

Responses to the French Revolution

“Foreman stand by giving directions from blueprints, but the blueprints do not correspond. A few eccentrics will labor only at little corners of their own. A great many struggle to keep standing what others would tear down. Some are doing nothing constructive; workmen who have turned against their work, or inhabitants who dislike the way the alterations are turning out... Meanwhile, in the distance coming closer may be seen a band of armed attackers, whether gangsters or policemen is not clear, but obviously bent on stopping the whole proceeding.

“The house so beset is France in the fifth summer of the Revolution. The approaching band is the armed force of monarchial Europe. The distracted throng is a babel of revolutionists, royalists and republicans, constitutionalists and insurrectionists, civilly sworn clergy, refractory clergy, renegade clergy, aristocrats and plebeians, Jacobins, Girondists, Mountaineers, Vendéans, Muscadins, federalists, moderatists and Enragés.”—Robert Palmer, 1894

The four selections we are reviewing suggest the complexity of the French Revolution; they perhaps suggest the complexity of any historical event and how its complexity demands some kind of narrative reflection, as well as some kind of cause-effect analysis. In particular, we have to ask what kind of narrative is best suited for recounting the historical past, as well as what kind of analysis is most beneficial. These readings also raise for us very basic ethical questions, such as whether violence is an appropriate means of social change; whether human rights are founded in anything other than pure social consent; and whether social institutions have any hold over us as individuals and/or as communities of people?

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)

1. Can tradition be compatible with revolution?
2. Can natural rights alone hold together a society?
3. Can political principles be taught and practiced in abstraction? Why and/or why not?
4. Why did Burke fear the revolutionary overthrow of ancient institutions?

Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* (1856)

1. How does Tocqueville use an analysis of social forces to explain what happened?
2. What role did tradition play? Natural rights? Political parties?
3. What role did centralization play?
4. According to Tocqueville, was the revolution inevitable or not?
5. How does he judge Burke’s analysis?
6. What does Tocqueville conclude about the French people?
7. Can one have a science of society that can offer an explanation of revolution?

Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution* (1854)

1. Describe the difference between Michelet’s tone and that of Tocqueville.
2. Which one do you find more convincing and why?
3. How does Michelet locate the drama in the scene?
4. How does he analyze the character of the King?
5. How does he dramatize the insurrection in Paris?
6. How does he defend the motives of the people?

Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (1837)

1. What makes Carlyle's approach different than the others we've looked at?
2. What is the effect of his catalogue of victims?
3. Likewise, what is the effect of his descriptions?
4. Is it appropriate to build such heavy dramatic references, including the use of myths and heroic allusions?
5. Are there any drawbacks to his approach?
6. Likewise, are there any advantages?
7. Are human beings naturally violent and destructive without some kind of civic controls?
8. How does Carlyle picture of death of Robespierre?

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 26 August 1789

The representatives of the French people, constituted as a National Assembly, and considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and governmental corruption, have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man: so that by being constantly present to all the members of the social body this declaration may always remind them of their rights and duties; so that by being liable at every moment to comparison with the aim of any and all political institutions the acts of the legislative and executive powers may be the more fully respected; and so that by being founded henceforward on simple and incontestable principles the demands of the citizens may always tend toward maintaining the constitution and the general welfare.

In consequence, the National Assembly recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and the citizen:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility.
2. The purpose of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
3. The principle of all sovereignty rests essentially in the nation. No body and no individual may exercise authority which does not emanate expressly from the nation.
4. Liberty consists in the ability to do whatever does not harm another; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no other limits than those which assure to other members of society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by the law.
5. The law only has the right to prohibit those actions which are injurious to society. No hindrance should be put in the way of anything not prohibited by the law, nor may any one be forced to do what the law does not require.
6. The law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to take part, in person or by their representatives, in its formation. It must be the same for everyone whether it protects or penalizes. All citizens being equal in its eyes are equally admissible to all public dignities, offices, and employments, according to their ability, and with no other distinction than that of their virtues and talents.
7. No man may be indicted, arrested, or detained except in cases determined by the law and according to the forms which it has prescribed. Those who seek, expedite, execute, or cause to be executed arbitrary orders should

be punished; but citizens summoned or seized by virtue of the law should obey instantly, and render themselves guilty by resistance.

8. Only strictly and obviously necessary punishments may be established by the law, and no one may be punished except by virtue of a law established and promulgated before the time of the offense, and legally applied.

9. Every man being presumed innocent until judged guilty, if it is deemed indispensable to arrest him, all rigor unnecessary to securing his person should be severely repressed by the law.

10. No one should be disturbed for his opinions, even in religion, provided that their manifestation does not trouble public order as established by law.

11. The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may therefore speak, write, and print freely, if he accepts his own responsibility for any abuse of this liberty in the cases set by the law.

12. The safeguard of the rights of man and the citizen requires public powers. These powers are therefore instituted for the advantage of all, and not for the private benefit of those to whom they are entrusted.

13. For maintenance of public authority and for expenses of administration, common taxation is indispensable. It should be apportioned equally among all the citizens according to their capacity to pay.

14. All citizens have the right, by themselves or through their representatives, to have demonstrated to them the necessity of public taxes, to consent to them freely, to follow the use made of the proceeds, and to determine the means of apportionment, assessment, and collection, and the duration of them.

15. Society has the right to hold accountable every public agent of the administration.

16. Any society in which the guarantee of rights is not assured or the separation of powers not settled has no constitution.

17. Property being an inviolable and sacred right, no one may be deprived of it except when public necessity, certified by law, obviously requires it, and on the condition of a just compensation in advance.