The Impact of the French Revolution on International Relations

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Abstract: The French Revolution was a critical turning point in France's history and the modern history of Europe more broadly. This monumental event or series of events began in 1789 and reached its peak during the 1790s with the emergence of Napoleon Bonaparte and his imperialistic and expansionary conquests in Europe and the Near East (Watson, 1992). The revolution's remarkable status in European history is firstly attributable to the wide-ranging and unprecedented citizen-led efforts to deconstruct and redesign the political landscape of their country, in the process uprooting long-standing institutions and traditions like the feudal system and absolute monarchy (Watson, 1992). Secondly, because such systems and institutions had come to define European culture and the European system of governance, over time, the reverberation of the revolution's consequences throughout Europe justifies the event's characterization as a watershed moment in the history of the continent.

Keywords: French Revolution; History of international relations; Europe; Middle East

1. Introduction

Before digging deeper into the implications of the Revolution for France, Europe, and beyond, a brief overview of the context and drivers surrounding the event's unfolding is relevant at this juncture. A preliminary examination of the factors responsible for the revolution reveals that the causes were largely economic (Halliday, 1999). France was at the brink of economic collapse at the turn of the 18th century owing to the extravagant spending of the monarch Louis XVI and his predecessor; and also because France's involvement in the American Revolution had proven to be costly (Wendt, 1992). This economic situation was further aggravated by ecological factors such as livestock disease and decades of poor harvest, which had cumulatively generated unrest among the urban poor, the peasantry, and the middle class (Watson, 1992). The French government's fiscal policies were also partly to blame, given the high tax rate and provision of minimum relief to the masses in the duration leading to the revolution.

Notably, the revolution's consequential implications for the French political system and other political systems in Europe are self-evident and uncontestable. The events that unfolded first in France and then to other parts of Europe and beyond and included the significant expansion of the power of the state, the acceleration of nationalism, imperialist military expansion, and the concentration of military and political power to a few state players; all of which indicate that the revolution had a fundamental role in redefining and shaping international politics and relationships as the world knows them today (Bukovansky, 1999; Anievas, 2015) The scarcity of extant literature and research into the impacts of the revolution on international relations (IR) is, therefore surprising, given the significant epistemological advancement of this theme in other related disciplines such as political science (Bukovansky, 1999). The discussion herein seeks to address the gaps currently extant within the body of knowledge on the French Revolution's IR implications. It first constructs a conceptual framework based on extant theories addressing this theme of interest before undertaking a comparative analysis of international relations' nature before and after the revolution and ultimately drawing pertinent insights and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

A preliminary survey of the latest IR literature addressing the French Revolution appears to indicate that today's theorists tend to overlook the significance of the revolution for the evolution of the international system as we know it today. This aspect is primarily because of how this historical event is framed in contemporary IR epistemology as one fundamentally characterized by a conflict over

material capabilities distribution (Bukovansky, 1999). Such framing consequently creates the misleading perception that the revolution did not possess the factors and characteristics necessary to impact the structure of the international system significantly (Bukovansky, 1999). Nevertheless, among the few scholarly perspectives undertaking in-depth examinations of the French Revolution and contextualizing the resultant effects to the IR contexts are exceptional theoretical contributions such as those by David Armstrong, whose core argument is "that the Revolution challenged and destabilized the 'Westphalian Order,' but also that it was constrained and socialized by that order" (Bukovansky, 1999, p. 198). According to Bukovansky (1999), Armstrong's viewpoint conveys the fundamental argument that the revolution produced ideological and universalistic contests into the international system. Mayall (1989) observers, on the other hand, that the revolution had a moderating effect on the evolution of the international system into its current state, in that it not only incentivized and informed the post-Revolution development of totalitarianism and nationalism, particularly in Europe but also helped shape and sustain the development of the Atlantic constitutional development. The unique differences of these and more theoretical propositions notwithstanding, what emerges from the above is an apparent convergence toward two focal theoretical perspectives from which the impact of the revolution on the international system can be explained, namely through the concepts of anarchy and political legitimacy.

Specifically, political legitimacy is a core concept in political science, international relations, and beyond, which, simply stated, refers to individuals,' parties,' or states' possession of the right to rule and the reasons why they possess such rights. At both the state level and in the context of the international system, legitimacy is almost always necessary for all political power and authority (Bukovansky, 1999). On the other hand, the concept of anarchy is a fundamental tenet of realist and structural realist or neo-realist theories, particularly to the extent in which it advances the proposition of self-help by state actors within the international system (Anievas, 2015). The concept of anarchy implies that individual states operating in an inherently disorganized international system have only themselves to rely on for survival, the advancement of interests, security, and other critical national concerns (Wendt, 1992). More specifically, the overarching implications of the French Revolution for the international system, when examined through the prisms of the IR concepts of anarchy and legitimacy, are that firstly, the revolution challenged the legitimacy of the pre-Revolution system of international politics and relations, particularly in Europe (Bukovansky, 1999). Secondly, the revolution threw the pre-Revolution system of order into a heightened level of anarchy, thereby resulting in additional conflicts and wars in the international arena (Mayall, 1989). However, rather than theorizing the effects of the event on the international system and international relations with such broad strokes, it is necessary to evaluate the validity of the two core propositions by comparing the state of IR before and after the revolution in the European context and beyond.

3. Analysis

3.1 The Impact on European International Relations

As proposed in the literature review section above, holistic comprehension of the French Revolution's impact on IR and the international system can be ascertained through a comparative analysis of international relations' nature before the revolution and the observable changes afterward. It is important to note, in this regard, that the system of international politics and relations at play in 18th century Europe, before the revolution, was not necessarily constrained by an overarching sense of international amity/community and neither was it governed by a regime of international law as it is contemporarily (Kolla, 2017). Rather, it was "the internal constraints faced by dynastic monarchies and the systemic rules which enabled 'power politics' to take place in conjunction with these constraints" that fundamentally characterized the international politics and relations system in Europe and beyond (Bukovansky, 1999, p. 203). Accordingly, the shared norms, understandings, and rules regarding the conduct of the relations between and among European states before the revolution were defined by homology in domestic structure by which the existence of nobility was recognized, with divergent social groups enjoying a diversity of legally entrenched hereditary superiority (Bukovansky, 1999). The implications of the revolution for this pre-existent structure in France and other European states at the time constitute the fundamental strand at which to commence a dissection of the possible implications for the broader European system of international relations.

Specifically, the most important challenge the revolution posed for the pre-existing IR system in European states was generated by its advocacy for and eventual realization of the annihilation of the privileged social groups that were hitherto legally recognized within the international political system.

The affected 'power groups' primarily encompassed the nobility and the clergy, whose power and influence over the European international politics/relations system the French Revolution undermined (Halliday, 1990). More importantly, by annihilating these monarchic power structures, the revolution eliminated the constraints hitherto imposed on the state's power first in France and then in other European countries (Cox, 1983). In this regard, the fundamental argument is that one of the French Revolution's most important effects from an IR perspective is that it annihilated critical intermediary bodies, thereby enhancing the power of the state all across Europe. In France, the enhancement of state power also meant a fundamental re-imagination and reconstitution of the state's nature and purpose (Halliday, 1990). This re-invention had the important implication of originating the concept of 'national interests,' namely "the idea that the state and the nation should become wedded in one general will and that it alone had the power to command absolute allegiance" (Bukovansky, 1999, p.212). The re-imagination of political power in France and Europe more broadly was, in turn, facilitated by a systemic process of reconstructing the structure and foundation of the French state through the post-Revolutionary shift from a system of a monarchy to one of popular sovereignty (Barkin & Cronin, 1994). These developments within the French context informed and lent credence to a subsequent re-imagination of international politics and relations within to the effect of creating distinct sets of national interests, driven by empirical experience of what states could achieve when their legitimating foundations and structures were reformed.

This re-imagination and recreation of France and other European states generate another important and problematic legacy of the French Revolution from the IR perspective, namely the revolution's contribution to the European system's accelerating nationalism. In France, the changing nature of popular sovereignty naturally led to militarized nationalism and expansionary imperialism, as evidenced by the Napoleon wars that followed the Revolution (Hochedlinger, 2003). For instance, Bukovansky (1999) conducts a comparative examination of the 18th-century wars in Europe relative to the wars that occurred within the European system after the revolution and in response to France's imperialistic advances; and finds that the latter were more consequential in effect because of the new regime of IR wherein one state player completely disregarded others' legitimate existence. More importantly, the rise of the French nation and its nationalism and imperialism following the revolution was an important lesson for other European politicians regarding how to mobilize societies for war in response to the anarchic effects introduced to the European system by the Revolution (Osiander, 2001). Calls for military reforms aligned with national interests and emulation of the Revolution-facilitated French military model were present in multiple states, including Prussia and Russia shortly after the Revolution (Hochedlinger, 2003). Although attempts made to emulate these French military innovations were unsuccessful in Austria and Prussia due to challenges of political legitimacy faced by the monarch, nationalistic revolutionary ideas eventually penetrated the European system, ultimately transforming how national interests in defense and relations were viewed by states post-Revolution.

An important implication of the nationalism and imperialism that resulted from the revolution was the European states system's structure's solidification into a few centralized great powers. Multiple European states, informed by the lessons on national mobilization gained from the revolution and incentivized by the need to defeat the imperialism that had Spurred Napoleon's expansionary conquests, resorted to European-wide revolutionary efforts and innovations to defeat the French (Acemoglu et al., 2011). Specifically, the revolution and its effects in the European context generated an increased reliance on massive armies that could only be produced and supplied by mass states, thereby resulting in power concentration to a select few European states (Kolla, 2017). This consolidation of military power and prowess had important implications for international relations within the European systems as the more powerful states "became more interested in the preservation of intermediary states, in attempting to settle disputes peacefully […], and in a more consciously equilibrated balance of power" as opposed to the older regime of IR that was characterized by purely competitive and aggrandizing notions (Bukovansky, 1999, p.214). The French Revolution can be said to have contributed directly to the establishment of IR system named the Concert of Europe that was functional between 1814 and 1914, by which the 'Great Powers' tended to consolidate their diplomatic actions initially to hold the anti-French coalition together and eventually to avoid the outbreak of wars on the continent (Watson, 1992). It thus appears that the French Revolution impacted the European system of states' regime of IR- with effects originating in France and its relationships with other European states- firstly ideologically by reinventing the nature of the nation-state, then through anarchy, and then toward liberalism.

3.2 The Impact in the Middle East

While the vast majority of extant research into the impact of the French Revolution focuses the pertinent scope and efforts to the context of the European system of states from the 17th century onward, there is a significant body of empirical evidence suggesting that said IR-related effects were felt widely, including in the Middle East. The vast majority of scholars share the consensus, in this regard, that the immediate influence of the French Revolution in the Middle East was almost non-extant from a cultural and intellectual standpoint (Keddoe, 1995). However, empirical evidence of the impact on the Middle Eastern military, political, and economic spheres, particularly in the context of the expansionary imperialism that followed the revolution, is irrefutable (Watson, 1992). The revolution effects within the IR arena of the Middle East are, in this regard, demonstrable in multiple units of analyses, including the Ottoman Empire and even as far as Iran.

The centrality of the Near East's involvement in the post-Revolution wars was equal in measure and extent to that of the European system. The extent of said involvement has, in this sense, resulted in multiple historians approaching the theme of the revolution's impact on the Near East from the perspective of considering Europe and the Near East from a singular perspective (Keddie, 1995). Specifically, the revolution appears to have generated two notable effects within the Middle East region that are discernible clearly when the said effects are approached from the IR perspective, namely creating anarchic conditions hence international conflict and the formation of strategic alliances.

Notably, the Ottoman Empire's example in the Near East is quite instructive in this context. Contrary to the common perspective that the Ottomans were not interested in international events beyond their borders except in exigent circumstances, historical evidence indicates that the Empire was directly involved in intelligence collection on the revolution through its European diplomats, which was an exercise that led to the Empire's early rebuking of the development (Yeşil, 2007). The French imperialist sentiment that led to Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1978 was, however, the precise juncture when the Ottoman Empire effectively declared war with France (Keddie, 1995; Tabakoğlu, 2008)). The Empire's decades-long alliance with the French against Ottoman enmities could not withstand Napoleon's aggression, and the subsequent warfare informed the subsequent Ottoman dependence on, and decades-long relationship with, Great Britain throughout the 19th century (Keddie, 1995). The same trends of alliance-formation following the revolution are also replicated in Iran, which, although farther from continental Europe than Near East Turkey and Egypt, became a competitive target for strategic military alliances for both England and France during the era of French imperialism that followed the Revolution (Keddie, 1995). From an IR perspective and in the Middle East context, the revolution had important implications in creating the anarchic conditions that result in international conflict and reshaping international alliances' nature.

4. Conclusion

The French Revolution's implications on the international system constitute a relatively under-researched theme within extant IR literature. This paper commenced by asserting the overarching intention of making meaningful contributions toward addressing the stated gap in the current body of knowledge. Through a literature review of the relatively scarce, extant contributions to the focal research theme, the discussion noted that current contributions reveal the emergence of two distinct and interactive IR conceptualizations regarding the effects of interest to this exploration. Firstly, it emerged that the concept of political legitimacy is a recurrent theme within extant postulations concerning the impact of the revolution on international relations as we know them today. In this regard, the core argument is that the French Revolution was essentially a challenge to the extant international relations system's legitimacy. Secondly, the review of extant research and literature also revealed a recurrence of the concept of anarchy within extant literary contributions. Thus, the paper proposed that the revolution generated anarchic effects, consequently creating and accelerating other conflicts in the international arena. Subsequently, after establishing this theoretical foundation, the discussion sought to evaluate the validity of its two propositions through a comparative analysis of the state of international relations before and after the French revolution within the context of the European system of states and beyond.

From both the theoretical and empirical perspectives, more specifically, the evidence reviewed herein in furtherance of the comparative analysis of the pre and post-Revolution era is consistent with the discussion's two core propositions. Evidence regarding the impact of the revolution on international relations within the European system of states indicates that the French Revolution is associated with transformative changes to the legitimating foundations and structures of France and other European

countries, which was facilitated by the annihilation of the previously monarchic system of IR that was representative of the broader European culture, and by the overall shift from monarchy to popular sovereignty. In turn, this resulted in a robust expansion in the power of the state, ultimately giving rise to nationalism, military expansion, imperialism, and the overall characterization of international relations consistent with realist and structural realist tenets of anarchy. These anarchic implications of the revolution are also evidenced in the Middle Eastern context, particularly through the example of the Ottoman Empire. The consolidation of legitimacy within Europe's military powers through European-wide anti-Napoleon coalitions, nevertheless, paved the way for the liberal and neoliberal approaches to IR- as we know them today- particularly by informing the formation of the Concert of Europe. Overall, the revolution's effects on international relations can be sufficiently explained through the IR concepts of legitimacy and anarchy as they are explicated within extant IR theories.

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