

The Great French Revolution and its Lesson

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On the 5th of May last the celebration of the centenary of the French Revolution began by the commemoration of the opening of the States-General at Versailles, at the same date, in the memorable year of 1789. And Paris—that city which in January last so clearly manifested its dissatisfaction with Parliamentary rule—heartily joined in the festivities organized to celebrate a day when parliamentary institutions, crossing the Channel, went to take firm root on the Continent. Must we see in the enthusiasm of the Parisians one of those seeming contradictions which are so common in the complicated life of large human agglomerations? Or was it the irresistible attraction of a spring festival which induced the Parisians to rush in flocks to Versailles? Or was it a manifestation intended to show that Paris proposes brilliantly to commemorate the Revolution, and the more so as the monarchies of Europe do not conceal their disgust at the very remembrance of such an event? Let it be as it may. At any rate, one who surveys the whole of the great commotion which visited France at the end of last century and exercised so powerful an influence upon the development of Europe during the next hundred years, cannot but look at the gatherings of the States-General on the 5th of May, 1789, as a decisive step in the development of the great revolutionary movement.

True that long before that date France was already in full insurrection. It is known that the advent of Louis the Sixteenth to the throne was the signal for a series of famine outbreaks which lasted till 1783. Then came a period of relative tranquility. But from 1786, and especially from 1788, the outbreaks began again with a new force. Famine was the leading motive of the former series; it played an important part in the new series as well, but the refusal to pay the feudal taxes was its distinctive feature. Small outbreaks became all but general from January 1789; from the month of March the feudal rents were no longer paid, and Taine, who has consulted the archives, speaks of at least three hundred outbreaks which took place since the beginning of the year. The first 'Jacquerie' had thus begun long before the gathering of the States-General, long before the memorable events by which the *tiers état* announced its firm resolution of no longer leaving political power in the hands of the Court.

However, a Jacquerie is not a revolution, though it be as terrible as that of Pugatchoff; nor is a simple change of government, like those which took place in 1830 and 1848, a revolution. The concurrence of two elements is necessary for bringing about a revolution; and by revolution I do not mean the street warfare, nor the bloody conflicts of two parties—both being mere incidents dependent upon many circumstances—but the sudden overthrow of institutions which are the

outgrowths of centuries past, the sudden uprising of new ideas and new conceptions, and the attempt to reform all political and economical institutions in a radical way—all at the same time. Two separate currents must converge to come to that result: a widely-spread economic revolt, tending to change the economical conditions of the masses, and a political revolt, tending to modify the very essence of the political organization—an economical change, supported by an equally important change of political institutions. The convocation of the States-General at a moment when the French peasantry was already in open revolt gave the second element. Ten years before, the meeting of the representatives of the nation might have prevented the revolution; it would have certainly given it another character; but now, amid the peasant revolt, it meant the beginning of a revolutionary period. The revolt of the middle classes joining hands with the revolt of the peasants was a revolution.

The history of the French Revolution has been written and re-written. We know the slightest details of the drama played on the stages of the National Assembly, the Legislative Assembly, and the Convention. The parliamentary history of the movement is fully elaborated. But its popular history has never been attempted to be written. So we must not wonder that even upon such a simple subject as the condition of rural France before 1789 opinions still remain discordant.

The fact is, that it was not the Revolution which abolished serfdom in France, as is sometimes maintained. Serfdom—that is, the bondage to the soil—had already disappeared long before. In 1788, there remained no more than 80,000 *mainmortables* in the Jura, and less than 1,500,000 all over France; and even these *mainmortables* were not serfs in the real acceptance of the word. As to the great bulk of the French peasantry, they no longer knew the yoke of serfdom. But, like the Russian peasants of our days, they had to pay, both in money and obligatory work, for their personal liberty. These obligations were exceedingly heavy, but not arbitrary: they were inscribed in the *terriers* which, later on, became the subject of such fury on the part of the peasants.

Besides, the manorial jurisdiction had been maintained to a very great extent; and when an old woman was bequeathing to her heirs an old woollen skirt and two chestnut trees—I have seen such wills—she had to pay to the bailiff of the *noble et généreuse dame du château*, or the *noble et généreux seigneur*, a heavy tax.

True, that since the time of Turgot many of the feudal obligations were paid no longer. The governors of the provinces refused to support those claims of the landlords which they considered as mere exactions. But the heavier taxes, which represented a real value for the landlord or his sub-tenant, had to be paid in full, and they were ruining the peasants, just as the redemption-tax is now ruining the Russian peasantry. So there is not a word of exaggeration in the dark pictures of village-life which we find in the introductory chapter of nearly every history of the Revolution; but there is also no exaggeration in the assertion that in each village there were individual peasants who were on the road to prosperity, and therefore were the more anxious to shake off the yoke of feudality. Both types represented by Erckmann-Chatrian—that of a *bourgeois du village* and that of a misery-stricken peasant—are true types. From the former the *tiers état* borrowed its real force; while the bands of insurgents which from January 1789 were extorting from the nobles the renouncement of the obligations inscribed in the *terriers* were recruited among the down-trodden masses who had but a mud-hut to live in, and chestnuts and occasional gleanings to live upon.

The same was true with regard to the cities. The feudal rights existed in the cities, as well as in the villages, and the poorest classes of the towns were as burdened by feudal taxes as the peasants. The right of patrimonial jurisdiction was in full vigor, and the houses of the artisans and workers

had to pay the same feudal taxes on inheritance and sellings as the peasants' houses; while many towns were bound to pay forever a tribute for the redemption of their former feudal submission. Moreover, most cities had to pay the king the *don gratuit* for the right of maintaining a shadow of municipal independence, and the whole burden of the taxes fell upon the poorer classes. If we add to these features the heavy royal taxes, the contributions in statute labor, the heavy tax on salt, and so forth, the arbitrariness of the functionaries, the heavy expenses in the law-courts, and the impossibility for a *roturier* of finding justice against a hereditary *bourgeois* or a noble, and all kinds of oppression, we shall have an idea of the condition of the poorer classes before 1789.

I need hardly mention the great intellectual movement which preceded the Revolution. No other period in the history of thought has so much been discussed, or is so well known, as that glorious era of revival which was born in this country, and after having been systematized and popularized in France, exercised so powerful an influence upon the minds and actions of the political leaders of the period. Full freedom of analysis; full confidence in humanity, and complete disdain of the inherited institutions which spoil human nature; the equality of all men, irrespective of their birth; equality before the law; Roman veneration for the law, and obligatory submission of every citizen—be he king or peasant—to the will of the nation, supposed to be expressed by its elected representatives; full freedom of contract and full freedom of religious opinions: all that, carefully elaborated into a system by the eminently systematic French mind, professed with the fanaticism of neophytes, ready to transport the results of their philosophical convictions into life—all this is well known. But what chiefly interests the historian is not so much the development of thought itself as the causes which determined the transition from *thought* to *action*—the circumstances which permitted men of thought to pass from mere criticism and theoretical elaboration to the application in life of the ideal which had grown out of their criticism. To induce men to pass from mere theory to action, there must be some hope of being able to realize their ideas. That hope was raised by the peasants' outbreaks, by the discontent of the middle classes, and by the thus resulting necessity of making an appeal to the nation for the reform of its institutions.

It is well worthy of note that the writings of the most popular philosophers and political writers of the time were imbued to a great extent with what now constitutes the essence of Socialism. The word was not known then, but the ideas were much more widely spread than is generally believed. The writings of Rousseau and Diderot are full of socialistic ideas; Sieyès expressed some of them in most vigorous terms; and the saying *la propriété c'est le vol*, which later on became the beginning of the fame of Proudhon, was the title of a pamphlet written by the Girondist Brissot. Nationalization of land is not unfrequently met with in the pamphlets; the toiling masses are unanimously recognized as the real builders of national welfare, and 'the people' becomes a subject of idealization, not in Rousseau's romances only, but also in a mass of novels and on the stage. All those writings had the widest circulation; their teachings penetrated into the slums and the mud-huts; and, together with the promises of the privileged classes and many secondary causes, they maintained in the masses the hopes of a near change. 'I do not know what will happen, but something will happen some time soon,' an old woman said to Arthur Young as he was traveling over France on the eve of the Revolution; and that was the expression of the state of minds all over France. Hopes of change were ripe amid the toiling masses; they had been maintained for years, but they had always been deceived. They had been renewed by the declarations of nobility during the *Assemblées des Notables*—and deceived again. And so, when the

terrible winter of 1788 and the famine came, while the revolts of the Parliaments were stimulating hopes, the revolt of the peasants took the character of a general outbreak.

The French Revolution already has its legend, and that legend runs as follows:—

On the 12th of July [I omit the facts anterior to that date] the fall of Necker's Ministry became known. That foolish step of the Court provoked the outbreak in Paris which led to the fall of the Bastille. As soon as the news reached the provinces, similar outbreaks began in the cities and spread into the villages. Many castles of the nobility were burned. Then, during the famous night of the 4th of August, the nobility and the clergy abdicated their feudal rights. Feudalism was abolished. Since that time the struggle continued between the national representation and the Court, and terminated in the defeat of the aristocracy and the royal authority. As to the peasants' outbreaks which continued after the 4th of August, they were—the legend says—the work of mere robbers, inspired with the sole desire of plunder, when they were not instigated by the Court, the nobles, and the English. At any rate, they had no reason to continue since the feudal rights had been abolished, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man had become the basis of the French Constitution.

To begin with, the outbreak of the 14th of July was not caused by the fall of Necker's Ministry.¹ It was an outbreak of the starving masses of Paris, and it began, with the watchword 'Bread!' three days before the fall of Necker; but the middle classes, aware of the *coup d'état* prepared by the Court, took advantage of it, supported it, and directed it against the stronghold of royalty in Paris—the Bastille. When the danger was over, and the Bastille taken, their armed militia crushed the popular movement, which was taking the character of a general revolt of the poor against the rich. In that outbreak, which had so decisive a meaning for the subsequent events, Paris did not take the lead, but followed in the wake of the provinces. However, the success of the outbreak at Paris provoked many similar outbreaks against the privileged classes in the provincial towns, and it encouraged the peasants, especially in the province of Dauphiné; but the *Jacquerie*, as said, had already begun long before, and Chassin is quite right in saying that if Paris had been defeated on the 14th of July, the outbreak of the peasants would have continued nevertheless.

As to the night of the 4th of August, it is a pity to destroy so gracious a legend, but the fact is that during that night the feudal rights were abolished in words only. All that display of patriotic abnegation was not serious, even if it was sincere, because already on the 6th of August the Assembly reexamined its work and introduced the subtle distinction between the personal, humiliating obligations of the peasantry, and the real ones which represented a pecuniary interest for the landlords. And while the decree of the National Assembly begins with the words 'The National Assembly entirely abolishes the feudal system,' we learn from the end of the same decree that the *personal* servitudes only are abolished, while the *real* obligations can be redeemed—on such conditions as will be established later on. And thus the peasants, miserable as they were, had to pay, in addition to all taxes old and new, a redemption the amount of which was not even fixed, but was left to an agreement between the peasants and the landlords. The decrees were thus much more like a declaration of principles than a law. Nay, even these decrees were not

¹ One may see in the *Moniteur* that the disorders began on the 6th of July, amid the twenty thousand unemployed engaged in relief-works at Montmartre. Two days later, the poorer classes of the suburbs, together with the same unemployed, attempted to burn the *octrois*. Encounters with the troops are mentioned in the *Moniteur* under the 10th of July; and on the 11th of July the people of the suburbs burned the *octroi* of Chaussée d'Antin. Next day, when the departure of Necker became known, the middle classes took advantage of the movement, organized it, and directed it against royalty.

promulgated till the end of September, and the promulgation consisted in simply sending them to the Courts of Justice together with the observations of the king.

It is evident that such concessions could not satisfy the peasants. 'Our villages are most dissatisfied with the decree upon the feudal rights,' Madame Roland wrote in May 1790. A reform will be necessary, otherwise the castles will burn again.' But the longed-for reforms did not come. The question as to the feudal rights remained unsettled, and one who has grown accustomed to the legend is quite bewildered as he finds, under the date of 18th of June, 1790, a decree according to which 'the tithes, both feudal and ecclesiastical' (and we know that the tithes sometimes meant one fourth of the crop) had to be paid for the current year,' in the usual way that is, in effects and to the usual amount; that the *champarts*, *terrages*, and *agriens comptants*² had to be paid in the same way 'until redeemed'; and that any attack upon these rights, 'either in writing or in speech, or by menaces' should be punished in the severest way—that is, in all appearance, by hard labor or death. In fact, the abolition of the feudal rights without redemption was voted only in June 1792, and that vote was simply snatched from the Legislative Assembly while two hundred of its members were not present.

The peasants thus had no other means of obtaining a real abolition of feudal rights than themselves to compel the landlords to abandon their rights, or to storm the castles and burn the *terriers*. So the Jacquerie continued for nearly four years. But as soon as the middle classes had obtained their first successes over royalty in 1789, and as soon as they had armed their militia, they began to suppress the peasants' outbreaks with a cruelty worthy of the old monarchy. The municipalities, at the head of the *bourgeois* militia, exterminated the bands of peasants. In the Dauphiné, where the revolt was severest, the *grand-prévôt* was traveling over the villages by the end of 1789, and pitilessly hanging the 'rebels'—the more so as those *brigands* did not respect the castles of the 'patriots' and attacked them as well as the castles of the noble supporters of the king.³

Another feature, relative to the common-lands, also must be mentioned under this head, because some of my readers may not be aware that the communal possession and administration of commonlands, the communal assembly of all householders of the village (the *mir*, I should say) and the common liability for the payment of taxes had persisted in France till the reforms of Turgot.⁴ It was Turgot who substituted for the communal assembly (which he found 'too noisy') elected bodies of notables, which soon became, in the hands of the richer *bourgeois du village*, an instrument for taking possession of the common-lands. A good deal of the common-lands having been enclosed both in this way, as well as in former times by the landlords, one of the aims of the peasants' outbreaks was to restore to the commons the possession of their lands; but the National Assembly took no notice of that desire. On the contrary, it authorized (on the 1st of August, 1791) the sale of the common-lands, which simply meant the spoliation of the poorer inhabitants of the villages of their last means of existence, for the enrichment of the wealthier peasants. One year later the sale of the common-lands was suspended by a new law, but that law permitted their division between the richer peasants, to the exclusion of the proletarians; and it

² The obligation of giving a certain amount of the crop to the landlord.

³ Twenty peasants were hanged in the Dauphiné, twelve at Douai, eighty at Lyons, and so on (Buche et Rous, ii.). The National Assembly fully approved the summary justice of the municipalities. The version representing the revolted peasants as paid robbers already appears in the history written by the 'Amis de la Liberté,' as well as in the *Histoire Parlementaire*, by Buchez and Itoux.

⁴ For more details see Babeau's *Le Village sous l'Ancien Régime*, and *La Ville sous l'Ancien Régime*. The general assembly of all inhabitants was maintained in smaller towns till 1784.

was not before the 10th of June, 1793, that the Convention, while ordering the communes to take possession of the lands arbitrarily enclosed in former times, enjoined them either to keep them undivided, or, in case the division be demanded by two-thirds of the inhabitants of the commune, to divide them between all inhabitants, rich and poor. The legislation about the common-lands was thus another cause of discontent which maintained the agitation, and continually resulted in fresh outbreaks till the question was settled in 1793. As to the towns, the outbreaks of the poorer classes became the more unavoidable since the National Assembly endowed the municipalities with wide powers, while the real power remained in the hands of a few privileged *bourgeois* and nobles.

I have been compelled to enter into these details—not always clearly understood—because the uprising of the peasants and the urban proletarians for the abolition of the last relics of feudal servitude was the real ground upon which the Revolution throve. That uprising permitted the great battle between the middle class and the Court to be fought; it prevented any solid government from being instituted for nearly five years, and thus enabled the middle classes to seize political power and to prepare the elements for its ulterior organization on a democratic basis. The middle classes alternately favored and opposed those uprisings. They used the popular discontent as a battering-ram against monarchy, but at the same time they were always anxious to maintain the popular wave in such a channel as not to compromise the privileges which they shared in common with the nobles or had acquired during the Revolution.

The National Assembly of 1789 boldly abolished in principle most of the odious privileges of the old *régime*. Proceeding in a most systematic way, it destroyed one after the other the old mediæval institutions and embodied its political principles in the shape of laws which are mostly distinguished by a remarkable lucidity of style and clearness of conception. It proclaimed the rights of the citizen and it elaborated a constitution; it elaborated also a provincial and a communal organization based on the principle of equality before the law. It abolished for ever the distinction between the three different 'orders,' and laid the bases of a complete reform of taxation; the titles of nobility were abolished; the Church was disendowed, rendered a department of the State, and its estates seized as a guarantee of national loans; the army was reorganized so as to make of it an instrument of national defense; and a judicial organization which could be advantageously contrasted with the present judicial organization of France was promulgated. Over-centralization had been avoided in all those schemes. The work was immense; it was performed by able hands; and many a historian, while passing in review the work of the National Assembly, has been brought to ask himself, Why the Revolution did not stop there? Why a second revolution was added to the first?

The answer is simple. Because otherwise all that symmetrical structure would have remained what it was, a dead letter, a simple declaration of principles, very interesting for posterity, but without any moment for the time being. Because there is an immense, often immeasurable, distance between a law and its application in life—a distance which is great even in the centralized, carefully organized States of our days, but was immense in a State like old France, which represented the most curious mixture of conflicting institutions inherited from several different historical epochs. Who was to execute those laws? In our modern States a law finds a ready centralized administration to execute it, and a whole army to enforce it in case of need. But nothing of the kind existed in 1789; the very organization for enforcing laws had to be created, and the law had to be enforced before reaction could set in and annihilate all reformatory work. There-

fore, the so-called 'second revolution' was not a second revolution at all; it was simply the means for transforming into facts the theories proclaimed by the National Assembly.

As to the opposition which the new measures met with in the privileged classes, far from having been overrated by historians, it never has been fully told. The conspiracies of the Court are pretty well known. What formerly were represented as so many calumnies circulated by the liberal historians have now become historical facts. No serious student of the period will doubt any more that each of the uprisings in Paris was an answer to some *coup d'état* schemed by the Court. The appeal to the foreigner to invade France is no longer a matter of doubt. Besides, new materials are steadily coming to light to show the extension of the conspiracies planned to oppose the Revolution; and it is now known that if the Protestants in Southern France had not so heartily joined the Revolution, two Vendées, instead of one, would have had to be combated. But the resistance of the Vendées was but a trifle in comparison with the resistance which every act of even the National Assembly, (not to speak of those of the subsequent assemblies) met with in each *provincial directoire*, in each town, large or small. When asked by the German historian Schlosser, 'How was it possible that Robespierre could keep all France in his hands?' the Abbé Grégoire retorted: 'Why, in each village there was its Robespierre!' Surely so, but in each town, in each castle and in each bishop's palace, there was also its Coblenz—its center of resistance of the old system. Hence the terrible struggles for the conquest of municipalities which we see all through the revolutionary period, the denunciations, the armed attacks, the local executions. Take, for instance, so simple a thing as the assessment of the income-tax, which had been entrusted to the municipalities. As long as the municipality remained in the hands of a few rich people from the privileged classes, the new taxation was not introduced; then, the proletarians took possession of the municipality, named their own men, and proceeded to realize the platonic declarations of the National Assembly. But if the royalists again obtained possession of the municipal power, they pitilessly executed the popular leaders, reintroduced the old system, and freed themselves from the burden of the taxes.

Moreover, the Revolution was far from universal. It had found warm followers in the east, the north-east, and the south-east of France, but over more than one-half of the territory either hostility or indifference prevailed, and in the best case men were waiting the issue of the events in order to take the side of the party which came out victorious; while the State expenses were growing every day, and the most strenuous efforts were required to cope with the foreign invasions.⁵

So it becomes evident that the National and the Legislative Assemblies had merely expressed *desiderata*, and that in order to transcribe those *desiderata* into facts, the 'second revolution' was rendered necessary on account of the resistance opposed to any innovation by adherents of the old *régime*. Not only had the flight of the king and the conspiracies of the Court rendered the republic a necessity; but the proclamation of the republic was needful in order to guarantee to France that it should not return under the rule of the old aristocracy—just as the proclamation of the Commune in 1871 proved to be the means of preventing the return of Monarchy after the

⁵ I once drew a map on which I marked the localities the names of which occur in connection with insurrections in general works and works of local history of France during the Revolution. It appeared that only the north-eastern, eastern, and south-eastern parts of France were marked on my map, and that sporadic spots only occurred in western and central France. When I saw, later on, the map on which the electoral districts which had reelected 'the three hundred and sixty-three' (under McMahan's presidency) were represented by a special color, I was struck with the likeness of both maps. Revolutionary traditions are transmitted, like all other kinds of tradition.

disasters of the German war. There was a moment of relaxation of revolutionary energy, especially in 1791. That moment could have been utilized for strengthening what had been elaborated by the National Assembly. If the nobility and the Court had understood the necessity of concessions, and made them, they most probably would have saved part of their privileges. But they admitted nothing save a return, pure and simple, to the old state of affairs. Instead of accepting the compromise which the middle classes were only too willing to come to, they called foreign armies in order to reestablish the whole system in full. They concocted their foolish schemes of the flight of the king, and threatened to take a bloody revenge upon those who had disturbed them in the enjoyment of their former rights. In such circumstances there remained nothing but to fight, and the fight was fought to the bitter end.

Nay, the terrible struggles between revolutionists themselves in the Convention, which have been often represented as an outcome of so many personal rivalries, were nothing but the logical development of the same necessity. The foolishness of the nobility and the Court rendered the very name of royalty hateful. Royalty meant no other program than a destruction, with the help of foreigners, of even the modest reformatory work that had been done by the first Assembly of the States-General. A new enthusiasm only, a new revival of the revolutionary energy, could save the little that had been done; but the Girondists did not understand that necessity. They could not see that the return of Monarchy had to be prevented in order to give to the new institutions time to take root; that the peasant ought to plow for the first time his newly conquered field in order to be ready to fight for it; that the new judge, the new municipality, the new tax-gatherer had to be accustomed to their functions, and that the nation as a whole had to shake off its former habits of servility and submissiveness. The Girondists did not understand that, and they fell victims of their irresoluteness. Even so moderate an historian as Mignet, who, however, had the advantage of writing under the fresh impression of the epoch, judiciously remarks that a sure return to the old *régime*, a victory of the coalition and the dismemberment of France would have followed if the Commune of Paris had not taken the upper hand on the 31st of May, 1793, when the Girondists were arrested and sent to the scaffold. Without fanaticism, without the law of *maximum* and the requisitions, the young republic never would have succeeded in repelling the invaders and the old *régime* which found a refuge in their camp. The struggle between the parties in the Convention was not a struggle for personal domination: it was a struggle to settle the question how far the Revolution should go. Should it succumb, or live to insure its work? And without the temporary triumph of Marat and the Commune of Paris, the Revolution would have been terminated in May 1793.

In fact, the Revolution lived as long as the double current of popular outbreaks in the villages and the towns continued. When the feudal institutions were totally destroyed both in towns and the country, and the famous decree of the Convention ordered the burning all over France of all papers relative to the feudal system, the movement began to exhaust its energy. Those who had taken possession of the 1,210,000 estates (representing one-third of the territory of France), which had changed hands during the Revolution, hastened to enjoy the benefits of their newly acquired property. Those who had enriched themselves by all descriptions of speculations monopolized the fruits of the rich crops of 1793, and starved the cities. The proletarians of the cities thus saw themselves reduced to the same misery as before. The men who had never refused to respond to the appeals of the middle classes when an insurrection had to be opposed to a conspiracy of the nobles, were reduced to starvation again.

A third revolution, having a kind of vague Socialism for its economical program, and the full independence of the communes instead of the dictatorship of the Convention as a program of political organization, was ripening. But it was not at the end of a revolution so vast as the preceding that a new movement could have a chance of success. Besides, the middle classes were decided not to part with the conquered privileges, and the Jacobins were too preoccupied with definitely establishing the building they had so vigorously defended against its enemies. The young Socialist party was defeated, and its chief representatives followed the Girondists on the scaffold.

From that moment the masses of Paris abandoned the Revolution. They unwillingly supported the Reign of Terror. The people can resort to massacres in a moment of despair; but it cannot support the daily executions performed in cold blood with the appearance of law. These legal executions weighed upon the Parisians. In fact, the Revolution had already come to an end, and when a last attempt was made to provoke an insurrection in favor of Robespierre and against the other members of the Committee of *Salut public*, the people of Paris did not answer to the appeal. The contre-révolution [Counter-Revolution], headed by the returned royalists and the *muscadins*, had its hands free: the newly-enriched middle classes hastened to enjoy the fruits of their victory and began the orgies of the *Directoire*, and the urban proletarians could only do their best not to succumb to starvation in the expectation of a new revolution in which fraternity and equality would be vain words no more.

And now let us cast a glance at the consequences of the Revolution. Here we meet in the first place with the usual objection: 'What was the use,' it is said, 'of all that bloodshed and disturbance if it had to result in the despotism of a Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbons?' The answer to that current remark has already been given in the preceding pages. The abolition of institutions which were doomed by history to disappear being so obstinately opposed, bloodshed and disturbances became an historical necessity.

As to those who would like to know what were the results of the Revolution, we would merely say to them: Go and travel over France, call at the peasants' houses, examine into the economical conditions of the peasantry for the last fifty years, and compare them with what they were a hundred years ago; and if you like to realize those conditions of the past in a concrete way, go to Russia; there you will see conditions very much the same as those which prevailed in France before 1789. Go especially at a time (like the year 1881) when a third part of the country is suffering from a scarcity of grain, and is feeding on bark and grass mixed with some flour. There, on the fertile soil of south-eastern Russia, you will understand the famous words of the French royal *intendant* who advised starving peasants to eat grass if they were hungry; because there you might see (as it was in 1881) whole villages living on mountain-spinach, and sending their people to fetch some of it from a neighboring province. There you would see the ruined but arrogant nobility preventing the peasant from making use of the uncultivated land; the arbitrariness of the functionaries; the lawlessness of the ministers; you would find the Bastille at Schlüsselburg, and you would have an insight into 'old France.' Personal rule returned in France with Napoleon, but not the feudal institutions. Neither the laws promulgated under the Bourbons nor even the White Terror could take the land from the peasants, nor reintroduce the feudal servitudes, nor reintegrate the old feudal organization of the cities. And if now, especially during the last twenty years, the French peasants have again to complain of the accumulation of land in the hands of capitalists, they have enjoyed, at least for more than fifty years, a period of relative prosperity which has made the real might of the French nation. More than that, the whole aspect of the

nation has changed. The ideas, the conceptions, the whole mode of thinking and acting are no longer those of the last century. Instead of coming exhausted out of the Napoleonic wars, France came out of them a fresh, consolidated nation, full of force—a nation which soon took the lead of European civilization. The period of reaction was soon over, and in 1848 France already made an attempt towards the establishment of a Socialist Republic. As to the degrading rule of Napoleon the Third, it was the necessary consequence of the unsuccessful revolution of 1848, and *bourgeois* Imperialism would appear in any other nation, if that nation repeated the errors of our French forerunners by attempting the State organization of labor.

The influence exercised by the French Revolution on European thought and institutions was immense. The revolutionary armies of *sans-culottes* gave to serfdom a mortal blow all over Europe. Their astonishing successes were not due to the military genius of Napoleon, but to the abolition of serfdom inscribed on the tricolor flag. And they succeeded only so far as they brought with them the downfall of feudalism. Even the Russian peasants considered the approach of the French army as a message of liberation from the yoke of servitude. But Napoleon, when he approached Russia, was already too much of an emperor. Even in Poland the liberation of the serfs was merely nominal: it was not even attempted in Russia; and the bloodiest battle on record, taking place at Borodino, put an end to the victorious revolutionary campaign.

The military campaign did not extend the full abolition of serfdom far beyond the eastern frontiers of France. But the French Revolution had given the watchword to the century, and this watchword was: the abolition of serfdom, leading to capitalist rule; and the abolition of absolute power, leading to parliamentary institutions. The wave slowly rolled east, and these two reforms have constituted the very essence of European history during our century. The abolition of serfdom in Germany which was begun in 1811 was accomplished after 1848; Russia abolished it in 1861; the Balkan States in 1878. The cycle was thus completed, and personal servitude disappeared in Europe. On the other hand, the necessary corollary of the above reform, the abolition of Court rule, which took a hundred years to cross the Channel, took another hundred years to spread through Europe. Even the Balkan States have parliamentary institutions, and Russia is now alone in maintaining absolute rule—a phantom of absolute rule. The two fundamental principles enunciated in the Declaration of the Rights of Man have thus been applied almost in full. And if liberty, equality, and fraternity do not yet reign in Europe, – we must look for some important omission in that famous Declaration.

All the sufferings which France underwent during the Revolution and the subsequent wars necessarily suggest the question whether that revolution may not be the last of the series of revolutions which has marked the ends of each of the last five centuries.

One might wish it, but when we take into consideration the state of minds in Europe, the immense agrarian question which has suddenly grown up in all countries, the still greater social problem which imperiously demands a solution, the difficulties put in the way of that solution, the indifference of the privileged classes which does not fall far short of the indifference of the French nobility, and, finally, the great dispute arising between the individual and the State, we cannot but foresee the approach of a great commotion in Europe, with this difference, that it cannot be limited to one country only but is likely to become international, like the uprising of 1848, although it is sure to assume different characters in different countries.

As to France, its present system of government is so undermined that it can hardly be expected to live more than the usual two decades which represent the maximum duration of a government in France during our century. However, historical previsions cannot go so far as to foretell the

dates of coming events. The character of the next movement in France is almost sure to be in the direction of independent federated communes trying to introduce a life based on socialist principles. The fundamental principle bequeathed by the French Revolution is full freedom of choice of occupation and freedom of contracts; but neither can be realized as long as the necessaries for production remain the property of the few. To realize those conditions will surely be the aim of the future revolutions. As to whether any of them will take the acute character of the great movement of the last century, all will depend upon the intelligence of the privileged classes, and their capacities for understanding in time the importance of the historical moment we are living in. One thing, however, seems certain: namely, that in no country can the privileged classes of our times be as foolish as the privileged classes were in France a hundred years ago.

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Pëtr Kropotkin
The Great French Revolution and its Lesson

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