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A Reflection

The "Philosophes" and the French Revolution

The precise--and indeed imprecise--role of the "philosophes" in the developing unrest leading to the French revolution is certainly a question open to wide interpretation. Since facts are as easily manipulated as were the revolting lower class masses during this period, it seems clear that almost infinite reconstruction is possible. With this in mind, it is with decided modesty and reticence that we must approach the subject. Despite this problematic--which is in many respects at the heart of historiography--the suggestion that the pernicious notions of the philosophes were the baneful cause of revolution is to both diminish their ideas as well augment their influence.

Any question regarding the nature of a Fireman is resplendent with redundancy, for he is a man dealing with fire; a similar query regarding the *philosophes*, however, is far less pedestrian--and before we can assess his importance we must surely understand his constitution as well as his situation.

Above all else, the *philosophes* were a phenomenon of the

privileged class, mostly--with few exception--of the third estate. They were men of means and men of letters who revered themselves as intellectuals above the common man, tenacious in their willingness and *ableness* to observe and criticise the weakness of others. They were often of, or closely associated with, the elite, sometimes filling the middle ground between bourgeoisie and high nobility, with Montesquieu and Condorcet, for example, holding minor titles. Accordingly their sympathy was not with the hopes of the peasant and urban breed, but the demands of the privileged. Despite the countersignature of their appellation, the *philosophes* were rather more the propagandist than the traditional philosopher, measuring their success by influence and scope of audience rather than the quality of their syllogisms. And yet that scope was necessarily limited, for only the literate could encounter their ideas and only the petit bourgeois upwards were likely to be literate. The *Encyclopédie* demonstrates an important methodology pertaining to the dissemination of ideas to the non-literate class, for it was believed--or perhaps hoped--that the more pragmatic information contained within its largely pragmatic pages would be read by entrepreneurs and master artisans and the modern techniques described subsequently passed on to the worker and peasant. This did indeed occur, and more political and philosophical notions were likewise circulated. Although such was the hope, the hope was largely half-hearted, for the *philosophes*, by virtue of

their breeding, were largely disdainful of the lower people. Accordingly, the notion of expanded political franchise was expanded by a majority of the *philosophes* only within the bounds of property ownership.

We have thus far seen that the sphere of influence in which the *philosophes* had free reign was largely limited within elitist bounds. It is well understood that all three estates were disgruntled to a greater and lesser extent, though this is hardly to suggest that their almost antithetical aims were equal players in the erupting revolution: it was the bourgeoisie who assumed the voice of the nation--as manifest in the establishment of the Assembly Nationale--and it was the *philosophes* who were the eloquence of that voice.

The *philosophes*, descendants of the Enlightenment¹, inherited numerous precepts of the Revised Cosmology made possible by Newton's remarkable revelations. Viewing the universe from this new perspective, the "grand plan" of the Almighty was replaced by a humanistic Universe where human freedom, responsibility and ethics were pre-eminent. This is hardly to suggest that the *philosophes* were entirely atheistic; but that the leading role of God had been succeeded by the leading role of man. Henceforth, reason dictated an

¹In this respect we should acknowledge the tremendous debt owed--particularly by the more ardent of revolutionary *philosophes*--to the postulations of John Lock.

authorial role to God as creator, rather than God as manipulator. The most concrete result of this was the establishment of Deism--an invention to religion analogous to Esperanto and language--nurtured by Lord Herbert and adopted by such notables as Voltaire.

With God reduced to the role of absentee landlord--at least according to the *philosophes*, then the void must needs be filled by the increased importance of man. With this increased importance came a notion both novel and revolutionary: the *perfectibility* of man. Few *philosophes* denied a certain evil intimate to man's nature, though it was generally accepted--and most forcefully expressed in the naturism of Rousseau--that such nefariousness was more a result of the corrupting effects of perverted social institutions rather than to any innate negativity the human condition. Although this seems a contest between the "noble savage" and "original sin" in truth it was a more profound statement of man's infinite potential. The perfectibility of man was indeed a revolutionary notion and one which was not universally adopted by the *philosophes*; nevertheless, the corrupted and corrupting quality of social institutions was largely acknowledged, and the notion of working towards social improvement was absolutely accepted.

Thus far we have all the ingredients for a new concept which, somewhat paradoxically, was almost a reality before it was ever an idea: progress. Nature, during the Enlightenment and ever onwards, had replaced God, and Newton had aptly

demonstrated that Nature was understandable. Just as Darwinism would be abducted and contorted into prescriptions for social progress, so too physical laws were muddled into a system of parallel moral principles. The nature cult--read Rousseau--led to a sentimentalism which pretended to be reason. In this manner, the least "civilised" persons were often glorified upon the grounds that they were closer to nature. If there persists any doubt as to the physical effects of philosophical ideas, then the anecdotal history of Marie Antoinette's rustic village should certainly offer some reassurance. Built--with ironic juxtaposition--close to the lavish splendour of Versailles, the Queen and her courtly ladies would--upon the sunniest of sunny days--abscond to this idealised setting and frolic about, dressed as milk maids. If philosophy and physicality are thus shown as linked, the relevance to the revolution of 1879 might perhaps remain obscure. Simply stated, this infatuation with nature allowed for another kind of link: between the elitist *philosophes* and the lowly peasant. Although it would be an overstatement to suggest that he was admired, it would be perhaps sensible to say that his being now contained some dignity, particularly from the more romantic of *philosophes*.

The *philosophes* were by no means a homogenous group, and their ideas traversed a wide spectrum of beliefs. Just as Rousseau, particularly in *Emile*, scorned book learning--and we can only assume he understood the paradox--again as a

manifestation of his naturism, most philosophes contrarily took to passionate pamphlet and book writing. With Christian heaven largely cast aside, the vision of progress took its place; and this was a vision *philosophes* expected to see realised in their own life times. The Marquis de Condorcet, in his *Progress of the Human Mind*, written during the revolution, expounded this very faith. Condorcet not only foresaw equal rights for women and the abolition of poverty, but proposed a social security system and suggested that population growth might one day necessitate birth control. Serving as secretary to the French Academy of Science, Condorcet is an example not only of the general optimism of the *philosophes*, but also of the positions of influence occupied by many. Voltaire, hardly the champion of the common man, provides us with an episode which demonstrates the application of this influence: using the prestige attained by his letters, Voltaire made moves at court to secure the release of a Protestant shoemaker condemned to death. After meeting the indebted fellow, Voltaire wrote:

Truly he [the shoemaker] is an imbecile. If his friends are just as dim-witted, as I presume, they are as certain of paradise in the other world as they are of the galleys in this.

Voltaire, though eloquent as were other *philosophes*, was less concerned with the refinement of literature as with the circulation of new ideas. Speaking of tolerance in his

Philosophical Dictionary, he wrote:

It is clear that the individual who persecutes a man , his brother, because he is not of the same opinion, is a monster.

The bitterness we sometime discover in his work stems from the friction between his ideals and the un-idealistic society in which he found himself.

It is perhaps Rousseau, however, who enticed the revolutionary with the greatest menu of food for thought, with *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and *On the Social Contract* providing the most notable selections. Despite the armchair anthropology of the former, the suggestion that man's only natural virtue is pity provided a foundation for much of his subsequent ponderings. Believing that pity precedes reason, Rousseau suggests it serves the role therefore of offering a more fundamental source upon which to base actions. This notion of natural pity is carried over into *On the Social Contract*, where the family unit is seen as being the prototype of political societies. In many respects Rousseau was antipodal to many other *philosophes*, particularly in his rejection of reason. Reasoned justice, *On the Social Contract* informs us, brings about the maxim: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Natural pity, on the other hand, sees: "Do what is good for you with as little harm as possible to others," a notion which is particularly politic for the bourgeoisie, who were perhaps most responsible for the

revolution.

We have briefly examined the what and who and how of the *philosophes*. Although many were sedentary intellectuals, passing time in Salons debating philosophy and politics until the cows came home, playing no direct part in the grumbling and mounting storm of revolution, even such fellows as these added to an atmosphere electrified with the possibility of change. Others, as we have seen, achieved through their writings and positions of influence a more direct and more clearly defined connection between cause and effect. The revolution though was a revolution of mass dissatisfaction, and the most vital influence achieved by the *philosophes* was in maintaining a discourse which was demonstrative of a new way of thinking and which finally allowed for the conceptualisation of social progress and human betterment.