

## Democracy in the Age of Revolutions

In today's popular imagination, representative democracy is associated with the United States; its history is also that of the rise and success of democratic republic. But during the Age of Revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, peoples in both Europe and America characterized their challenges to entrenched power using the language of democracy. Democracy was the central term in the oppositional politics of the period and figured in revolutions not just in the United States, but also in France, Poland, Haiti, and beyond.

Democracy is derived from the Greek words “demos,” meaning “common people,” and “kratos,” meaning “rule, strength.” This origin could lead one to imagine that democracy is a movement of “ordinary” people. However, many of the leaders of the transatlantic revolutionary movement were far from that. Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, was a member of the slave-holding elite in Virginia. The Marquis de Lafayette, French revolutionary and friend to America, was an aristocrat and military officer. Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution, was a highly educated freeman when he established himself as the leader of a slave revolt in the Caribbean in 1791. And Tadeusz Kosciuszko, the Polish revolutionary leader in the 1790s, was a member of the Polish nobility who owned an extensive amount of land. It may seem ironic that the democratic age was actually begun by reform-minded aristocrats, not those of the middling or lower classes—until one remembers that there was no such thing as public education in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Education was private at the time. Articulating the aspirations of a revolution required literacy and a background that allowed one to think and write both critiques of the existing order and visions of alternate political arrangement to come. The revolutions undertaken in the name of democracy were initiated by dissident members of social and economic elites who used the idea to define and defend conceptions of freedom and rights and to oppose the tyrannical arbitrariness of existing monarchs and legislatures.

These dissident aristocrats became conscious of themselves as “democrats” through the experience of revolution. The language of democracy was as important in shaping the views of those who initiated revolution as it was in mobilizing others to join. This may explain why, despite the social origins of most revolutionary leaders and ideologues, the revolutionary movements of the 1700s and 1800s were largely *not* class-based. Leaders such as Toussaint and Lafayette saw themselves as democrats working to overturn tyrannies and forged alliances that cut across class lines. At the same time, the idea of “the people” that fought to overturn older, aristocratic orders did not refer to a single, homogenous group. “The people” was a composite made from alliances between elite and popular classes. These alliances are what made revolution possible.

The language of democracy had its origins in various crises that affected aristocrats in particular, such as the Imperial Crisis (the default on the bonds issued by the French Crown to pay for intervening in the American Revolution). Aggrieved aristocrats couched their criticisms of the dominant order in terms of “the people's” liberties and property. This language made it possible to construct visions of “the people” and “the nation” in ways that went beyond class-based loyalties. In the ideal of

“nation,” privileges, distinctions, and the hierarchical class structure were largely obliterated in favor of a political community without ranks or classes. The realities that were instituted after the revolutions of this period were far less radical.

Democracy was a common denominator in the age of revolutions, but it was not monolithic. Democratic movements and aspirations differed from place to place. The French and American revolutions, for example, indicate the range of meanings assigned to democratic revolution. The French Revolution was more radical than the American. For example, the Americans revolted in order to restore rights that they believed had been usurped by the British Crown; the French revolted against the entire monarchical system. Most of the American revolutionaries favored a republic on the model the Athenian philosopher Plato had outlined in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC; French revolutionaries had a range of views of democracy, with the Girondins advocating constitutional monarchy, the Jacobins a form of a republic, and radicals like Baboeuf a direct democracy. Unlike the Americans, French Revolutionaries did not seek recognition as a “civilized” state, but rather intended to foment radical change across Europe. And while Americans embraced only a metaphorical killing of King George III with the Declaration of Independence, French revolutionaries executed King Louis XVI in 1793.

Despite the widespread usage amongst revolutionaries of the language of democracy, creating a democratic politics remained problematic. When Americans broke from the British Empire, “democracy” still carried from Plato some pejorative connotations of anarchy and mob rule. Patriots rejected the tyranny of their monarch, but they also distrusted democracy; they were concerned about the “tyranny of the majority” and protection of minority interests. American revolutionaries argued that George III, “the royal brute of Great Britain,” had broken the law and, by contrast, framed their own actions as a fight to restore and uphold the rule of law and to vindicate their own rights under law. These factors led Americans to limit democracy and institute a Republic. By doing so, they argued America could defy predictions of devolution into anarchy. As Thomas Paine put it in *Common Sense*: “in America the law is king.”

At the same time, Americans wanted to challenge the contemporary assumptions that the rule of the people was no rule at all. The development of a democratic polity would advance toward the goal articulated by patriots during and after the American Revolution: that the people be recognized as a civil people capable of sustaining law and preserving order without the props of royal authority. Their quarrel was with the British king and a distant, unresponsive, imperial legislature, not with the “better sort” in their own midst. In short, revolutionary upheaval had been directed at exterior threats. For a time, most Americans believed that their nation was without internal divisions and that the “people” were free, equal, and unified by a common commitment to law and self-rule.

Democratic revolutions did not necessarily secure democratic outcomes for revolutionaries in Europe and the Americas. In Haiti, thousands of slaves defied their bondage, seeking to overturn the elite class of white planters that had dominated the most valuable sugar island in the Caribbean (St. Domingue) for centuries. Influenced by both the French and American revolutions, the charismatic Toussaint L’Ouverture led the movement to expel French citizens and soldiers from the island and bestow civil rights upon former slaves. And yet, in 1801, Toussaint issued a constitution that called

for the autonomy of the people but also declared himself governor-for-life. In Poland in the 1790s, Tadeusz Kosciuszko found himself in the midst of far-reaching political reforms in the Polish state. Kosciuszko called for a new army and a constitution that would give power to Poland's people, rather than to the *szlachta* (local nobility) or influential Russian aristocrats. Conservative Polish magnates soon initiated an alliance with Catherine the Great of Russia in a bid to overthrow the Polish constitution and the revolutionaries who were empowered by it. This sparked the Polish-Russian War of 1792, which resulted in the Polish king's capitulation, the dismantling of the Polish army, and the partition of Poland. What had begun as a democratic vision of Kosciuszko and his fellow revolutionaries resulted in the reinstatement of the entrenched aristocracy and centralized, foreign rule.

The story of the rise of modern democracy usually focuses on America, or on leaders who were true "democrats." Reality is more complicated than that. The democratic revolutions of the revolutionary age were incited by elites who used the language of democracy to frame demands for restoration of lost rights or privileges in universal terms and not by commoners who were fighting for rights they had never enjoyed. And these elites only saw themselves as democrats in hindsight. Further, democracy was not confined to America. The era from the 1770s and 1840s witnessed revolutionary upheaval of unimaginable proportions in a range of regions, including the United States, Haiti, France, Greece, Poland, and Latin America. Although the character of democracy and revolution was shaped by the specific histories of individual nations, a general commitment to democratic revolution nonetheless was a unifying feature in the emergent modern Atlantic world.

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