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Reacting to the Past: The French Revolution from the Eyes of History Students

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Reacting to the Past:

The French Revolution from the Eyes of History Students

Editorial Introduction

Reacting to the Past (RTTP), a program developed at Barnard College, was designed to get students more engaged with the history they read, write, and learn in history courses. By assigning historical characters to the students in the classroom they are required to put themselves into the mindset of those leaders in the past and the debates they faced. The RTTP program's success is visible in how many topics the program has undertaken, ranging from "Patriots, Loyalists and Revolution in New York City, 1775–76" to "Confucianism and the Succession Crisis of the Wanli Emperor, 1587." The concept itself has been widely embraced by many colleges across the country. (For more information about the program, see its website, <https://reacting.barnard.edu/>)

Most recently at Armstrong, Dr. Allison Belzer, Assistant Professor of History, began to utilize the "Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791" text in her Civilization classes and Modern France course. The students accepted the challenge and put forward remarkable work, far more insightful than seen in traditional lecture formats. The students were all assigned roles within the factions Jacobin, Noble, Clergy, Moderates, the crowd, and individual characters like King Louis XVI, Marquis de Lafayette, lawyer, doctor, journalist, and rural delegate. Every group was given delegates and power just as they were historically distributed. The students got a chance to make their mark on the historical debates such as the constitution, slavery, and equal rights. The roles were dynamic and ever changing as back room deals were encouraged. Also

crowd riots could shift the number of delegates and therefore the balance of power with moment's notice. The student experience was unique amongst classroom atmospheres, with feelings of pressure, competition, and excitement all playing a role in their assigned work. Basically, no one wanted to lose their head or be killed in a crowd riot, and their best defense were the writings they published in weekly newspapers hoping to gain approval of the factions and crowd. Every week each group produced newspapers comprised of their individual essays. The newspapers stated the stance and political leanings of the factions and covered details of the fighting and protests. The following pieces are written in first person as though they were published by historical characters in 18th-century France at the height of the debate over the role of the clergy, monarchy, and what equal rights for all really meant to the men and women of France. (*Editor, Francis Tannie Arnsdorff*)

Shifts in Political Philosophy: From Antiquity to Modernity

Khristina May

There is a lot of talk about what type of government France is to have? I believe a traditional monarchy is off the table and with good reason. We, the people of France, are not willing to compromise on this point. We are willing to talk about a limited constitutional monarchy. We will not be bullied into accepting a government that is not concerned with its own people! What purpose does the government serve? It serves as the protector of its citizens. I would like to point out that the National Assembly's interim government has not fulfilled this role. The treatment of the people by this Assembly has been ruthless. Yes, riots do hinder the

Assembly's progress; however, this is no excuse to use such violence against France's starving citizens. France has the ability to change the world! We should not continue to fight amongst ourselves, but instead unite.

Aristotle, in the beginning of his work *Politics*, writes that "our decision is to study the best political community for those who are capable of living, as far as possible, in the conditions they would aspire to live in; hence we must also investigate the political systems that are found in cities said to be well governed, and also any systems other people have proposed that seem well conceived." There has been a change in political philosophy since Hobbes that, to me, is disturbing. Government for the ancients was of great importance, not only was it necessary for a civilization, but it was natural that we form political communities and governments. After Hobbes we see a huge shift in this idea. Hobbes gave us the social contract. The social contract for Hobbes is an arbitrary contract done for the sake of our individual need for survival and we are not naturally inclined to form a political community.

We could blame Descartes for this separation of nature and law. Descartes in his *Meditations* splits the world into two separate planes of existence: the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, the thinking world and the extended world, or in other words, the mind and the body. This separation allows us to think of ourselves as outside of nature in some way and influenced Hobbes to separate our natural inclinations from our political governments, which are now just run by a powerful monarch. Understanding this shift in political philosophy is important if we are to move forward for a New France. I don't know about you, but I would like to disagree with Hobbes and the separation of law and nature, in preference of us and our nature to come together.

I do not have a clear solution as to what type of government France should have in the near future. I do, however, hope to bring about a sense of unity in our new society. I think we have the ability to learn from those past philosophers who did hope to bring about a more unified government where they were brought together, not out of fear, but out of the idea that we are social creatures and do take comfort in being political as well. We should not be worried about political parties and our own prejudices, but be focused on what makes us want to move forward as a political, social, and natural body. There is such potential for our nation to thrive if we can but learn to make compromises, and not just view the world as a binary system of yes and no, but of wonder and hope. Wonder and hope with one another and not as arbitrary enemies who want to kill each other over property, greed, and power.

No Liberty, No Equality, and No Fraternity

Stephanie Thompson

How can we come up with the ideology of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, if there are people on French soil not liberated, unequal because of race, gender and beliefs, and brothers fighting in the street? Many people of France have said they believe in this idea but have yet to practice it. They have fought for themselves at the expense of others participating in a nation with no liberty, no equality, and no fraternity. As a citizen of this nation, I will continue to fight for the general will of all, sacrifice myself for France, and fight for Liberty, Equality, and Humanity.

Fraternity...as Jean Jacques Rousseau said “all of my misfortunes come from having thought too well of my fellows.” My comrades are those who believe in the general will, the people marching beside me to Versailles, storming the Bastille, standing against tyranny on our fatherland on the Champ de Mars, and who believe in sacrifice for the greater good. The men in the National Assembly are not my brothers and their pompous wives and noble women are not my sisters. Fraternity is a counterfeit term to describe the affairs in this country. Maybe one day the clergy will realize the pope is no more a king than Louis XVI. The will of God is for all people not specific religions, and they can find fraternity in Christ not in labels. Maybe one day all labels will be pushed aside and we will have true fraternity because we are French.

Equality is a laughing matter and the men of this nation are building France on a lie. In the old regime, powdered wigs, ostentatious outfits, and ghostly faces were the symbol of a gilded France and with the revolution we have begun to scratch away the false image of this nation. While people were celebrating life, there were those struggling to live it. If the men of the National Assembly build this nation on having equality, then they might as well adorn the powdered wigs, and costumes. There is no equality for the poor, the women, and the colored. These men know this, and they have continuously shuddered in fear at the thought of someone other than wealthy white men being equal to them. Therefore, instead of fixing this nation and actually offering equality to all and creating a golden foundation of equal rights of all French men and all French women, they rather paint over the surface of a tattered nation.

Saint-Domingue, the French colony, generates 2/3 of the nation’s wealth at the cost of 2/3’s of the slaves’ blood. In the Fall of 1791, the white plantation owners appealed to the National Assembly for troops to put down the slave rebellion. I am sure Marquis de Lafayette will come to the plantation owners aid and put down the slaves right to insurrection, despite

Lafayette saying, “When the government violates the people’s rights then insurrection is, for the people and for every section of the people, the most sacred of their rights and the most indispensable of their duties.” By “people” Lafayette, means only the Americans as he has proved time and time again by denying the French citizens their right to revolt yet supporting the Americans in theirs.

After reading an article from “Letters from Abroad in Revolutionary times” by a local journalist, I now see the slaves of Saint-Domingue, revolting for their liberation, as our brothers in this revolutionary cause. Members of the National Assembly have repeatedly expressed what an abomination slavery is in Saint-Domingue, but that it was a necessary evil so France could thrive. What is evil is that they preach “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity,” and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Article I of this document says, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.” Does this not apply if their skin is a different color, because it clearly does not apply to women, the mothers, daughters, and sister of the men who helped create this great nation of France. Article XII states, “The security of the rights of man and of the citizen requires public military forces. These forces are therefore, established for the good of all and not for the personal advantage of those to whom they shall be entrusted.” Does the term “all” not refer to every person living on French soil, or does “all” refer to a select few the National Assembly chooses? What other choice do the slaves or my fellow compatriots have but to revolt when the laws and the rights of citizenship do not apply to us. Who will fight for our justice and liberation from tyranny, the king’s troops, the National Assembly, the National Guard, the clergy? They are the people who have went back on a declaration they helped create, the people who spout Liberty, equality, and

Fraternity for their own causes. No, the people who will defend what is right are the people who will and are still fighting for Liberty, fighting for equality, and fighting for humanity.

People of France!

Brent Wacho

Dear readers, Georges Danton here addressing the events that took place this past week at the National Assembly. With every great victory comes great loss, as appeared last Tuesday rumors from inside the National Assembly stated that the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was addressed. As this victory took place a day later an attack on the crowd was enforced by Lafayette. This demonstration by the National Assembly against the people of France shows that the cruel people in there do not have our best interest at heart as a country. I would like to remind The National Assembly that both children and women were killed during this action by Lafayette. Throughout the debate in the National Assembly the issue on how to get money for the country and where to place blame on Frances debt was a topic for heated discussion. Not once did the idea of the poor come up in conversation, but rather the issue to keep the rich richer was a topic for both sides. This brings me to this week's topics of loyalty to France and the right for the lower class to have a say in what takes place.

The clergymen refusing to take the obligatory oath makes me question their loyalty to France. The reason they stated that they did not want to take the oath was that it went against their beliefs with the Church. As Rousseau has stated, "in a state where people value their personal interests over the interests of the state, the will of all may differ significantly from the

general will.” This simply means that if the clergymen continue to only have their best interest at heart then the lower class will remain poor as they keep control. Excuse me if I am wrong but is not the whole idea of the National Assembly to better every class in France just the ones with money? The clergy responded by stating that if we got rid of the Roman Church we would lose ties with the pope. As I walk these streets day to day I want to remind the people that we live in France not Rome and should not have to answer to anyone other than France itself.

The Clergymen are not the only ones to blame with the issue of loyalty, as I remind you our king has just returned after trying to flee the country. From what is being fed to the crowd from the inside the National Assembly, it appears rumors of Austria at our borders was a discussion brought up at the recent assembly meetings. The upper class have stated that if we the crowd rebel against the National Assembly and overthrow the king, then France will be worse off than we are right now. One reason that we are being threatened is because the king’s wife is Austrian! I ask the king personally how he planned on ruling the country from the outside. He should have known that any country that does not have the ruler living in the country is sure to overthrow that ruler in the long run. A prime example being the British colonies in North America where our king fought so hard to help in the struggle against Great Britain for nothing in return, but the loss of income to France. As the days go on I feel and have heard from crowd members how tired they are becoming with the king’s excuses for what he has done. It should come as no surprise to people of France that a revolution is at hand and many deaths are to come if demands are not met.

What I believe is the best interest for the future of France is that the crowd has a heavier say in what happens in the country. We the people are tired of being threatened and kicked aside while the monarch runs this country into the ground. The monarchs are the reason for the debt in

which we the people are forced to deal with while they sit back and try to place blame, as our women and children are rebelling and being killed every day. If results are not shown soon for the general will of the country I fear we have no choice but to attack. Hear my word Monarch we on the streets are not happy about what has taken place so far. The National Assembly should have handled the rebellion in a different manner than sending out armed forces to kill our people. By using your forces you are killing your own... the people of France.

About the authors

Khristina, Stephanie and Brent were all history majors taking Dr. Belzer's Modern France class at Armstrong in spring 2014.