

To what extent did the period 1789-1794 witness a 'cultural revolution' in France...

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



In defining the period of 1789-1794 as a having witnessed a cultural revolution, we are assuming its independence from political and economic change and revolution. Whilst the connections between culture and politics may fluctuate, they remained and still do remain inextricably linked.

Therefore, the extent to which we can define this period as a 'cultural revolution' is also dependent on how we approach the societal and cultural changes that took place; making sure to evaluate the timeline of cultural change in line with broader political shifts. Through looking at the effect of the Enlightenment which stretched throughout the period and its subsequent influence on education, the press and literature as a whole, we must acknowledge the effect it had both in society and in politics. How far was the Enlightenment movement a motivating factor in political change, or vice versa? Moreover, the discussion of the significant increase in the rhythm of popular culture feeds into this, again posing the same question.

Development of social mobility and public political education evidently entailed a shift in French culture in the period of 1789-1794. Paying specific attention to the mobilisation of people in rural areas and their subsequent involvement in politics, this essay will analyse to what extent these changes can be termed as a 'cultural revolution' and are not just defined more simply as broader cultural shifts. This naturally leads to the question of whether the cultural element of this period of political and social turmoil in France, can be termed as a 'cultural revolution' or whether it is actually an example of mass cultural destruction. We can analyse how far the actions of the French Revolution represented radical cultural reform, and subsequently how far this was independent of political change. Starting from the beginning

of the Revolution in 1789 and following its progression past the Terror, all the way into 1794, we must analyse how culture and society has shifted and developed, if at all. And therefore whether these shifts are compatible with the definition of revolution and not just synonymous with the political revolution that is widely accepted to have taken place.

Jules Michelet described the French Revolution as the revolution of the people, asserting that it can be best understood as the victory of the Enlightenment over social interests.[1] Yet, whilst many of the key values and principles of the French Revolution were founded in the roots of the Enlightenment, historians who argue that the nature of the Revolution was more cultural than political have found it incredibly difficult to discuss and argue this point with much certainty.[2] Patrice Higonnet cites the tendency for such historians to refer to book sales statistics in support of such an approach, remarking on the results as 'disappointing'.[3] Unsatisfactory perhaps, due to the boom of press and booksellers in the capital and not in more rural areas, thus completely failing to discuss to what extent these developments reached across France and outside of the capital.[4] Causing issue with the way one attributed the changes of Enlightenment culture to the social changes seen in the midst of the French Revolution. However, the press development seen throughout this period is definitely of note regarding the extent to which the revolution can be seen to have witnessed a radical culture shift. Critical to the background of cultural change was the emergence of public opinion backing these press developments. Fostering the widespread publication of political pamphlets. Even though public opinion was understood to have been the expression of the nation's elite,

and not of its marginal members at all, it still demonstrates a substantial shift in the cultural structure of France from the year 1789.

Jeremy Popkin refers to the creation of a polemical newspaper press in 1789, discussing its role as a 'vehicle for ideology' and an efficient means of commercialising political discourse.[5] This commercialisation of political knowledge, not only expanded the reach of a component of French culture previously excluded for the elite classes, but also enabled journalists to free themselves from the antiquated routine of the old regime. Moving from the tradition of high politics, where matters of the state entirely concerned the monarchy and the nobility, to the distribution of political knowledge, implies a cultural development to a seemingly revolutionary extent. However, one must not ignore its occurrence as the consequence of political enlightenment. This does therefore presuppose the question of whether culture and politics are inextricably linked. Considering that the 1789-1791, civil society appeared more important than the state, the notion of 'cultural revolution' seems relatively plausible.[6] Nevertheless, by 1793-1794, the revolutionary definition of sovereignty placed civil society at the mercy of the state, thus rendering the existence of a 'cultural revolution' a concept that may have been realised at the beginning of the revolutionary period. Prolific historian on the French Revolution, Robert Darnton has stressed the importance of the diffusion of Enlightenment thought which accompanied the developing commercialisation of the printed word in the eighteenth century. [7] It is therefore unsurprising that when the French cultural revolutionaries seized power in 1789, the dissemination of underground Enlightenment

literature was a successful venture. Yet the extent to which this defined the French Revolution as a having witnessed radical cultural shifts in the same way that it did political is highly questionable.

Whilst the intent to spread the ideals of the Enlightenment was present at the beginning of the Revolution in 1789, the increasing desire for entertaining literature as opposed to politically educational publications demonstrates the difference in high enlightenment ideas and 'low-life' literary interest and subsequently why this change does not equate to a 'cultural revolution'.^[8] Thus some might argue that instead of laying the foundations of a 'cultural revolution' witnessed from the period 1789-1794, the Revolution was in fact responsible for the complete undoing of these Enlightenment ideals of virtue and truth that may have fostered the beginnings of a 'cultural revolution' until 1793.^[9] The destruction of the infrastructure of licit publishing which occurred between 1789 and 1793 highlights the level of influence the Enlightenment ideals had on the cultural changes witnessed in this period. However, cultural changes as the result of political motivations and pressures. By removing the censors, inspectors and the various systems of literary privileges and publishing regulations, as specified in Article 11 of the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789.^[10] French press culture saw wave of free speech and inflammatory pamphlets which evidently fed the momentum behind the revolution, especially in distributing political ideas and enhancing revolutionary political culture in more rural areas.^[11] Following the October Days of 1789, the National Assembly took steps to formulating a legal regime of press

regulation. The subsequent clash between the rights of authors' versus the rights of public expression was reflected in Sieyès' proposal of 1790.

[12]Which sought to fuse these two competing visions of Enlightenment cultural practice whilst incorporating them with the values of the political revolution taking place.[13]Such an explicit shift from a society of ultimately censored proliferation of political literature, to the notion of free speech and the increasing popularity for inflammatory pamphleting clearly notes existence of radical cultural change. The press revolution was arguably largely responsible for developing a style of political culture that proliferated throughout the duration of 1789-1794. Pamphlets, whilst initially being directed at a literate audience, were also intended to indirectly influence the political opinions of the illiterate. Even so literacy rates had risen substantially and periodicals were well established.[14]Harvey Chisick argues that explosion of political pamphlets and development of journalism enabled the development of a political culture which was well suited to the social and cultural conditions of the late eighteenth century.[15]The crucial element here is the development of a ' political culture'. The development of the political culture, as highlighted by Chisick was undoubtedly integral to the progress of the French Revolution as a whole, but is far too intertwined with the broader political shifts to be categorised as having also experienced a ' cultural revolution' in itself.

The increasing rhythm of popular culture witnessed throughout the period of 1789-1794 marks a clear development in public engagement both with society and with politics. However, this is not to suggest that the mobilisation

and growth of popular culture was rapid or particularly revolutionary.

Revolutionary political culture materialised slowly. Instead, French men and women began the revolution with a clear set of ideals on how they wished to be described and how they wished for things to change within their society.

As a result it is imperative to recognise the correlation between the development of popular culture, the growth of revolutionary political culture and subsequently how and or whether this fed into a 'cultural revolution'.

For much of the twentieth century, debates surrounding the relationship between culture and politics during the French Revolution were heavily influenced by historians whose attitudes were strongly informed by their own political views. From the perspective of Marxist and socialist historians, the French Revolution represented an upheaval in popular culture, with the Terror being equated as the only viable solution to the war.[16]

However, whilst debates surrounding major examples of severe cultural shifts have changed, there has been a refocus on social history in the twenty-first century which has sought to focus on the impact of the populous in

determining revolutionary culture and its subsequent impact on French society.[17]

In line with more contemporary historical research which has seen a renewed focus on the social history of the French Revolution, when we are presented with the idea of a 'cultural revolution' in light of the

French Revolution one is naturally directed to assume a breakdown of elitism and class barriers and the emergence of social mobility. The prospect of universal values highlighted in the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen did indeed represent a core aspect of the motivations behind the French

Revolution and perhaps the potential for a 'cultural revolution' (specifically

Article 4).[18]However, in actuality, when partnered with the developing political culture there is a clear shift away from what we would understand to be a 'cultural revolution' and more towards cultural disarray from 1793 onwards.

The polarisation of the church is a key example in this discussion. Rebellion against the tyrannical institution of the church represented an attempt at the transposition of the democratic ideals that underpinned the French Revolution onto the integral structure of religion, whereby members of the clergy could be elected instead of being internally appointed. Following the reforms in 1789, the Catholic Church no longer enjoyed the independence of being a privileged corporate body within the body politic and was subsequently nationalised.[19]Popular culture saw a transposal from the emphasis on sovereignty in the form of the Pope to the demotion of the church to the nation.[20]The attack on the 'ecclesiastical compromise' of 1790 which sought to retain ritual and sacraments of the church was a pure form of revolutionary ideology.[21]Such attacks and subsequent shift from what had been such an integral component of French culture represented to some extent the makings of a 'cultural revolution'. To replace this structure would emerge a state where the relationship between the state and the citizen was rendered more important than the order of corporation as seen in the old Regime. Religion represented a major component in popular perceptions of stability throughout the old regime, especially due to its dominance in rural areas of France. Therefore the new emphasis on reason and scientific thought was perhaps a desire towards achieving a 'cultural

revolution'.[22]However, this attempt to 'break the chains of despotism' that the church represented threatened to cull the majority of the population who were still devoted Catholics.[23]The tensions of this conflict, Lynn Hunt argues laid the ground work for the 'justified' use of terror to achieve revolutionary ideals. This total inversion of what began as an attempt to rid the state of a force of tyranny, culminated in a period of such extreme violence it is surely void of the crux of the Revolution; virtue.

Maximilian Robespierre persistently spoke of liberty as the leading motivation behind the revolution, yet it is questionable whether the French Revolution was successful in enhancing liberty, or if it only enhanced state power.[24]In the same way it is questionable whether the ideal of instigating a 'cultural revolution' in the midst of the French Revolution became a reality. Historians, as well as many art historians have described the period of 1789-1793 not as an example of 'cultural revolution', but due to the destruction of cultural property, the prime example of progressive revolutionary politics.[25]As the political revolution taking place grappled political powers from privileged orders, the French Revolution in culture was simultaneously working to shift the artistic patrimony from the same elites and gave them to the nation.[26]For example, the history of the Louvre as a museum begins on the day the Bourbon monarchy finally collapsed, with the royal collection being declared as national property.[27]The cultural values and principles of the old regime did not disappear under the pretence of those of the Revolution. Instead the National Assembly showed explicit interest in announcing its intentions on completing the museums completion.

[28]Subsequently, the Revolution was responsible for 'nationalising the high culture of the past'. [29]Kennedy, like Andrew McClellan is careful in asserting the existence of a 'cultural revolution'. Rather, allowing for analysis of the redevelopment and redistribution of cultural practices of the old regime and their subsequent integration into Revolutionary ideals.

[30]Kennedy marks this point in his analysis the treatment of certain cultural properties; noting that they were largely redistributed as opposed to being burned as many would have preferred. [31]

Except the dilemma was evidently more complex than this. The general tendency up to 1792 appeared to work in favour of preserving the fine arts that were deemed to demonstrate 'untrue' values. [32]Stanley J. Idzerda noted, significantly earlier than Kennedy. That the tendencies of revolutionaries regarding the preservation or destruction of cultural property varied across the period. [33]Just as our perception of a 'cultural revolution', too, varies across the period. Yet this attitude concerning the indecision between preservation or destruction of the arts disappeared under the uprising of the Paris Commune in 1792, whereby August 10 marked the collapse of the monarchy and the beginning of a epidemic of iconoclasm which would last for another three years. [34]The change seen here was one from the separation of political tyranny and the cultural property of France to the equation that the two were synonymous with each other. As a result, separating politics from culture becomes increasingly difficult as the Revolution progresses, invariably leading to the description of the period as

having witnessed the development of revolutionary culture instead of a 'cultural revolution'.

Moreover, to describe the period as having witnessed a 'cultural revolution' becomes increasingly challenging as examples of cultural property are increasingly equated with the politics of the old regime. With zealous republicans eventually embracing the political side of the revolution, yet remaining more apprehensive about its cultural aspect, art works that were once recognised as defining features of French history were now defined as symbols of the monarchy and the regime the revolutionaries were trying to extinguish.[35] For example, the Temporary Arts Commission, founded in December 1793, purposed with the preservation of the remaining art works of the old regime which possessed a purely historical or aesthetic value, failed to protect against the destruction of cultural property.[36] The commission ordered all images of the House of Capet be destroyed due to their ties to the history of despotism of the old regime.[37] Actions such as these demonstrate how in the mind of the revolutionary, art and politics were inextricably connected, especially when one considers the protests against such destructions were met with justifications of patriotism. Defining these changes as either a solely political or a 'cultural revolution' would be to blatantly ignore the fluctuating relationship between the two concepts across the period. As the culture born of liberty came as the result of the revolutionary political discourse in its triumph over tyranny.[38]

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the emergence of revolutionary festivals as a replacement for the traditional festivals of the old regime.

Whilst they represented a cornerstone in cultural development in France, they were undoubtedly underpinned by the concepts of political revolution. Traditional festivals epitomised the territory of distinctions and articulated the hierarchy of rank in society.[39] This was just as true in religious celebrations before the revolution. Revolutionary festivals instead would attempt to offer individuality in its suppression of hierarchies and the homogenisation of the human condition.[40] Subsequently making it indispensable to the legislative system. However, Ozouf in her seminal work on Festivals in the French Revolution, argued that the Revolution lived in an 'intellectualised overestimation of itself' where by politics and culture could remain distinct enough for the other to develop and change not to the detriment of the other.[41] Drawing upon this idea, one can see that revolutionary festivals provide the perfect example of this difficulty regarding the existence of a 'cultural revolution', in that they epitomise socio-political blindness. Aiming for spontaneity, yet in actuality resulting in a number of precautionary and coercive measures, they mirror the intentions and ideals of the revolution witnessed in 1789, to the political and cultural nightmare which took place in 1794.

Whilst the period in the French Revolution from 1789-1794 fostered a revolutionary culture, this is not to say that it witnessed a 'cultural revolution' in its own right. More specifically, the period witnessed a rollercoaster of cultural developments, which sometimes building upon revolutionary ideals, did not completely denounce the entirety of pre-existing French culture. Instead, choosing to retain certain aspects which were

deemed worthwhile in themselves. In this knowledge we cannot make the distinction of a 'cultural revolution'. As to do this would be to blatantly ignore the importance of pre-existing French history and culture that remained integral to society. Instead, we can make note of how different areas of France will have experienced the cultural developments in different ways, some in a more revolutionary manner than others. Although this analysis has operated a hard focus on the cultural changes according to Paris within the period, this is not to denounce the relevance of rural revolutionary experience. This focus must be made when exploring such a broad conceptual question as failing to do so would mean neglecting the groundwork of cultural change in France. Whilst culture and politics were far more distinct in Paris, surely the same cannot be said for rural areas which relied heavily on the relationship between culture and politics in their day to day lives, as demonstrated in the importance of the polarisation of the church. Therefore, it would be far more accurate to describe the period as having witnessed substantial cultural developments, as a direct result of major political shifts - making sure to place emphasis on the role of political revolution in influencing the cultural developments. Ultimately, whilst certain areas of French culture certainly saw radical changes in light of broader revolutionary developments (prime examples being in the church and iconoclasm). This does not mean that the period of 1789-1794 witnessed a 'cultural revolution' as it chose to only repudiate the culture of the old regime rather than creating a new one.[42] Culture had become too embroiled in the network of social-political interests for it to be defined as a

revolution in its own right. Evidence of this is blatant in the precariousness of revolutionary creations after 1794.

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[6] *Higonnet* , p. 83.

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[41]Ibid, p. 10.

[42]Kennedy, p. 375.