Introduction many factors that caused societal unrest

Introduction

Western Europe made a significant contribution to the economies of the present day. This rapid growth did not just occur spontaneously, it must have originated somewhere. Many studies show that the growth must have occurred over the preceding centuries starting from the 16th century. Western Europe grew in its influence greatly by the time it was approaching the 19th century. In this essay, we are going to look at the history of Western Europe in the 17th -18th century with emphasis on the causes of societal unrest prior to the French revolution, the enlightenment era, and the rise of the state system.

Causes of societal unrest before the French revolution

There were many factors that caused societal unrest in Europe before the French Revolution to the extent that one can not easily categorize all the events.

However, a better understanding can be arrived at if one looks at these factors from three perspectives. These are the European society, the enlightenment ideas, and economic considerations. The European society: Before the French revolution, the European society had remained unchanged for many years because power was hereditary. This saw those in power and wealthy pass their wealth and power to their kin. The common and poor people were forced to support the rich from the little they earned. These wealthy people would in turn squander the money on lavish lifestyles without regard to the plight of the peasants. Enlightenment thinking was another

major cause of societal unrest. The enlightenment made people aware of their natural rights.

Philosophers started coming up with theories about ethical and social values. People became aware of how individual rights can influence politics to put in place a better world of humanity. The unrest was also precipitated by economic factors. The European economy began suffering both domestically and in the foreign lands. Europe began losing control over its ability to sustain a powerful, influential and competitive system.

The monarchies also started experiencing financial difficulties and therefore, more pressure was put on the poor to support them (Halsall 1). Crop failures brought about famine that saw food prices increase. For instance, in France, hording of corn increased bread prices which were a staple food for the French.

The fear of corn and grain scarcity increased anxiety among the peasants. This meant that the little that was earned was spent on buying bread; therefore, trade in other goods deteriorated stretching the economy further. These problems reached a complex turn and the people could hold no more. The issue of inequality had to be addressed urgently. People believed that the majority of Europe's citizens, in this case, the peasants, had suffered enough at the hands of the rich who imposed taxes on them. They could therefore, not tolerate any longer. They therefore, planned to stand to protect their dignity. They lived through many years of lavish lifestyles by the monarchies and privileged few who held them in contempt.

They saw that the only solution was to fight for equal opportunities in the public affairs that included employment, politics and education. Enlightenment ideas helped in addressing inadequacies in Europe's social domain so as to forge a better Europe for everyone not just the rich and the nobility (Halsall 1).

The Enlightenment

The enlightenment was an intellectual movement in Europe especially Western Europe. This movement was majorly influenced by the emergence of modern science and by the effects of the religious conflicts that ensued after the reformation. Those who were committed to this movement believed in secular views that are based on reason in which they hoped changes will be made regarding the life and thinking of man. The enlightenment was concerned more with the natural rights of people which they had been denied for many years.

They came up with different opinions on how to reform the governments and the whole society, but converged on one issue, to bring about human liberty. It had become a norm for people especially the poor to be denied their rights; the peasants were expected to pay taxes, which were then used irresponsible by the monarchies and the wealthy groups. The peasants had no chance of ascending to political power, because the monarchies passed on power to their people. This had been embedded in the society to the extent of being accepted as a norm (Hooker 1). The enlightenment sought to change this ' Norm", to give people the freedom from arbitrary power, freedom to participate in trade, to speech, to explore their talents and make their way in the world without restriction or pressure. It sought to change the

prevailing order of Christianity especially in the Catholic Church, which according to them, had been a major cause of misery and intolerance in Europe. The enlightenment also brought about changes in taxations, by proposing that items should be taxed basing on necessity and luxury. This changed the way taxed had been implemented by taxing heavily the luxury items that most of the wealthy and the monarchs used, and reducing tax on necessity items so that the poor and the peasants could afford a decent living.

This had never happened in the history of Europe. The enlightenment movement argued that naturally, all men are born free and equal, that it's only the increase in wealth, which on most occasions, is done unfairly, that strips man of his natural liberties (Hooker 1). The government was therefore forced to respect the rights of individuals especially the right to life and own property. In this way a kind of contract is formed between the people and their governments. This ensured that people could only be loyal to a government which is loyal to them. This changed the way politics in Europe was handled. Governments seen not to be loyal to their people, encountered resistance from the people, leading to conflicts such as the French revolution (Hooker 1).

The rise of state systems in Europe

The enlightenment era did not just influence the laws of nature, but also influenced the 17th century rulers in Europe in building their own states along rational lines.

Political regimes of the time become centralized; territorial boundaries were formed with more bureaucracy. Imperial and feudal authority was no longer welcome, and instead, it was replaced by state sovereignty. There are many factors that were responsible for the reformation of political institutions in Europe in the 17th century. Three of these factors are seen to have been the most influential.

The first factor was the never ending wars that were expensive and therefore, exerted pressure on the rulers. This paved way for political bargains that later led to adaptation of administrative units. Social struggles ensued bringing about drastic changes in the nature of political power (" Flow of History" 1).

The second factor that influenced state system was the changes that were being experienced in the European economy. These changes were supported by the rising preindustrial capitalism and the growth in direct trade connections with other regions mainly Africa, Asia, and the American region. Trade routes brought about major changes in the way the trading parties influenced the resources of others. The trading connections also played a role in determining the revenues and powers of many rulers. And the third factor is the enlightenment which has already been alluded to. It is believed that the new ideas especially those from the enlightenment and protestant reformation influenced the shaping and putting in place new states in Europe (" Flow of History" 1).

The variations seen in the present states were brought about by the unequal expansion of dynastic power. The rulers at this time greatly expanded their

powers to cover " towns, churches, and even over other nobles" (" Flow of History" 1). This created new monarchies in Western Europe. In Germany, territorial princes also started amassing power. It was not just principalities and kingdom that participated in this.

In Italy, city states, and wealthy families established their own control over independent regions (" Flow of History" 1).

Similarities and differences in state development in England and France

In the 17th century, both England and France had monarchial systems of power. This started to change in the later half of the 17th century. England started at this adopted the parliamentary system. The French ruler, Louis XIV, did the opposite. He weakened the French general assembly and strengthened his own office.

He employed absolutism in his rule claiming that he was send by God. Royal absolutism was also introduced in England in the first half of the 17th century but failed because parliament had a lot of control in the government. The parliament was also supported by the merchants and the nobles who owned land. This made sure that members to the parliament could be elected and replaced if need be, instead of an absolute monarch with no checks and balances. Royal stubbornness to share powers in control the country led England's civil war. Any effort at absolutism died as parliament survived becoming a major arm in the English government. Over the years, parliament gained more power over the monarch and eventually was accepted as England's governmental body (Hooker 1).

In the middle of the 17th century, France was thrown into disarray when the scattered parliaments started claiming a right to power. The nobility also wanted power and saw that the only way to get it was to remove the monarch from office. Nobles started organizing groups of fighters who went round terrorizing people so as to weaken the power of the king. They went to the extent of hiring Spanish troops, but their attempt failed. This made people believe that they needed a powerful monarch to protect them. At the death of the cardinal, Louis XIV took over the monarch and become the absolute ruler that the people wanted to restore order in the country. Louis placed himself at the head of the government, where he was able to control all government functions.

Unlike England, there were no parliamentary groups to challenge his authority. Another contrasting feature is that the French monarch had enormous support from the people unlike the English absolute monarchies which received opposition from the people. Louis capitalized on this to put in place an absolute monarch that was popular with the French citizens (Hooker 1). There is no doubt that it is the differing political systems that existed in these two countries that enabled absolutism to succeed in France and fail miserably in England. As shown, the English parliament had enjoyed power for so long and therefore, could not accept to give it away.

France on the other hand, had no parliament or any group that could challenge the monarch. The feudal lords tried to fight the king but failed. The public on the other hand, were in favor of a strong head of government to restore peace.

In England, many of the English people supported the parliament that represented all the people from the nobles to the peasants. England therefore, was a representative state that recognized all people unlike French absolutist state that saw its rules amass power, power that they used as they pleased.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that there were many factors that caused societal unrest in Europe before the French revolution. These factors have been discussed using three perspectives, the societal perspective, the enlightenment ideas, and economic considerations. We have seen how the enlightenment ideas made people realize that it was important to respect the natural rights of everyone. These ideas plus the never ending wars in Europe and economic strain forced rulers to start thinking about territorial lines and eventually the idea of states was born. And lastly we have learned that England formed an inclusive state with a parliamentary system different from the French absolutist state where power was concentrated in one ruler.

Works cited

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