Charlie Nitschelm

Global Citizenship

10/07/2017

The Emergence of New Universal Values

The Enlightenment culminated in the French and American Revolutions. The values and ideas of the philosophers during the 18th century guided the people within nations to explore new universal ideals. The explosion of new universal values guided the revolutionaries of the 18th century to lead the transformation of nations across the world.

Tales and stories have travelled across time to reach us through a filtered lens. Our lives are short in relation to the years that historians study. The Enlightenment caused the revolutionaries of the 18th century to be accepting of new ideas. They were exposed to a constant force creating hope for change. This mainly was due to the timing of the nation states and increased communication between people. The American Revolution began during the end of the 18th century. Would the colonists that first landed in the early 1600’s be even considering a revolution? They were all British, looking for a better and more prosperous life. From father to son, the culture of the colonies changed. By 1776, when the leaders of the colonies no longer related to their forerunners, they were ready to question their state of freedom. They realized that they have the power for change. They could instill universal rights for their fellow colonists. In *The French Revolution and Human Rights,* Lynn Hunt writes “The idea of universal human rights is western in origin. It did not appear all at once, but slowly emerged in the eighteenth century” (Hunt 3). The end of the 18th century was a time that fostered the perfect collision between the change of values of people and increased global communication. Polasky in *Revolution Without Borders* referenced Jacobin Maximilian Robespierre when he wrote that this ‘Age of Revolution’ was truly ‘the land of the pamphlet’(Polasky 19). With the change of universal values over time and a source of easy communication through the ‘pamphlet,’ it created a perfect scenario to enact change.

A contemporary philosopher explained, “the deepest mistake is to think that your little shard of mirror can reflect the whole” (Appiah 8). To think your values and culture are better than others is a grave mistake. Appiah continues, “so perhaps, when it comes to mortality, there are lots of mirrors, lots of moral truths, and we can at best agree to differ” (Appiah 11). Countless wars have begun because a group of people thought they were superior to another. This point can explain many of the world’s heinous acts, including the era of slavery. Rousseau, an enlightenment philosopher, wrote “slaves lose everything in their chains, even the desire to escape from them” (Rousseau 2). This oppression of people is a clear example of the consequence of other cultures thinking that they are superior to the rest. Owen, during discussion, talked about how war has never established an answer, right or wrong. It is wrong to push values, both universal and local, onto another people if they do not accept it freely. Nothing is gained, whether you think you are right or not. “Most Enlightenment thinkers remained indifferent to the plight of Jews,” according to the western hemisphere. Hunt continues to state they also opposed persecution of the Jews, arguing, for example, “what was the Jews crime? None other than being born” (Hunt 8). Revolutionaries of the late 18th century were living during a time when people began to accept ideals that were different from the norm. Women were beginning to speak up about their rights, including “We ask to take leave of ignorance, to give our children a sound and reasonable education so as to make them subjects worthy of serving you” (Hunt 61). They were not at the point where they would fight for complete equal rights to that of men, but were taking steps to reach that. It would only take 200 more years to have the common population believe that women are just as smart. The battle of racism, sexism and anti-Semitism grew tremendously because of the Enlightenment triggering new problems to be solved. The Age of Revolution took hold with the people of nations fighting for their universal values and rights.

Peace is one of the most significant shared goals of the Age of Revolutions. The revolutionaries wondered “is peace an unattainable goal?” With any form of an intelligent species, will universal peace always be a fantasy? Were the revolutionaries values hypocritical? They were igniting war within and against other nations. They were not doing it to force values onto another, but to free themselves from their government. The revolutionaries desire for freedom pushed them to lead others to a freer state. Appaiah asks “Would one look in the world for wrongness of a basic desire? A science might be able to explain why you desire something. It couldn’t explain that you should – or shouldn’t – desire it.” He continues, “talk of values, then, is really a way of talking about certain of our desires” (Appiah 23). No one can prove that someone’s desires or values are wrong. The explosion of new revolutionary thinking began a transformation around the world. About the universality of values, Kant writes “it is just the same with trees in a forest. Each needs the others since each are seeking to take the air and sunlight from others much strive upward, and thereby each realizes a beautiful, straight stature.” He continues to write “which those that live in isolated freedom put out branches at random and grow stunted, crooked and twisted” (Kant 3). Universal values bring together people from around the world to live in harmony, while those who oppose continue to live in isolation. Cosmopolitanism and universal values have been developing since the 18th century and have given revolutionaries ideas about how to ‘begin the world again’ and search for that overreaching fantasy of peace and freedom. There will be a time where all humans will end their constant struggle for power and achieve global universal values and peace.

Works Cited

Polasky, Janet. *Revolutions Without Borders*. *Yale University, 2015.*

Hunt, Lynn. *The French Revolution and Human Rights. Bedford/St. Martins, 2016.*

Appiah, Kwame. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers. W.W. Norton and Company, 2006.*

Kant, Immanuel. *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View. 1774.*

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract. Jonathon Bennett, 2010.*