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The French Revolution and the idea of progress

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THE FRENCH REVOLUTION and the IDEA of PROGRESS

GRADUATION THESIS

Presented by

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cum laude
George C. Bell.

a very thoughtful thesis.

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The French Revolution and the Idea of Progress.

I. Introductory

1. The Meaning of Progress and the Importance of the Belief.

The fact of change need not necessarily imply progress. Nevertheless, by progress we mean change. That which is static cannot be progressive. Progress implies progression in the direction of a desirable goal. Any change other than in that direction would be retrogression. Progress may be revolutionary or it may be evolutionary. Both methods have been successfully employed by man in his development to the present time. In any study of progress, social progress should be carefully distinguished from racial progress. This distinction is essential because society may be progressing even though the race is standing still.

The importance of the belief in progress cannot be overstated. It is one of the chief ideas of today. For many people it is their religion. The idea of Progress is not of the same nature as the ideas of Liberty, equality of opportunity, and socialism. Those ideas express human aims and must depend upon the human will for their realization. The idea of progress

is to be classed with such ideas as Fate, Providence, or Personal immortality. The value of these ideas is dependent upon their being true, and not upon the question whether they are good or bad. They pertain to the mystery of life and, therefore, exercise a great power in determining a man's conduct.

The belief in progress has a very direct bearing upon religious beliefs. It tends to overthrow our belief in the Incarnation, for it is hard, in the light of progress, to see how the first century could have produced a Perfect Man. Also, the idea of progress tends to secularize religion by making the present order supreme. There is no longer any need of the future. And, too, the idea gives credence to an unauthorized probation. Give a man time and he must necessarily become perfect.

Some refer the idea of progress to a religious basis and make it a part of the divine plan. Some give it a scientific basis and regard it as the law of the universe. This makes progress necessary and inevitable. Others feel that progress must be earned. Progress is a conquest which humanity may achieve, if she will.

II Criteria of Progress

1. Unsatisfactory Criteria.

(a) Population Test

According to this test, any nation increasing in population would be progressing; and any nation not increasing in population would be considered as static. But this is plainly a superficial test. It would make China the most progressive Nation. Increasing population is no essential guarantee of progress.

(b) Increasing health and longevity.

This standard would compare the average life today with the average length in periods past, and upon that comparison determine whether or not there is any real progress. But length of life and health need not imply progress, for they may be entirely the results of scientific control.

(c) Increase of wealth.

This is a very uncertain standard. Progress cannot be made identical with increase of wealth. The question of the amount of wealth is relatively unimportant. The real question is as to how wealth is earned and how it is expended. The material may be an aid to progress, but progress is more than material progress.

2. The Real Test.

The ethical test is the real test of all progress. Increasing wealth, population, longevity and health may be, and usually are, the conditions and results of progress, but they are not satisfactory criteria and they are not the aim of progress. Progress looks forward to the "realization of an ethical order which will yield definite and coherent guidance to human effort." (Todd "Theories of Social Progress, Chapter 7) The result of progress has been to bring man to the point of development where he can rationally direct and determine his own future course. And his ability to thus direct his own destiny, is the faith of mankind today.

So, we test ~~that~~ progress by an increasing ethical and moral interest in human well-being. "The progress of society is not merely moral progress, or intellectual progress, or material progress, or institutional progress; it is a complex and combination of all these and more. It is probable, however, that the natural order of these may be through the material and intellectual to the moral; the material furnishing the basis, the intellectual and institutional the means, working toward the moral as the result." (Todd, Chap. 7)

III The Idea of Progress before the Revolution.

The notion of progress has become so familiar to us today, that we can scarcely realize the idea to be of comparatively recent development and origin. Quite true, the ancient Seneca and the medieval Bacon made observations of society. They saw that man had risen gradually "from primitive and savage conditions to a certain level of civilization by a series of inventions," and they saw "the possibility of some future additions to his knowledge of nature." (Bury "The Idea of Prog." Page 6.) But observations of the past do not imply progress; progress has value, interest and power only when it is applied to the future. "You may conceive civilization as having gradually advanced in the past, but you have not got the idea of progress until you go on to conceive that it is destined to advance indefinitely in the future." (Bury Page 7) It was the sixteenth century before the observations of the past were applied to the future.

1. Antiquity.

The prevailing notion of antiquity among Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Babylonians was the idea of world cycles.

The good Creator had set the world going for seventy-two thousand years. The first half of that period was

was characterized by order and uniformity; the second half--of which the present was a part--was a period of decay and degeneration. Thus the Golden Age was always in the past and the idea of progress had no room for expression and development.

2. Hebrew Period.

The Hebrews rejected the belief in world-cycles. They looked forward to the day of Jehovah. Their eschatological belief was that the present order would pass away and that a new order would be set up. This idea of cosmic progress we owe to the Prophets. The Hebrews looked to the future for the restoration of the Golden Age, but the idea of progress had no real place with them for the new order was to be established independently of any human effort.

3. The Middle Ages.

In general the idea of the universe in the Middle Ages was contrary to the fundamental principles of progress. For instance, St. Augustine held the chief purpose of history to be the securing of happiness for a small part of humanity in the next world. This took no thought of "any further development of human history on earth. For Augustine, as for any medieval believer,

the course of history would be satisfactory^{ly} complete if the world came to an end in his own lifetime. He was not interested in the question whether any gradual amelioration of society or increase of knowledge would mark the period of time which might still remain to run before the day of judgment." (Bury, page 21)

The doctrines of Providence and of Original Sin were also contrary to any belief in progress. The former considered history a series of events ordered by divine intervention, and not as a natural development. The latter doctrine made impossible any belief in "the moral amelioration of the race by any gradual process of development."

Roger Bacon (1200-1300) is thought by many to have announced the idea of progress. It was "his aim to reform higher education and introduce into the universities a wide, liberal and scientific programme of secular studies. . . But, although Roger Bacon was inspired by these enlightened ideas, although he cast off many of the prejudices of his time and boldly revolted against the tyranny of the prevailing scholastic philosophy, he was, nevertheless, in other respects a child of his age and could not disencumber himself of the current medieval

conception of the universe. His general view of the course of human history was not materially different from that of St. Augustine." (Bury pages 25-26)

4. The Renaissance.

The transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern period took about three hundred years (c.1350-1650)

This period is marked for its progressive mental development. The human mind in this period achieved two great results. "Self-confidence was restored to human reason, and life on this planet was recognized as possessing a value independent of any hopes or fears connected with a life beyond the grave." (Bury, page 30)

But we do not find the idea of progress in this period. Machiavelli, the most advanced and representative thinker of his day, largely followed the Ancients in his views. He regarded man as forever the same, and therefore, incapable of making permanent progress. The only hope for society lay in a dependence upon outstanding legislators and lawyers, from whom the masses of the people should never depart. This left no room for progress.

But here and there men were beginning to question the authority of the Ancients. The positions of Ptolemy,

Galen and Aristotle were attacked by men like Copernicus, Vesalius, Telesio, and Bruno. "The thinkers and men of science were living in an intellectual twilight. It was the twilight of dawn." The early Renaissance had brought man into his own in art and literature. It was for the later Renaissance to accomplish this freedom in philosophy. When this had been done then the field would be prepared for the development of the idea of progress. The names outstanding in this period are Bodin and Bacon. "Neither of them discovered a theory of Progress, but they made contributions to thought which directly contributed to its subsequent appearance."

(Bury, page 36.)

IV The French Revolution and Progress.

"Modern Europe is of comparatively recent origin. The present system of society, with its industrial organization, democratic government, and scientific outlook, is a product of conditions that came into existence hardly a century ago; for in spite of Columbus, Luther, Copernicus, and Newton, the life and thought of the average person in Europe at the end of the 18th Century were not very different from that of his ancestors in the later Middle Ages. It is true that the medieval system had

received mighty blows at the hands of the Humanists of the Renaissance and the Protestants of the Reformation; that the classics had received full recognition in the Universities; that a system of National Churches had displaced the International Catholic Church; that Feudal aristocracy had given way to absolute monarchy; and that discoveries had expanded the known world. It is also true that the pinneers of science had begun to make those discoveries in physics and astronomy which were destined to reconstruct the whole intellectual horizon of Europe. But the great mass of people remained untouched by the changes; they continued to plow their fields in the same old way, to make things by hand, and to quarrel bitterly about religion,---At the end of the 18th Century there were three great revolutions which transformed every aspect of European Society and created the world in which we now live. These movements were the Intellectual Revolution, which gave birth to new points of view in philosophy, literature and science; the French Revolution, which proclaimed the democratic principles of government; and the Industrial Revolution, which inaugurated our present economic life." (Schapiro, "Modern and Contemporary Eur. Hist." p 1-2.)

The French Revolution has not inaccurately been compared in importance to the Protestant Reformation and to the rise of Christianity. That it was of equal and far-reaching importance was due to the fact that the Revolution, as the Reformation and Christianity, destroyed the very foundations upon which society had previously builded and existed. The old landmarks were no more after the Revolution. It was a movement toward a greater and completer humanity. "It brought on the stage of human affairs forces which have moulded the thoughts and actions of men ever since. . . As Christianity taught man that he was a spiritual being and the Reformation proclaimed that nothing need stand between the Soul and God, so the Revolution asserted the equality of man, conceiving individuals as partakers of a common nature and declaring each one of them, regardless of birth, colour, or religion, to be possessed of certain inalienable rights.--This doctrine expressed itself in three main principles: (1) The sovereignty of the people; (2) The doctrine of personal liberty, involving the disappearance of serfdom and the abolition of social privileges; (3) The idea of nationality. This arose naturally from the idea of the sovereignty of the people." (Cambridge Modern Hist. Vol. VIII)

1. The Background of the Revolution.

To appreciate the vast changes which were brought about in the years from 1789 to 1815, we need an understanding of the conditions which existed in France and the rest of Europe previous to that time. "Europe was not a unity. There were states of every size and shape and with every form of government. The states of the Church were theocratic; capricious and cruel despotism prevailed in Turkey; absolute monarch in Russia, Austria, France and Prussia; Constitutional Monarchy in England; while there were various kinds of so-called Republics-- federal republics in Holland and Switzerland, a republic whose head was an elective king in Poland, aristocratic republics in Venice and Genoa and in the free cities of the Holy Roman Empire." (Hazen, "Modern Eur. Hist." Chap. 1)

Socially France and Europe were the homes of several classes, divided by sharp lines of distinction. Each class had privileges and powers over the classes beneath it. This led to a very degrading Caste system with all the injustices which always follow such a system. The poor were compelled to bear all of the menial burdens, while the rich and privileged reveled in their luxury. This classification naturally led to cruel and abusive

treatment of the lower classes and they were little better than slaves.

Economically the system had not changed from the earliest days of civilization. So far as the great mass of people was concerned, the feudal system was still a living fact in Europe at the close of the 18th Century. The upper classes were exempt from burdensome taxes, while the poor were ever taxed to the very extreme. The peasant class was compelled to support the luxuriant Royal Palace. In the year that the Revolution broke out this court was composed of 18,000 people, and cost the immense sum of \$20,000,000. And this upon the already overburdened shoulders of a poor, miserably mistreated populace.

In matters of Religion and Education the people were likewise bound. The Protestant Reformation had broken the power of the Catholic Church but it had not established religious equality. And education was almost entirely in the hands of the clergy. The vast majority of the people could neither read nor write, and hence knew nothing of even what little information was abroad in that day.

2. Precursors of the Revolution.

Among those who had been privileged the intellectual life was different. They were distinctly modern in their tendency and in their substance. Of the leaders in this circle, whose thoughts stirred the intellectual world to its depths we may name Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Quesnay, Concorde, and others. Montesquieu wrote "The Spirit of Laws," which was an analysis of various forms of governments. Voltaire stood for the law of reason and the emancipation of the intellect. Rousseau combined emotion with the intellect. He stood for the sovereignty of the people and the political equality of all citizens. To accomplish these ends, Rousseau believed a total reorganization of society necessary. Montesquieu and Voltaire believed the desired results could come through political reforms.

The works of the Encyclopedists, Diderot, Concorde, and others, were very influential at this time. Their works helped greatly in the spread of the doctrines set forth by Voltaire and Rousseau. The encyclopedia of Diderot became "the arsenal of knowledge from which were drawn the weapons to attack the old system."

But the works and teachings of the philosophers did not cause the French Revolution. It was the inevitable result of the contemporary conditions. The philosophers only gave concrete expression to the flagrant evils which existed, and helped to rivet popular attention upon them.

3. The Revolution in France.

The influence of the Revolution upon the life of France cannot be overstated. The entire political, social, educational, and economic fabric was destroyed and a new structure builded. The English Revolution of 1689 and the American Revolution of 1776 had been little more than political revolutions. They had changed the ruling houses but the structure of society was not altered. The French Revolution was different. It had its effect upon every part of life, social, political, religious, economic, legal, religious, educational, and geographical. The life of France was never again to be the same as in times gone by.

On the fourth of August, 1789, the National Assembly completely abolished economic feudalism. This one step removed many of the evils of the old system. Then came immediately the "Declaration of the Rights of Man"

boldly proclaimed all men to be born and to remain equal in right, that law is the expression of the popular will and that the people instead of the king are sovereign. The manifesto also declared for freedom of speech, of religion, and forbade imprisonment, without trial. Thus the French Revolution was not merely a political revolution seeking to overthrow the existing government and establish new rulers. It was a movement to free the imprisoned Soul of France. And to do this it must destroy the old and reorganize a new social, political, and economic system.

To accomplish this radical change was a marvelous undertaking. It was a program so large that the Revolution alone could not hope to accomplish all of it. The period of Reconstruction would be needed, especially for the constructive work.

But the attacks of the Revolution were fatal to the old system. The Battle-Cry of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," carried with it principles which were to overturn and re-shape Europe. Much that the Revolution accomplished has been obscured by the horrors which accompanied the process, but the great outstanding achievements cannot be erased from the pages of history.

The cry of "Liberty" was the death warrant for the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings. If the people were free, then they were sovereign. This was a new thought in the minds of men. They had always been under the strict authority of the Church and of the State. Now they were free!

"Equality" was also a dynamic idea. It carried with it the forces which were to destroy feudalism, for feudalism was formed upon inequality. If all men were born equal and remained so, as the "Rights of Man" declared, then must the old system be destroyed. There could no longer be a privileged few living at the expense of the burdened many. And the Revolution did accomplish all of this change. The Feudal System was destroyed. Equality of taxation was established, all privileges were abolished, and the land was distributed to the peasants. This readjustment greatly benefited the peasants and the great middle class. The latter now became the ruling class. The struggles had largely been won when control of the government passed from the nobility and clergy into the hands of the peasants and the middle classes.

The idea of "Fraternity" was a natural outgrowth

from the idea of the sovereignty of the people. The best expression of this idea of Fraternity was in the development of Nationality. The nation was no longer identical with the king but with the people, and to represent the new 'people-nation' a new national flag was adopted. There was a new sense of power among the people. They were no longer helpless individuals under the control of a powerful monarch who might even require their lives without reason.

The fruits of these great ideals were only slowly realized in France and the rest of Europe. Indeed, great results continue to be achieved from time to time which are the direct fruits of the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.

But the old day had passed forever in France. The "Divine Right of Kings" had but to show its weakness to make itself ridiculous, and it was a doctrine never again held by the people. Any obedience to it was from that time on reluctant and unwilling obedience. Feudalism had but to be shorn of its class distinctions, and special privileges, and it was a part of past history. Free men could not be treated as chattel and slaves.

4. International Influence of the Revolution.

The revolutionary principles of Equality and Brotherhood began to have immediate effect upon the structure of all European society. Slavery could not exist under the new doctrines, and the Constitutional Assembly declared all slaves in French possessions to be free French citizens. The conception of common citizenship also created a new attitude toward the persecuted Jews, and they look upon the French Revolution as the period of their emancipation. Woman, too, may look upon the Revolution as a turning-point in her history. The principles of equality inevitably led to a demand for equal opportunity and equal treatment for the sexes. Socialism also gained new power from the work of the Revolution in transferring the ownership and attacking the idea of the sacredness of property.

But to insure to France the permanence of the accomplishments of the Revolution, the same results had to be brought about in neighboring countries. The struggle was really between two conflicting social systems, and either the one or the other must be destroyed. If the Modern had not destroyed the Medieval System, the latter would have continued to reign supreme. It was because

the conflict was of this nature that the new regime in France was so set upon by the Monarchs of Europe. The continuance of their powers depended upon the defeat of the Revolutionary principles of France. Every possible attempt was made by these various rulers to crush the new Spirit, but a living Spirit cannot be crushed.

It was therefore a necessity that the French Revolution become international. After Waterloo everything was reactionary. The "Holy Alliance" under the leadership of Metternich, exerted every power to restore the old order in France. This went so far that the people revolted again, in 1830. The influence of this Revolution was felt throughout Europe, in Poland, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, England, and the Netherlands. Revolutions followed in Belgium, Poland, and Italy, and Germany barely escaped a revolution by enacting the strictest measures for the suppression of liberalism. The movement against misrule and oppression was fast spreading.

Louis Philippe came to the French throne in 1830. Internal strife made his position difficult to maintain. Finally he was enabled to carry out his policy through

Guizot, who became the leading minister of affairs. It was their purpose to keep peace within and without, and not to bring about further reform. The refusal of the King and his Minister to institute the requested reforms led to the Revolution of 1848. The people were all behind the demands for reform, and the result was the overthrow of the Monarchy and the establishment of the Republic.

This French Revolution of 1848 was the occasion for the most extensive revolution of the century. Practically all of Europe was in a turmoil. Revolutions broke out "from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, from France to the Russian frontier." The whole system of reaction established by Metternich was overthrown and the Revolutionary principles were again supreme. But the French uprising was only a signal for, and not the cause of the revolutions in Germany, Austria, and Italy. Since 1830 there had been a vast evolution of ideas. Democracy was spreading, and the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity were fast undermining the old system. The conflict did not stop until all Europe had been shaken by the new ideas.

V Fruits of the Revolution in Modern Life.

The ideals for which the French Revolution stood are so commonplace to us today, that we enjoy their fruits and little realize at what cost they were purchased. For instance, we enjoy political liberty, and religious freedom and do not appreciate that they are privileges bought with blood. Liberty is for us of eternal value, but ^{it} is a modern achievement. Also, we enjoy political and social equality, other fruits of the Revolution. And Brotherhood is one of the ideals determining the relationships between men today. All of these we enjoy, often failing to appreciate their costs.

The details of the working out in modern life of those principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, would require a study of the entire social, political, and economic life from the Revolution to the present day. It would involve the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of womanhood, the laws and regulations concerning women and child labor in the modern industrial world, and many other achievements. In fact, every benevolent act, every progressive step taken, is a result of one or more of the principles set forth by the Revolution.

The Spirit of Brotherhood was at the very basis of our hope for an International State at the close of the World War. There was everywhere the conviction that all men are Brothers, and that they should therefore work together for common interests. But the ideal always precedes the realization, and oftentimes by long periods.

VI Conclusion.

Though the truthfulness of our position cannot be demonstrated, we believe that mankind is moving toward a desirable goal. At least there is a great deal of change, and we have the faith to believe that it is in the direction of Progress.

We marvel that the idea of Progress should have been so long dormant. The fact that the world was so long without the idea, dependent upon the idea of Providence, etc., leads to the belief in the probability that future generations may even replace the idea of progress with some other idea. But for our present day it is the outstanding characteristic. We no longer are content with Platonic contemplation; today we go in to create our world as we would have it.

This new confidence in the ability of mankind to

improve himself and his environment we can not trace beyond the French Revolution, though we can see the preparation and fertilization of the soil into which the idea was to be sown.

Then came the Revolution. The idea of progress became a vital force. It was based upon the Revolutionary battle-cry, of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Since that day all things have been changed. France and Europe were completely transformed, politically, socially and economically. The thought of progress, which before had been unknown, now sent a thrill over mankind. He gained a vision and a courage which he had never before realized. Reform was no longer expected from those without; man had within himself the power to bring the changes he longed for.

So, we find in the Revolution, the origin of the Idea of Progress and the rise of Modern Europe. The practical application of the principles enunciated by the Revolution, we see in every phase of modern life. We enjoy the fruits without realizing oftentimes the source of their birth and the process of their development.

After all that has been accomplished, there is yet

much to be done to make the ideals of the Revolution a reality. For, as Hayes says, "The Revolution has been but one battle in the long war between the rival aristocracies of birth and of business, a war in which peasants and artisans now give their lives for illusory dreams of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," now fight their feudal lords, and now turn on their pretended liberators, the bourgeoisie. For already it begins to dawn on the dull masses that "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" are chiefly for their masters."

It is an interesting observation to note the continuity of the struggle for power on the part of the masses. The Revolution itself was really a struggle for power between the nobility and clergy on the one hand, and the peasants and the middle class on the other. The nobility and clergy were shorn of the unlimited power which they had known, but the peasants were disillusioned for the power went into the hands of the middle class and the peasants were no better situated than before. Since the Revolution there has been a continual struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working classes. We are in the midst of that conflict today. The balance has been in favor of the former,

but it is fast swinging to the laboring classes. The not far-distant future will find the laboring classes with powers they have never yet known. Progress in that direction is unmistakable.

Faith in the idea of Progress was given a severe blow by the World War. The war with all of its barbarous cruelties was thought to be impossible before it was actually upon the world. It was everywhere believed that civilized mankind had advanced beyond the barbarities of former generations, but only the occasion was needed to prove the conclusion to be wrong. However humanity should be judged by its periods of highest achievements and not by the stages of relapse and retrogression. Viewed in this light humanity would seem to be more perfectly realizing itself from generation to generation. The process is indeed slow and the greater part of the journey is yet ahead no doubt, but there is every reason to believe that each successive generation makes some progress toward the desirable goal. And the birth of the idea which inspires man to pursue the ideal which ever gleams before him and gives him confidence to believe he may attain it, we find in the French Revolution.