

EPISODE 30

LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 30 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now the last bunch of episodes have been leading up this one. Namely: What happened when all of those wonderful liberal ideas of the 18th Century were finally put into practice? In other words, it's now time to talk about the French Revolution.

But before we get into that, and lest you think that the French Revolution was just too weird a set of circumstances, and therefore wasn't really a real world test case of the theory behind the Age of Enlightenment, let me start you off with a couple of, as it were, liberal short stories.

For instance, consider the French settlements in North America.

Because although most of us are familiar with the one in Quebec, there were also French pioneers in today's Canadian Maritime Provinces, principally Nova Scotia. And these folk were known as Acadians.

So to protect them France had built a major fortress in Louisbourg, Nova Scotia. But when this was decisively captured by the British in 1755, the Acadians had the same stark choice that conquered peoples had always had in this era: Either sign an oath of allegiance to the British King and give up their Catholic faith, or be deported. And being proud French people, they chose the latter.

This resulted in what is known as the Great Expulsion, with over 90% of the peasants being rounded up and sent to wherever. Many of them eventually found their way to Louisiana, where they became known as Cajuns. And today they are still known for their distinctive accents and customs. But otherwise they are fully integrated citizens of America.

Eight years later, however, in 1763, the British also found themselves in possession of what is now Quebec. But now new liberal ideas of tolerance of religion and culture were in the air. And so in 1774 the Quebec Act was passed. In it these new subjects of the Crown were allowed to keep their

language, keep their religion, and keep their French land practices and civil code. And the theory was that now they would be much more loyal and enthusiastic citizens as a result.

Two and a half centuries later Canada has a lot going for it. But by far the greatest problem that the country has faced in the intervening time has been the endless, unbridgeable divide between what is known as the 'Two Solitudes', the French and the English. Well known for their general tolerance, you'd be surprised to know that English Canadians have a visceral disdain for all things French. And it is common to see and hear statements from them which would be thought of as shockingly racist were an American to say it about anyone. For their part, the Quebequois have effectively created their own little country, and—outside of Montreal and the touristy part of Quebec City—it is quite possible to spend an entire day driving around the province without seeing a single out of province license plate.

So much for theory.

Now here's another example. For, as you'll recall from Episode 22, the cultivation of sugar was so important to the 18th Century economy that in 1763, when given the choice of regaining Canada or the small island of Guadeloupe, France gladly took Guadeloupe. But this colony was small pickings compared to what was by far France's wealthiest possession, namely the western two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, which was then known as St-Domingue. With its rich soil and abundant rainfall, its plantations easily produced more sugar and other tropical produce than Jamaica and all the rest of the British West Indies combined. It was not for nothing that it was known as the 'Pearl of the Antilles'.

Of course, all those plantations required thousands upon thousands of slaves. Especially since both yellow fever and the horribly brutal working conditions were always depleting their ranks. And in 1791 those slaves revolted.

For thirteen years there was an extremely complicated ebb and flow, with the slaves first triumphant, then defeated, then mollified when France abolished slavery, then rebelling again when Napoleon sought to re-institute it, and finally achieving complete independence in 1804. Liberals in Europe, especially Jeremy Bentham, rejoiced when this new country of Haiti was announced. To them personal liberty was such a universal human right and goal that even what to their minds were inferior black people would fight and die in order to make it triumphant!

Of course, this didn't mean that any of these liberals actually volunteered their money or time in order to go help the almost totally uneducated newly free citizens. After all, freedom in and of itself would solve all problems, wouldn't it?

Unfortunately, the leader of the rebellion immediately declared himself to be emperor for life. He then immediately ordered the execution of every white person still remaining in the country, resulting in the massacre of 5,000 men, women, and children. He then immediately re-instituted slavery so that the sugar plantations could continue running and his new state could generate income. For himself.

So much for liberty.

Today Haiti is arguably the poorest and most dysfunctional country in the entire world. Its soil is so depleted that it cannot grow enough food even to feed its own population, which, even after earthquakes and hurricanes and all sorts of man made disasters, is still growing way too rapidly. If you go there you will no doubt agree that its society is disturbingly close to Hobbes' ugly vision. Life is nasty, brutish and short. There is an atomized lack of social cohesion. And it is sadly almost every man, woman, and child for themselves.

Meanwhile, ironically, Martinique and Guadeloupe, where France successfully put down slave rebellions, are today both prosperous, integrated departments of the mother country. The descendants of those slaves are now fully fledged citizens of France, with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto. And it almost goes without saying that every single citizen of Haiti would give anything in order to trade places with them.

Again: So much for theory. Not to mention liberty.

But by far the biggest and most spectacular attempt of the 18th Century to put these new understandings of individual rights and personal freedom into practice was the French Revolution.

Historians have come up with any number of causes for this most cataclysmic of world events, and some of them have already been mentioned. For instance, starting with Louis XIV the power of the king had become more and more absolute, and the members of the nobility, who had always provided some sort of balance in systems of monarchy, had become instead consumed with the affairs, the niceties, and the intrigues of court. The State had become all too artificial. And, as the 18th Century progressed, the increasing hedonism, the devolution of popular culture, and an almost exponential increase in sexual titillation all served to increase a sense of dissolution.

The weather didn't help. The eruption of the Laki volcano in Iceland in 1783 started a chain of climate disturbances in Europe that lasted until the end of the decade. Harvests were greatly affected, and what food that was grown was now subject to the new thinking of 'laissez faire' and 'free markets'.

The old thinking was that you kept a nation's food for your nation's citizens. But new economic theory now said that it was much more efficient to always sell to the highest bidder. In this instance the highest bidder happened to be the Dutch. And the result was that the French people starved.

Then there was the state of French finances. Going back to the Mississippi Bubble of 1720 and the machinations of John Law, both the banking system and the government which ran it had never really been on a sound footing. And during the Seven Years War (1756-1763) the government had run up a truly massive debt.

Which means that the new king, Louis XVI, really shouldn't have borrowed another fortune in order to finance the American Revolution. And while it is true that France, which had lost badly to England in that Seven Years War, did really want to get back at their enemy, the larger reason was that the French people had been smitten with the *idea* of the New World, of that unspoiled Eden, America. And even the monarchy was in its way also taken up with this vision of new Republican ways.

After all, despite all the atheism and negative deism of philosophes like Diderot and Voltaire, the gentle, back to nature writings of Rousseau were also wildly popular. The disgust with artificiality, the yearning for Authenticity and the cult of Sensibility reached all the way to the top of French society. And—as already noted—even Marie Antoinette would spend her afternoons at a special palace with her ladies in waiting, all of them dressed up as milkmaids, and all of them pretending to be simple peasants.

But of all the plausible causes for the Revolution, one of them definitely was not that France was still primarily a feudal society. Proto-capitalist industry was just as advanced in France as it was in England. All sectors of society were fascinated by science, and both the American electrical wizard Ben Franklin and the ballooning Montgolfier brothers were national idols.

Nor was there a large disenfranchised class of bourgeoisie who were just itching for a share of the power. This was because, first of all, it wasn't that hard to buy yourself into the nobility if you wanted to. More importantly, by the end of the 18th Century money, not rank, was now all that mattered. After all, many nominally noble families were in reality quite poor. Whereas a rich businessman in Paris would have the exact same doors opened for him, and with the same servility, as would any nobleman.

In actuality, ironically enough, most of the energy at the beginning of the Revolution came from disaffected members of the aristocracy. After all, they were generally the ones who were most educated, most financially independent enough to consider new ideas, and therefore most entranced

with all those Enlightenment ideas. And whether one was a follower of the hedonist Voltaire or of the naturalist Rousseau, each one of these writers in his own way was preaching for individual rights and freedoms and against the old autocratic establishment.

This group of idealistic aristocrats is perhaps best exemplified by the Marquis de Lafayette. One of the richest men in France, he went to America as an idealistic nineteen year old to fight for independence and had developed a son-father relationship with George Washington himself. Now a beloved national hero, his vision was to create a constitutional monarchy along the lines of Great Britain, with a figurehead king, a fully representative congress, religious liberty, and the Rights of Man duly enshrined in written form. And if the Age of Enlightenment really had been all that enlightened, then it would seem that such an enterprise should have been a piece of cake. Further, most historians agree that this was something to which Louis XVI—another child of the Enlightenment—would have ultimately assented to.

Instead, here (in greatly condensed form) is what actually happened:

By 1787 the debt situation had become completely untenable. Back in the 1770s a finance minister named Turcot had tried 'free market' type reforms, but they had totally backfired. Then in the early 1780s a new finance minister named Necker had tried *his* free market ideas. These too failed. So now—in order to raise the necessary taxes—the king was only left with the option of calling the Estates General, which were sort of a French version of the English Parliament, and which hadn't been seen since 1614, before the rise of the doctrine of royal Absolutism.

Given impending bankruptcy, general famine, widespread social dissoluteness, and Voltaire's (and others') century long attack on any and all authority, religious or political, what could possibly go wrong?

Well, first of all, the Estates General consisted of three estates, each of which was presumably equal. The First Estate was the Church, the Second Estate was the nobility, and the Third Estate was the people. But whereas this sort of division would have made sense to someone in the 16th Century, by 1789 the idea that 95% of the population held (at most) one third of the vote didn't make much sense to anyone any more.

This became rather apparent as soon as the first Estates General meeting was held on May 5 of that year. By June 17 the Third Estate had separated from the other two and declared itself a National Convention. Three days later its members swore an oath not to disband until they had written a new

constitution. And a few days after that they were joined by a majority of the clergy and about a sixth of the nobles.

What then ensued among the political players were mixed signals and bad moves and counter-moves. And amid the confusion rioting mobs started roaming the streets of Paris. Then on July 14 they stormed the Bastille, which was by then a little used prison, but also a major source of weapons. Its commander and the mayor of Paris were both brutally murdered.

Then it went downhill from there.

On August 4 this new National Assembly formally abolished feudalism. Which sounds rational and progressive, except that it also meant that any and all privileges that not just the clergy and the nobility, but also towns and cities and even private companies, had traditionally held vanished overnight. Most means of taxation were held to be invalid. A couple of months later France's judicial system was suspended. In short, the country's entire cultural framework, built up over many long centuries, had suddenly disappeared in the relative blink of an eye.

Meanwhile on August 26 the Assembly had passed a resolution on the Rights of Man, which borrowed heavily from Thomas Jefferson. But absolutely nothing had been done about the economic crisis, which had been the whole reason for calling the Estates General in the first place. What's more, the common people were starving. On October 5 a mob of 7,000 women marched the twenty miles from Paris to Versailles, and the next day the king meekly agreed to relocate to Paris, in effect admitting his subservience to the Assembly.

As for the Church, the August 4 declaration meant that it could no longer collect its 10% tithe from the population. By November 2 all Church property was forfeited to the State. Around the same time monastic vows were deemed invalid, and on February 13, 1790, all religious orders were abolished. By July of that year all priests and nuns were declared employees of the State. A few months later they were all required to swear an oath to that State, which naturally superseded any oath which they had made to God, let alone the Pope.

Now let's pause for a moment. Because the French Revolution was so complex, with so many dizzying twists and turns, that a full length book could hardly do it justice. For the purposes of this episode, however, I hope that it is apparent that, just as the Soviet Union was a fairly accurate attempt to implement the theories of Karl Marx, so too the French Revolution was by and large a direct result of the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment. After all, in theory once you stripped away all those

encumbrances of culture, tradition, and religion, then Rational Man and Rational Woman would automatically stride forth together into the sunlight of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

But then we are up against some of the central fallacies of this era: That by stressing selfishness and people's individual rights, this would somehow magically produce civic mindedness. That freedom from laws and social mores would necessarily produce citizens of Virtue.

For whereas idealistic patriots like Lafayette labored away trying to produce that fair and rational constitution, it soon turned out that people like him were in the minority. Today the Marquis de Sade has a particularly bad reputation, but by no means was he alone in his debauchery. And so many minds had been corrupted by those decades of sleazy and anti-clerical, anti-royal plays and publications. Finally, most of the Assembly representatives were well educated lawyers and such. The 1%. Meanwhile, it began to filter through to the sans-culottes, those uneducated and poor masses, that each of their votes was just as important as that of the high born. And, further, that their mobs had the power to change things quickly.

So it shouldn't be surprising that what started out as a semi-courteous debate between center-left and center-right soon became dominated by personalities who appealed to those unwashed masses. And that these personalities would espouse ever more radical positions.

Still, in June, 1791, when Louis tried to escape from France but was caught, a majority was yet in favor of a constitutional monarchy. So that, when the constitution was finally completed in September of that year and the king duly signed it, what we might call the 'conservative' liberals assumed that their job was done.

Except that the economy was now in worse shape than it had been in 1787. The army, which had been Europe's strongest, was now in tatters. With religion and tradition thrown out the window there were not really any standards left to hold anyone to. And the sans-culottes were hungrier and angrier all the time.

In October of 1791 a new Assembly was elected, and they settled in to... well, basically accomplish nothing. Like the Russian liberals before Lenin's power grab, for the next ten months, as the country fell apart more and more, they endlessly debated. Then in August, 1792, a mob forced the issue by killing the soldiers guarding the king and capturing him. On September 20 a third assembly, this one called the Convention, convened. And the next day the king was dethroned and a Republic declared. On January 17, 1793, Louis was condemned to death, and four days later he was executed.

Ah, the guillotine. It was the perfect expression of the Age of Reason. After all, it was scientifically quick and efficient. More importantly, it was a painless way to dispatch the condemned. And above all it was all about equality: The poor murderer and the aristocratic traitor both received the same fate. The fact that it would make life seem cheap and worthless, and that the spectacle of its use would attract crowds of bloodthirsty thousands, never once occurred to its inventor.

But there was much more about the Revolution that was pretend 'scientific'. For instance, the calendar, that remnant of the ancien regime, was thrown out. And in its place was the new Revolutionary calendar, starting each year on September 22, with twelve newly named months of thirty days each, each containing three weeks that were ten days long. A day now consisted of ten hours, each with a hundred decimal minutes, each of which had a hundred decimal seconds. And if that sounds totally insane to you, consider that the metric system was also introduced at that time. And even today this system, simply by having removed all human reference and dividing everything into tens, this is presented as somehow being more 'rational' than others.

And then there was the Cult of Reason.

By late 1792 anti-clericalism had gotten to the point where a radical atheist named Jacques Hebert decided that it was time to declare a new 'civic' religion where human perfection in Truth and Liberty would be gained solely through the means of Reason itself. Soon all cemeteries were forced to remove all religious references and to display a sign that said, 'Death is an eternal sleep'. This new anti-religion religion spread quickly, especially among the sans-culottes, and on November 10, 1793 (sorry: 20 Brumaire, Year II) there was a nationwide Festival of Reason. In Paris the Cathedral of Notre Dame was cleared of all Christian symbols and instead up upon an Altar of Liberty, surrounded by girls in Roman togas, and ready to be worshiped, sat a provocatively dressed Goddess of Reason.

Who just happened to be the wife of Hebert's best friend.

Meanwhile the economy had totally collapsed and the masses were rioting. France found itself at war with virtually every other country in Europe, especially since it had so casually just slaughtered its monarch. And in this atmosphere, in April, 1793, the Convention was superseded by the Committee of Public Safety. Various factions had been forming, splitting up, and reconstituting as different factions throughout this whole process. But now the losing parties were almost inevitably being immediately led to the guillotine. And in *this* atmosphere the Reign of Terror began.

Now Maximillien Robespierre is one of the stranger creatures of history. As a young man he had idolized the Roman Republic, and then later he became quite the follower of Rousseau. He was constantly obsessed by Virtue, and in his personal life he was known as 'the Incorruptible'. He was against slavery and before the Revolution was staunchly against capital punishment.

But in a certain way he was also like Jeremy Bentham, in that his mind took the logic of the Age of Reason away from all human considerations and to its totalitarian logical conclusion. If Virtue was so all important, and if small minded or wrongheaded people were preventing Virtue from happening, then those people must be eliminated.

Because the 'Reign of Terror' isn't some negative term that later generations have applied to that period. It's exactly what the rulers of the time called it. And they actually thought they were giving it a positive name. And although the Committee of Public Safety started out with nine rulers, pretty soon Robespierre was the last one standing. First Hebert and his followers were liquidated in March, 1794. Then a month later Danton (who was another leading figure and Robespierre's former partner) literally got the axe.

To quote Robespierre: 'Terror is only justice prompt,...it is an emanation of virtue; it is...a natural consequence of the general principle of democracy.' Unquote. Soon mere suspicion, unsupported by evidence of any kind or any sort of trial, was legally sufficient to condemn a person to death.

In all there were over 16,000 officially registered deaths by guillotine. Many, many more were killed in much more mundane ways. Revolts in the provinces were brutally extinguished. In the Vendee region alone it is estimated that 170,000 died. And then there were all the countless deaths on the battlefields of all the wars which France was constantly engaged in.

One of the most bizarre aspects of all this is that throughout his life and throughout the Terror Robespierre remained an ardent believer in God. And not just the impersonal God of the Deists, but in almost what we might call an overblown New Age version of the Divine. In fact, when he eliminated Hebert he also outlawed from that point on the Cult of Reason.

In its place he immediately substituted the Cult of the Supreme Being. Seriously. From now on everyone in France would worship in a post-Christian religion which nonetheless believed in a living God, immortal souls, and an eternal higher moral code. As effective dictator, he declared this on May 7, 1794, and, unconsciously echoing Jeremy Bentham, he stressed the 'social utility' of this new vision.

Then a month later, on June 8, he staged the Festival of the Supreme Being.

Much grander than the Festival of Reason, this was staged on an artificially created hill on the Field of Mars in the middle of Paris. There was a parade of hundreds of classically garbed garlanded and beribboned youths leading the way, and majestically descending from the summit was Robespierre himself, enraptured and with a beatific smile upon his face. The New World of Virtue had finally come to pass.

But a month later the political tide had turned again. In essence, virtually everyone had now become freaked out over the possibility that they themselves might be the next victim. Robespierre was summarily guillotined. And the Reign of Terror officially came to an end.

The so-called Thermidorian Reaction brought to power those centrists who had somehow survived to this point. They set about executing everyone still alive to the left of them, and then created the Directory, which was ostensibly a council of five who ruled the country. But the economy was still in total chaos and wars and internal rebellions still raged, and for the next five years everything else just sort of sputtered and stalled.

So that when a white knight suddenly appeared, a young charismatic general still in his twenties named Napoleon Bonaparte, and when he then staged a coup in 1799, most of the French population, sans-culottes and all, cheered in relief that the long national nightmare might be finally coming to an end. And when Napoleon declared himself Emperor in 1804 and set about almost taking over the entirety of Europe, everyone was absolutely jubilant. And the irony of all of this being the direct result of the Age of Enlightenment was lost on just about everyone.

And today there are very few people who nostalgically look back upon the Reign of Terror. However, just as Episode 4 pointed out that in the midst of the Soviet Union's failure most Russians blamed themselves and not the pure truth and beauty of Marxism, in the postmodern era it has become an almost unchallenged assumption that all the good in the West (and the World) is a direct function of those selfsame 18th Century thoughts.

Because surely the French Revolution was an unmitigated disaster. But, just as surely, that couldn't have anything to do with the Age of Reason assumptions that it was based upon, now could it?

Well, except for a few bitter enders, that sure as hell wasn't the reaction both in France and in the rest of the world immediately after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. To the people who had just experienced all the chaos and insanity, it seemed to be the most obvious thing in the world

that this is what happened when you tried to replace culture, tradition, and interlocking human relationships with some sort of cold blooded fantasy you called 'Reason'.

In fact, it is difficult to overstate how traumatized the civilized world was after the events of the French Revolution. After all, after the Peace of Westphalia had ended the Thirty Years War in 1648, although there had been innumerable wars, they had all been relatively small ones, with relatively small armies, with each one playing by the rules, and with relatively few casualties. Indeed, it had been the relative peace and prosperity of the 18th Century which had allowed all those philosophes and such to sit around in their coffee houses and salons and spin off all of those liberal ideas.

And if those liberal ideas had then directly led to the immediate collapse of the largest and most complex society and economy in Europe, which had then led to the dictatorial reaction which gave rise to Napoleon, then it is absolutely no surprise that as the 19th Century dawned all of a sudden what we would now call conservative ideas would be in the ascendant. And if a belief in the sanctity of Reason had ended up becoming the legal justification for a Reign of Terror, then it is also no surprise that the 19th Century would see the rise of the Romantic Era, which would totally reject the Age of Enlightenment and replace Scientism and all those other affectations with an emphasis on inspiration, human warmth, and beauty.

And we'll start taking our brief look at how the 19th Century unfolded in our next episode. But, once again, for this episode, it's all over. But, once again, I would like to thank you so much for so far having listened.