

'Revolutions don't repeat, but they do echo.' Discuss.

According to Marxist theory, revolution is inevitable. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Karl Marx postulated that, for Communists, “their ends can be attained only by forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions¹.” Although in practice Communist theories and ideologies have never resulted in perfect societies, Marx was certainly correct in highlighting the unavoidable fact that the grievances of the working-class, if not sufficiently addressed, will often result in revolt. Another aspect of revolutions which must be addressed, are the echoes which follow. Whether these echoes occur within the same country shortly after the revolution, or centuries later in an entirely different nation, it is indisputable that all revolutions send echoes forward to the events that follow them and in the case of the most influential revolutions, these can be felt on a global scale. The main revolutions which I will discuss, and which many historians have argued have been the most powerful in reshaping their respective societies and global politics and history more generally, are the American Revolution (1775), the French Revolution (1789) and the Russian Revolution (1917). All three of these revolutions were vital in completely shifting the mechanisms of government in their respective societies in an attempt to introduce greater equality and thus, their impact can be seen strongly in both the revolutions and emerging political theory which followed. As well as enacting crucial change within their respective nations, these three revolutions also exemplify the ways in which revolutions echo through time and influence both the politics and the societies that follow them, domestically and internationally. This essay will study and evaluate the ways in which these three revolutions impacted each other and the ways in which they have echoed through time and across nations, into the 21st century.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, an echo is defined as ‘a close parallel to an idea, feeling or event’. When applying this to a revolution, I will characterise an echo as something following the initial revolution which presents similarities to an aspect of that said revolution, whether this be a physical event, revolutionary tactic or ideology. Generally, there appear to be two lines of reasoning when discussing the original statement: firstly, the physical echoes that follow revolutions and; secondly, the way in which theories surrounding the revolution, such as the era of Enlightenment philosophy, echoed across borders to influence further revolutionary thought.

The French Revolution, which was a result of years of discontent amongst the working classes and repeated despotism of Louis XVI, sparked the beginning of what would be known as one of the most violent periods in European history. Before considering the echoes of the Revolution, one must note that a very significant factor which contributed to the beginning of the revolution in France was the American Revolution. Due to their loss against Britain in the Seven Years War, King Louis XVI opted to assist the rebel army in America, in an attempt to show France’s dominance over Britain as his foreign minister pointed out, “providence had marked out this moment for the humiliation of England.’ Arguably, the King and his government succeeded, as the war was undoubtedly a great failure for Britain, with support from the French being paramount in the success of the rebels. However, this also resulted in the spread of revolutionary ideas from America to France, most notably the idea of ‘no taxation without representation’, a notion which was certainly absent during the *ancien regime* under the rule of Louis XVI. Thus, one can conclude that, as Thomas Jefferson aptly wrote, ‘the nation has been awakened by our revolution, a statement which becomes apparent when considering aspects of the American Revolution which were echoed in the French Revolution. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, the goal of the French Revolution was almost identical to that of the American Revolution.

¹ (Marx 1848)

Despite the specific differences between the old regimes of both nations, the concept of no representation, democracy and great inequality between social classes were all shared issues which revolutionaries wanted to solve. Thus, when the Third Estate deputies first made their demands to the King, it was demanding a constitution, and following this one of the main sections of the August Decrees was concerning the implementation of equal taxation. This demand carried significant weight as until this point, the system was completely unbalanced and placed the majority of tax burdens on the Third Estate, which contained the poorest groups of people, and therefore was also a cause of their discontent. Arguably, this demand could be interpreted as an echo from the American Revolution as the idea surrounding the slogan, ‘no taxation without representation’, appeared to have a strong presence amongst the Third Estate and other influential revolutionaries, such as Lafayette, who had a crucial role in both the American and French Revolution. Another example of a physical echo of the American Revolution, which was introduced following the successful implementation of the August Decrees, was the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. By simply reading the initial statements in each declaration, such as in the American Declaration, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”, and in the French Declaration, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights”, one can note the strength of influence that the former had on the latter. Lafayette, the principle writer of the Declaration, confirmed that the American Declaration was the template from which he drafted the new declaration, and further, his close friendship with Thomas Jefferson, one of the key contributors to the American Declaration, also played a role in the similarities between the documents. Thus, when considering this example, I would argue that it provides evidence in support of the original statement. Despite their similarities, it would be incorrect to argue that the revolution in France was a repetition of the American Revolution given the differences between them, notably the fact that the American Revolution was a war by colonists against occupation whereas the French Revolution represented the dissatisfaction of the people with the ruling elite at home, however aspects and ideologies of the War of Independence were certainly echoed throughout the French Revolution.

In the same way that the echoes of other revolutions, most notably the American Revolution, can be identified in the French Revolution, it, in itself had a huge impact it had on future political philosophies and revolutions. To fully grasp the extent of its influence, one must consider the impact it had on Marx, and by default, the Russian Revolution and of course later communist uprisings around the world. Marx focused much of his political theory around the idea of the proletariat rising up and seizing the means of production and when considering the ways in which the French people rose up against authority, this is not a wholly different idea. Thus, we can see how the ideologies and means of revolt are echoed in Marx’s work. From 1843, Marx studied several works in order to develop his own writing, of which a significant portion focused on the events and ideologies of the French Revolution, such as Roux’s “*L’Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution française*”. Despite describing it as ‘the most colossal revolution that history has ever known’, Marx outlined the fact that it was a bourgeois revolution, and thus had drawbacks. The most crucial of these, Marx posited, was that even after the Second Republic in 1848, the system of government was too centralised around the state, and therefore, because the state always acts in the interests of the bourgeoisie, French society couldn’t never be free from the ‘parasitic excrescence’ which was the government. From this, one can observe how Marx used French revolutionary ideas to act as the foundation of his works which he would go onto develop into the more radical concept of the Communist Revolution, which has formed the basis of numerous revolutions – including the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was possibly the most pivotal moment in Russian history, representing a total shift of power to the Bolsheviks, who would later become the Russian Communist Party, following the forced abdication of the Tsar. Whilst there are many parallels between the French and Russian Revolutions, many of them are common to numerous revolutions, such as the removal of a monarch and rising of the working classes. However, there are certain specific echoes from the French Revolution and the ideologies involved which can be noted in the Russian Revolution. Vladimir Lenin, the original Bolshevik (Communist) leader and one of the most influential figures in the Revolution was a firm supporter of the 1789 revolution, coining it 'the great French Revolution.' He used Marxist theory, as well as ideas from the French Revolution, in order to develop his own ideology on how society should be structured. Given this, historians have drawn parallels between the views and actions of French Jacobins and Soviet Communists, with some referring to the latter as 'Russian Jacobins.' In his work, *The Jacobin Ancestry of Soviet Communism*, William Henry Chamberlin identified the links between the Communists and the Jacobins, and from this one can ascertain ways in which French Enlightenment and revolutionary philosophy echoed 100 years on. The first, and most important link, is the philosophy of utopian perfectionism² which is present in both. This is the idea that was held by both Robespierre, arguably the most influential Jacobin, and Lenin, that their respective policies would result in the greatest contentment for their society. A fundamental tenet of Jacobinism was that man was inherently good, and every evil was simply a product of the State, who had a duty towards building a positive and 'good' society. Although Lenin did not fully advocate this ideology, it is strongly implied in his view that the way to build a perfect Communist society is by overthrowing the existing order and allow the proletariat to rule without the tyranny of capitalism. This similarity highlights the way in which Lenin developed the ideals of those fighting for the French Revolution, along with Marx's views, to create his own ideology – Marxism-Leninism. Another point which is echoed in Lenin's ideology was that any means, including violence, was justified as long as it was contributing towards his aims for society, a belief that was previously held most famously by Robespierre. Robespierre was one of the strongest advocates of the Reign of Terror in France from 1793-94, stating it was an 'essence of virtue', and therefore was necessary in order to secure the prosperity of the revolution. Thus, when considering the influence Jacobinism had on Lenin's ideas, one can truly grasp the French Revolution's impacts in creating the ideologies which formed the foundations of the Bolshevik movement.

When considering the ideologies and emerging political thought which influences revolutions, as well as how they echo to influence other uprisings, it is paramount to consider how these ideas are communicated to the general public. Throughout history, revolutionary activists have used different techniques in order to convey their message to the public, a task which was particularly difficult in times where the majority of the public was illiterate and communication technology was less developed. Techniques which were prominent in the French Revolution, such as pamphleteering, were also used in the Russian Revolution, along with propaganda which spread the message of revolution. Furthermore, these, now outdated, methods of campaigning have evolved through the technological developments over the last century culminating most recently in the rise of social media campaigning, a prominent tool used to promote activism in many instances, but most notably in the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011. At the end of the *ancien regime* in France, unauthorised political pamphlets became one of the most crucial ways of spreading enlightened and revolutionary ideas, as well as expressing and publicising negative opinions of the monarchy and government ministers. In addition to raising general issues with the government, the pamphlets played a crucial role in the rise of public opposition to the monarchy. Political pornography was always present in some form in certain pamphlets; however, they truly

² (Chamberlin 1958)

began to affect the public opinion of the monarchy after 1789. The content was increasingly focused on Marie Antoinette, a figure who was already recognised for her promiscuity, and was critical in the eradication of any respect left for the monarchy. Obviously this kind of political activism (pamphleteering) has become obsolete and would not be effective in the 21st century due to the rise of social media. Thus, social media could be considered as the 21st century's alternative to pamphlet journalism, and a case in which this was particularly applicable was the Arab Spring campaigning in 2011. The Arab Spring consisted of a number of uprisings across the Middle East and Arabic countries that were sparked in early 2011 surrounding a variety of causes, but broadly due to the general dissatisfaction with the governments of those countries. Social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, were used in order to spread ideas, interact with other activists, and arguably, due to the correlation between social media use and mass uprisings, organise large protests. However, similarly to the censorship of the French pamphlets, the governments of these Arab countries (for example, Egypt, whom imposed a social media blackout), increased the levels of censorship and blocking of specific content in an attempt to quash the activism. Although this was unsuccessful in preventing protests, one can draw parallels between this and the constant attempts of the French governments to censor the spread of pamphlets containing revolutionary material. Therefore, when highlighting the similarities between the two methods of promoting political change, it becomes apparent how aspects of the French Revolution resemble aspects of uprisings as recent as the Arab Spring.

I believe it would be reasonable to conclude that the original statement, that revolutions do not repeat but echo, is valid. The word 'repeat' suggests an event occurring again in the exact way as it did before which, if true, would ignore the degrees of nuance which are present within each individual revolution, regardless of their significance globally. However, due to these nuances it becomes certain that revolutions do, in fact, echo. Following a further analysis of the American, French and Russian Revolutions, one can see examples of these echoes exemplified. Both in terms of physical echoes, such as the similarities between the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, or ideological echoes, such as the influence French ideologies had upon Lenin and therefore the Russian Revolution. Thus, when considering this evidence, along with the long-term impacts of pre-21st century revolutions, it is certainly the case that revolutions do not repeat, but echo.

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