

The French Revolution and the Birth of Communism

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While not being an American event, the French Revolution would have broad and lasting impact on both American history and world history. It would change popular Eschatological beliefs especially in American Evangelicalism. It planted the seeds of European communism. Arguably it may have been the first documented color revolution.

Like most revolutions it was fueled by economic strain and rapidly changing social conditions and demographics some of which was common with the American Revolution and some of which wasn't. Demographically the population of France increased from 21 million in 1715 to 28 million in 1789 with about 80% of the population being peasants (aka serfs or third estate) (1). The percentage living in towns and cities increased to 20% with Paris breaking the 600,000 mark. The economy grew but this didn't benefit those on the bottom. An expanding middle class made up about 10% of the population and the benefits of economic growth largely favored this new class of people with finance and trade doing particularly well. All of these characteristics were distinctly different from the American colonies and the middle class that would develop in America would largely be producers as opposed to traders.

The French economy contracted from 1785 which was made worse by bad harvests in 1787 and 88 leading to higher food prices. France was saddled with war debt from the Anglo-French War from 1778 to 83 which was consuming half of the state revenue just to service it. The tax system was decentralized and complex and had created an impasse between the clergy and nobility on one hand and the third estate on the other. The Catholic Church was the largest land owner in France at the time controlling about 10% of all estates but also provided some level of social services (2 p. 16). While the Catholics were the dominant religious group in France there were French Protestants who, as in New England, tended to align with and support the Enlightenment and many were Masons. Religious affiliation was somewhat regional as it was in America.

A common explanation given for why the American Revolution and the French Revolution went in different directions has been that the American Revolution was based on Christianity and the French on Secular Humanism. The level of religious adherence between the two regions doesn't support this conclusion, however, and enlightenment ideas were really central to both. France certainly could have wound up with some form of constitutional monarchy but didn't. France had a much higher concentration of radicals amongst the liberals, who also tended to be Anglophiles, and involvement of foreign actors tied to England. Thomas Jefferson was ambassador to France at the time and claimed that the British used "*hired agents*" to steer the revolution writing "*[the British] used hired pretenders to crush in their own councils the genuine Republicans*" turning the revolution toward "*unprincipled and bloody tyranny of Robespierre*". He further stated that "*the foreigner [overthrew] by gold the government he could not overthrow by arms*". Much later in a letter to William Plumer dated January 31, 1815 Jefferson summarized in more detail what he saw while ambassador during the revolution:

"[W]hen England took alarm lest France, become republican, should recover energies dangerous to her she employed emissaries with means to engage incendiaries and anarchists in the disorganisation of all government there..." "Incendiaries and anarchists" [infiltrated the Revolution by] "assuming exaggerated zeal for republican government, [then gained control of the legislature] overwhelming by their majorities the honest & enlightened patriots..." Their pockets filled with British gold, these paid agents "intrigued themselves into the municipality of Paris controlled by terrorism the proceedings of the legislature... and finally murdered the king demolishing liberty and government with it."

In the same letter, Jefferson accused Georges Jacques Danton and Jean-Paul Marat by name of being on the British payroll. Danton was a lawyer and orator who became an adversary of Robespierre in calling for the end to the terror and he himself was eventually executed. Marat was a physician, scientist, and radical political journalist who was assassinated in 1793. These two individuals along with Robespierre were the force behind the Jacobin clubs and the revolution. Jefferson referred to the three of them as a *"Jacobin cabal"*. (3)

So was Jefferson right and is there surviving evidence to support his claims. Although this topic is not commonly addressed, there is a good deal of evidence that he was. The radical Jacobin clubs in France were modeled after and closely associated with the London Revolutionary Society that was formed in 1788 with the stated purpose of commemorating the 100th anniversary of the William III's Glorious Revolution (4). This was one of several revolutionary societies in different English cities with the London society being the most vocal and was very supportive of the French Revolution according to their own records (5). In terms of religious affiliation there were some dissident Anglicans but the group was principally Unitarian. Their address (letter read aloud to legislators) to the French National Assembly on November, 1789 led directly to the formation of the Jacobin clubs (6 pp. 593-615). Up to this point in time, which was four months after the storming of Bastille, King Louie XIV, who provided significant support to the American Revolution was still on the throne and was working to form a constitutional monarchy. After 1792 the London Revolutionary Society and the movement reorganized back into the London Correspondence Society. The English intellectual revolutionaries along with their French Jacobin counterparts were notably not nationalist but represented an early form of globalism calling for *"cosmopolitanism, internationalism, and universalism"* putting aside each countries interests for the greater interests of mankind.

The British aristocracy or ruling class clearly wouldn't be advocates of the Jacobin thought and would have to see the revolution as a threat if it was to become a contagion. There is also fairly extensive specific documentation of British agents involved with Royalists and Constitutionlists groups during the same period and they were certainly acquiring intelligence from all parties. What Britain was interested in was weakening a long term adversary and managing the outcome to suit their interests. (7)

British meddling on all sides and factions of the French Revolution could simply be explained as people of different political perspectives in one country supporting their ideological brethren in another country which is commonly how such involvement is explained away today. The strongest point supporting more direct involvement in a way that substantially influenced the outcome runs through

Francois-Noel Babeuf (also known as “Gracchus”) who led a group called “*the conspiracy of Equals*” that tried to overthrow the last revolutionary government in 1796 (referred to as the Directory). This attempt failed and Babeuf was put to death. Marx and Engels referred to him as the first modern communist although the word was not commonly in use then and his life predated the industrial revolution. Babeuf derived his ideas from British mentors some of whom are thought to be intelligence agents. One of those was James Rutledge who was an Englishman living in Paris who Babeuf was acquainted with prior to the revolution. Rutledge, who was a fellow radical, introduced Babeuf to *Courrier del Europa* which was a French revolutionary newspaper that was distributed in France but published in London. Babeuf became a regular correspondent. Where the story gets more interesting is that the paper’s owner was Samuel Swinton who was a wine merchant but previously was a lieutenant in the Royal Navy and had performed diplomatic missions for Lord North. French historian Helene Maspero Clerc concluded in a 1985 paper that Swinton was a British agent based on his correspondence with Secretary of the Admiralty Philip Stevens and that the paper was a front. Apart from this theory there is no reasonable explanation as to why Swinton would own such a publication.

The entire revolutionary period in France was complex and unstable with the country continually at war along with the multiple phases on the domestic revolution. After a prolonged period of house arrest King Louis XIV was guillotined on January 21, 1793. Following the execution, a large older man with a beard who had been prominent in the murder of priests during the September riots ascended to the scaffold, covered his hands in the king’s blood and sprinkled it on the people shouting, “*I baptize you in the name of Jacob and Freedom?*” (8) (9 p. 38) An interesting question is who is Jacob? Some think it to be Jacob Molet who was a templar leader executed by the king of France or possibly it is a reference to the Masons of the Scottish rite who were supporters of the Stuart Jacobites. Others think it may be a reference to Jacob as he wrestled with God or potentially in a broad sense to Judaism. (8)

The span of time linked to the reign of terror is from the 5th of September 1793 to 27 July, 1794 when Robespierre was guillotined as the revolution eventually ate its own. Both dates are arguable as the violence ramped up and died off gradually (10). Other views on the start date are September with the September Massacres or March when the Revolutionary Councils came into existence. Along with political motives, it also became a means to settle grudges and also coincided with the imposition of price controls. Violating the price controls could result in someone being declared an enemy of the state but the farmers simply produced less. During this period 16,600 people were executed on charges and as many as 40,000 more were summarily executed or died awaiting trial (10 p. 77). Probably the most notable aspect of the Revolution and the Reign of Terror was the directed effort to erase Christianity which extended not just to the faith but to any common or cultural memory.

In the early stages of the revolution it is notable and perhaps a bit surprising how accepting the church was of these radical anti-Christian reforms including elimination of the 10% tithe that allowed the church to provide some level of social services including education, welfare, and health care (11 p. 188). This most effected local clergy and the people they served. Contrary to the common belief that the church and the government was one prior to the revolution, the Christian church in most of its forms uniquely held to a concept of separation of authority. Princeton scholar Bernard Lewis, who is an authority on Islam, observed that this separation “*is, in a profound sense, Christian.*” (11 p. 191) The

ideas of Voltaire and his followers shaped the revolution and led to the bloody attempt to fully de-Christianize France. One of Voltaire's followers, Denis Diderot who died shortly before the revolution in 1784 stated, *"Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entails of the last priest"* (11 p. 194) and this could be considered a guiding vision of the revolutionaries. Quoting Rodney Stark on the significance of Voltaire, *"To gauge how much Voltaire influenced the actual leaders of the French Revolution, it must be noted that Anacharsis Cloots, who was a foremost dechristianizer, led the campaign to have Voltaire "pantheonized"²¹—the revolutionary equivalent of being canonized. Thus, in 1791, with elaborate ceremony, a bust of Voltaire was placed in a former Parisian church that had been converted into the Pantheon."* (11 pp. 194-5)

Elimination of the tithe was just the beginning followed by the confiscation of all church property on November 2, 1789 and then by a selloff of church property starting the next month. In February of 1790 all monasteries and convents were forced to close and the orders dissolved. Even after this the church continued to participate in the Assembly. In July of 1790 the Assembly passed a law making the priests employees of the state and greatly limiting their functions as well as requiring them to swear an oath of allegiance to the state and to renounce the church. About 24% of the clergy did this which then finally drove the church to oppose the revolutionary government. The Assembly then criminalized all clergy who failed to take the oath.

In 1791 the Assembly was disbanded and replaced by the Legislative Assembly and then the Committee of Public Safety which was made up of anti-religious zealots who wouldn't stop at disbanding the church and taking its property but sought to put an end to religion entirely. In September of 1792 a mob egged on by the revolutionary leaders drowned three bishops and more than 200 priests in Paris and many more in Lyons (11 p. 196) in an event which came to be known as the September Massacre. Also in 1792 large quantities of metal were confiscated from the churches in part to inhibit the giving of sacraments. Following the execution of the King in January of 1793, 16,594 victims were guillotined in Paris and another 25,000 throughout the rest of France (11 p. 196). In October of 1793 a law was passed making priests who had not sworn loyalty to the state and anybody harboring them subject to immediate execution. In November of 1793 the French calendar was changed to eliminate Sundays and switched to three ten day weeks a month and all street names with religious references were changed. On September 29, 1795 all public forms of religious expression were banned including holiday decorations. Cults were created to replace Christianity with the most well known being the Cult of Reason. During services girls dressed in white robes danced around a woman dressed as the goddess or reason.

On November 10 of 1799 Napoleon Bonaparte, who a few years earlier was an obscure military officer, overthrew the Directory and the parliamentarians, who he described as *"hot air"*, scattered as the two elected assemblies were dissolved. The humanistic attack on religion saw groups of believers start to question the postmillennial optimism that was characteristic of the *"enlightenment"* in general and the Unitarians and progressive Christian groups in particular. A new sort of eschatology would rise starting in Scotland and England with small groups of followers and gradually spread to America where it would gradually become a widely held theology with significant geo-political impact. The Catholic Church was reinstated in 1801 and Napoleon's rise to power actually strengthened monarchies throughout Europe for a period of time. The forces of liberalism, however, didn't retreat for long.

Communist movements that developed in France in the decades that followed were an offshoot of the Jacobin legacy. In England there was another sort of movement that would seem to be diametrically opposed to Marxism but still had some strange common points. The “*Young England*” movement sought a return to feudalism claiming that the problem of “*pauperism*” that became increasingly pronounced during the industrial revolution was caused principally by the rising bourgeoisie. The leading voice for Young England was David Urquhart who in the terms of the time would be considered a “*reactionary*”. Urquhart wrote in his 1845 book *Wealth and Want*, “*Serfdom, I assert, to have been a better condition than dependent labour... The villain was not the slave of the lord, but...a freer man than any labourer today* (12 pp. 14-17).” It would seem as if Urquhart and Marx would have been on opposite poles but they seemed to have a mutual admiration where their ideas in many converged. Marx biographer John Spargo wrote of this surprising relationship, “*In David Urquhart he [Marx] found a kindred soul to whom he became greatly attached...The influence which David Urquhart obtained over Marx was remarkable. Marx probably never relied upon the judgment of another man as he did upon Urquhart.*” (13 p. 198)

The Young England group became the English reformers of the 1840’s advocating policies that were to help the poor and working class including attempting to legislate a maximum 10 hour work day. In this Young England became aligned with the communist and socialists. While the specific proposals may or may not have been good policy at the time, it placed Tory aristocrats like John Manors and George Smyth in alignment with the leaders of the far left like Robert Owen and Joseph Raynor Stephens and Marx became aligned with Urquhart (4). They both shared a vision of a paternal elite class with everyone else being part of a serf class. In this regard all modern political philosophies tend to be similar but differ principally in how this comes about and who comprises the elite rulers.

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