

# The Influence of Enlightenment Ideals on the French Revolution

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## Abstract

The French Revolution, one of the formative events of the modern world, has been variously interpreted as either epitomising or betraying the ideals of the Enlightenment. The fall of the *Ancien Régime* and the subsequent period of turmoil are usually linked to the philosophies of a group of Enlightenment thinkers which include Rousseau, Hobbes and Locke among their varied ranks, as well as many lesser-known theorists. This paper attempts to assess the influence the ideas these philosophers put forward had upon the events and *personae* of the Revolution, while stressing the difficulty inherent in conceiving of the Enlightenment as a cohesive whole. Some historical background is offered to provide an idea of the causes of the Revolution, as well as drawing our attention to the parallels with our own times. That the Revolution was preceded by a financial crisis is seen as particularly relevant. The events of the Revolution are discussed in relation to the ideas that are considered to have been among the primary motivators for these actions, and there is brief reference to some of the prominent personalities within the Revolutionary movement.

**Keywords:** French revolution; Enlightenment; history; formative events.

## Essay

In 1778 Louis XVI pledged his support, and that of France, to the revolutionaries in America. Fourteen years later, on his way to the guillotine, he may well have regretted setting such a

dangerous precedent. His own “deeds of enlightenment” (Dostoyevsky, 1880: 411) had backfired with fatal consequences. This essay will attempt to shed some light on the motives behind what Marx described as “the greatest revolution in the history of the world” (cited in Blanning, 1998: 62), as well as considering some of the events and *dramatis personae* involved, and attempting to discern the extent of the influence of Enlightenment ideas on the revolution. If we are to do more than just scratch the surface of probably the most tumultuous decade in the history of France, we must consider both the events of the Revolution and the ideals of the Enlightenment in order to determine how the latter motivated or influenced the former, if at all. Saint-Just spoke truly when, at the trial of the king, he declared “The words we have spoken will never be forgotten on earth” (cited in Scurr, 2007: 318) – two hundred years later, and the issues faced by the revolutionaries have never been more relevant. With a widening gap between rich and poor the norm in most countries, and at a time of growing dissatisfaction with governments worldwide, as well as huge financial problems, our contemporary world would do well to heed the warnings of history.

When, in 1789, Louis XVI convened the Estates-General to try and resolve France’s problems, “a generation reared on the speculations of the Enlightenment and inspired by the example of the American Revolution seized the chance to draft a new social contract for France” (Hampson, 1978: 26). One of the main issues the revolutionaries (particularly those of the ‘Third Estate’, the *sans-culottes*<sup>1</sup>) were so keen to resolve were the manifest inequalities between nobles and *sans-culottes*, particularly the idea prevalent at the time, that “a man with money is everywhere a man” (Dostoyevsky, 1880: 916) whereas a poor man was regarded as little more than an animal. Ideas like this, which reasserted the current status quo, had already been challenged by the ideas of many of the *philosophes*, a group of radical thinkers integral to the Enlightenment. The influence of other Enlightenment thinkers can also be clearly discerned in the Revolution: thinkers like Locke, who asserted the right of the populace to overthrow corrupt governments and whose ideas had been invoked in the American Revolution, were well within living memory for the inhabitants of France (indeed there were even those like the Marquis de Lafayette, who had actually fought with the Americans to try and help them achieve independence). There was also urging from the newly independent Americans; for example Thomas Jefferson (1944: 436) wrote that if the French were

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<sup>1</sup> A name for the members of the ‘Third Estate’ – i.e. those not in the Clergy or Nobility – deriving from the lack of ‘culottes’: knee-breeches typically worn by the aristocracy.

to remain peaceful under the *Ancien Régime* it would be “the forerunner of death to the public liberty”. He went on to give justification to violent insurrection, saying that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants” (Ibid).

The country was ripe for change, with the American Revolution serving as an example and an incitement to overthrow the monarchy – as well as providing an alternative to monarchy in the republicanism espoused by many of its prominent thinkers. These included Thomas Paine, whose ‘*Rights of Man*’ contained many of the ideas that motivated the French Revolution. He was for the inalienability of certain basic human rights, and challenged the notion of heredity as a basis for government. Furthermore, Paine was just one of many Enlightenment thinkers who were criticising various aspects of life under the *Ancien Régime*, and their audiences appeal was obvious – they offered what seemed to be a better alternative to the current state of affairs. Another factor that contributed to the Revolution was the financial crisis at the time. France’s involvement in the Seven Years War and the American Revolution had crippled the nation’s treasury, and the taxation that was levied to deal with this was applied only to the lower classes. The aristocracy were free to continue spending lavishly, with Marie-Antoinette in particular becoming a symbol of royal excess. Following a meeting of the Estates-General, which the delegates of the Third Estate found themselves locked out of, these delegates formed the ‘National Assembly’ – in itself a revolutionary act – and, once the nobility and clergy had joined them by order of the king, who found himself in a position of weakness, the National Assembly set about creating a new constitution for France. Growing unrest led to violent uprisings, most notably the storming of the Bastille, which has become infamous as a symbol of the demise of the *Ancien Régime*. Following these outbreaks, Louis found his royal authority fast evaporating and attempted to flee the palace they had been confined to by the revolutionaries, yet he was unsuccessful and was brought back to Paris, mortifyingly still dressed in the servants’ clothes he had worn for a disguise. He endorsed the new constitution that had been drawn up, which lessened his powers as monarch. Over the next year there were frequent disagreements between the king, who retained a veto over votes in the newly-formed Legislative Assembly, and the members who were putting forward radical proposals for change. Something had to give, and on the 10<sup>th</sup> August 1792, a popular uprising attacked the palace where the king was living, with the result that royal family ended up prisoners. In a hastily convened session of the Legislative Assembly, the monarchy was suspended. Less than a year later, the king was dead and

the revolution was spiralling out of control, with daily executions dealing out arbitrary justice. With so many factors conspiring to overthrow the established order of the *Ancien Régime* it is no wonder the Revolution occurred – it was a natural consequence of the propagation of Enlightenment ideas, and the power of monarchy had already been challenged in the American war of independence. When Louis convened the Estates-General he provided the ideal opportunity for the common people to make their voices heard. It was an uneasy peace in which the representatives of France met in Versailles – Dostoyevsky (1880: 406) could well have been describing the situation in France at this time when he wrote “among the poor envy and the frustration of needs are at present dulled by drunkenness. But soon in place of alcohol it will be blood upon which they grow intoxicated”. He was chillingly accurate: over the next few years France was to face a torrent of executions, as well as war both at home and abroad. Yet at the start of the revolution, it seemed as though things were going to improve. Danton’s cry of “audacity! Yet more audacity! Always more audacity – and France will be saved!” (cited in Scurr, 2007: 202) seemed analogous to Descartes’ calling for scepticism regarding received knowledge – and promised change on the same level as the Enlightenment which Descartes sparked off. Indeed, as the writer Goethe was to say, “here and today a new epoch in the history of the world has begun” (Ibid: 203). Unfortunately, the epoch that promised so much was to deliver so little. By promoting the questioning of tradition and the status quo, Descartes opened up a Pandora’s Box of possibility – setting an example that others could follow with deadly consequences. By showing that the current state of affairs could be altered by anyone, not just the powerful, Descartes provided a pioneering example of intellectual rebellion, an example which the revolutionaries applied to other aspects of their contemporary society. It is precisely this, that Descartes introduced the concept of radical, ‘Cartesian’ doubt to the masses, that he can be seen as *the* prime instigator of the Enlightenment, and more than any other thinker of the time, can be seen as the author of the philosophies that moved the revolutionaries to action – Descartes is, if you like, the stone that started the avalanche. However the events of the Revolution, particularly as it descended into the bloody, internecine score-settling that characterised its latter days, do not hold true to Descartes’ ideas, or indeed those of many others whom the revolutionaries claimed to be following. It would thus seem that although we can say that Cartesian philosophy motivated or was used to justify the Revolution, it was later abandoned as the high ideals of the Enlightenment were traded for the cold steel of the guillotine.

Although the *sans-culottes* were to provide most of the impetus for the violence of the Revolution, to present it as a peasant revolt, as a great cry of “*la bourse ou la vie*” (Schiller, 1979: 42), is to provide a distorted view of events. It was for some, as Dickens said, the best of times; for others, the worst. Yet the two groups were not divided strictly by class: there were both nobles and commoners among both those leading the Revolution and those dying because of it. It was a period that offered real social mobility, as Revolutionary France was, after all, a meritocracy, at least in theory. Thus, to say that the nobility were the enemies of the revolution is to make an oversimplification. Although many nobles were in favour of the existing order, many of the key players in the revolution were in fact nobles: people like Lafayette<sup>2</sup>, Mirabeau<sup>3</sup> and Lameth<sup>4</sup>. Many of the *philosophes* whose principles guided the revolution were also liberal nobles: Montesquieu, Helvétius and Baron d’Holbach to name but a few. Those who came to dominate the centres of power throughout the revolution were predominantly middle class, and “far from seeking to fight the nobles, the most earnest wish of the *bourgeois gentilhomme* was to join them” (Blanning, 1998: 4) – this is especially obvious if we consider that Voltaire, one of the most outspoken critics of the *Ancien Régime*, bought his way into the nobility as soon as he was able to (Ibid: 16). Although the revolution was ostensibly fighting for the rights of the common man, it was really “initiated by the privileged classes, guided by the bourgeoisie, and [only] enforced by the people” (Thompson, 1952: 168) and when we examine the *philosophes* whose ideas were so crucial to the revolution we find people like Baron d’Holbach, who spoke in withering terms about “the imbecilic masses who, lacking all enlightenment and good sense, can become at any moment the tool and accomplice of subversive demagogues who seek to disrupt society” (cited in Blanning, 1998: 23). It is interesting that his view seems to have been borne out by the events of the revolution: the conflicts within the various committees and other governing bodies were almost always resolved by public opinion being turned against one party or individual. As the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (2003: 9) has commented, drawing an interesting parallel between the Revolution and modern global terrorism, this was “terror against terror – there is no longer any ideology behind it”. The ideals of the Enlightenment, which seemed so promising in theory, proved hard to apply in practice, mainly because there was no single ‘lawgiver’ such as Rousseau suggested was required, which meant that

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<sup>2</sup> The Commander of the National Guard in Paris, he also fought in the American War of Independence.

<sup>3</sup> The leader of the National Convention, which the Estates-General became at the end of June 1789.

<sup>4</sup> One of the founding members of the Jacobin Club, which played a crucial role in the revolution.

no single policy could be pursued consistently. The revolution lacked what Jay Bernstein calls “the generating of an authoritative fiction” (1990: 80), a unifying doctrine that could be applied evenly – this much could also be said about the Enlightenment, although it can be said of both that they are broadly progressive and liberal in their ideals.

Within the revolution there was a motley crew of notable individuals, much like in the Enlightenment, and as with the Enlightenment, there was not a unified, coherent ideology that everyone agreed upon. There were devout followers of Rousseau like Robespierre and Saint-Just, who declared bluntly that “every political edict which is not based upon nature is wrong” (Bruun, 1966: 46), there were those who were more realistic, like Danton and Condorcet, as well as people like Marat “who thought the solution to most problems began with the massacre of as many of one’s opponents as possible” (Hampson, 1978: 80). With no absolute ruler in charge, it is no wonder the revolution degenerated into internecine struggles and the petty vengeance that characterised the period known as ‘*La Terreur*’ – the Terror, which prompted Mme. Roland famously to cry in despair “Liberty, what crimes are committed in your name” (cited in Scurr, 2007: 262).

Yet even in the darkest hour of the Terror, the revolutionaries were able to turn to the thinkers of the Enlightenment for the justification for their actions. For example, Voltaire once declared that “governments need both shepherds and butchers” (cited in Knowles, 1999: 798), and from this skilled orators like Robespierre were able to convince people that “terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue” (cited in Zizek, 2007: 115). The leaders of the revolution were able to use the ideas of the Enlightenment philosophers to their own ends, at times misinterpreting and obfuscating the original message. The excesses of the terror came about mainly because the ‘Committee of Public Safety’ was in effect endowed with both the legislative and executive powers of government, which was in direct opposition to the ideas of Montesquieu, who had written that “when the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person, or in the same body of magistrates, there can be no liberty” (1949: 151). This was therefore a clear violation of Enlightenment doctrine. Rousseau once said “mankind disgusts me” (cited in Edmonds and Eidinow, 2006: 58), and there is no doubt that he would be disgusted with what the Revolution had turned into: effectively from 1792-94 France was a dictatorship, mainly in the hands of the ‘*Robespierriestes*’ – although they were merely the dominant group at the time. From 1795 until the turn of the century France was in the hands of the Directory, a corrupt and

incompetent group of a few men, which was eventually overthrown when Napoleon came to power. His ascension marked the official end of the Revolution, and eventually the return to monarchy. The Terror merely confirmed what Napoleon already knew, that “*on ne peut point regner innocemment*”<sup>5</sup>(cited in Bruun, 1966: 25) – which had already been used to damning effect in the trial of Louis XVI.

The French Revolution then, like the Enlightenment “set out to destroy the authority of tradition. It only partially succeeded” (Giddens, 2002: 42). After the revolution, the everyday lives of the average French peasant had not changed in any great way, although the bourgeoisie had benefitted the most out of the revolution – the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen’, which was supposed to be based upon the virtuous ideals of Rousseau, “declared private property to be a natural and inalienable right” (Blanning, 1998: 53). Rousseau would have been incensed – however, this was perfectly in line with another prominent Enlightenment thinker, John Locke. The conflicting ideals within the Enlightenment make it difficult for any single person or movement to embody the Enlightenment without self-contradiction. As a result the French Revolution was compromised from the outset by its combination of Rousseau’s ideas about the innately virtuous nature of humanity and by the more materialistic focus on property offered by Locke, among others. As there were also political groups within the revolution fighting for supremacy, what we are left with is a Hobbesian “Might is right, and the limits of our strength the only law” (Schiller, 1979: 33).

After the dust settled on post-revolutionary France, it would seem that nothing had been achieved, and in a very real sense this was true. The revolution, though momentous and terrible, was unable to set up a lasting constitution for France, and in the end merely confirmed what Horace Walpole once said, that “this world is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel” (cited in Edmonds and Eidinow, 2006: 235). The rule of Napoleon saw power once again concentrated into one ruler, and a return to monarchy was long in coming. The lot of the average peasant was perhaps a little better than it had been, yet those who survived the guillotine’s justice were likely to end up forced into Napoleon’s armies. The financial problems of the country were never properly addressed, so the result was that most people were just as poor as before the revolution. In this sense, the revolution was not a success. Yet the revolution does serve us a powerful warning about

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<sup>5</sup> “One cannot reign innocently”

the use and abuse of power, as well as a stark example of what can happen when government neglects those it represents. It has been said that “we have to understand history so we can make history” (Giddens, 2002: 2) – so perhaps by learning from the past we can prevent the same mistakes from being made again. As anti-government sentiment is becoming increasingly visible both in the UK (due to financial issues) and in France (due to the progressively more authoritarian policies of Sarkozy), the birthplace of rebellion, the issues that caused the revolution are once again emerging. We should feel free to protest against government if we feel it no longer adequately represents us, but we should be careful that our protests are peaceful. We should bear the example of the revolution in mind when we think of the recent student protests in London, and take heed.

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