

The Ninth Grade and the French Revolution

by

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All historical descriptions must awaken the feeling of re-experiencing the events. The French historian, Jules Michelet, made this demand on himself. While the 1848- revolution tore through France he sat and wrote about the great French Revolution. During his long work on that overpowering theme, he said: “I am busy with a difficult task, namely to relive, to re-experience and re-suffer the revolution.”

To truly bring a historical reality into the classroom is very difficult. The teacher faces two main challenges: The theme must be one that suits the children’s age, and it must also be taught and learned with that goal in mind.

In the ninth grade at the Waldorf school in Norway, we work with historical themes from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These three centuries are filled with phenomena that help us understand our own situation today. For two- or three-week main lesson blocks (one and a half hour lessons each morning), we cover the French Revolution. For children in this grade it is not enough to present detailed, colorful descriptions of the personalities and events. In the ninth grade questions arise in a different way than in the seventh and eighth. The students want to penetrate, to understand what they are told. The belief that they can penetrate the world with their own thinking sprouts forth in their soul, though fully unconsciously.

We also find this belief in the European people of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is “The Age of Enlightenment.” The belief in the intellect was greater than the belief in God. Only with reason (*ratio*) could humans comprehend and solve their problems. This was carried to such an extreme in the French Revolution that they renamed the beautiful, Middle Age Notre Dame Cathedral “The Temple of Reason!”

At that same time, Goethe and Schiller were expressing the power of comprehension differently. The life stories of Goethe and Schiller make a good contrast to the French Revolution.

Now we should not think we are dealing with the history of philosophy in the ninth grade. No, far from it. Rather it is the pupil's ability to judge and think about the relationships and total picture of history that must be stimulated.

What was the unique character of the eighteenth century? "The more reason wins ground and reveals mistakes, delusions, prejudices, and superstition, the closer mankind nears the golden age where reason has conquered, leaving harmony and peace to govern." The enthusiastic revolutionary and thinker Antoine Condorcet wrote these words in 1794. The French looked up to the enlightened, thoughtful and educated men. But "enlightened" expressed itself in different ways for different nations and individuals.

Especially noteworthy is the way in which it appeared in Benjamin Franklin from the newly created United States of America when he arrived in Paris in 1776! In Franklin we find the citizen, scientist, enlightened philosopher and statesman united in one person. He was a totally self-educated man. What moral training did he obtain before he dared present himself as a statesman! He conceived and systematically practiced nineteen moral virtues. Franklin's autobiography can awaken excitement in young people who are just starting their own development.

But "enlightenment" can also deviate into the rudest materialism and the airiest fanaticism. The prerequisites for the "Age of Enlightenment" are found in the types of people who lived in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in the consciousness that created the Renaissance, led to the great explorations (both the geographical and the natural scientific ones) and the Reformation. We find the new feeling for life and consciousness that does not fall into extremes expressed in the biography of Pico Della Mirandola.

(God the Father speaks to Adam) No important place, no finished shape or inheritance have we given you, Adam, so you may choose your home yourself, your shape and the path of our being. All other beings we have placed under certain laws; only for you have We set no limitations. You can choose, with your own will you can be who you choose to be.

In the middle of the world I have placed you, so you may freely look around to all sides and observe whatever pleases you. Not heavenly, not earthly, not deathly nor immortally have I created you. With your own will and to your own honor create and educate yourself and form your being of the content that you choose. In that way you are free to sink down to the lowest animalistic level or raise yourself to the gods' highest spheres.

Should not that new feeling of life and consciousness usher us into new social orders? The Middle Ages were over!

A characteristic quality from the eighteenth century was that people were still spun into ancient social orders. In some places the ancient orders were legitimate, in other places no so. For the most part the remaining ruins of the feudal and vassal society that were based on lineage limited the development of humanity into enlightenment. In the time of Louis XIV the disintegration had progressed so fully that an absolute royal state was created to hold society together. A feeling of dust and stiffness streamed as an undertone in the “Sun King’s” festive France.

In a gigantic, symmetrical castle, surrounded by an artistic and well-kept park, the Sun King held court. In the most refined, historical scenery a gigantic play unfolded: a luxury of superficial excitement and splendor. Halls and rooms were filled with works of art, orange trees in silver planters, enormous galleries covered with “charm’s advisors”(as mirrors were called then). Processions, parades and pageants with masked balls were celebrated in the illuminated park, and people embalmed in powder and wigs constantly changed their costumes throughout the day. To the castle at Versailles came the nobility to bathe in the Sun King’s favors. But in the winter it was so cold in the royal halls that both wine and sauce on the King’s table froze to ice.

“The State—that is me,” proclaimed Louis XIV. What did that mean? The Sun King’s predecessor Louis XIII and his talented minister, Cardinal Richelieu, had set the foundation for an effective, centralized royal state with public servants. Just as the stone frogs in the park garden at Versailles spat out streams of water to the center of the fountain, so did money, through complicated taxation laws, stream into the Sun King’s treasury. Who was the state? At the castle at Versailles everything that happened and all who partook were woven into an extraordinary arrangement called etiquette. This etiquette was a pattern, a set of rules that regulated every detail of the day: how one should present oneself, what clothes to wear, which interests and attitudes to pursue. The system became so dominating that even the King could not break etiquette. A superior principle seemed to control France.

A history block on the French Revolution can begin with a description of Versailles and Louis XIV’s state. In direct contrast the teacher can describe life in the cities and the provinces. The Englishman Arthur Young’s travel journal from the provinces paints a gloomy picture of life in the farm villages. Tremendous poverty arises as a growing shadow over the glittering Versailles. Drama is in the air and it grows as time progresses. In the cities, especially in Paris, the sparks of enlightenment and the ideas of freedom shoot into the sky. Politicians, professors and artists meet in the salons. They plan and intrigue until far into the night. It thunders and lightnings in human souls. The needs of a new age brew forth and

struggle to find their form apropos for the changes that have occurred in the inner life of man as they manifest in the outer world.

The French Revolution

To understand what a revolution is, it will help us to acknowledge our own unpeaceful times. Two powerful historical examples are the French and the Russian revolutions, even though they were very different. The Russian Revolution, which is related directly to the events of World War I, is often taught in the tenth grade. The French Revolution (1789–1799) that ends with Napoleon Bonaparte is part of a continuous line of dramatic events. Behind the scenes are the powerfully inspired ideas: Freedom—Equality—Brotherhood.

Here is one brief synopsis: During the reign of Louis XIV trouble brewed all over France. The state treasury was empty and state debt grew continually. “After us comes the Deluge,” people said at the court. They sensed an inevitable catastrophe. It was as if all outer events, even nature created the prerequisites for the drama. The autumn of 1788 saw the worse grain harvest in memory. But in Versailles the days continued in festive splendor. On the throne sat Louis XVI with his wife Marie Antoinette. Louis was a pious, but weak and unconscious person. The inherited blood forces no longer produced qualified kings.

On May 4, 1789, the King was forced to allow the consultative chamber to meet for the first time since 1613. The citizens took over and refused to leave Versailles until they had a new constitution for France.

Unrest broke out in the streets of Paris on July 4. The Bastille prison, an old castle from the Middle Ages was stormed and the commander’s head carried off on a pike. The revolution was begun. No one was spared. The deepest longing of the people ran freely—but appeared distorted and unrestricted. The people’s feelings swung from one extreme to the next. One minute a whole parade of people marched to Versailles to dethrone the King, but after Louis calmed the crowd, the very same people enthusiastically escorted the entire royal family to the city! A new constitution, inspired in part by the American bill of human rights, was sanctioned. It brought limited monarchy and equal rights for law and justice—no matter social status. Taxes would be shared equally among all of the people, the nation was divided into eighty-three departments, and the church became a state church. In this phase of the revolution there was still some idealism in the air.

The National Assembly proclaimed: “Freedom is the right to do everything that does not hurt other people.” Flyers with the ideals: Freedom—Equality—Brotherhood circulated. July 14, 1790, one year after the revolution broke out, it was celebrated ceremoniously before a huge fatherland’s altar. Idealism was now

over-heated to fantastic enthusiasm. And the people lost control in the exaltation. The pendulum swung the other way and the revolution moved into its horrific phase. Revolutionary leaders, with Robespierre, Danton and Marat in the lead, fought for power in the new consolidation. The revolution became a caricature of what had been intended. The Republic became the next goal. And by the majority of one vote, Louis XVI was sentenced to the guillotine. After a painful imprisonment the rest of the family shared his fate. In an atmosphere of joy and fear, France was proclaimed a republic.

The next phase was the dictator phase. The revolution never became radical enough—it sent its own leaders to the scaffold. Enthusiasm turned into fear. What would happen now? Could anyone bring order to the chaos? A new government tied down the people. Posters in Paris read: “Freedom-Equality-Brotherhood—or death.” The people swung between hope and fear, but fear was strongest. Europe’s royalty shuddered in fear, and France became involved in a war with Austria and Prussia. Finally we see the fall of Robespierre (1794)—the people moved into a final phase—reaction. Through the masses a voice was heard: Peace at any price—give us peace and order, whoever can! And there stood a compact young general, a man who later said of himself “I am the French Revolution!” France became one nation under the emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. The great revolutionary pendulum swing was complete.

How can we recreate the concepts of the French Revolution with our pupils? Has our presentation been successful? Do the pupils wonder: Was that a revolution? What thoughts can unfold here? Through questions and conversation in class we try to create concepts together.

Let us look back upon the revolution and identify the phases it went through. Hopefully we will understand it later on. Once as my tenth grade class worked through the Russian Revolution, one student exclaimed, “Now I see it! The Russian Revolution stopped too soon. It never progressed beyond the dictator phase!”

Many interesting questions may arise: Why did the revolution take place? Could it have been prevented? Even if there are no complete answers, at least the important questions have been raised. The questions do not always arise, but hopefully the teacher has sown the seeds for future questions.

When pupils in the ninth and tenth grades begin asking about historical causes, how shall we react as teachers? What kind of thinking do we want to develop? Here we need to tread carefully. Causes in history are not easy to approach. One must take roundabout routes, based on experiences and events, so one can continue to develop flexible mental images. In the case of the French Revolution the teacher would have thought through the following line of

questions: What set the revolution into action? What were the motives and the intentions behind the activities? Ordinarily the teacher will point to economic and production-oriented causes: the failing economy of France, widespread poverty, unjust government and the old-fashioned social orders may have set the French Revolution into action, but they were not the causes. If we want to approach the causes we need to inquire more about the motives and intentions of the actions. What did people want to happen in 1790?

Let us look at the French Declaration of Human Rights approved by the National Assembly on August 26, 1789. The first three points are:

1. People are born and remain free with equal rights. The social differences can only be explained in relation to how they serve the public.
2. The goal of every political institution is to protect mankind's natural and inalienable rights. These are: freedom, property rights, security and the right to resist repression.
3. The basis for power rests on the nation; no social class nor person may exercise power that does not specifically come from the people.

Freedom and equality! In the American Declaration of Independence (1776), the inalienable human rights are recorded as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Behind these unclearly defined demands we also suspect greater impulses.

In eighteenth century France the feeling for responsibility and the power of freedom were unfolding in individual form and required a new social order that gave them space. But a new society is not created in one day and may not be put into place by paragraphs of human right declarations. That is the problem for the French Revolution.

Freedom and equality were two of the demands during the French Revolution. The third was brotherhood. Rudolf Steiner explained that future social orders must allow the possibility of freedom so every individual may unfold his creative skills, his individuality. Within the law and the legal institutions (also the state political institutions), equality must rule so that each person can be co-responsible for and active in decisions that concern the entire society. And in the economic sphere the principle of brotherhood must break forth (production and needs must meet in cooperation, not at the mercy of power interests). How these impulses will be realized in the future is totally up to the people. Even though the French Revolution forced these ideas on the cultural development, the tendencies were already there. But, despite their "enlightenment," the people of the eighteenth century were not able to take up

and work on these ideals. Therefore enormous chaos set in. From this perspective teachers can create the right mental images on why the French Revolution exploded and what it actually meant.

In the ninth grade the teacher cannot introduce to the children the prerequisites for new social orders. But by taking a look at human rights, the class can approach the outer phenomena and direct their attention to questions concerning what people needed in 1790 and which motives were expressed in the actions. This is not a direct answer to the questions concerning causes but if the children's thinking receives support, their understanding can eventually grow.

The teenage years are a time for unrest and enlightenment that also includes the drama and explosiveness of a revolution. From history we can learn that if catastrophes in the social life are to be prevented, the problems and tasks of every age must be solved in each individual's consciousness. For the subject of history is the human being himself.