

The Origins of the French Revolution

Alas, much more lies sick than poor Louis: not the French King only, but the French Kingship; this too, after long rough tear and wear, is breaking down. The world is all so changed; so much that seemed vigorous has sunk decrepit, so much that was not is beginning to be!--Borne over the Atlantic, to the closing ear of Louis, King by the Grace of God, what sounds are these; muffled ominous, new in our centuries? Boston Harbour is black with unexpected Tea: behold a Pennsylvanian Congress gather; and ere long, on Bunker Hill, DEMOCRACY announcing, in rifle-volleys death-winged, under her Star Banner, to the tune of Yankee-doodle-doo, that she is born, and, whirlwind-like, will envelope the whole world!

Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (1837)

- 1st. What is the third estate? Everything.
- 2nd. What has it been heretofore in the political order? Nothing.
- 3rd. What does it demand? To become something therein.

Abbé Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?* (1789)

France, by the perfidy of her leaders, has utterly disgraced the tone of lenient council in the cabinets of princes, and disarmed it of its most potent topics. She has sanctified the dark suspicious maxims of tyrannous distrust; and taught kings to tremble at (what will hereafter be called) the delusive plausibilities of morel politicians.

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)

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:

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 (see Lecture 9). 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 *corvee*), 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 (see Lecture 9). 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. They 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 *Parlement*.

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)

The French Revolution: 1789-1792

Beloved and loyal supporters, we require the assistance of our faithful subjects to overcome the difficulties in which we find ourselves concerning the current state of our finances, and to establish, as we so wish, a constant and invariable order in all branches of government that concern the happiness of our subjects and the prosperity of the realm. These great motives have induced us to summon the Assembly of the Estates of all Provinces obedient to us, as much to counsel and assist us in all things placed before it, as to inform us of the wishes and grievances of our people; so that, by means of the mutual confidence and reciprocal love between the sovereign and his subjects, an effective remedy may be brought as quickly as possible to the ills of the State, and abuses of all sorts may be averted and corrected by good and solid means which insure public happiness and restore to us in particular the calm and tranquility of which we have so long been deprived.

Louis XVI's letter regarding the convocation of the Estates General at Versailles
(January 24, 1789)

The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (August 26, 1789)

After all these facts and the impossibility the king found himself in to do good and prevent the evil which his committed, is it surprising that the king sought to recover his liberty and to get himself and his family to safety?

"Declaration of the King Addressed to All the French About His Flight from Paris"
(June 21, 1791)

It is time to teach kings that the silence of the laws about their crimes is the ill consequence of their power, and not the will of reason or equity. . . .

Speech of Marquis de Condorcet (December 3, 1792)

We now come to the Revolution itself. We have already outlined some of the basic causes of the French Revolution as well as the general features of the *ancien regime*. It seems fairly clear that the closed social structure of 18th century France, administrative inefficiency, bankruptcy and the example of the American Revolution as well as Enlightenment thought all had their effect on what would indeed occur in the last decade of the 18th century. Above all, a *revolutionary mentality* had been created and this alone, perhaps, is what drove the revolutionaries forward. Our discussion will suggest that there were actually two revolutions, or two distinct stages within the Revolution: the moderate stage of 1789-1792, followed by the radical stage of 1792-1794 (see [Lecture 13](#)).

For centuries, Frenchmen had met in local electoral assemblies in order to elect deputies for the Estates General. This was, in theory, a representative institution.

However, the Estates General had not been called into session since 1614. In July 1788, and because of its unresolved and mounting financial crisis, Louis XVI called for a meeting of the Estates General. After electing deputies, the full body was to meet in June the following year. For the next twelve months following Louis' request, each Estate drew up a list of grievances, the CAHIERS DE DOLÉANCES. Among the lists drawn up by the deputies of the Third Estate were expressed loyalty to Louis, loyalty to the Church and the sanctity of private property. Several lists called for a written constitution as well as an elected Assembly.

As the Estates General prepared to meet, there was a general consensus of high hope amongst all concerned Frenchmen. As yet, no one was talking about revolution. The Estates General met at Versailles on May 5, 1789 and there ensued an immediate stalemate over procedure. The nobility argued that the three Estates meet separately and vote as individual bodies. Since the First and Second Estates were the privileged orders, they would stand together against the Third Estate, 2 votes to 1. The Third Estate recognized this and instead proposed to the nobility and clergy that all members of the Three Estates would meet as one body and vote by head. This is an important consideration. The First and Second Estates were composed of 300 delegates each. But the Third Estate consisted of more than 600 solidly middle class deputies from the ranks of government officials, lawyers, merchants, property owners and other professionals. Since the Third Estate had the support of liberal minded priests and members of the nobility, they were almost assured of a majority.

On June 10, 1789, the Third Estate broke the stalemate. They invited the First and Second Estates to join them. Some of the more liberal-minded members of the nobility and clergy did in fact come over, but the stalemate continued. On June 17, 1789, the Third Estate began the French Revolution by declaring itself a National Assembly. This was a profoundly revolutionary act indeed. Days later, now locked out of their meeting hall, the Third Estate moved to a tennis court and took the OATH OF THE TENNIS COURT, which stated that they would not disband until a constitution had been drafted.

Louis ordered the National Assembly to disband immediately. A Declaration sent to the Third Estate from Louis on June 23 expressed the following demand:

The King wishes that the ancient distinction of the three Orders of the State be preserved in its entirety, as essentially linked to the constitution of his Kingdom; that the deputies, freely elected by each of the three Orders, forming three chambers, deliberating by Order . . . can alone be considered as forming the body of the representatives of the Nation. As a result, the King has declared null the resolutions passed by the deputies of the Order of the Third Estate, the 17th of this month, as well as those which have followed them, as illegal and unconstitutional . . .

The Third Estate, stood by their solemn oath and refused to yield to Louis' demands.

In an effort to reach some kind of compromise, on June 27, Louis ordered the clergy and nobility to join the Third Estate. Of course, some members of both Estates had already done so but the vast majority refused. I suppose Louis figured that he could control the Third Estate if it were simply a part of a larger body, but his plan clearly back-fired. The Third Estate would not compromise and the First and Second Estate

would not conceive of lowering themselves to the same collective body as the Third Estate. Instead, the nobility joined with Louis against the National Assembly. Louis went on to order the army to station themselves near Paris and Versailles, just in case. Although not one shot had yet been fired, the French Revolution had begun.

By the beginning of July, Paris had reached a high level of tension. After all, the convocation of the Estates General had aroused hope for much-needed reform. But meanwhile, the price of bread was soaring. For example, in August 1788, 50% of a peasant or urban worker's income went toward the purchase of bread. By July 1789, this figure had risen to 80%. To compound the situation, there was a growing fear of an aristocratic plot against the National Assembly. On July 14th, between eight and nine hundred Parisians, mostly women, gathered in front of that medieval fortress, the Bastille. They were looking for weapons and gunpowder. They stormed the prison – 98 were killed and 73 wounded. Although the Bastille contained no hoped-for weapons, the FALL OF THE BASTILLE served, and has always served, as a great symbol of the Revolution itself. To many, it seemed there was now no turning back.

As a result of this *journee*, the aristocrats fled the country and Louis decided to withdraw his troops from Paris. Keep in mind, the events that we have been discussing thus far, occurred in Paris alone. Something very different took place in the countryside. The peasants believed that the Estates General would solve some of their more pressing problems. After all, they had already sent their list of grievances to Versailles. If Louis only knew their plight, then he would take care of them. But by June 1789, the peasants had become restless and violent. As the price of bread continued to soar and its supply decreased, the peasants began to attack food convoys on their way to Paris. The peasants also refused to pay taxes, tithes and manorial dues to their landlords, whom they held responsible for their economic plight. By the end of July, the peasants began to burn down the houses of their landlords and with them, the records of their obligations to their lords. The *ancien regime* was being destroyed by the will of the people. But why did the peasants turn violent? A rumor began to spread that the aristocrats had organized an army to kill the peasants. This was only a rumor, but the Great Fear, as this episode is known, led the peasants to take arms against an imaginary foe. The Great Fear worked to the advantage of the Parisian reformers and provided the National Assembly with the opportunity to criticize aristocratic privilege. So, on AUGUST 4, 1789, French aristocrats surrendered their special privileges by decree (ratified August 11, 1789). This *journee* marks the destruction of the remnants of feudalism.

On the night of August 4, several members of the Assembly drew up a key document of the French Revolution – this was the DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND THE CITIZEN. On August 26, the *Declaration* was formally adopted by the National Assembly. A moral document through and through, the *Declaration* outlined man's natural rights. The purpose of such a *Declaration* was to rally the country and to add support to the National Assembly.

The representatives of the French people, organized as a National Assembly, believing that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments, have determined to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man, in order that this declaration, being constantly before all the members of the Social

body, shall remind them continually of their rights and duties; in order that the acts of the legislative power, as well as those of the executive power, may be compared at any moment with the objects and purposes of all political institutions and may thus be more respected, and, lastly, in order that the grievances of the citizens, based hereafter upon simple and incontestable principles, shall tend to the maintenance of the constitution and redound to the happiness of all.

Barely 300 words in length, it could be printed cheaply on one side of a single sheet of paper. The *Declaration* appeared all over France and was subsequently translated into every major European language. As a symbol, it became the gospel of the new French social order.

Louis accepted neither the decrees of August 4 nor *the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*. However, on October 5, 1789, several hundred Parisian men and women marched the twelve miles to Versailles in order to protest the lack of bread to Louis and the National Assembly. At the same time, 20,000 Paris Guards loyal to the Revolution set out to join the mob gathered at Versailles. Louis had no choice but to promise bread and return to Paris with the protesters. Louis was now the captive of the people. He promised bread. He approved the decrees of August 4 including the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*.

With the conclusion of the OCTOBER DAYS the King and the National Assembly left Versailles for Paris. By the end of 1789, Louis had made several concessions to the National Assembly, none of which he sincerely intended to keep. The people of Paris and the French countryside loved their king as a child loves his father. Louis was not to blame for the misfortunes of France, instead, his evil ministers were held responsible. So, by bringing Louis to Paris, it was hoped he would be less influenced by his evil and corrupt ministers. But on June 20, 1791, Louis XVI did something which earned him the general distrust of most French subjects. He planned to raise an army and crush the revolution. He appealed to Leopold II, the brother of Marie Antoinette, who promised Louis Austrian troops if Louis could reach Montmédy and mobilize a sizable French force. Louis did not intend to leave France except as a last resort.

At ten o'clock on the night of June 20, a *berline*, or heavy coach, drawn by four horses, pulled up at the south end of the Tuileries. At intervals until 11:30, the coach picked up members of the royal family, all of whom were dressed in disguise -- Louis as a valet, Marie Antoinette as a children's governess. It had been planned that as Louis passed through major cities and towns that his troops would be nearby. If he kept on schedule, Louis ought to have arrived at Montmédy the following day. But it was not to be. Louis began to treat this serious occasion as an excursion -- he ordered extra stops so that he could sup on his favorite meals and on one occasion he was recognized at Ste.-Ménéhould by an old soldier, Jean-Baptiste Drouet.

Drouet rode ahead to the small village of Varennes and with the help of the locals, blocked the bridge across the Meuse River. At midnight, Louis' *berline* was stopped at the bridge and Louis immediately admitted who he was. The royal party was treated to dinner and treated with utmost respect. Of course, all the church bells began to ring and by morning, 10,000 peasants were in the streets of Varennes. Finally, at 6 A.M. on June 22, representatives of the National Assembly arrived on the scene, escorted

by the National Guardsmen. Three days later, the royal family was back at the Tuileries. Louis was now a prisoner of the Revolution and an enemy of the Revolution. With the FLIGHT TO VARENNES, the National Assembly began to wonder just how possible a limited monarchy really was, or if indeed it was now even necessary.

Regardless, between the October Days of 1789 and September 1791, the National Assembly busied itself with reforms meant to dismantle the *ancien regime*. They accomplished this with six basic reforms

1. the abolition of special privileges of the nobility through the legalization of equality (August 4, 1789)
2. they made their statement of human rights with the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (August 4, 1789)
3. they subordinated Church to State. In November 1789, the National Assembly confiscated all Church property. And in early 1790, they passed the CIVIL CONSTITUTION OF THE CLERGY which reduced the power of the bishops. The clergy was now selected and paid by the State
4. in September 1791, the National Assembly drew up a constitution, something it had been trying to do since June 1789. The constitution of 1791 specified such liberal ideas as a limited monarchy and full equality before the law
5. the National Assembly also made every effort to replace the inefficient and uncoordinated provinces with 83 new administrative units nearly equal in size. A standardized system of courts was introduced, the sale of judicial offices was abolished, citizen-filled juries were introduced and torture was abolished
6. in terms of economic reforms, the National Assembly adopted a uniform system of weights and measures, guild restrictions were abolished and customs on goods transported within the country were eliminated

By the end of September 1791, the National Assembly announced that its work was done. In many ways, the Constitution of 1791 seemed to fulfill the promises of reform which had been first uttered by the *men of 1789*. All Frenchmen could now be proud that the following rights had been secured: equality before the law, careers open to talent, a written constitution, and parliamentary government

With this in mind, there was a sizeable faction within the National Assembly who were so satisfied that they claimed the Revolution to be at an end, since its primary aims had been achieved. But, revolutionary times are unpredictable. By 1792, the Revolution moved in a more radical and violent direction. This radical direction was neither desired nor anticipated by the men of 1789. Why the Revolution became radical is interesting and there are basically two reasons why it did so. First, a counter-revolution, loyal to Church and King, was led by the noble and the clergy and supported by staunch Catholic peasants. Because this counter-revolution threatened the changes of the revolutionaries, the revolutionaries had to resort to more drastic measures than hitherto imagined. Second, the economic, social, and political discontent of the urban working classes also propelled the Revolution in the direction of radicalism. These were the small shop-keepers, artisans and wage earners. These were the *sans-culottes* (see Lecture 13), men who defined themselves not only by their trade but also by the clothes they wore. They wore trousers or pants as opposed to the knee-breeches of their social superiors. The *sans-culottes* had played a role in

revolutionary events since 1789, but they had, as a class, received few gains. As one historian has written:

The sans-culottes saw that a privilege of wealth was taking the place of a privilege of birth. They foresaw that the bourgeoisie would succeed the fallen aristocracy as the ruling class.

The French Revolution: 1792-1794

The proof necessary to convict the enemies of the people is every kind of evidence, either material or moral or verbal or written. . . . Every citizen has the right to seize conspirators and counter-revolutionaries and to arraign them before magistrates. He is required to denounce them when he knows of them.

Law of 22 Prairial Year II (June 10, 1794)

Inflamed by their poverty and hatred of wealth, the SANS-CULOTTES insisted that it was the duty of the government to guarantee them the right to existence. Such a policy ran counter to the bourgeois aspirations of the National Assembly. The *sans-culottes* demanded that the revolutionary government immediately increase wages, fix prices, end food shortages, punish hoarders and most important, deal with the existence of counter-revolutionaries. In terms of social ideals the *sans-culottes* wanted laws to prevent extremes of both wealth and property. Their vision was of a nation of small shopkeepers and small farmers. They favored a democratic republic in which the voice of the common man could be heard. In this respect, their ideology falls into line with that of Thomas Paine (1737-1809), the English radical who argued that the best form of government was the one which governed least: government should guarantee basic natural rights and then lay off the citizen (on Paine, see Lecture 14). In other words, and this is important to grasp, the social and economic ideas of the *sans-culottes* were politicized by the Revolution itself.

On AUGUST 10, 1792, enraged Parisian men and women attacked the king's palace and killed several hundred Swiss Guards. The result of this *journee* was the radicalization of the Revolution. Louis and Marie Antoinette were forced to flee the Tuileries and took refuge in the Legislative Assembly itself. The royal family was placed under house arrest, and lived rather comfortably, but the king could not perform any of his political functions. Although the revolutionaries had drafted a constitution, now they had no monarch.

By September, Paris was in turmoil. Fearing counter-revolution, the *sans-culottes* destroyed prisons because they believed they were secretly sheltering conspirators. More than one thousand people were killed. Street fights broke out everywhere and barricades were set up in various quarters of the city. All this was done in order to consolidate the Revolution – to keep it moving forward. On September 21st and 22nd, 1792, the monarchy was officially abolished and a republic established. The 22nd of September, 1792 was now known as day one of the year one. In December, Louis XVI was placed on TRIAL for violating the liberty of his subjects and on January 21, 1793, Louis was executed like an ordinary criminal. From this time on, the Revolution had no recourse but to move forward.

After the execution of Louis, the National Assembly, now known as the National Convention, faced enormous problems. The value of paper currency (*assignats*) used to finance the Revolution had fallen by 50%. There was price inflation, continued food shortages, and various peasant rebellions against the Revolution occurred across the countryside. France was close to civil war.

Meanwhile, the revolutionaries found themselves not only at war with Austria and Prussia, but with Holland, Spain and Great Britain. As the Revolution stumbled under the weight of foreign war and civil war, the revolutionary leadership grew more radical. Up to June 1793, moderate reformers had dominated the National Convention. These were the Girondins, men who favored a decentralized government in which the various provinces or departments would determine their own affairs. The Girondins also opposed government interference in the economy.

In June 1793, factional disputes with the Convention resulted in the replacement of the Girondins with the Jacobins, a far more radical group. The Jacobins and Girondins were both liberal and bourgeois, but the Jacobins desired a centralized government (in which they would hold key positions), Paris as the national capital, and temporary government control of the economy. The Jacobin platform managed to win the support of the *sans-culottes*. The Jacobins were tightly organized, well-disciplined and convinced that they alone were responsible for saving and "managing" the Revolution from this point forward. On June 22, 1793, 80,000 armed *sans-culottes* surrounded the meeting halls of the National Convention and demanded the immediate arrest of the Girondin faction. The Convention yielded to the mob and 29 Girondin members of the Convention were arrested.

The Jacobins now had firm control not only of the Convention, but the French nation as well. They were the government. And they now had even more pressing problems: civil war was everywhere, economic distress had not been lifted, they had to keep the *sans-culottes* satisfied, they suffered continued threats of foreign invasion and the nation's ports had all been blockaded. They lived, dreading the possibility that if they failed, so too would the Revolution. Only strong leadership could save the Revolution. The Committee of Public Safety assumed leadership, in April 1793. As a branch of the National Convention itself, the Committee of Public Safety had broad powers which included the organization of the nation's defenses, all foreign policy, and the supervision of ministers. The Committee also ordered arrests and trials of counter-revolutionaries and imposed government authority across the nation. What is amazing is that only twelve men controlled the CPS, although the CPS was ultimately led by MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE (1758-1794).

In Robespierre's utopian vision, the individual has the duty "to detest bad faith and despotism, to punish tyrants and traitors, to assist the unfortunate and respect the weak, to defend the oppressed, to do all the good one can to one's neighbor, and to behave with justice towards all men." Robespierre was a disciple of Rousseau--both considered the general will an absolute necessity. For Robespierre, the realization of the general will would make the Republic of Virtue a reality. Its denial would mean a return to despotism. Robespierre knew that a REPUBLIC OF VIRTUE could not become a reality unless the threats of foreign and civil war were removed. To preserve the Republic, Robespierre and the CPS instituted the Reign of Terror. Counter-revolutionaries, the Girondins, priests, nobles, and aristocrats immediately fell under suspicion. Danton (1759-1794), a revolutionary who sought peace with Europe, was executed.

The CPS also closed the numerous political clubs of the *sans-culottes*. The CPS feared spontaneous action, that is, that the revolutionary leadership might pass into other hands. About 17,000 people died as a result of the Terror. The choice

instrument, was the guillotine -- it was quick and humane. In 1794, there were mass executions at Lyons. Boats were fired upon and sunk at Nantes -- 500 were killed in one execution. About 15,000 people perished officially and over 100,000 people were detained as suspects.

Robespierre and the CPS resorted to the Terror but not because they were blood-thirsty madmen. They did, however, wish to create a temporary dictatorship in order to save the Republic (a Roman idea). By the summer of 1794, there seem to be less need for the Terror. The Republic seemed a reality, an aristocratic conspiracy had subsided, the will to punish traitors decreased, and most *sans-culottes* went home to tend to business. And, as the need for the Terror decreased, so too did Robespierre's power and leadership. Some members of the Convention, fearing for their own lives, ordered the arrest of Robespierre. On July 27, 1794, (the NINTH of THERMIDOR) Robespierre was arrested and guillotined the next day -- the *sans-culottes* made no attempt to save him. With the 9th of Thermidor, the machinery of the Jacobin republic was dismantled. Leadership passed to the property owning bourgeoisie, that is, those men of the moderate stage of the Revolution (see Lecture 12).

By 1795, the government had passed into the hands of the five-man Directory. The new legislature sat in two chambers: the Council of 500 and the Ancients (or Senate). The Directory tried to preserve the Revolution of 1789 -- they opposed the restoration of the *ancien regime* as well as popular democracy. They refused to leave the door open for either the excessive radicalism of the Jacobins or the spontaneity of the *sans-culottes*. The Directory muddled on until 1799. By this time the French Revolution was over and the French tried to get back to business as usual. Radicalism had been effectively thwarted as well. But France was still at war with the rest of Europe. And because of the war, leadership began to pass into the hands of generals. One of these generals would seize control of the government in November 1799. And on December 2, 1804, this general, Napoleon Bonaparte, would declare himself Emperor of the French -- the new Augustus Caesar. As François Furet [*The French Revolution, 1770-1814*, (Blackwell, 1996)] has remarked:

Ten years after 1789, the French Revolution had largely become in public opinion that very special something which eluded [Benjamin] Constant's analysis: a universalist nationalism, in which the historian can discern its component elements of anti-aristocratic passion and rationalism, transfigured by the idea of the nation's historico-military election. The Directory could no more identify this mixture of sentiments than it could reassure those whose interests were threatened. On both sides there was the implicit demand for a king, but one who was radically different from other kings, since he would be born of the sovereignty of the people and of reason. This was where Napoleon Bonaparte, king of the French Revolution, was born. In 1789, the French had created a Republic, under the name of a monarchy. Ten years later, they created a monarchy, under the name of a Republic. (215)

With all this now behind us, what did the Revolution accomplish? First, the Revolution weakened the political influence and leadership of the aristocracy. The aristocrats lost their privileges based on birth because from this point on, privilege would now be based on property and wealth. As the *sans-culottes* quickly realized, one evil simply replaced another. Second, because careers were open to talent, the bourgeoisie had access to the highest positions in the state. In fact, throughout the 19th

century, the French state was a bourgeois state which echoed middle-class needs and values. Third, the Revolution transformed the dynastic state of the *ancien regime* into the modern state (natural, liberal, secular and rational). The state was no longer just a federation of provinces, it was not the private property of the king. Instead, the state now belonged to the people. The individual, formerly a subject in the old order, was now a citizen, with specific rights as well as duties. Lastly, the Revolution managed to give practical application to the ideas of the *philosophes* -- equality before the law, trial by jury, the freedom of religion, speech and the press. In the 19th century, all these ideas led to the quickening pace of reform. And in that century, the voices of the *sans-culottes* would be heard once more. All these developments were accelerated by the Industrial Revolution itself (see [Lecture 17](#)). While the French Revolution politicized the *sans-culottes*, the Industrial Revolution industrialized them. Both events had the ultimate effect of making the European working classes.