

French revolution and enlightenment



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Give a critical perspective on the events that led to the French Revolution. How much of the political ideals of the Enlightenment were reflected in the revolution? Do you agree with the contention that all the revolution achieved was the replacement of one ruling elite with another?

The French Revolution is considered by many historians to be the first modern revolution in history. It did not only overthrow the existing leaders but, most importantly, it also change the existing structure of society. Moreover, even if the Revolution was initiated by the privileged, power and the control of the Revolution was passed on from the privileged class to the middle class, and then, temporarily, to the poor and extreme – the sans-cullotes in Paris. It is in this sense that the French Revolution of 1789, which lasted for ten years, is hailed by historians as an event which changed societies.

The idea of nationalism, as known in modern times, was a product of the French Revolution. It also provided the empirical data from which Karl Marx, among others, based his theory of modern revolution. Moreover, it served as an important model for succeeding revolutions that changed the rest of the world.

Most historians would consider the political ideals of the Enlightenment as the driving force behind the Revolution. Some, such as Burke, even went as far as including Rousseau and his philosophy. Rousseau's book, *The Social Contract*, is considered the Bible of many leaders of the French Revolution (Russell, 1945). Russell also states that Robespierre's reign is the fruit of Rousseau's teaching. Moreover, he also holds Rousseau's ideas partly responsible for the dictatorships of Russia and Germany. Specifically, he writes, " Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau."

Even if Rousseau's ideas did bring about Robespierre's reign of Terror, wherein thousands were executed for alleged crimes against the Revolution, and the dictatorships of Russia and Germany, he did advocate democracy. Our modern idea of democracy is what he calls elective aristocracy and this, for him, is the best form of government. However, he points out that this is not for all countries. His idea of democracy, no doubt, was the thread that connected him to the French Revolution. Eventually, the idea of democracy brought about the downfall of monarchy in France.

According to Karl Marx, all the Revolution did was replace the feudal economic system of France with that of a capitalistic system, which reinforced the peasantry. It is at this point that one may express dissent. A capitalistic society does not automatically reinforce peasantry. It can be said that peasantry is an unnecessary result of the shift from a monarchy to a democracy. It may seem at first that peasantry was strengthened after the Revolution. All it may have done is replace the existing rulers by a different set of elites. No one can blame the historians for adopting this point of view. After all, it is always likely for anyone to blame the doctor if, after intensive treatment, a patient remains or becomes even sicker. However, historians who take this position may be blamed for not peeking from the other side. By overthrowing the monarchy, which sustains the peasantry, the Revolution overthrew the system that maintains the existence of the poor. However, it does not logically follow that the peasant class will also disappear. Indeed, the poor remained poor, and some even poorer. This is not the merit of the French Revolution.

The greatness of the French Revolution lies in fact that it eliminated a rigid system that kept the poor class poor. In medicine, an intensive cancer

treatment does not automatically make a sick person feel better. After radiation treatments and chemotherapy, cancer patients may actually feel worse. However, this opens up the possibility of cure. It does not keep the patient sick but gives him/her a chance to be better. If the patient retains the old habits, he/she may go back to being sick. The beauty of America does not lie in the idea that there are no poor Americans because, on the contrary, there are. It lies in the fact that, in America, everyone has the opportunity to change his/her economic status, though it may not always be equal in all aspects. This is the point of the Revolution. It may have replaced the existing rulers with another elite class but it abolished a rigid system that maintained the poor class. Moreover, by replacing the feudal economic system with a capitalistic system, opportunities are brought to the peasantry to change their social status. However, these are just opportunities, only potential and not actuality. The poor remains poor not because they are not given opportunities but because of their mode of thought. At this point, it stops being a social-political problem and begins as a social psychological problem.

REFERENCES:

Russell, B. (1945). *A History of Western Philosophy*. Simon and Schuster: New York.