

Permanence of an Ideal: The True Triumph of the French Revolution

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Between April and May of 1945, after six years of war, a series of surrenders by both German and Italian forces ended an era of destruction and death across Europe. With the surrender of Japan a few months later, the Second World War was finally over, but more than 52,199,262 people had been killed and millions more left devastated. Six million Jews were killed in Europe, a Holocaust that left a lasting mark on the global community.¹ It was out of these horrors that, on October 24th, 1945, the United Nations was incorporated. An entity dedicated to maintaining international peace and security, improving the quality of life worldwide, and mediating interactions between countries, it was meant to prevent any similar conflict in future years.² In one of its earliest actions, the UN created a document known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration began:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”³

While many of the themes of this document do relate to the American Bill of Rights of 1789, the inclusion of several “natural rights,” such as education, employment, and the ability to participate in cultural life, shows indisputably the influence of the French Revolution of 1789 and of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.⁴ This idea that all are entitled to certain human rights is one that until recent times has been controversial, but has developed, as a result of its widespread acceptance, into something often taken for granted. The Revolution

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of 1789 wasn't just the angry reaction of a crazed and belligerent mob, nor, despite its collapse into the Reign of Terror, was it evidence for the inability of the lower class to rule, as was argued by many scholarly contemporaries. While it did fail in the short term, converting a movement intent on preserving peace, liberty, and the rights of man into a reign of horror and death, ultimately the Revolution was indeed successful, as it defined the natural rights to which we are entitled at birth, and greatly influenced the modern mainstream perspective on human rights.

The French Revolution sprang out of the need of the population to feel that they had representation, and that the decisions made daily for them by their monarch would reflect the best interests of the people as a whole, instead of just those of the wealthy or politically connected. The French people felt constricted under the Estates system, which gave them no rights other than the right to exist and expected them to dedicate their lives to the service of the king and more directly their lords. The wealthy and the clergy, along with the king, received all of the benefits of society's production while remaining tax free, and controlled every aspect of the lives of the less fortunate, despite the fact that these privileged few made up only two percent of the population. The rest of the population worked constantly, as doctors, lawyers, peasants, merchants, and craftsmen, in order to support an élite that never reciprocated. However, the power of the ruling class was so great that it would take an outrage before the oppressed dared to stand up against their oppressors. In 1789, King Louis XVI called into session the Estates General and, by a vote of all three Estates, exacerbated the financial devastation of the Third Estate (everyone but nobles and clergy) through an increase in taxes. The revolutionary movement finally took hold. To retaliate, the rebels formed the National Assembly, a system very similar to a parliament, and published, as a declaration of their independence from the oppressive rule of the Crown, the Declaration of the Rights of Man. This iconoclastic document outlined, for the first time in France, the rights of the impoverished, the uneducated, the wealthy, the middle class, and everyone else, as being irrevocable and identical. It summarized the main goals of the revolutionaries: to establish liberty and equality for all, to better the lives of

the people as a unit,⁵ and to switch the political direction of France to one that did not tolerate oppression.⁶ It also made provisions for the right to property, made arbitrary arrests illegal, and gave the people the right to free speech. In theory, these goals seem reasonable, and from a modern perspective even necessary: the work of persecuted men with the desire to be truly free.

However, passion in combination with unaccustomed freedom like that given to the revolutionaries can often lead to errors in judgment, and power, whether absolute or not, always has the potential to corrupt. Under the strain of political, social, and economic conflict, the French Revolutionaries' new government devolved into a tyranny that violated the rights they had so recently given the people. After establishing control, they were immediately thrown into war with the rest of Europe. After they defeated their attackers, a new kind of revolutionary emerged, trying to create a new beginning for France. Despite endowing their new regime with an idealistic outlook—creating an adapted constitution in the year 1793 that detailed a democratic world from all angles—they never lost sight of the enemies they were convinced were hiding just around the corner, even as they were faced with food shortages, war, and inflation. After only a short period of time in control, the newly christened National Convention passed legislation detailing the kinds of people whom France would no longer house—namely, according to the Law on Suspects of September 17, 1793, those who supported other forms of government from that of the Revolution, former nobles who had not cemented a friendship with the Revolution, or anyone who had emigrated during the Revolutionary Wars and then returned after its conclusion. In fact, the decree called for the arrest and imprisonment of all of these. Former public officials, non-citizens, and those who couldn't show evidence of their contribution to society were also persecuted. The convention outlawed women's clubs and popular societies to prevent protest over the poor circumstances in which people were living.⁷ As a result of the constant turmoil, they lost sight of their original goals, and never actually put their constitution in place. France became the stage for myriad new power struggles, between the Girondins and the Montagnards (the two main political groups), between women and men, and between revolu-

tionaries and their enemies.⁸ Eager to ensure dominance, the National Convention's Committee of Public Safety began executions of any who fell under the Law of Suspects, leading to the public deaths of tens of thousands of their opponents.⁹ A government that had been established to advocate freedom, social and political equality, and fair treatment was now completely contradicting its own values. Perhaps the most conspicuous and reproachable offense was the institution of the Law of 22 Prairial Year II, passed on June 10, 1794, which removed the previous legal trial system and eliminated lawyers and both oral and written testimony, declaring them to be too easily manipulated and susceptible to corruption. The new system did not allow defendants to state their case, and led to over 1,515 executions in just two months.¹⁰ The government seemed to have truly lost its way and all sense of justice. The constitution created under the same politicians declared that "[T]he law ought to protect public and personal liberty against the oppression of those who govern. ... [N]o one ought to be punished except after having been heard or legally summoned, and except in virtue of a law promulgated prior to the offense. The law which would punish offenses before it existed would be a tyranny; the law ought to impose only penalties that are strictly and obviously necessary."¹¹ They had lost the liberty that they had fought so hard for. For this reason, the revolution failed in the short term. The same men who had represented relief from oppression had become its advocates and enforcers.

Still, the ideas nurtured during the Revolution of 1789 did not die in later years. Almost immediately after the Revolution, the population of Haiti, a French Caribbean colony consisting of 500,000 slaves, 30,000 free "people of color" and 40,000 Europeans, declared their independence from France, using many of the same ideas instituted by the French Revolution itself. A massive slave revolt began in 1791, echoing the protests of the poorer Europeans who wanted economic equality for citizens. A quasi-civil war ensued, with people from different walks of life fighting against each other for the "unalienable rights" that the Declaration had given them. On January 1, 1804, Haiti finally achieved formal political independence after the slaves had successfully defeated their oppressors. The new régime gave all citizens equal rights, regardless of class, socio-economic background, or race. While

these ideals didn't last, and whites were afterwards persecuted in Haiti, the ideas inherited from the French Revolution were a key factor in the liberation of the Haitian colony and in the government that they attempted to establish.¹² Their new government promoted equality, at least in theory, due to the influence of the French rights movement. When a third model of the French Republic came into existence in 1870 after the defeat of Napoleon III by Prussia and the political turmoil it caused, it echoed many of the principles of the Revolution of 1789, focusing in particular on the responsibility of the government to the people.¹³ It gave the people the rights that they were supposed to have been given by the Constitution of 1793. The movement promoting egalitarianism continued to flourish, giving power to these newly inalienable rights and transforming political France into a Republic that gave power to all the people.¹⁴ And in fact, these ideals did reach all the way to the modern world when after the Second World War a nascent entity as important as the U.N., charged with the protection of the rights of humankind, chose to adopt the values of those impoverished men of 200 years before, and gave their ideals primacy over other ideologies, cementing them worldwide.

The Revolutionaries of 1789 could not have known how deeply their policies would impact the world nor how long-lived their ideas would ultimately be. Their vision of a society that accepts the views of its entire people, whether that society is a democracy or not, changed the global definition of "human rights." They advocated certain entitlements, protecting individuals from exploitation, persecution, or false prosecution. They connected the social and political aspects of life in an unprecedented manner. As a result, even though the Revolution of 1789 was not successful in the short term, due to its devolution into the Reign of Terror, it was nevertheless ultimately successful in terms of its monumental impact on future societies. ●

Notes

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5. Robert W. Strayer, *Ways of the World: A Brief Global History* (New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2009), 504-507.
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7. Laura Mason and Tracey Rizzo, *The French Revolution: A Document Collection* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 221, 225, 230-232.
8. Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: From its Origins to 1793* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 264-265.
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10. Laura Mason and Tracey Rizzo, *The French Revolution: A Document Collection* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 240-241.
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