A Critical Examination of the Role of Political Thought in the French Revolution

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/10/12/a-critical-examination-of-the-role-of-political-thought-in-the-french-revolution/

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The French Revolution started on the 17th May 1789 when the newly created National Assembly declared itself the sovereign power in France in the name of the people. It replaced the 'ancien regime' of King Louis XVI and the old ways of feudal, aristocratic hierarchy. Over the following four years the Assembly removed most of the privileges enjoyed by both the upper classes and by the church. However, on the 21st January 1793 King Louis the XVI was guillotined in the Place de Louis XV in front of crowds of Parisians. After he was dead a guard held his severed head up to cries of ''Vive la Republique' and as an eye witness, Vincent Cronin later wrote, 'this cry, a thousand times repeated became the universal shout of the multitude, and every hat was in the air.'[1] After this France was declared a Republic and full power placed in the hands of the National Assembly especially in the innocuously named Committee of Public Safety. On the 5th September 1793 the Convention (under pressure from the Parisian Sans culottes) declared 'terror the order of the day.' From this point the Committee under the control of the infamous Maximilien Robespierre instituted what would later be called the Terror where over 16,000[2] 'saboteurs', 'royalists' and 'enemies of the Republic' were imprisoned and executed. One of the worst atrocities was the destruction of the Federalist city of Lyon, which had surrendered in October 1793 in which 1880[3] people were condemned to death and much of the city was raised to the ground. A German adventurer who travelled to Lyon with the army recalled that 'the blood of those who had been executed a few hours beforehand was still running in the street.'[4]

A monument was erected in the city centre reading 'Lyon made war on Liberty. Lyon is no more.'[5] The Assembly continued to rain terror upon the people of France. On the 10th of June 1794 the Laws of 22nd Prairial established the idea of 'Thought Crime' for the first time. This began the 'Great Terror' in Paris –or as Robespierre called it the 'Republic of Virtue'[6] where people were almost executes for their counter-revolutionary potential alone.[7] The fear of the general populace that they could be next came to a head when Robespierre was shouted down in the Convention on the 26th July. He was declared outlaw, captured (during which he was shot in the jaw) and executed on the 28th followed by most of the leaders of the Terror. This began a time of political turmoil and reconstitution under the Directory until, on the 9th November 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte took power in a coup. As First Consul (he was crowned in 1804) he had almost unlimited power and declared that 'the Revolution is established on the principles with which it began. It is over.'[8]

This essay will attempt to critically examine to what extent political thought and philosophy caused or had an impact on these events. It will be mainly focused on the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (notably The Social Contract and his Discourses[9]) for as Napoleon was famously meant to have said 'If there had been no Rousseau, there would have been no Revolution and without the Revolution I should have been impossible'. It shall be structured around two of the major themes of the Revolution, that of early constitutional reform, especially the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens and then later the period of the terror under the Committee of Public Safety. In each case I will discuss how the influences of Rousseau affected the events and also discuss other factors that may have been of similar or greater influence.

'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.'[10] These words of William Wordsworth sum up the public enthusiasm, among both the burgeoning middle classes and the oppressed working class, which greeted the beginning of the French Revolution. The constitutional reform of France was begun by the so-called Third

Estate (prosperous middle class representatives to the Estates-General) when, on the 26th August 1789, shortly after the famous Tennis Court Oath that they would not disband until France had a Constitution, they published the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens.' This document laid out the rights every citizen can expect – several of which show the mark of Rousseau's writings. Section VI states that 'the law is the expression of the will of the community,'[11] which is very similar to Rousseau's idea of the general will. 'The body politic, therefore, is also a corporate being possessed of a will, and this general will, which tends always to the preservation and welfare of the whole and every part, and is the source of laws…'[12] In Rousseau's idea of the 'social contract' society is controlled by the general will of all participants who rise above their base nature and self-interest and work only for the good of the collective. Sections One and Four can also be viewed in terms of Rousseau's work. Section One declares 'men are born and always continue free, and equal in respect to their rights' and any limits to these rights are 'determinable only by the law.'[13] This is almost identical to Rousseau's idea that 'in the state of society [as oppose to the state of nature] all rights are fixed by law,'[14] and as we have already seen the law is governed by the general will of the people.

In the French Revolution this idea is certainly true to some extent. The removal of feudal tithes and privileges met with much public agreement but the power to decide the laws was not held in common as in Rousseau's definition – 'it can no longer be asked whose business it is to make laws, since they are acts of the general will'[15] – but by the more wealthy middle classes in the Third Estate. The sans culottes in Paris or the serfs in the fields had no more ability to change the law than they had had under the monarchy. While the Declaration widened the political franchise and provided a bill of rights for the citizens it did not create the ideal community of Rousseau's writings.

It has to be said that in the early period of the French Revolution, the era of constitutional reform, political ideas did play a large yet relatively focused role. These ideas were not openly available to the populace in the beginning and so they only affected the new policy makers of the National Assembly. However, as the example of the Declaration shows, they did permeate deep into the new political system, its laws and reforms.

Wordsworth describes the Terror well – 'All perished, all – friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks, head after head, and never heads enough, for those that bade them fall.'[16] The question is why did Robespierre and the Committee feel it necessary to kill so many people in the name of 'liberty, equality and fraternity'? Political ideas and theories certainly played a part in the answer.

It was always said that Robespierre carried around a copy of the Social Contract wherever he went. Like Rousseau he looked at the people in general not individuals. He was a moral crusader who believed that only with the application of moral principles to government could social security and happiness be created. He saw the words 'people' and 'nation' as interchangeable and believed strongly that patriotism was one of the strongest virtues man could achieve. In other words, for him politics was simply a branch of ethics.[17]

To this end, in keeping with the works of Rousseau, Robespierre wanted to create a Republic of Virtue in Revolutionary France. This was the attempt to create a society in which all men were free to enjoy their natural rights in freedom and equality. It can be achieved, Rousseau argues because 'virtue is nothing more than this conformity of the particular wills [of the individual] with the general will, establish the reign of virtue.'[18] This is one of the ways in which the work of Rousseau impacted on the events of the Terror. By attempting to follow Rousseau's idea of a 'reign of virtue' Robespierre had to remove any 'particular wills' that did not conform to the general will or, as Robespierre believed, the Revolution. Anyone who appeared to be against the Revolution and, therefore, the Republic of Virtue had to, as Rousseau famously puts it, 'be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free.'[19] If they still refused to conform then Robespierre thought they must die to make may for the revolution; be they aristocracy, moderates, counter revolutionaries or Federalists as in Lyon. It can be argued that Robespierre went to war on immorality. Robespierre simply came to the logical conclusion of what had been expressed in Rousseau's writings.

The idea of a general will is a very dangerous concept if, as it was with Robespierre. It implies that instead of the democratic principle of people voting for what they want (even if its not good for them) there is a notion of what is really best for them. This can lead to false prophets, such as Robespierre, who believe that they can interpret the

general will without the formality of voting.[20] Rousseau also proposes the idea that the more political parties there are the more they divide the people, interfere with the general will and that 'there are no longer as many parties as there are men [as individuals] but only as many as there are parties. The differences become less numerous and give a result which is less general.'[21] This idea led to the viewing, in France, of any other political party as a faction which had to be removed for the general will to work effectively. These two ideas had the power to turn the French 'republic' into a one party state without a democratic vote – in a sense a totalitarian regime run by the Committee for Public Safety.

However, it has to be said of course that political ideas were not the only reason for the beginning or escalation of the terror. Firstly, some historians argue that the terror is caused by Frances military position. After the execution of the king Great Britain, the Dutch Republic, Spain and several Italian states joined Prussia and Austria in their war against the French Republic.[22] The French army suffered several large defeats and the forces of the other nations entered French territory from almost every direction. The seeming inability of the French government to prevent these attacks only exacerbated the problems of social and political unrest. This unrest prompted harsh crackdowns by the government to maintain basic order. However, this argument is undermined as the terror continued and even increased after France began to win military successes and forced the surrender of most of its enemies.

Also, the individuals themselves must be taken into account. The Committee for Public Safety was made up of men who were mostly unused to wielding such enormous power – Robespierre himself was a provincial barrister and later judge from Arras.[23] Suddenly being in control of the lives of the population of France must have given them almost a sense of unreality where the lives that were lost and the deeds that were done meant very little. Also it is certainly true that by the end Robespierre and other members had become paranoid of plots and conspiracies from invisible counter-revolutionaries.

In conclusion, it would appear that political ideas did play a large role in the French Revolution especially during the Terror under Robespierre. However, it is impossible to say that it is the only, or indeed the major cause of any of the events that happened during that time. The threat of the invasion by almost every sovereign power surrounding France played a part in the rise of the terror and political extremism. Similarly, the people who were the protagonists of the revolution cannot be forgotten because whatever their influences they were the men who made the decisions. While politics did play a part that shouldn't be underestimated it was by no means the only factor in explaining the events of the French Revolution.

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Date written: November 2009