

A Brief analysis on Enlightenment & Its Relations with the French Revolution

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ABSTRACT: *This essay explores the background of the Enlightenment and its role in leading to the French Revolution. Historians have competing ideas regarding the role of different factors in instigating the revolution. The question in consideration is whether or not Enlightenment ideas are direct and full triggers of the French Revolution. Through the examination of primary sources such as the Declaration of Rights of the Men and the Citizen as well as a variety of secondary sources, this work investigates the question and finds that Enlightenment ideas, especially the emphasis on natural rights and the yearning for democracy established upon the separation of power, served as a crucial factor. Yet flawed social structures were also important in causing the Revolution.*

KEY WORDS: *Enlightenment, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Baron de Montesquieu, French Revolution, Declaration of the Men and Citizens.*

Introduction

Spectacular scenes of furious civilians marching towards the same destination. Entry denied, they charged towards the gate with knives, axes, and sticks in hands. Within hours they had taken control of the entire construction. The mobs marched again, this time with the heads of guards carried on spikes. Constant celebration of the triumphant attack.[1] All these scenes took place on July 14, 1789 and was later termed the Storming of the Bastille, the symbol of the monarchy's dictatorial rule. Led by the common residents of Paris, the assault marked a successful challenge to the king's power. This challenge, indeed, was only the beginning of a tide of armed riots across the country that soon developed into a decade-long political and social upheaval.

At first glance, the causes of the French Revolution seem self-evident: by the 18th century, the French population had survived centuries of inequality and exploitation, and the country was in a deep financial crisis due to inefficient administration, widespread corruption and endless foreign wars.[2] After another failed attempt to acquire loans from the bankers, the French ruler, Louis XVI, had few options but to convoke the Estates-General, a meeting that summoned delegates

from all three of the estates of French society—the clergy (the first estate), the aristocracy (the second estate), and the ordinary people (the third estate, virtually everyone else)—to discuss the imposition of taxation so as to raise revenue for the royal family. His attempt, however, received strong opposition from the deputies of the third estate, who refused to pay even more taxes and demanded a voice in the state’s legislative structures so as to be more involved in the discussion of state affairs, including the collection of taxes. Receiving a negative answer from the King, the Third Estate withdrew from the meeting and went into discussion themselves. Backed by numerous ordinary people, the deputies of the Third Estate organized the National Assembly and proclaimed the Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen. It was the Revolutionaries’ constant effort that marked an end to the country’s centuries-old *ancien régime*[3], launching France into the process of modernization.

However, if we take a look at the big picture, other factors seem to play a role as well. The 17th and 18th centuries are often referred to as the Enlightenment era, in which European societies were engulfed with novel philosophical and scientific knowledge. Numerous philosophers had argued against the contemporarily universal political system of absolute monarchy and the belief of “Divine Right of Kings.” John Locke, for instance, was a leading advocate on people’s natural rights, which are not dependent on any form of government and are hence universal and inalienable.[4] His view was supported by John Locke, who went further by attacking patriarchalism in addition to supporting civilized societies based on natural rights in *Two Treatises of Government* (published in 1689).[5]

Nevertheless, the above two authors, and Hobbes especially, still believed in the importance of overwhelming government power, which required people to abandon some of their rights and freedoms to the central authority in order to live peacefully. Enter Montesquieu. The great French philosopher pleaded in favor of the separation of powers—which later became the fundamental political system of the United States of America—in the *Spirit of the Laws* (published in 1748) and was hence deemed to be one of the central principles of modern democratic government. Born in 1689, Montesquieu was greatly influenced by the Glorious Revolution, the revolution that restored constitutional monarchy in England. Indeed, the popular belief of absolute monarchy had been heavily struck at the end of this century.[6]

In the 18th century, philosophers became more radical as they started questioning the legitimacy of the Catholic church. The French writer Voltaire was one of the pivotal figures of this era. His private letters frequently contain the word “l’infâme” and the expression “écrasez l’infâme,” or “crush the infamous thing,” referring to the church and the abuse of power by the clergy explicitly.[7] After many decades of exposure to the above-mentioned Enlightenment ideas, the French people found themselves living in an unequal society and had long suffered from the exploitation by the royal administration. In 1789, taking the crown’s demand for extra taxes as an excuse, outraged Parisians—and, subsequently, the entire French population—rebelled against the monarchy and, similar to the British,

eventually established their own government on the basis of a constitutional monarchy.

Scholars have cited different factors as the primary cause of the French Revolution. Jocelyn Hunt, for one, focuses on short-term triggers and claims disputes between the first and second privileged order and emerging bourgeoisie to be a decisive factor. Hunt argues that the privileged caused the revolution by resisting reform attempts and aimed at making use of the Estates-General to protect their own interests, which ended up stirring hatred from the lower classes and contributing to the radical revolution.[8] In contrast, other historians pay more attention to long-term causes. William Doyle identifies Louis XVI's attempts to avoid bankruptcy as a direct trigger of the state-wide revolution caused by the long-term fiscal problems of the French crown.[9] This is echoed in Jocelyn Hunt's *The French Revolution*, in which the author argued that it was the lack of means to deal with the financial crisis that forced Louis XVI to convene the Estate-General and hence led to the downfall of his regime.[10] Marxist historians, on the other hand, argue that the French Revolution was merely a phase of social and economic evolution, "a fundamental process that was doomed to happen." [11] This assertion could first be found in Antoine Barnave's *Introduction à la Révolution Française* in 1792, where he depicted the French Revolution as an inevitable event in which the bourgeoisie was struggling to align political rights with their increasing wealth. A long line of historians have adopted the same view. The late French historian Georges Lefebvre, for instance, put it clear in his work, observing that "The Revolution is only the crown of a long economic and social evolution which has made the bourgeoisie the mistress of the world." [12] Such a determinist point of view is, not surprisingly, not accepted by all historians. Those include R. R. Palmer, Jacques Godechot and Claude Manceron.[13] They tend to stress the importance of assertions of justice, organizational rationalism and anticlericalism—all of which have a close link to the Enlightenment—in causing the revolution. My own research tends to confirm this school of thought.

This essay aims to explore the Enlightenment and the French Revolution through the research question "Why did the Enlightenment break out and how its inspirational thoughts contribute to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789?" The first part of this essay will investigate the factors leading to Enlightenment and how it spread across France. The roles played by Enlightenment ideas, including a detailed treatment of the stance of several renowned philosophes, in the explosion of the French Revolution, will then be assessed. The third section probes the question how France's flawed social structures added the final straw to the French Revolution. The last part then provides a conclusion drawn from the investigation conducted here.

Part I: Why did Enlightenment happen?

Among all researchers on the history of Europe, few would deny the importance of the Enlightenment. Many even cite the Enlightenment as "the heart of the

eighteenth century.”[14] According to Brain Duignan, philosophers in this period, akin to their counterparts in ancient Greece, lay extensive emphasis on the use of reasoning and rationality, both to criticize absolute monarchy and to promote the establishment of better societies based on knowledge, freedom, and happiness.[15] D’Alembert, an Enlightenment figure in France, also described the 18th century as “the century of philosophy par excellence.”

Given that philosophy included natural and social sciences at the time, the origins of the Enlightenment can be traced to the tremendous progress in sciences of the 16th and 17th centuries. Astronomy, for one, witnessed Nicolas Copernicus’s remarkable feat of proving the heliocentric theory, challenging the previous geocentric view. The great astronomer also emphasized the significance of truth by emphasizing the description of the real, physical system of the world.[16] In physics, similarly, Galileo also proved the principle of inertia by conducting numerous experiments, which allowed him to develop the parabolic path of projectile motion.[17] By performing his famous experiment of dropping two spheres with distinct masses, Galileo successfully showed that the time of descent was independent of the objects’ masses.[18] These efforts helped to explain various things that were unable to be explained previously and so were deemed “supernatural” in the past, hence elevating the general knowledge level of society. While these improvements were still inadequate for challenging the prevailing views of the contemporary Catholic Church, which continued to defend geocentric theories and Aristotle’s theory of motion, they proved excellent stimuli to philosophers in the next century by showing them the power and effectiveness of reasoning and rationality. Their different ideas and values on societies, governments, and human nature then started a new era of reasoning.

Another important cause of the Enlightenment was resistance to the cultural control under Louis XIV, the French ruler from 1643-1715. Prior to the 1700s, Europe was ruled under the feudal system, with the King (deriving his divine right from the will of God. France witnessed the Bourbon Dynasty’s rise to power in 1589, which ruled the country for over 250 years. The Dynasty grew to its full strength in the mid-17th century, when Louis XIV, the so-called “Sun King,” took the crown and exerted unprecedented control of various aspects in French society, especially cultural. At the time of his assumption of power, France had faced a series of challenges, including the Thirty-Years War against Spain and a long-lasting civil war. Louis XIV witnessed directly the moodiness of Parisians, never forgetting how they struggled to force him out and how they exclaimed to welcome him back.[19] It was these memories that turned Louis XIV into an adamant practitioner of absolute monarch. He thus projected to strengthen of his authority by actively appealing to the divine-right doctrines and maintained a strong hold on his people throughout his reign. In fact, he relied extensively on the institutional and administrative systems left to him, while also establishing a new centralized government of his own.

The King took two paths to reach his aim. On the one hand, he generously supported artists and painters to present him as an immortal monarch. He also introduced the Royal Blue to represent his absolute power over his country and

subjects. On the other hand, the Sun King enacted strict control over French literature, banning “scandalous” texts such as pornography and radical political writings in order to reinforce royal prestige.[20] These measures allowed him to establish an agreeable figure in the mind of his subjects and the world while also holding power firmly in hands. Strict control over literature and arts, nevertheless, diminished after his death. During the reign of his successor Louis XV (1715-1774), France was dragged into two devastating wars: the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48), in which his country failed to eliminate Austria as a strong power, and the Seven Years War (1756-1763), in which France lost almost all of its colonial possessions in North America to Britain. That the crown’s energy and finances were consumed by endless external wars actually created conditions for internal changes to take place. A “counter-culture” revolution thus began to take place starting from the second half of the 18th century, laying extensive emphasis on individual spirit, which, the leading advocates believed, had to be released after the remarkable oppression in Louis XIV’s time.[21] Such cultural revolutionary movement was later known as Enlightenment.

Part II: Liberation & Revolution

As the tide swiftly swept across the country, the unleashed Enlightenment ideas and values decisively shifted the cultural center of the realm from Versailles (where the royals lived) to Paris. Over the course of the following decades, numerous Enlightenment thinkers, or philosophes as they were called, would gather in this new cultural center, sharing their opinions on the best forms of government, the role of religion in administration and people’s unalienable rights.

A crucial aspect lay in the importance of natural rights, that is, rights that are not dependent on the laws, customs, or beliefs of any particular culture or government, and are therefore universal and inalienable,[22] which had a lasting influence on the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789. Although its origins stretch back all the way to the ancient world, natural right theory was elaborated by a series of Enlightenment thinkers,[23] who all had different interpretations regarding the scope of natural rights. The reasons why philosophes were extremely influential in the drafting of the Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizen were quite straightforward. Readers in the 18th century were largely obsessed with novels, which provided an ideal source for the leading thinkers to spread their thoughts and hence allowed them to train individuals to care for others, including those that were socially inferior. According to historian Lynn Hunt, the empathy that reading novels developed towards others was indispensable in the development of human rights.[24]

The second half of the 1700s also witnessed the rise of frequency in other literary works such as pamphlets, essays, and journals. A search for the uses of “natural rights” (droit naturel) could also demonstrate how leading philosophes and those less renowned pushed the trend upward: between 1700-1709 there were only 6 uses of the phrase, yet by the 1760s the figure had surged to 53.[25] All these trends indicated the public had been enormously impacted by the philosophes’ ideas, which

was clearly shown in the Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizen. John Locke, for one, argued that individuals had a right to protect their “life, health, liberty, or possessions.” The reason and tolerance that characterized human nature, Locke believed, was not enough to defend people’s natural rights. The government was hence established to help protect these unalienable rights, and, whenever the government became oppressive to this end, it is the right—even the obligation—of the people to rebel.[26] Locke’s view was clearly reflected in Article 2, which stated “the aim of all political association” is to preserve rights including “liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.”[27] Bodin, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, in addition, made their contributions in promoting national sovereignty, the general will, and the separation of powers, respectively,[28] which were listed in Article 3, Article 6, 16, respectively.[29]

Despite different interpretations of the scope of natural rights, the French philosophes generally agreed with John Locke on the ideal of the separation of power in government and its role of protecting people’s natural rights. This proved a sharp contrast to the role and power of contemporary French government, which was ruled by an absolute monarch (Louis XVI) who claimed to be the father of all his subjects. Administrative orders were enforced in various provinces to represent the absolute will from Versailles.[29] This model, though, according to another Enlightenment thinker Baron de Montesquieu, would not serve to maintain the law and order that were implied by natural rights. In his renowned work *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Montesquieu bitterly criticized the despotic political system of his home country while citing a system in which government power was separated among three branches (legislative, executive, and judicial) that were mutually checked as the ideal form of government.[30] His view was furthered by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who sharply accused those in power of stealing the land which belonged to everyone and fooling the common people into accepting them as rulers.[31] In his epoch-making work *The Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau wrote the maxim that still strikes the world today: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”

Enlightenment intellectuals also laid extensive criticism on religious superstition for misleading individuals’ lives. Voltaire, for one, was never reserved when attacking the Church. In his *Treatise on Tolerance*, for instance, Voltaire tactfully attacked religious superstition by comparing it to astrology and astronomy, claiming that they were alike “foolish daughters of a very wise mother.”[32] In addition, Voltaire also demonstrated a positive attitude towards religious actors who that were banned by the contemporary Church, taking Jansenists as an example and praising them for “rooting out gradually from the spirit of the nation the greater part of the false ideas which dishonored the Christian religion.”[33] It could thus be concluded that Voltaire’s work directly stirred Catholic believers’ desire for religious reforms to allow them to perceive things through the use of reason instead of merely according to religious interpretations. Simultaneously, he encouraged adherents of religious sectors that were banned (such as the Jansenists) to struggle for religious freedom, hence indirectly leading to the cahiers, in which the discontented public

listed their grievances and suggested reforms to the Estates-General for consideration, in 1789.

To sum up, all of these works and the novel ideas and values proposed were crucial to enlightening the public, showing them a new path that they should struggle for. The main goal of Enlightenment, defined by Immanuel Kant in his renowned essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784) as the effort to “release humankind from its self-imposed immaturity,” which lay in people’s “lack of resolve and courage,”[34] was therefore, to a large extent, realized. However, Enlightenment ideas alone were not enough to trigger a state-wide revolution against the centuries-old monarchy system, not to mention the French public’s long-standing admiration and support for the country’s rulers. Some extra forces were necessary to add the final straw.

Part III: Flawed Structure: The Final Straw

French society had been divided into three Estates or Realms since the 14th century, which consisted of the clergy (the first estate), the nobility (the second estate), and the third estate, comprising virtually every else. These estates met periodically in a general meeting called the Estates General to discuss domestic affairs and counsel advice to the king. From the very beginning, the assembly was designed in such a way that each order received a single and equal vote. However, the Estates General had no real power in enacting policies or initiating reforms; it remained an advisory body to the king on how issues should be dealt with.[35] This allowed the first two orders, whose interests were often mingled together, to readily refute the demand of the third order by an easy 2:1. The situation grew even more complex when it was decided that the crown—not the assembly itself—would have the power to summon an Estates General. This allowed Louis XIV to use his power and stopped all meetings of the Estates General since 1614—which would not be summoned again after 175 years. Despite these clear failures, though, the system was sustained into the late 18th century. At this time, the number of people in each order had changed significantly, with that of the third estate surging: on the eve of the Revolution it was estimated that the entire French population was around 27.5 million, in which the first two orders comprised less than 470,000 men—120,000 and 350,000, respectively—and the third order took up all the rest.[36] The tremendous difference in population also reflected divisions between the three orders. The First Order, for instance, was extremely unpopular among the people. The major source of income of the church was the tithes, an annual tax paid to the church by landowners based on the amount of crops produced.[37] Despite differences in the exact amount paid, tithes proved a heavy burden to the general public; indeed, in bad harvest years, the tithes could consume much of what the peasants had grown in the past twelve months, while granting the clergy a steady and lucrative income without any hard work.[38] Even worse was the fact that this income, which was supposed to be spent as poor relief and healthcare expenditures to the people, often went into the pocket of bishops and abbots.[39] The determination of the Church to defend their privileges, together with the

maldistribution in wealth, hence contributed to the widespread disgust towards the First Order,[40] and, after another poor harvest of 1788, the year in which harvesting was hit drastically by a severe hailstorm and resulted in widespread starvation and the airing of many grievances inspired by Enlightenment beliefs.

The Third Estate also possessed a deep hatred towards the Second Estate, and many especially detested the aristocratic Queen Marie Antoinette. On the one hand, peasants were constantly bothered by ever-rising taxes between 1749 and 1783 when France was at various wars and the government raised taxes to pay for the preservation of the country's hegemony.[41] Also, the expanding population from 22.4 million in 1705 to an estimated 27.9 million on the eve of the Revolution also meant a rising demand for farms and rising rents, which put heavier financial burden on peasants.[42] On the other hand, the royal family lived an extremely extravagant lifestyle with astronomical expenditures; for instance, Queen Antoinette once called artisans to build an enormous yard merely to meet her desire of hunting without leaving Versailles. That the peasants were always struggling to make a living while the nobility lived peaceful live without paying any attention to the difficulties of the common people created widespread anger among the public as they believed the government was not protecting their natural rights but valuing their own pleasure as more important, hence contributing to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789.

There were also clashes between the first two orders and the intellectuals, who became notably more active during the reigns of Louis XV and XVI than their counterparts under Louis XIV. The leading thinkers clearly demonstrated their criticism and hatred towards the excess of absolutism in contemporary French politics through elaboration of their Enlightenment ideas and values such as "separation of power" (Montesquieu) and "free will" (Rousseau), and religious tolerance. Seeing their interests at stake, the clergy responded by introducing the Index Librorum Prohibitorum, which banned a series of influential works that were deemed heretical, anti-clerical, or lascivious in 1751,[43] a move that only exacerbated the intellectuals' hatred and prompted them to continue attacking the arbitrary rule and power of religious and political leaders. Indeed, the intellectuals' social influence was not tantamount to their political status, creating an asymmetry that contributed to their discontent towards those in power. Finding their reform efforts frustrated under the current system, they called for a general reform and envisioned the construction of a more democratic republic. It could thus be said that their beliefs, fueled, not triggered, the Revolution.

Animosity also existed in between the lower clergy and the bishops and, mainly owing to the enormous differences in income levels. According to Dylan Lees, the Archbishop of Strasbourg received an annual income of 400,000 livres, while most parish priests, the most common religious members, merely got between 700 and 1000 livres.[44] Furthermore, some bishops were responsible for more than one diocese, the religious region that was managed by a bishop, only to claim more income. Absurdly, most bishops never visited their diocese, hence helping to contribute to the belief that Church valued income more than believers' well-being.[45]

On the other hand, the Church was also struggling to maintain its privileges over the other orders. They were extremely reluctant to adopt new Enlightenment ideas by constantly launching bans on works written by leading thinkers such as Rousseau or Montesquieu. The Church also insisted on its intolerant attitude and vigorously attacked Jansenists and Protestant, which resulted in deterioration of its reputation among the public and made the conflict between the Third and the First Orders more difficult to solve. Even when the government started to implement policies conducive to Reform Catholicism, including limited toleration to Protestants, in 1787, the Assembly of Clergy still indicated strong opposition.[46] This was, in fact, only an epitome of the suppression of over half a century of Reform Catholicism attempts[47] that contributed to the accumulation of grievances and discontents towards the Catholic Church and the strengthening of determination to launch reforms through a revolution.

So did the Second Estate. French monarchs had adopted an extremely aggressive stance against Jansenism since Louis XIV, which was regarded as a threat to the absolutist rule.[48] The King's oppression of Jansenism really aroused the Parlement, the high courts of appeal which signed edicts into laws, who regarded Jansenism as a liberty movement and determined to defend it decisively. The monarchy, in response, enacted a series of policies to counter the Parlement's appeals: évocation, to remove cases from the Parlement to the Royal Council's judicial; the lit de justice, to temporarily suspend the Parlement's authority in signing laws; and the lettre de cachet, to exile or imprison recalcitrant magistrates and clergy.[49] However, this only resulted in exasperation of Jansenism movements. In the 1720s and the 1730s, when persecution was in a height, Jansenists frequently attended miracles of healing and other prophecy campaigns; some even demonstrated convulsionary tendencies.[50] Indeed, it was the systematic persecution from the state that caused Jansenism, the so-called religious reforms, to fall into superstitions and pushed most philosophes in the following decades to distance themselves from Jansenists. The Philosophes, as well as their Enlightenment ideas, had then come to the opposite side of the Church, contributing to the polarization of conflict. The urge for religious reforms were hence a crucial factor towards the French Revolution.

Conclusion

The outbreak of French Revolution in 1789 owned to a variety of factors, including the inspiration of Enlightenment ideas and beliefs on the general public about the flawed social structures in France at the time. While each factor may have played their corresponding roles in causing the upheaval, the significance of Enlightenment was indisputable. Indeed, social problems alone would not have been able to bring about the Revolution as the public would not have been fully conscious that they were living in a flawed society and that their obedience and service to the Church and the nobility were not unquestionable duties. Only with the novel thoughts proposed by Enlightenment thinkers, especially the doctrine of natural rights and the challenge to the divine rights of kings, could the Revolution be truly aroused among the public and inspired with the most precious dream of democracy.

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