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Resource Distribution and the French Revolution

by

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Domestic carnage, now filled the whole year
With feast-days, old men from the chimney-nook,
The maiden from the bosom of her love,
The mother from the cradle of her babe,
The warrior from the field - all perished, all -
Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks,
Head after head, and never heads enough
For those that bade them fall.

~William Wordsworth

Abstract

Throughout the centuries following the French Revolution (1789 -1799), social scientists and historians have attributed a myriad of causes to the sociopolitical upheaval. Food and beverages played a key role in the coming of French Revolution, for the people were in effect fighting for the right to have nutrition rather than for social or political ideals. Literary analysis of both primary and secondary sources illustrated the integral role of the peasant's stomach to the uprising. The Enlightenment disillusionment of the royals, rising bread prices, discrepancy in food distribution both within and around Paris, and substandard quality of food, wine, and water all combined to create rancor among the commoners. Had the Ancien Régime (Old Regime) taken its responsibility to the people more seriously and ensured their necessities, rather than exploiting the commoner's mercilessly, the French Revolution may never have started, much less caused the death of so many.

Introduction

“The French citizen’s fear and distrust of authority and his simultaneous need for strong authority feed on both his individualism and his passion for equality” (Ehrmann 11).

Throughout the centuries following the French Revolution (1789 -1799), social scientists and historians have attributed a myriad of causes to the sociopolitical upheaval. However despite exploring scientific, economic, and idealistic reasons, theorists have failed to fully acknowledge the role of natural resources in the acts of the people.

Extreme discrepancies in distribution of these resources instilled rancor within the hearts of the French people, especially the recently established middle classed. Clean water and nutritional food were rare to the hoi polloi and this rarity led to desperation. Desperation which occurred at a time when many were disillusioned with both the royalty and religion. Desperation that led to whispers. Whispers that led to rumors. Rumors to plans. Plans to violence.

France has held an integral part among the history of humanity for centuries; from the Magna Carta to the American Revolution, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. However since the 18th century the country’s influence has increased and France has asserted its power throughout the world. France’s ability to retain power over this period stems directly from the political and social movements that have characterized its history. What is not often acknowledged, conversely, is the influence of resources on France’s power. Through trade and colonialism France has established significant relations globally that have given the country access to numerous resources, yet these have not always been distributed evenly among its peoples. Certain social groups,

namely those higher up, have consistently had more access to food and water, as well as higher quality nutrition. Whereas the distribution seems more even in current day France, such as with universal health care, the difference in quality available to different people remains severe. “Inequitable access to ecological benefits-are often referred to as environmental injustices” (Sachs 7) and these injustices, once brought to light, are usually righted. However, a discrepancy in availability has oftentimes precipitated upheavals within social and political groups; the most well-known and intensely studied of these coups being The French Revolution. Hence this essay will focus on tracing how resource distribution directly and indirectly influenced socio-political movements just before and during the uprising. Food and beverages played a key role in the coming of French Revolution, for the people were in effect fighting for the right to have nutrition rather than for social or political ideals.

While scholarly research of the French Revolution is relatively new, it has been the focus of cultural speculation for a while. This may be why the majority of previous studies focus on political and idealistic reasons. The former would include the rise of nationalism and dichotomy of the social classes whereas the latter involves less emphasis on religion and the conclusion of the Enlightenment. These reduced the validity of the royal class as ordained by God because the people were looking towards reason as the new authority. Many focus on political tensions of the time between the “economically retrograde, ‘feudal’ aristocracy and a progressive, ‘capitalist’ bourgeoisie” (Stone 1). However, in most of the existing works, resource distribution is not emphasized. While food and starvation is often stated as a factor, as well as water quality, most of these problems are usually attributed to discrepancies in the social system.

Literary review remains the most practical way of studying the French Revolution, although many accounts of France prior to the uprising were lost during the decade long struggle. However, those preserved paint an accurate enough portrayal to draw general assumptions of the life of the people. Sachs' book works as an introduction to the importance of the environment for human rights. It illustrates how deprivation of basic needs such as food and water often correlates with exploitation of human rights, the latter of which is often righted through coups and revolutionary acts. Braudel's work proved invaluable in that it focused on the daily life of the French as a whole rather than focusing solely on the Revolution. Because of this the book allowed for a detailed study of the actual lifestyle the people had, namely where food was concerned. Kaplow's anthology *France on the Eve of the Revolution* held a myriad of essays that are primary sources of people living during the time of the Revolution. These contemporaries of the movement chronicled their experiences in interacting with the peoples and their daily sufferings when it came to eating or drinking. Lefebvre also wrote about the peasantry and the daily hardships of agrarian life. The work allows one to determine how directly food played a role in the development of the French Revolution.

Stone's writing, on the other hand, targeted the Old Regime and how they failed the French people. While the work focuses primarily on the international aspirations of French colonization, it nonetheless highlights the failures of the royals to meet their domestic responsibilities first. The economic strain of multiple wars prior to the Revolution such as the Second Hundred Years War and the American Revolution (Stone 22-24) caused exploitation of the commoners that were already hard-pressed to afford food before the ascension of Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI. Ehrmann's text

illustrates how the stressors of the outbreak of violence occurred within Paris as the commoners were more readily able to see the difference in their lifestyle and that of their royal neighbors. The variability within the city when it came to wealth caused the rancor that eventually led to the execution of Louis XVI and his family. Rudé's work contained tables illustrating hypothetical French workers' earnings and daily spending on bread and other forms of survival. Because of these charts, it was easy to see the drastic results of rising food prices on French living and its importance in the Revolution. Michelet also mentioned the unrest that arose with the lack of bread, yet attributed this deficiency to the incompetence of the Old Regime.

Discussion

The idea of linking human rights with the environment arose almost two centuries after the close of The French Revolution, yet these “issues are inextricably bound together” (Sachs 5). The connection between the two clearly illuminates the correlation between discrepancies and political upheavals throughout the world. The heart of these upheavals in France lies with the relationship between Paris and the rest of the country. With the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in 1750, France's population began to grow exponentially. This overflow of people led many to migrate to Paris, yet the population “shifts and a corresponding redistribution of national wealth [accented] traditional differences” (Ehrmann) of wealth, social standing, and access to food or beverages. The Revolution may not have arrived as suddenly as it did if the more abject Parisians were not so attuned to the affluence of the nobles. Within the city itself the discrepancy in wealth “is about twice as great as that between them and the poorest region of France” Ehrmann 22-23). The people that remained in predominantly

agricultural societies were by no means rich, but they had better access to resources than the urban poor.

The Enlightenment of the 18th century led to The French Revolution in two ways; it questioned the power of the Catholic Church and, by default, that of the nobility. The latter were no longer protected from harm because it was no longer believed that birth within a royal lineage meant that they were chosen by God to lead the country, and the peasantry began to lose patience with those that were supposed to feed and protect them but rather exploited them and offered rotten food (Stone 17). The incessant warring with the British drew heavily upon the Kings of France to keep their soldiers healthy. In fact, because wine had been exported to the British as a major source of income and was now banned from export to their enemies, the French economy suffered harshly. This strain on the economy led to more and more of a burden to be handed to the commoners, for the nobles continued to live their affluent lifestyles whereas the commoners were those to experience the subsequent depression. The food and wine rejected by the nobility as second-rate went to the soldiers on the fronts and only that rejected once again made its way to the common people of Paris. Hence, between the travel time and already subpar quality of the food, that which reached peasant stomachs was often a detriment to health more than anything else.

Even bread, a staple of the French diet for centuries now, soon became unattainable to the commoners as prices rose significantly (The International World History Project). Starving commoners would sneak into fields at night and cut down the grain that farmers grew, which worked to increase the already rising prices, to the point where “bread was wanting, and still more often the money to buy bread” (Michelet 259).

Workers in Paris normally spent about “50 per cent. of his income on bread; 16 per cent. on vegetables, fats, and wine; 15 per cent. on clothing; 5 per cent. on fuel; and 1 per cent. on lighting” (Rudé), which clearly explains how any spike on the price of bread such as those of 1789 could prove disastrous for the people. The percentage of one’s daily salary that went towards buying bread alone could range from 15-97% (Rudé 251) depending on one’s job, and when taken into account with the rest of other daily necessities, the price of bread was astronomically high.

Despite the interdependence of rural and urban France, the bourgeoisie refused to acknowledge the plight of the commoner because it was clearly understood that that was simply their lot. Despite the “signs of misery everywhere” (Moheau 4), many did not perceive the commoners’ plight as a serious threat to society or the old regime. The agricultural area of Northern France consisted of “many large areas where there was more grass than wheat, and where livestock was the predominant form of wealth, the commercial ‘surplus’ off which peasants lived” (Braudel 118). Food was wealth in an area where people did not have daily access to water or energy, yet sustained the nobility of Paris who led a life so different from the peasantry that the capital was an altogether different country.

The grasslands provided neither the lumber nor coal necessary for energy yet it “fed the flocks... and without this other France, how could Paris have been fed” (Braudel 118)? The nobility held no respect for the people, nor fear as it were, but relied on their distant countrymen entirely. However the relationship was by no means reciprocal, for “recourse to the throne was neither easy nor the usual practice, and the unfortunates died without help” (Moheau 6). The Parisian system supplied wheat to “suburban millers and

flour to the Paris bakers-often at the expense of the supplying areas themselves, or at the reputed expense of the villages lying on the rivers and roads along which food-convoys bound for the capital traveled (Rudé 22), again showing the exploitation by the Parisian nobility at the expense of the general population of France.

The decades leading up to The French Revolution consisted of famines so extreme that “from one end of the kingdom to the other, a national cry rose up against the lack of food, and there is almost no town or province whose food supply has not been threatened” (Moheau 5). Diets consisted of bread with occasional meat for the more prosperous, which led to rampant malnutrition throughout the country. Within the city of Paris, people combed the market streets searching for food or straw to sell and lived miserable lives where they “never know, when they get up, what they will live on during the day” (Schulz 113). Furthermore, the “holdings of the overwhelming majority of the peasants were not large enough to support them and their families” (Lefebvre 133) and much of this was due to low levels of production because cultivation methods had not advanced in decades. Famines had caused farmers to devote all time to growing meager amounts of food and did not allow time to apply new methods of agriculture; even if time had allowed, distrust of new methods from foreigners would have dissuaded any technological advancements from other countries. In addition, fallow fields were deemed “common land, to which all persons, or at least all proprietors, might send their livestock to graze” (Lefebvre 140), which caused further strain for the French to keep as much land as possible cultivated at the expense of food and nutrient quality.

Food was not the only necessity of which the commoners were deprived, however, for potable water was a rarity in most cases, as well. The people were forced to

find alternatives to make up for this deficiency in their diet. The most common substitute became a staple in the lifestyle of the French that persists to this day, for before the Revolution there were “many who drink wine” (Moheau 6) instead of water.

Pasteurization would not be invented for a few decades and wine, like milk, occasionally caused sickness after consumption because of microorganisms or molds present.

Therefore, many people were hurt by the only option they had to sustain themselves.

Only those commoners with enough money to own goats or cows even had the choice of risking illness from milk, so even among the commoners there was inequality in the availability of drinks.

French philosophers say “the true poor have a real right to demand basic necessities,” which is exactly what they did beginning 14 July, 1789. “The best way of holding those who wield power accountable is through the protection of the basic civil and political freedoms-free speech, a free press providing access to information, fair elections, and freedom to organize in groups” (Sachs 8). Unfortunately, the common people did not have any of these rights in The Old Regime and demanded for them over the ten years of instability and civil coups. Once the coup began “the peasant [may have] destroyed the feudal regime... but he consolidated the agrarian structure of France” (Ehrmann 25). The country itself retains a strong agricultural sector in the modern day, but the social inequality and food shortages associated with it greatly reduced within ten years.

The norm of the people consisted entirely of fear; fear of their oppressors, fear of where their lives would lead that day, and fear that it would all end. When the former two began to appear more threatening than the latter, the people decided to act. In the

minds of the people the royals were dangerous and could easily have killed them, but that possibility was still favorable to the certain death many felt daily as their lives progressed in fear. While the beginnings of the uprising could easily have been suppressed and mitigation would have saved the Old Regime, the nobles simply couldn't understand the extent of the peoples' hunger and subsequent desperation until it was too late. "The [peasantry] would have forgotten freedom and the hope of freedom if they had been able to forget their stomachs" (Schulz 114). While liberation was indeed a prominent ideal of The Revolution, hunger was at the forefront of the environment that actually produced the actions.

Conclusion

Drinking and eating enough stood at the forefront of French thought during the years preceding the French Revolution. In greatest light stood "the price of food- particularly of bread- [rather] than the amount of [one's] earnings (Rudé 21). 13 July, 1789, the day before the storming of the Bastille and official commencement of the French Revolution, saw an attack on the Saint-Lazare monastery in an attempt to "remove grain stored in its barns to the central markets, and among the local raiders, who looted its rooms, the cry of 'allons chercher du pain' [let us go and look for bread] was heard" (Rudé 203). Even before the release of political prisoners, before the capture of the royal of the family, before the toppling of the Old Regime, the French went in search of bread to satisfy their stomachs and ensure their survival for another day. "Other equally unhappy causes [such as exploitation of the masses and wine illness from microorganisms] had profoundly undermined the consideration due the crown of France, which in earlier days, had been the object of terror and jealousy" (Stone 19). All of these

factors culminated in the French Revolution, not because the people wanted equal standing or freedom of an oppressive government and religion, but simply because the antiquated system was not working for the majority of the people. They were dying by the scores within and around Paris while the nobles did nothing more than order the dead beggars away from their gates. The scraps of food provided were few and far between and rotten more often than not, clearly illustrating that the nobility was not caring for the people that sustained them and their lifestyles.

To conclude, the focus of this essay was to determine how a discrepancy in availability caused the French Revolution. This essay traced how resource distribution directly and indirectly influenced socio-political movements just before and during the uprising. Food and beverages played a key role in the coming of French Revolution, for the people were in effect fighting for the right to have nutrition rather than for social or political ideals. I have found through the literary review and the discussion that this is the case.

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