Power and Production of Reality: Manifestations of Internalized Conflict in the French Revolution

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Like millions of others over the last year and a half, I have been drawn into the chaotic wilderness that is TikTok and I have not since emerged from its grip, nor known peace. Any sort of niche category you may think of can be found with the simple search of a hashtag, from music, artwork, dance, relationship advice, recipes… the list truly goes on. Being the astute student of history I am, Tik Tok’s algorithm immediately filled my “For You Page” with history content. Undergraduate students, professors, graduate students, high school teachers, and history buffs alike posting content on topics they were all passionate about. In a video I watched, long since lost to the bottomless pit of liked videos, I remember seeing a young woman wearing a pair of dangled guillotine earrings. In her video, she was describing how they were modeled after a similar design from 1793, which feature miniature severed heads of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. The jewelry was interesting enough, sure, but it raises eyebrows when one remembers it was an execution device – not to mention the fact that people are creating and selling their own versions of guillotine earrings, which seems odd. What gives?

For the first half of the 20th century the one cultural aspect that dominated conversations of the French Revolution revolved around the Marxist paradigm and the question of class struggle. A Marxist, perhaps, would look at those guillotine earrings and see a symbol of class triumph – the downfall of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie as the new dominant class. However, a person’s position in the social process of production is merely one dimension of a power struggle that effects individuals differently depending on their identity. With that in mind, works of classical Marxist historians like Albert Soboul require a sort of philosophical reverse-engineering to get a better picture of *what it is* that creates these different “cartographies of emergent world systems”[[1]](#footnote-1) in the first place, with class struggle being only one manifestation of that effort.

The attempt to answer this question lies in the revisionist approach to the revolution, one that places politics over social conflict as the source of tension and takes into consideration multiple perspectives. The revisionist approach to the Revolution provides a space where multiple things can be true and false at the same time without needing to be mutually exclusive. Recognizing the limitations of perspective while also understanding the value in specialization – and being able to live with the tension that arises given our current understanding – is how stalemate is mitigated and overcome; feeling affirmed by what we perceive to be true while also being vulnerable to critiques in the limitations we fail to see. It is an introspective analysis of how individuals conceptualize the self and how it interacts with a reality they themselves did not create, but nonetheless have the potential to influence and be influenced by.

This paradigm shift, much like the one that pointed towards the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution, is a product of a political culture that brought to light new dimensions of power struggle. The second half of the 20th century, marred by political and social strife on multiple different fronts across the globe, gave birth to cultural studies that worked to analyze different dimensions of identity and how those different perspectives challenged and were informed by the Marxist paradigm. The shift in focus from social, class conflict to political culture gives a more comprehensive answer as to the causes of the Revolution, attributing its ideology as the crux of its failure in establishing a constitution[[2]](#footnote-2). This ideology was heavily influenced by Enlightenment era philosophes, perhaps most importantly by Jean-Jacque Rousseau and his ideas of general will. In *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue*, Carol Blum argues that members of the National Assembly conceptualized their own roles and responsibility in the movement based heavily on the universal acceptance of the *Social Contract*. Although the general consensus more or less accepted the Rousseauian school of thought, Blum notes that “not one of the central political concepts discussed in the *Social Contract* was understood by the revolutionaries who had already proclaimed themselves his spiritual heirs”[[3]](#footnote-3). The image that they essential created of Rousseau was separate from his actual work and ideas, immortalizing as creed an ideology filled with logical flaws that carried devastating implications.

That is not to say that some portions of Rousseau’s framework were not beneficial to the cause. Ultimately it provided revolutionaries with a decent outline to follow for political change, one that was supposedly guided by logic and reductionism. However, that mode of discourse did not allow for dissent or compromise, undermining the very processes they used to bring about change and placed them into a stalemate. This seemingly minute flaw creates a situation where it is impossible for multiple perspectives to be satisfied in a disagreement. In a nation trying to establish itself under a new constitution, the constant gridlock in creating a constitutional framework exacerbated the inability to reconcile peacefully in general consensus. Left to simmer and build hostility, flashpoints emerge as expressions of that very power struggle and are evidence to how certain groups responded differently to that stress.

By not fully understanding the extent of the flaws inherent in Rousseau’s framework, ideological discontent widened the divide between different factions in France that accepted his philosophy as integral to the revolution’s struggle. One such example of this ideological discontent and the conflict that emerges comes from Lynn Hunt’s article, “The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution”. This article uses political pornography to demonstrate how images of the queen were representative of gender roles and political culture, and how she was in a sense formulated in opposition to Enlightenment ideas of will and morality. As Hunt reveals through the article, the *character* of Marie Antoinette in the numerous pornographic pamphlets changes over the years from a passive to an active and malicious participant in culturally subversive sexual acts, such as adultery and pedophilia. It painted the monarchy as immoral, and a threat to the progress posed by those influenced by the Enlightenment – mutual exclusivity was impossible, and violence was inevitable under the circumstance.

These portrayals of the queen were “emblematic of the much larger problem of the relation between women and the public sphere in the eighteenth century”[[4]](#footnote-4), yet the image that was being cultivated encompassed more than a general gauge of gender relations. As thousands of pamphlets were spread across France, increasingly hostile viewpoints towards the monarchy took hold in the political and literary imagination. Portrayals of Marie Antoinette, once written and illustrated as a passive actor in the pornographic pamphlets, took on a new dimension as different inflection points emerged as sources of conflict in French society. She was no longer a symptom of the corrupt monarchy, but a cultivator of it – she (and the monarchy itself) maliciously opposed the image of reality that revolutionaries were striving towards. In this sense, these pamphlets were not just commentary on politics; they were tools that shaped the attitude of the masses, delegitimizing claims of monarchical holiness and exceptionalism. The internalization of the grievances against the monarchy and the system it represented eventually gave way to action – including the execution of Marie Antoinette herself.

The metaphorization of Marie Antoinette to embody the so-called immorality and despotism of the Old Regime encouraged action in the real world to dismantle it – the internalization of anger and tension, fostered not only through political culture and popular literature, provided the space for reactions to build on top of one another until it reached a tipping point. Words and literature in conjunction with the political culture of the Revolution proved to be instrumental in swaying public opinions of the monarchy, and the revolutionaries themselves were quite aware of the way that words and discourse shaped and reflected reality in the political process. Sophia Rosenfeld’s *Revolution in Language* reconstructs the extended historical processes by which language became a major site of political controversy and experimentation, and how politics became a locus of linguistic controversy and experimentation[[5]](#footnote-5). To try and combat the linguistic divide in communicating ideas, there was an active push to fine-tune the ways that politicians presented and argued their ideas to the masses.

While they knew language had the power to construct reality, they thought it was imperative to use it in a way that was new and beneficial to their cause; language was an indicator of changes from the past to the present but was also a means to an ideal future[[6]](#footnote-6). Members of the National Assembly sought to eliminate forms of miscommunication, from standardizing language used in debate to outright banning words they saw as subversive and conflict-provoking. They saw their language in their current form as contaminated by the values of the past, and that they had to come up with a clear, unembellished way of communicating to avoid the confusion they saw as the reason for conflict and tension. Rosenfeld points back to Sieyes’s words as evidence, asserting that the Third Estate was “nothing” that came to be “something”, and saw the possibility of constructing something similar to aid in the progressing Revolution[[7]](#footnote-7). To accomplish such a feat there had to be a way to regiment language and the creation of meaning to present an accurate representation of thoughts and ideas among the National Assembly.

In trying to establish a fool-proof way of facilitating discourse, including attempts to assimilate sign language as a tool to project the political imagination, those spearheading this attempt failed to recognize the limitations posed by their own presumptions[[8]](#footnote-8). Based on their acceptance of Rousseau, overcoming difference was rooted in a reductionist viewpoint – if in fact a general consensus could not be reached, it would be because a person was either intellectually incapable of seeing the truth or actively working to undermine it. This assertion assumes that at the core people are fundamentally the same, but completely disregards how individuals are also products of their social environment and rejects the notion that “a healthy political system could be built on debate and conversation”[[9]](#footnote-9). They are the accumulation of prior experience in addition to bannermen of the present, representative of something greater than the sum of their parts. That does not automatically ascribe a virtuosity to political factions and representatives, but under the influence of Rousseauian practices their politics adopted that belief as true.

The flaw that revolutionaries failed to grasp was their own understanding of language and how it operated as a world-building process. They knew that language played an important role in communicating ideas that facilitated action, but falsely assumed that they could transcend the limitations of their own constructed reality without falling in the same trap. The belief that they could “fix” language ignores the real-time world building process that language helps create – it is itself a dynamic work of culture, one that internalizes and produces meaning back onto the people that is in constant flux. In a way, representations of culture (like language) produce individual examples of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle; while you can see the position of power demonstrated at certain fixed points, the momentum behind that power becomes more and more uncertain – and vice versa.

Providing accurate accounts of the different power struggles that took place in the French Revolution involves an intersectional approach to historical analysis, one that calls awareness to the privilege of hindsight and contextualizes intent to study such issues in terms of *why* instead of *what*. The Marxist paradigm and its prominent popularity since the late 19th century is representative of the influence that politics and ideology has on our very understanding of the world. Historians reflect onto their work the internalized ideologies of their own political realities – to Marxist historians like Soboul, himself a member of the French Communist Party, the French Revolution was a clear example of class struggle. Historians create works of fiction based on their own knowledge, values, and ideals, but are *not* complete representations of the truth. To take these accounts at face value without recognizing the context under which they were made creates the same problem that revolutionaries faced only looking at the *Social Contract* from a constructionist point of view. There is no room for dissent, no space for nuance when each side is blinded with righteous tunnel vision.

That being said, the French Revolution is only one in a long list of revolutions that took place in the 18th and 19th centuries. If class struggle, language, gender relations, and religious strife can be argued as microcosms that drove the French Revolution, then instances like the French Revolution are microcosms for larger patterns that emerge where the lines overlap on a global scale. They are metaphors to create and express meaning, imperfect in capturing the human condition for all people at the same time, but nonetheless a powerful tool in the production of a reality that effects real people. It is expressive as well as informative, representative of something greater than the sum of its parts. The Revisionist framework provides a space for nuance that is not accounted for in the Marxist paradigm. Despite our best efforts, however, it is impossible to take into consideration every nuance in opposing facts in a way that is actually productive – at least, of course, based on their own understanding.

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2. Baker, K. M. (1989). Constitution. *A Critical Dictonary of the French Revolution*, p. 484 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bloom, C. (1986). *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution.* p. 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hunt, L. The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution. p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rosenfeld, S. (2001). *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France*. p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (Rosenfeld, 2001, p. 129) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. (Rosenfeld, 2001, p. 130) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (Rosenfeld, 2001, p. 140) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Rosenfeld, 2001, p. 8) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)