

Humanities 4

Lecture 18



The French Revolution

Outline of Lecture

- ❖ Historical Background
- ❖ Major Events
- ❖ Analysis of Some Key Texts
- ❖ Broader Analysis of the Significance of the French Revolution

Historical Background

- ❖ Absolutism (King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette)
- ❖ The Three Estates
- ❖ The Seven Years War (1756-1763)
- ❖ Economic Collapse (1780s)

Main Events (1789-1799)

- ❖ 1789-90 (Revolution and Reforms)
- ❖ 1791-92 (Monarchy comes and goes)
- ❖ 1793-94 (Reign of Terror)
- ❖ 1795-99 (Second Stage of Reforms)
- ❖ 1799 Napoleon takes power (1804 Emperor)

Sieyes: What is the Third Estate?

- ❖ What is the Third Estate? Everything
- ❖ They perform all the arduous services (pu&pr)
- ❖ What has it been until now in the political order? Nothing (because privileges of Court rule)
- ❖ What does it want to be? Something (equal and genuine representation of interests) (Three claims of the Third Estate)

Declaration of the Rights of Man

- ❖ Statement of “the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of man, [so that we can] remind all members of the social body of their rights and duties”.
- ❖ Men are free and have equal legal rights to property, security, and resistance to oppression.
- ❖ The law is the expression of the general will.
- ❖ Freedom of thought and religion.

The Anatomy of Revolution?

- ❖ The English (1642-51), American (1765-83), French (1789-99), and Russian (1917) Revolutions have a common structure that proceeds from “[1.] financial breakdown, [to] [2.] organization of the discontented to remedy this breakdown, [...] [3.] revolutionary demands on the part of these organized discontented, demands which if granted would mean the virtual abdication of those governing, [4.] attempted use of force by the government, [5.] its failure, and [6.] the attainment of power by the revolutionists. These revolutionists have hitherto been acting as an organized and nearly unanimous group, but with the attainment of power it is clear that they are not united. The group which dominates these first stages [7.] we call the moderates [...] power passes by [8.] violent [...] methods from Right to Left” (Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, New York: Vintage

Notable Themes

- ❖ No two revolutions are alike.
- ❖ Revolutions often start due to financial problems and lack of representation.
- ❖ Revolutionaries are born of hope, not misery.
- ❖ Short honeymoons till revolutionaries take over.
 - ❖ radicals eventually triumph, but not for long
- ❖ Reign of Terror and Virtue, followed by dictator

Larger Questions

- ❖ How does this structure compare to other revolutions?
- ❖ (Arab Spring? China?)
- ❖ Is there a connection between revolutions and democracy?
- ❖ Or dictatorship? (Napoleon)
- ❖ Is there a connection between terrorism and revolution?

Conclusion

- ❖ Transition from Absolutism to Republic (and dictatorship)
- ❖ Rousseau
- ❖ Ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which are Enlightenment ideals
- ❖ human rights, populism (common laws and common representation)
- ❖ What is the best way to promote Enlightenment ideals politically?