Questions for Review and Discussion (Week II)


RELEVANT READING: McKay, Chap. 21; Perry Chap. 4

1. Identifications (intended as an aid to review: If you do not recognize or clearly remember any of these, look them up)

   a. Lafayette  
   b. Benjamin Franklin  
   c. Louis XVI  
   d. Estates General  
   e. The Bastille  
   f. Abbé Sieyès  
   g. Jacobin  
   h. Great Fear  
   i. Thermidor  
   j. Napoleonic Code  
   k. Constitution of 1791  
   l. Committee of Public Safety

2. Review Questions (also intended as an aid to review; if you cannot answer these, review your lectures notes and the relevant reading in McKay and in Perry)

   a. What were the three estates of the Old Regime? What was the role (at least in theory) of each? How do these differ from modern conceptions of social class?
   b. Why did Louis XVI finally agree to call the Estates General?
   c. What were the main grievances expressed in the cahiers de doléances?
   d. According to de Tocqueville, what was the role of the philosophes in the coming of the Revolution?
   e. In what sense might the demands of the revolutionaries in France be called “bourgeois”? What are the problems with calling the first stage of the French Revolution a “bourgeois revolution”? Is it justified to see developments from 1792 through 1794 as having a socialist, or at least a proto-socialist aspect?
   f. Napoleon has been described as the last and most successful of the enlightened despots. Is that description appropriate? How might we distinguish him from a figure like Joseph II of Austria? Were Napoleon’s ultimate concerns for the welfare of society at large? What was the basis of the opposition to the French Revolution and to Napoleon by the other great powers of the day?

3. Discussion Questions (designed to stimulate critical thinking, as well as to help pull together reading and lecture)

   a. What do you consider the most important or fundamental factor in the outbreak of the revolution? For example, how would you rank the relative importance of social and economic developments as compared to the effect of the ideas propagated by the philosophes? What is the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution? [Note the linkage of these questions with 2 d and e, above.] What about more “accidental” factors, such as the incompetence of the king or certain decisions he made (to double the
Third Estate, etc.)? How important a factor was the irresponsibility of the old nobility and privileged orders?

b. How important was the role of the “crowd,” especially in the principal cities, in the French Revolution? What about the role of the peasant masses? To what extent were such common problems as famine and poor harvests to blame for the actions of the poor? How important were the ideas of the *philosophes* for them?

c. Edmund Burke’s objections to the French Revolution are presented in both McKay and Perry. How valid do you find them? More generally, how significant do you consider tradition and custom—the “wisdom of the ages” he mentions—in human affairs? Is it wise to attempt to rebuild state and society from the ground up? Do not such revolutionary efforts always result in mass suffering—worse than the evils against which revolutionaries first rebel? Provide as many concrete examples as you can.

d. Napoleon’s defenders have accepted his claim to have “saved” the revolution from destroying itself in chaos. Others have asserted that he “betrayed” the revolution? Can these two assertions be reconciled?

e. Napoleon has long been considered one of the “Great Men” of western civilization. Yet, he was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands, probably millions of people. Does that not put him in the ranks of men like Adolf Hitler—“war criminals”? If not, how can one distinguish between them? American presidents, too, have made decisions that resulted in the deaths of thousands, many of them innocent civilians, women, and children. How may one morally justify the violent actions of powerful political leaders like Napoleon or Reagan (Bush, Clinton)? In short, are there credible rationales for the application of violence, often on a large and indiscriminate scale, in the realm of politics and international relations? One of the more obvious rationales is self-defense—itself not always easy to define—and another is the protection of others (innocent victims being attacked in another country or in a civil war, for example), but what are the guidelines that politicians should heed in self-defense, or in the protection of others?