THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND ITS LEGACY

I. Purpose of Lecture
   A. To describe and analyze the major events of the Revolution
      1. They are in fact dizzying in their complexity, far greater than was the case with the American “Revolution”
      2. Gaining some overall sense of them is a challenge
         a) Again, my main goal is to help students see the forest for the trees
   B. To explain its main successes and failures
   C. To indicate further why it has exercised such an appeal, at the time and over the centuries
      1. One could compare it to the events of the Bible, but now on a secular level
         a) Kropotkin: “The blood shed in the French Revolution was shed for the whole human race”.
         b) And the events of the Revolution come to be referred to by revolutionaries as events of Bible are referred to by Christians and Jews

II. Dynamics and Direction of Revolutionary Development (review of end of last lecture)
   A. By the end of the year 1789, much had changed in France:
      1. A National Assembly had been created, with great potential power
         a) It had vowed to provide France with a constitution limiting royal “tyranny”
      2. The city mob had shown its power
         a) The Bastille had been stormed
         b) The Assembly and the king had moved from Versailles to Paris
      3. The peasantry had risen, showing its power
      4. Feudalism had been abolished (in the Night of August 4-5)
   B. But much greater changes were in store; the stage was only set

III. The major contending forces, how they allied, moving in ever more radical directions:
A. *The king at the top*—he had faced an alliance of the whole
nation against him from 1788 to end of 1789

1. At first, both the privileged orders (the first two estates) and the Third Estate had allied in opposition to “royal tyranny”

2. Even within the Third Estate, there was initially a kind of unanimity, including wealthy bourgeois, petty bourgeois, manual laborers, peasants—a most diverse group in outlook and interests

3. But this anti-royal alliance soon broke down
   a) The signs of its impending collapse were when the parlements refused to support the demands of the Third Estate for a doubling of its numbers, voting as a whole

B. The nobility (the First and Second Estate [the First is actually the Church, but men of noble background dominated it])
   1. By late 1789, the nobility began to feel as much under attack as the king
   2. It tended increasingly to move away from the reformers and revolutionaries and ally with the king

C. The Third Estate
   1. Even here serious internal conflicts began to emerge, especially between wealthy property owners and those that held no or little property
      a) this was a conflict that would assume much greater dimensions later

D. There is a general movement leftward, from 1789 to late 1794
   1. And progressively the poorer parts of the population make their demands felt in government

E. Thereafter, the pendulum swings back to the right
   1. The wealthier parts of the Third Estate, and finally even parts of the nobility, regain power

F. Yet it can be argued that a “bourgeois revolution” remained (though the concept needs much careful definition; “Enlightened reform” might be better)
   1. The pendulum never goes all the way back to a re-establishment of the Old Regime, even with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1814-15
2. “Bourgeois” in this sense means simply that the French
state remained “friendlier” to the interests of the
bourgeoisie

a) It became easier to engage in trade and industry, less burdened with internal tariffs, complex regulations, controls on the movement of goods

b) The “career open to talent” becomes an official ideal

c) Privilege or noble birth no longer determine which posts one can hold in the state

d) A new standard of social prestige comes to the fore: How rich you are, how much money you have accumulated?

e) Not (or less than before) how illustrious your lineage, how elevated your birth

f) In a general way: Everything now was in principle subjected to reason and efficiency, not custom and privilege

g) That change opened new opportunities to the educated yet unprivileged bourgeoisie (but of course the previously privileged could also benefit if they were competent)

IV. The Constitution of 1791

A. How did the “bourgeois revolution” first look on paper?

B. It obviously owed much to Enlightenment thought, to classical precedents, to the model of the American Constitution

1. But with significant variations in each case

C. Was it a “democratic” constitution?

1. The writers of the Constitution of 1791 obviously depended upon the support—and pressure—of the masses, or “people” (Greek: demos from which “democratic” comes)

a) Yet the majority of the people were not given the vote in it

2. Ironically, more adult males were allowed to vote in 1789, in voting for Estates General, than under the Constitution of 1791

3. Thus, both the nobility and the common people lost power under this new document (and of course the king lost the most)

D. “Privilege”—the key concern
1. The nobility and king lost most of their previous claims to
special privilege, or traditional rights
a) The morass of legal and administrative jurisdiction of the Old Regime was abolished
b) No privileged protection from taxation: All French people had a similar obligation to pay taxes

E. The “rationality” of the Constitution
1. This rationality was seen as a corollary of ending privilege (since privilege was considered irrational)
2. France was put under a rational, centralized, efficient administration
   a) New institutions of state were established
   b) For example: the historical provinces lost their political existence or significance
   c) In their place were introduced the départements

F. Implications of these changes for the poor
1. The end of privilege and the introduction of rationality did not necessarily mean an immediately better situation for the common people
2. Often the new laws turned out to hurt them in the short run
   a) For example, the abolition of guilds (“irrational” institutions) and the introduction of free trade (“rational”) hurt those who were in the guilds, who depended upon guilds for economic protection
   b) Loi Le Chapelier, 1791 prohibited virtually all organizations of the workers, any effective opposition to free trade by the common people
   c) The common people had also often depended on price controls, especially for bread, that were now abolished

G. Implications for the bourgeoisie
1. Freedom of the sort introduced by the Constitution of 1791 tended to “liberate” the bourgeoisie (although in fact many of them, too, had benefited from earlier privileges)
2. Yet it also tended to make for a greater level of insecurity, especially for the common people, for the poor

H. The Declaration of the Rights of Man
1. This declaration is in the opening section of the new constitution, followed by the General Preamble

2. Here were the constitution’s guiding principles, with clear roots in the thought of the Enlightenment
   a) Key phrase: “All men are born free and live free and equal under the laws

3. The exact meaning of the Declaration is spelled out in later sections
   a) There were “active” and “passive” citizens (and “men” was meant pretty literally)
   b) The passive were “equal under the law” but in fact not active citizens
   c) They were subject to same criminal laws, paid the same kinds of taxes, had the same rights of speech, but they did not participate in government by voting or serving as government officials
   d) Another key passage: The right to private property is “sacred”—an end, thus, to the feudal concept of property (which was of course already declared abolished in principle, in the declaration of Aug. 4-5)

4. The passages giving precise definition to liberty and political sovereignty are revealing:
   a) Freedom of expression, free communication of ideas are “among the most precious of the rights of man”
   b) “Law is the expression of the general will” (note the use of Rousseau’s term)
   c) Public office is open to “all” (if they are rich enough to become an “active citizen”—and not women, of course)

V. Disintegration of the Constitutional Monarchy
   A. The Constitution of 1791, setting up a constitutional monarchy, was not a “radical” document, at least not in comparison to what followed
   B. Yet it did finally alienate a large part of the population
   C. Even more important in alienating large numbers of Frenchmen from the Revolution was the Civil Constitution of the Clergy
      1. Large numbers of churchmen, priests, and believing Catholics said essentially “never!” (since it meant the
takeover by the state of much that was previously in the
hands of the Church)

D. If the Constitution of 1791 could have remained in force, the revolution might reasonably have been considered “moderate”

E. Even if different from the American Constitution in many ways, it still satisfied many who thought of themselves as moderate

F. But such was not to be the case

G. Radicalizing forces: Neighbors and masses
   1. As already noted, these forces did not allow the situation to calm down in France
   2. Neighbors:
      a) Declaration of Pillnitz (Aug. 1791)
      b) Leopold of Austria declared his willingness to intervene in France, if others would join him
   3. The revolutionaries were enraged; the emigrés given new hope (they had been urging this); war fever began to grow inside France
   4. Declaration of War, April 1792
   5. The war acts as an intensifier, or radicalizing force
      a) Brunswick Manifesto, July 1792: Any harm done to the king would result in severe retribution—further fanning fears inside France
   6. Masses:
      a) “Second Revolution” of late summer 1792
      b) “September Massacres” after initial defeats in the battlefield
      c) A whole new range of revolutionary measures are now contemplated, including the formation of a “revolutionary Commune,” replacing the old one
      d) A declared end to the category of “passive citizens”
      e) New elections were ordered, now with universal manhood suffrage
      f) An army of the people introduced—“the people armed,” not just a professional army

H. These were steps in the direction of creating an entirely new legislature, the Convention, and a new Constitution (of 1793)

I. They marked an end to the monarchy, the creation of the First Republic
1. Louis XVI tried to flee, was caught, and eventually put on
Before long his head would roll, appalling the other crowned monarchs in the rest of Europe.

VI. The Revolution at war, *la patrie en danger*

A. In the course of dizzyingly complex developments, the Paris Commune oversaw the successful defense of France.

B. However, its success in war was at first partly a result of luck: the Miracle at Valmy.

C. Similarly, the attention of the other great powers was diverted to the partition of Poland at this time.
   1. Thus they did not devote full attention or energies to France.
   2. Thereafter, at any rate, French military victories were won more clearly through actual merit in the field of battle.

D. In the process of organizing the defense of France some fundamental and long-lasting changes occurred.
   1. The decentralization instituted in the Constitution of 1791 was undermined.
      a) This was the beginning of a process that would end up in the highly centralized state of Napoleon—incomparably greater than that of Louis XIV.
   2. Note once again the key influence of the threat of war on the “liberties” in France.
      a) “Liberties” of the privileged, aristocratic sort worked against the efficient organization of national power.
   3. Indeed, there was no little irony in the fact that the Constitution of 1793 never really went into effect.
   4. Rather a series of what might be termed “emergency committees” exercised a de facto dictatorial rule in France.
   5. The most famous of these was the Committee of Public Safety and of General Security.
      a) It organized war both inside and outside of France.
      b) That is, it got rid of internal opposition as well raising armies, providing weapons, etc.

E. The Committee of Public Safety was led, in a crucial period, by Robespierre and the Jacobins.

VII. The Terror
A. The summer of 1793 to the summer of 1794 saw the height of
revolutionary excitement, millenarian expectations

B. That year is sometimes referred to as the period of “The Terror”

C. During it, the masses in the main cities, above all Paris, were organized as enragés, ultras, and Hébertistes

1. They spoke words of class conflict, the need for violence to achieve revolutionary goals, destroy the wealthy traitors, etc.

2. They forwarded growing demands for equalization of wealth, leveling—a kind of “socialism” before the word

3. The Jacobins, the leaders of the Committee of Public Safety, made efforts to respond to these demands, to appease their resentments

4. However, what they did was only stop-gap, temporary, not a real introduction of state-run economy, etc.

5. The most interesting of them: Law of Maximum, Decrees of Ventôse, state-directed war industrial production,

VIII. The Fall of Robespierre and the turn to the right

A. Robespierre’s rule generated its own inner resistance

B. He was brought down in a meeting of the Convention, in the month of Thermidor 1794

1. He was executed almost immediately afterwards

C. Yet another new constitution was once again worked out, establishing the Directory

1. This constitution re-introduced a property requirement for voters, representing a resurgence of “bourgeois”, or more conservative, control

D. This period sees a sense of exhaustion, a move away from the heated idealism of the previous years (a familiar cycle in revolutions)

1. Widespread governmental corruption

2. Popular misery as never before

IX. The Revolt of Babeuf

A. This uprising was much less important in itself than as a symbol for future revolutionaries

B. Babeuf, a revolutionary from Picardy, composed the Manifesto of the Equals, and organized the “Conspiracy of the Equals” to seize power
C. He put a much more rigorous interpretation to the philosophes than did the Jacobins
   1. He was especially committed the idea of absolute human equality (for him, it was the “equality of the human stomach”, and the equal right to happiness)
   2. He went so far as to say that if there were some individuals who were naturally superior to others, they should be suppressed
      a) Such people broke down human solidarity
   3. He defined wealth as a “privilege” and claimed to speak for the “proletariat"

D. He was easily caught, put in a special iron cage for trial in Aug. 1796

E. He made a famous defense before the court, then attempted suicide

F. Babeuf’s was one of a series of plots to bring down the Directory, both from the left and from the right

G. The Directory came increasingly to rely on the army to put down these plots
   1. And that set the stage for Napoleon, the subject of the next lecture

X. Conclusion
   A. Pull together the previous complicated narrative