favor of this inclusion was slim, and the nature of the lengthy debates made it clear that even those who supported granting Jews civil equality did so out of an ideological attachment to the concept of human equality and adaptability, not out of respect for the Jews in their present state. After the vote, angry dissent in regard to the suitability of Jews as citizens was repeatedly expressed, and the civil equality of Jews would come up again for serious reconsideration under Napoleon.

The Many Meanings of Fraternity

The Jewish issue touched revealingly upon the last element of the revolutionary trinity: fraternity. This is the most difficult of the trinity to evaluate, both in terms of its practical expression in the 1790s and its long-term legacy. Jews and non-Jews in late eighteenth-century France obviously did not think of one another as part of the same people or nation, let alone as brothers. The wider implications of civil equality for Jews were for

similar reasons uncertain: Would they eventually change and become French or would they remain foreign residents in the French nation, with formal rights but still substantially separate? Fraternal feelings among much of the rest of the population also remained a distant ideal; local fidelities often prevailed over feelings of national unity, or of “Frenchness.” The Revolution paradoxically intensified hostilities, underlining the lack of fraternal feelings within large parts of the populations living in France.

Yet an emerging sense of fraternity in some parts of the population also characterized the 1790s. This sense was an aspect of the dynamics of revolution, as revolutionaries joined ranks in the struggle to retain power against mounting resistance inside France. But it was more powerfully enhanced in defending the French *patrie* (fatherland) against foreign invasion. Once Napoleon had come to power, fraternal feelings merged with the *gloire* (glory) of French military victories. *Patrie* and *gloire* became watchwords for French patriots, in practice more widely and lastingly embraced than equality or liberty.

The ideal of fraternity had implications far beyond French nationalism, however, and was an especially enduring legacy of the Revolution insofar as it merged into modern socialism. Fraternity, suggesting as it does feelings of emotional closeness and social cohesion, may be considered even more essential to socialism than equality, since a society of social and economic equals can be non-socialist, based on competitive individualism and private property (the emerging ideal in the United States). The ideal of fraternity was obviously very old, part of the Christian heritage (“brothers in Christ”). It looked to the past, insofar as the corporatist nature of premodern society tended to emphasize mutual responsibilities and emotional ties. Still, these were ties of inequality, linked to hierarchies of authority, of *noblesse oblige* (“nobility obligates,” the notion that being a member of the nobility involves social and moral responsibilities to the lower orders). In a similar way, Christianity’s ideals included such mystical concepts as the Christian community as part of the body of Christ, with obligations to charity or loving kindness (*caritas*) for the needy and unfortunate.

The word “fraternity” itself suggests the obvious gender bias of the day (itself linked to the gender bias of both Christianity and Judaism). While women were included in the emerging sense of the united French people and nation, their participation in politics and the public realm was significantly restricted. They were not given equal political rights in any of the constitutions of the 1790s, and their rights would be even further curtailed under Napoleon’s empire. However, women and femininity gained a symbolic affirmation in the Revolution: French currency, postage stamps, and public statues would for the next two centuries prominently feature Marianne, or Liberty, as a woman. She would be famously portrayed in a painting by the Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix as “leading the people” on the barricades in 1830 (and of course is featured on the cover of this volume). Liberty as a woman was even more famously represented in the Statue of Liberty, a gift by the French Republic to the United States in 1886. As will be explored in later chapters, female virtues were often associated with higher levels of civilization.

The Revolution: Progressive or Regressive?

Liberty, equality, and fraternity were, then, potent ideals with some concrete implications but also with a sprawling, even mystical legacy allowing for diverse interpretations by contemporaries and succeeding generations. Partly for such reasons, what was actually

being fought for in France after 1789 is not easy to describe or even understand. The Revolution has often been said to have moved France “forward,” but whether each of its stages represented progress is highly debatable, in part because the concept of progress itself has so much emotionally laden ambiguity. Most historians now describe the Revolution as both progressive and regressive; it achieved liberty, equality, and fraternity in some regards but threatened them in others. It is awkward to describe the rampaging Paris mob as a progressive force; most of its members were driven by immediate and often ugly resentments – anything but reasoned, altruistic principles – and they often expressed themselves in brutally violent ways. Conservatives feared the Paris mob, and that fear no doubt helped reformers to get their measures passed over conservative resistance.

Just as the mob was only ambiguously a force for progress, so Louis XVI cannot be adequately described as simply against progress, since he and the French kings before him also had favored rational reform, especially when that reform promised to increase the wealth, efficiency, and power of the state. As many observers later pointed out, the reforms of the Revolution, in centralizing the state and curtailing the power of the nobility and the Church, succeeded in achieving the centralizing and rationalizing goals that French kings had been working on, at a much slower pace, for well over a century.

Louis XVI, however, was no progressive in doggedly struggling to preserve the principle of royal privilege. The peculiar and confusing range of meanings associated with that familiar word, privilege, also needs to be carefully scrutinized. Privilege has a basic meaning of a special advantage or immunity (from taxation, for example), usually sanctioned by custom or birth rather than earned by individual merit. That range of meanings, however, meshes at one extreme with the concept of “rights” (as in the rights of the citizen) and at the other extreme with the notion of “sinecure” (a paid position involving minimal work or service, close to the concept of parasitism).

The nobility in 1789 denounced the exercise of *royal* privilege as an intolerable despotism when it violated *noble* privileges, which they considered sacred. However, the king considered royal privilege to be sacred – indeed, a divine right. Revealingly, most nobles, once their own privileges came up for hostile scrutiny by revolutionaries (who in turn saw noble privilege as an intolerable despotism), rapidly rallied to the king and to a general defense of the merits or sacred nature of privilege. No less revealingly, the members of the bourgeoisie, or the untitled middle spectrum of society, were scandalized when their own inherited private property was denounced as an unacceptable privilege by those radical revolutionaries who represented the poor. Indeed, even more uncomfortable questions about privilege continued to arise: Women denounced the privileges associated with being born a male; black slaves in the colonies denounced the privileges of being born white; the Church, the guilds, and the towns all enjoyed extensive privileges, which they all termed their own inherited “rights.” And what would be the result if *all* privileges were abolished? It would be a world so different that few could imagine it. The identities into which all are born would be changed beyond recognition.

The escalating claims, in the opening stages of the Revolution, by various constituencies to remedy immediate and pressing grievances were often inelegantly

and even incoherently presented; they were translated into more coherent and literate form by those lawyers and other intellectuals who wrote up the revolutionary constitutions (of 1791, 1793, and 1795), but it is doubtful that those educated elites were actually or accurately speaking for the majority of the population, or even for the majority of the literate population. Nor were the intellectual elites speaking for the bourgeoisie in any sense that seems coherent today. Still, beyond all the complexities that recent historians have introduced, one can say that certain basic and interrelated notions seemed to enjoy wide support. Those included popular sovereignty (rather than the divine right of kings to rule), an end to the legal privileges of the older estates (making all citizens equal before the law), and a rational reorganization of government (streamlining it, to make it more efficient, and weeding out the parasitic office-holders).

Insofar as basic differences about such revolutionary principles arose, members of the initial national assembly divided into “right” and “left,” originally according to where they sat in the semicircular assembly meeting hall. The left tended to have greater confidence about the powers of human reason and a more deeply critical attitude to tradition and privilege. The left believed in the possibility of steady progress and human improvement. (“Progressive” is a term with a long and checkered history, but central to its meaning was a confidence that material conditions could be improved, as could the human condition more generally, in contrast to established notions of history as cyclical and the human condition as irreparably flawed.)

In the meeting halls of the revolutionary assemblies of the 1790s, a kind of macabre musical chairs came into operation, where those on the extreme right were forced out, often fleeing the country to avoid being sent to prison or to the guillotine, whereas those initially on the left found themselves pushed to the center by ever more extreme deputies on their left. In the summer of 1794 the music stopped, as it were, and then the game of musical chairs began in the opposite direction, with those on the left pushed to emigration, prison, or the guillotine.

Even though the left favored change, based on Enlightened principles of rationality and utility, elements resembling the old religiosity and dogmatism seeped back in. Perhaps more accurately stated, the left’s beliefs had much about them that ultimately came down to a new kind of faith, to convictions that were little more rational or any less dogmatic than religious beliefs. Among the obvious signs of that secular religiosity were the new rituals that emerged around the commemoration of decisive revolutionary events or “days” (*journées*). These eventually merged into “sacred narratives” similar to those that are common to all religions. Just as Kropotkin wrote of a cleansing revolutionary blood in ways that recalled Christian notions of Christ’s sacrifice, so the vocabulary of the left came to be filled with emotion-filled allusions to such events as the storming of the Bastille (on July 14, 1789), to this day the principal national holiday in France, or to the Great Fear (also in July, when peasants went on a rampage). Revolutionary armies marched singing *Allons enfants de la patrie!* (forward, sons of the fatherland!), the first line of *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem to this day. The parallels with “Onward, Christian Soldiers!” are only too obvious; the content was different but the form and emotionality were strikingly similar, suggesting how both served basic human needs in ways to this day only imperfectly understood.

Further Reading

The first chapters of Gordon Wright's *France in Modern Times* (5th ed. 1995) provide an excellent overview of the French Revolution and its legacy.

Crane Brinton's *A Decade of Revolution* (1985) is dated (1st ed. 1936) but still a highly readable overview by a noted Harvard historian.

Covering more recent reinterpretations of the Revolution are François Furet's *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1981) and Lynn Hunt's *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (1984). Simon Schama's *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (1989) is a profoundly negative account of the results of the Revolution by a leading professional historian, but aimed at a broad audience.

Vincent Cronin, *Napoleon Bonaparte: An Intimate Biography* (2009) is one of the best of hundreds of biographies of Napoleon.