

Primary source analysis: the french revolution and human rights

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Perhaps one of the most unique eras in world history was the Enlightenment, a time period in which intellectuals like Voltaire, Adam Smith and Denis Diderot “ Observed with unprecedented acuity the evils and flaws of human society in their day” (Tignor, Adelman, Aron, Kotkin, March and, and, 621) and sought to change the worldview of their generation both socially and politically. Those intellectuals believed that by sharing an aspiration to spread knowledge, human judgments could resist ignorance. Today, the ideals of those Enlightenment thinkers have become the foundation of many, if not all human societies.

The Enlightenment had a great impact on the world, especially on Europeans who were customary to old practices of fixed social hierarchies, in which the king held absolute power. The knowledge gained from this intellectual movement brought about many changes in society. Minority groups such as women “ gained confidence in their own worthiness---to create art, to write books, to observe the world accurately, and perhaps even rule their states” (Tignor, Adelman, Aron, Kotkin, Marchand, and, 619). The Enlightenment also paved the way for a newer approach towards the concept of human rights.

Human beings were granted certain individual rights known as their “ natural rights” that was always convenient by law. Before the French Revolution, European cultures were restricted by “ two major institutions: the Catholic and Protestant churches and the dynastic court systems” (Tignor, Adelman, Aron, Kotkin, Marchand, 617) where individual rights were given based on social ranks. The Enlightenment influenced the concept of human rights in France in that society had a better awareness of their world, which

contributed to the emergence of cultural ambitions such as women forming political clubs to debate for social and political equality.

Traditional governing ideas were gradually replaced by new governing visions to protect the natural rights of citizens over the king's authority. For instance, prior "traditional Christian belief in original sin and God's mysterious tamperings with natural forces and human events" (Tignor, Adelman, Aron, Kotkin, Marchand, 617) were abandoned. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens was also established, which helped change the social and political structure of the country.

Additionally, and perhaps the most influence the Enlightenment had on the concept of human rights in France was that it provided "freedom of religion, freedom of the press, no taxation without representation, elimination of excessive punishments, and various safeguards against arbitrary administration" (Hunt, 77). Having been greatly influenced by the American War of Independence, "French officers who served in North America arrived home fired by the ideals of liberty that they saw in action in the New World" (Hunt, 13).

French deputies met in 1789 with constitutional ideals adopted from Americans like Thomas Jefferson and George Mason, establishing the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens in an effort to drive the "ideas of rights and liberties in a more universalistic direction" (Hunt, 13). A more Universalistic direction basically meant replacing ideals of the old order with knowledge gained from the Enlightenment. The Declaration of the Rights of

Man and Citizens empowered all French citizens with protected liberties and granted all men equality under the law.

It also declared that the basis of all sovereignty rests most importantly in the nation. Additionally, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens not only grant these rights, but “ trumpeted individual rights, the principle of equality and connected more closely the concept of the people with the nation” (Tignor, Adelman, Aron, Kotkin, Marchand, 647). It is obvious that the document had great significance. Prior to the declaration, political and social situations raised questions that were often left unanswered, usually sparking tensions between government and society.

France’s government was based on the old order, a monarchy system in which feudalism was practiced and aristocratic values were vital. Under such system, “ legitimacy depended on the king’s will and maintenance of a historic order that granted privileges according to ranks and status” (Hunt, 15). The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens granted all people of the French society equality under the law, yet the content of those “ true, inalienable natural rights of humanity” remained undefined (Hunt, 6).

Several national assemblies were held, but not one of them acknowledged women’s political rights. Rather, all of those assemblies dodged granting women equal political rights. Women were still forbidden “ the rights to meet as a group, draft grievances, or vote” (Hunt, 60). As a result, women, influenced by the declaration, debated for specific rights when “ they saw the opening created by the convocation of the Estates General and hoped to

make their claims for inclusion in the promised reform” (Hunt, 60). Between 1790 and 1791, members of a group called Cercle Social, formed by agitated women, campaigned for equal political rights. Their campaign exposed discrimination against women that denied them equal rights in marriage and education. In that same year (1791), female activist Marie Olympe De Gouges issued the Declaration of the Rights of women in an effort to prove that women had been excluded from the promises of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens. In her declaration, she requested that “ The law should be the general will. All citizenesses and citizens should take part...in its formation. It must be the same for everyone.

All citizenesses and citizens, being equal in its eyes, should be equally admissible to all public dignities, offices and employments” (Hunt, 27). She argued that women and men were born equal in rights. Therefore, women should have all those rights that a man enjoys such as holding public offices. However, all of these actions of the Parisian women soon increased the National Convention’s negativity towards women and their rights. From October 29-30, 1793, the National Convention held a discussion about women’s political clubs and abolished all women’s clubs.

They claimed that women were “ hardly capable of lofty conceptions and cogitations” because “ their body and social role made them unsuited for public affairs” (Hunt, 29). Yet, they felt threatened by women’s organized political activities. The Age of Enlightenment significantly changed the fundamentals of European cultures, and French society during the eighteenth century. It took them away from their rituals of the old regime

where government was dominated by monarchy. It formulated ideas on how the churches and the dynastic court systems could be reformed.

The Enlightenment also influenced the establishment of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens. However, fundamental questions about rights especially that of women, remained unanswered. The declaration did little to change the inferior status of women. “ None of the national assemblies ever considered legislation granting political rights to women (who could neither vote nor hold office), and on a few occasions on which the possibility arose, however tentatively, the deputies greeted it with widespread derision and incredulity” (Hunt, 27).