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WHIS5001 World History

Feb 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Prompt: With reference to the French and American revolutions, discuss how politics changed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The Enlightenment spirits that sprouted during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries sprouted a spiritual tree of rebellion in Europe and the American continent. Two major fruits, holding similar names, grew in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: the French Revolution and the American revolution. In this paper, I will argue that the political consequences caused by each event are highly correlated with the extent of influence from which the Enlightenment spirits imposed.

To provide a context, the Enlightenment spirits mainly focus on equality and replacing “authority” with “reason” as the priority of thinking. John Locke’s “[every man] being all equal and independent” [1] and Montesquieu’s thought of not proposing deeds that harm others’ nations [2] are clear representations of equality on different scales; “the only defense against the world is a thorough knowledge of it” [1] and Diderot’s “skepticism is the first step towards truth” [3] shows the desire towards a logical and objective point of view instead of blindly following the authorities. These ideas created a common database for these revolutions to happen.

Firstly, we will compare the contexts of both revolutions. On the French side: In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the French population increased from 18 million to 26 million, leading to large numbers of unemployment and famine. Years of bad harvests sharply increased the food prices. This

“widespread social distress” led to the convocation of the Estates-General in May 1789, which was converted into a National Assembly [4]. However, the conditions on the American side were much easier: for a long time, the American colonies faced the problem of shortage of labor; on average, “taxes per capita of population in the colonies were only about one twenty-sixth what they were in the mother country [Britain]” [5]. This huge contrast corresponded to what Lefebvre described: “... France ... witnessed the most vehement attacks on privileges, feudal survivals, the imperfections and arbitrary nature of monarchical administration.” [6]

These context differences influenced the magnitude of “revolutionary”. For the French: under the suppression from monarchy (Louis XVI imposing taxes, even calling military suppression [4]), the existing Catholic church and consequential forces (German count who were under the church’s control sending troops to defend the royals in the name of the church [7]), and their physical lack of food. This meant they need a strong spiritual center as their support to overthrow the existing system. For the Americans: they were initially in a “high level of autonomy” [8] (referring to the salutary neglect, the British policy of avoiding strict enforcement of parliamentary laws, especially trade laws [9]), which was a result of the gap of Atlantic, a path that took over two months to travel across [5]. “No taxation without representation” was only a seeking for “a common right of Englishmen” [8]; America was, as Engels described, “on more propitious soil, . . . where no obstacles exist[ed] in the form of remains of the medieval period” and where “elements of contemporary bourgeois society were already taking shape in the seventeenth century.” In short: the French were fighting for their most basic rights against giant pressure, while the Americans were simply advancing on already loosened orders. [10]

The obstacles to the revolution corresponded with the importance of a spiritual center in both revolutions. In French, Sieyes’s famous pamphlet, “What is the Third Estate?”, had become the political manifesto of the French Revolution. His ideas of “the third estate is all” had

stated that the Third Estate was essentially the authority of the government, and that it could invite or deny the first two orders to join a united body as the representation of the nation. This argument was widely agreed and adopted during the revolution, especially when the “Estates General” renamed themselves to the “National Assembly”. [11] His ideas were based on his old studying of theology as a clergyman, where he showed apathy to the Catholic church but was influenced by teachings of Locke, Condillac, and other Enlightenment political thinkers, who pondered in the psychology of people and political ideas. [12] This pamphlet not only showed the influence of a spiritual/political center on the French revolution, but also reflected on the deep causality of Enlightenment ideas in their origin, France.

Without many obstacles, the Enlightenment spirit only acted as a supporting idea of “breaking authority” in the American Revolution. [8] As Rudolph Rummel suggested, the American Revolution was “an explicit attempt to establish the greatest possible common freedom” [13]. This contrast in spiritual influences could also somewhat reflect on the citizen distributions in both revolutions: for the French, the mass gatherings among the lower classes (the propertyless and the poor) who were “organs of popular lawmaking” and the active part played by the middling proprietors (farmers, merchants, artisans, shopkeepers, and lawyers) who had the literary and spiritual power together constituted the revolution government; for the Americans, from the top class (mostly planters and industry owners) to farmers and workers, all of which influenced by the revolution in aspects of access to western lands, industrial development and trading, participated in the revolution, which does not require too much spiritual motivation. Billington stated, as quoted in [5], “[the American Revolution’s] motives were only partly patriotic ... they were attracted by the prospect of bettering their social and economic situation.”

The context difference of these revolutions led to varied obstacles and to different extents of needed spiritual support; finally, they led to different results. The French, where the spirit of Enlightenment played a major role, created a bigger wave of influence in return.

(Firstly) On the positive, long-term side: under the manifesto pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?*, the former Estates-General voted, approved the motion made by Sieyes, and declared themselves a legislative authority equal to that of the king. [17] They soon declared *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, a human civil rights document drafted by Sieyes and Lafayette, in consultation with Thomas Jefferson. All three writers were highly influenced by Enlightenment thoughts, where Lafayette believe in constitutional monarchy [19], and Jefferson favoring decentralized government powers and democracy [20]. These beliefs can be found directly in the declaration: “men are born, and always continue, free, and equal in respect to their rights”; “the exercise of the natural rights of every man” is limited by “secur[ing] every other man the free exercise of the same rights”. [21] This declaration, according to Hobsbawm, “is a landmark in all countries”: its direct influence radiated as far as Bengal (ancestor of modern Indian nationalism), Latin American, Turkish; its indirect influence “is universal”, providing lessons that are incorporated even in modern socialism and communism. [16] The declaration itself, along with other documents, inspired in large part the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. [18]

(Secondly) As argued by Tocqueville in his “L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution” (quoted in [22]), the outbreak of revolution was located at a place where the suppression was the weakest. The people who could not suffer the feudal suppression had the courage and spirit to break the barrier; but when the breaking initiated, the remaining system seemed more intolerable. This was perhaps the underlying cause of the controversial, short-term influences the French revolution radiated to Europe.

From a sociological perspective: as argued by the Irish statesman and philosopher in 1790, “the age of chivalry is gone ... Never, never more shall we behold ... that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart.” [23] As the founder of modern conservatism [24], Burke proposed opinions of conserving the authority and obedience to the monarchy and condemning the French Revolution. The French themselves might have also gone too far: On the internal side, intending to replace Catholicism, they proposed “The Cult of Reason” (and then “The Cult of Supreme Being”) to directly reject the concept of religion and propose reason [25]. On the external side, the French did not conceive the clashing between their interests with those of other people, and saw the revolution as a beginning to generally freeing liberations of people from tyranny [16]. These pieces of evidence together showed the spiritual chaos caused by the French Revolution.

Radical steps in the spiritual aspects also caused geopolitical influences to happen. The French Revolution seemed to be in circulation since the first armies sent to re-establish the royal family from other European countries: the French armies fought back the enemies and started radical steps of conquering; the Europeans panicked and established anti-French coalitions; the French army sent out can no longer fight against the enemies and retreated; the party that was unable to defend the country is overthrown by another force, and sent out more armies. [22] This circulation also caused the controversy on which event marks the ending of the revolution: whether the July Revolution, the downfall of the Royalists, or the defeat of Napoleon. These revolutionary wars also stirred up Europe: Switzerland was invaded and became the Helvetic Republic; Belgium split up and conducted revolutions; German troops sent after transferring from favorable to antagonistic towards the revolution; etc. [4] Together, these controversial spiritual and geopolitical impact of the French Revolution constituted its short-term influences.

For the Americans: they fell straight to resolving problems not addressed in the Declaration of Independence (slavery, the form of government, etc.) by establishing a constitution. However, “class interest, even personal interest, guided them apart” [6]: many top-classed citizens who were included in the drafting of the constitution, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, were prosperous plant owners. The problem of emancipation, tracing back to the clear abolition opinions in the Enlightenment era (for example, Rousseau’s “‘slavery’ and ‘right’ are contradictory” [14]), was considered contradictory to the nation’s union, at least in their generation [15]. The form of the government was also a problem: “they understood that Freedom would be short-lived, that defeating an imperial State would only unleash a new State at home, unless the power of the State could be shackled.” [13] In general, the Constitution acted more as a compromise and a mending patch. In the end, the American Revolution remained a crucial event in its own and related country’s history but did not leave major traces elsewhere. [16]

As a conclusion: in this paper, we first analyzed the preset of Enlightenment ideas, identified the contexts, and listed out obstacles in the French and American Revolutions. In this part, we showed that the magnitude of Enlightenment thoughts’ effect is correlated with the importance of spiritual centers (decided by obstacles and contexts). We then discussed the influences of both revolutions: the French Revolution, being highly motivated by spiritual matter, had both long-term positive influences and short-term controversial results (due to radical moves); the American Revolution, being weak in spirit innovation, had relatively less political impact. These differences in the magnitude of impact correspond to the high-low relationship in the Enlightenment’s impact in the French and American Revolutions. Thus, we can conclude that the political consequences caused by each event are highly correlated with the extent of influence from which the Enlightenment spirits imposed.

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