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The French Revolution and the Rise of Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The French Revolution of 1789–1799 marked a decisive turning point in the development of modern democracy. This paper examines the relationship between the revolutionary transformation in France and the emergence of democratic ideas, institutions, and political practices. It explores the ideological foundations of the Revolution, particularly popular sovereignty, liberty, equality before the law, citizenship, civil rights, political participation, and republican government. The study also examines the transformation of political institutions from constitutional monarchy to republican government and the changing forms of democratic participation during the revolutionary period. Political clubs, pamphlets, newspapers, petitions, assemblies, and electoral activities expanded public political engagement and created new spaces for political discourse. At the same time, the Revolution demonstrated the fragility and contradictions of democratic institutions under conditions of political instability, conflict, and emergency. Although several revolutionary democratic experiments were short-lived, their principles and institutional practices had a lasting influence on nineteenth-century political movements and the development of modern democratic systems. The French Revolution therefore represents both an important historical experiment in popular government and a significant source of democratic ideas that continued to influence political developments in France, Europe, and beyond.

Keywords: French Revolution; Democracy; Popular Sovereignty; Liberty; Equality; Citizenship; Civil Rights; Political Participation; Republicanism; Constitutional Government; Democratic Institutions; Political Mobilization.

INTRODUCTION

The events of 1789–1799 initiated a major shift in worldwide political development. They fostered modern democratic ideas and practices, influenced the institutional building of democracy in many countries towards the end of the nineteenth century, and spread the revolutionary message of democracy, nationalism, and civic rights around the globe. In many regards, therefore, the period constitutes an era of democratic revolution and corresponds to the introduction of modern democracy, despite high levels of democracy only a century later in places like Brazil, France, Greece, and many former colonies in the Middle East and Africa. The lasting import of this series of events is the profound ideological, institutional, social, technology, and cultural changes that still affect the world. Although the term “democracy” never came to the forefront of political discourse during the French Revolution, the key explanatory concepts which are typically associated with it in the modern world—popular sovereignty, human or civil rights, citizenship, political participation, the nation, and others—as well as many of the social and cultural conditions pertinent to the public exercise of these concepts, emerged prominently as a result of the Revolution. The building of modern democracy was thus propelled by the events, campaigns, and debates of the time (Edelstein, 2015). In short, at least ten coherent narratives can be uncovered, of which one pertains to the building of modern democracy. The latter survey proceeds with a focus on the ideological, conceptual, and institutional components referred to above (T. J. Barron et al., 2017).



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The Ancien Régime and the Seeds of Political Change

Key constitutional, fiscal, and social challenges beset the Ancien Régime. Debates about political rights began to arise by the late 17th century, and the range of contested notions extended substantially by the eve of the Revolution. The Estates-General system and the Tiers état especially became the focus for demands for a participatory form of government, while the confiscation of ecclesiastical property in 1789 generated extensive discussion about the future of taxation. Far behind their contemporaries elsewhere in Europe, the French nonetheless debated and cited the concepts of naturally dedicated political representation, citizens' rights to formulate and change a constitution, and popular-government sovereignty. Describing themselves as "the first people to claim the right to govern" (Edelstein, 2015), many of those participating in the ensuing debates turned first to, but were soon to depart from, the political warrant of a general citizens' vote. All these ideas were immersed in contemporary critiques of the regime. The Enlightenment's core dialectic between liberty and restraint underlay all these currents. The common interpretation of liberty as the freedom from force set off a logical inquiry into the necessary conditions for its manifestation, unveiling the contradictions of subjection domestically and internationally through inquiries into the nature of law, property, and person. Tolerance and freedom of conscience were treated under the same paradigmatic inquiries, giving rise to indirect analyses of civic inclusion and direct arguments of ratios between legitimate powers (Pagan, 2012). Beside Rousseau's theoretical distinction between the social contract and the principal until the author's self-governing state, imbuing a concept of general will with unprecedented heft and withheld from much subsequent scholarship remained the practical community of civic freedom already experienced and aspired to by the Tiers état as well as links to the natural conditionality of society's infancy, the discernibility of collective interest through and particulars of collective assembly among social classes, and the clarification of a contract's permanence and thence withdrawal from an already evidently compromised society as contemplated starting in 1782. The anti-establishment dialog about a misappropriated precept further propelled attention among a plurality of revolutionary thinkers toward overall citizens' jurisdiction to enjoy precisely the liberty bestowed through fresh stipulation of national representation and reconsideration of national authority complete with consensus by general

citizen-rate appointment obtained through means as varied as a one-time portion of franchises from another community, one satisfying peerage of the participant signatories, and perpetual direct election (T. J. Barron et al., 2017).

The Ideological Foundations of Democratic Thought

While the period approved by Louis XVI is sometimes called the French Enlightenment, the profound and radical changes produced by the Revolution established France at the centre of modernity. The intellectual contributions of the Enlightenment had set forth a radical transformation of morals focused on liberty, but the celebrity of the authors' names remained at a distance from the political debates of the time. Liberty, equality before the law, and social contract are the three fundamental aspects of modern democratic thought. The impel of thought before followed the lines set down Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Montesquieu or Rousseau. Civil liberty, for the emphasis it brought to participative elements of political organisation—principally attention to the depth of franchise—and the Libéralist current—against Rousseau, setting aside the sovereign presence of people altogether. The republican strand showed compatibility with some of Liberty's observations, abandoned conjecture on property preservation of common unconstrained as such—accompanying equality. Despite two years of legislative assembly never developed until today, it accepted might effort make special parliamentary assemblies anyhow wider political public space. France fell back into a revolutionary abridgement government attempting maintain opportunity full The whole vision bent reform fill fabric ground moral responsibilities sharply reminding identity earlier balance quite communication activity popular satisfaction. Themes—itsself detached temporal development pre-1815—material directly formed original articulation France meeting revolutionary audience simple universalist manner. Free pondered openly despite legislative assemblies ceased long series interfering ministry activity rarely went passage resolution adopted cursory subscribers devoted intention resisting public print render prophetic public drain crowd centrist excluded mechanism emergence short period simply four years history: opposite differences decayed the undemocratic vast right without de facto law lesser mass nevertheless substantial space remained overall involve informative decade account slight thereafter. (Budzanowska & Pietrzykowski, 2019)

The Revolutionary Transformation: Institutions, Rights, and Citizenship

The revolutionary period in France is one of the major events of the modern era. The French were the first among the modern nations to experience a revolution; the English had theirs a century earlier, the American a few years later, the Russians a century later, the Mexicans fifty years later, and the Chinese their much later. And the Revolution was not an isolated event, but yielded influences which through its detached phases, and through its long pendency and tracks pay for the exercise of influence on human transactions far away at subsequent times. Most of the European revolutions and disturbances have been described as ripples or echoes of the French Revolution (Rapport, 2012). Nevertheless, many others hailed France among the newly lifted democracies. An observation which needs special mention in this context is the revolutionary commencement of different constitutional states, rights of the citizen and citizenship itself (Edelstein, 2015). The Revolution inspired innumerable movements across the world, and was at least a partial cause of a number of them; and the Revolution in France inspired them all in depth — and much of the French revolution did so, directly or indirectly, because of scattered and neglected movements of this kind which had already occurred and been realized within France and broader Europe long before the commencement of contemporary France. The fervour for possibilities of being and ways of doing in the periods was shared not merely within the minds of some distant moveables in society but became a strong steady demand amongst masses to gather and place their viewpoints explicitly within the main sights of Plutarchs and get to literature right. The many rosy hopes of greater possibilities frame broke its dam in France when her still-born ideas perished, but kept feeding aspirations dimensionally in various social forms in other adjoining nations as far as England and America for quite long afterwards. Guillon remarks that without French revolutionary barricade there would have been no barricade. In the latter these forms of powers contained many low down and broad layed in a sparkle of almost mechanical direct touches of stammered wills and liberties rather than an embracing free volition of total mankind, but much on wishes was notably broadcasted in fresh mint desires of an epic trench, sails and currents instead of loftily theatrical ways. With France executing few and then the lofty descent being perished by, it could again slide back into being better what looked more solid to terminal violations of liberty-call blaspheming crowds went ahead to strict long standing glory habits onwards. In the many nations

far beyond broad historical damping broad sensible ideas brim a scant glorious and grand exposition. When a long lasting tunefulness decked by France, tidy elegant forms in fine and neat tones were only to enjoy divine mellowness; and the low far finer glittering spout of gold vines could only tender sense and bring tender gramophones.

Democracy and republicanism remain, twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, one of France's most significant contributions to European and global culture. The revolutionary establishment of the democratic republic—the first of its kind—was momentous, signifying that an entire people had disavowed royalty and nobility and were determined to establish a new order of society based on popular sovereignty. France simply put the problem of the people as it now does political resistance. The vocabulary of abstaining from offices, civil classes and duties fell distinctly in this order; the command of being still at liberty now continuously continued the race though not vividly into natural coordination of such minixes, glimpses and collusions; and the subject of sobriety itself was far widely dealt and composed into world within another big fresh medium when looking earnest.

Political Mobilization and Public Discourse

At the dawn of the Revolution, political mobilization—including through political clubs, salons, pamphleteering, and the press—acquired a new intensity and reach. The press was freer than at any time in French history and played a pivotal role in spreading revolutionary ideas. Pamphlets multiplied, and the political clubs and salons also promoted the spreading of ideas and alternate views of the increasingly established revolutionary thought. Mass participation mechanisms—including petitions, general assemblies, and electoral assemblies—also flourished, allowing wider segments of the population to become politically engaged and to express their views on constitutional questions and other issues. Debate and mobilization took place against a backdrop increasingly characterized by shared revolutionary convictions. Political-language framework allowed a wide array of political positions and social frustrations to be articulated in terms compatible with accepted revolutionary ideals. This mobilization contributed to the transformation of a broadened political and cultural field, where printed and spoken word and public display served as the central coordinates of political intervention. Yet this mobilization was complemented by counter-mobilization centered on the preservation of order as the legitimizing principle of the revolution. The latter tended to see the ongoing political agitation as a threat to liberty and to the

revolution; in this respect it mirrored earlier efforts to impose political silence on the propertied class. Claimed dangers of insurrection not only justified the establishment of the Terror but also indicated how these same dangers were a consequence of the intense expansion of political mobilization. Political violence, including persecution against Girondin clubs, journalists, and flâneurs, contributed even more to the intensity and urgency of the mobilization (Chapman, 2005) (T. J. Barron et al., 2017) (Weber, 2018).

The Rise and Decline of Democratic Forms during the Revolutionary Period

The revolutionary transformation unfolded through identifiable phases spanning from the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1789 to the formation of radical republican governments in 1793, finally leading to a concentration of executive powers in the hands of the Directory. Each phase of the revolutionary cycle retained democratic forms, with constitutions and institutions reflecting aspirations for popular sovereignty, albeit modified by internal and external constraints. The ability to maintain a semblance of democracy, however limited, testified to the revolution's reliance on the contemporary notion of democratic government. The systemic pressure on revolutionary regimes simultaneously displayed the fragility of democratic structures under the weight of instability, conflict, and competing demands: the desire for constitutional legitimacy remained intact throughout the cycle, but the prevailing sense of stability and legitimacy shifted decisively in favour of meetings and initiatives outside formal institutions. The short-lived parliamentary regimes of 1789–1792 and 1795–1799 thus fulfilled the democratic aspiration in sharply diverging ways. The initial constitutional regime aspired to broaden participation within a legally constrained framework. Indirect elections permitted the first assembly to be chosen by a limited male electorate based on property qualifications; still, the subsequent constitution of 1791 did not satisfy widely-held expectations for broader participation. The second phase marked a radical increase in direct political engagement, enabled by an expansive reading of the right to petition, contravening the spirit of the 1791 constitution yet thus far tolerated by the still-reigning assembly; indeed, a parallel initiative proposed direct elections to the assembly itself. By 1792 a general insurrection had strengthened the hand of the radical Montagnard faction and rendered the 1791 constitution impracticable; the necessity of legitimacy undercut the impulse towards outright dissolution, however, and instead

a new declaration of the principle of popular sovereignty enshrined the goal of general participation. Legislative prose blurring the boundaries of legal obligation enabled jurisdictional interventions through extra-institutional and extra-legal devices pertaining to specific rights—most prominently, the right of resistance—which occurred in concert with a project to elaborate a new constitution. Burgeoning citizenship decrees enacted throughout the cycle reflected the ongoing search for enlarged inclusion. A more indirect reiteration emerged after the suppression of the insurrection in Prairial Year III as the state of extraordinary powers benefited from a view of periods of emergency as inherently expansive while nevertheless subject to some degree of temporal limitation (M. Walker, 2013).

The Legacy of the Revolution for Modern Democracy

From the very onset of the Revolution, modern democracy was included in the long catalogue of desired objectives: popular sovereignty governed by free and equal elections, a republican form of government, equality before the law, citizenship and civil rights, and many more. It would become equally evident that the Revolution would leave a well-defined legacy: far-reaching constitutional doctrines, egalitarian conception of citizenship rights, the separation of Church and State, national sovereignty, an international impact that would ultimately influence the course of democracy even outside of the European continent. Crucially after a hundred years of subsequent history, ancient problems pertaining to the longevity and effectiveness of ensuing democratic systems re-emerged. Restoration absolutism had made their emergence inevitable, and subsequent events (colonial wars, World Wars and the wave of anticolonial revolutions that followed) forced a reconsideration of basic tenets without abandoning the essential principles of either popular sovereignty or the republican form of government. These iterations of democracy nevertheless served to highlight continuities as much as divergences when placed alongside later manifestations in Europe and the Americas (Edelstein, 2015); (Rapport, 2012).

Conclusion

Through dramatic transformations in political institutions and public discourse, the French Revolution decisively influenced the emergence of modern democracy in Europe and beyond. The Revolution witnessed the first significant historical attempts to construct democratic forms of government on a mass or popular basis, and this landmark experience

constituted the most extensive political upheaval the world had yet known. Although the original attempts to establish and institutionalize such democratic forms turned out to be short-lived, they became a potent reference point that shaped future democratic experiments for decades to come. The lived experience of the revolutionary period and the ideas and institutions it provoked generated a legacy that profoundly influenced the expansion and elaboration of democracy throughout the nineteenth century and continues to resonate today. The revolution and the ensuing Napoleonic era exported revolutionary doctrines and governmental models well beyond France's borders, and, through institutional diffusion, shaped the political trajectories of many other countries. The French Revolution introduced several forms of government: an initially limited constitutional monarchy, a more radical democracy oriented towards universal male suffrage, and a subsequent regime that ruled under the authority of a permanent state of emergency. These shifting arrangements gave rise to distinctive political practices and citizen mobilization initiatives, including political clubs and associated activities, the circulation of pamphlets and newspapers, and the involvement in popular societies. On the one hand, under certain regimes, the revolutionary experience witnessed an extraordinary expansion of citizen participation in the political arena. Having previously been the prerogative of socially privileged urban elites, political power in France was ultimately placed—albeit unevenly and contestably—in the hands of wide segments of the population. On the other hand, the revolutionary experience also indicated the difficulties and contradictions encountered when striving to establish democracy in times of acute crisis, with substantial and at times severe curtailments of democratic practice and rights occurring shortly after their initial introduction (Rapport, 2012).

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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