

## Right Left..... Which Way Is UP?

Where did  
the Right-Left political spectrum  
come from?

The French Revolution,  
it is said.  
1789

For where people sat  
during the national assembly  
in relation to the King, or later,  
the President of the Assembly,  
those grouped together  
in support of the Old Regime  
on the most honorable Right,  
those wanting change  
on the Left.

Some say the terms were inventions  
of pundits, politicians and preachers,  
labelling rival political clubs,  
a rhetorical tool  
in the struggle for power.

Before and during  
“The Revolution”  
France was showered  
with pamphlets and newspapers,  
media  
with salons, corporations, cafes  
molding minds.  
What did people want?

The literature is vast,  
full of argument,  
and the picture  
blurry.  
Who were the  
“popular forces”  
of Paris,  
the insurrectionary  
peasants of Provence,  
the counter-revolutionary émigrés?  
What did people want?

King Louis XVI  
and his administration  
wanted to avoid bankruptcy of the State,  
a condition pushed  
by massive financial and military support  
for The American Revolution, his colonial empire  
and by expensive administrative reforms.  
They wanted more TAXATION!!!  
Parlement, a traditional legal club of the nobility  
and merchant nobility,  
allied with Court Grandees,  
resisted  
claiming authority to check monarchic excess.  
The old nobility wanted a restoration  
of their ancient political power  
eroded by state building

kings and ministers  
through centuries of near constant warfare  
for boundaries, trade routes, dynastic glory, power,  
state building for  
more revenue, more control.  
They wanted  
to defend their privileges,  
including avoidance of  
more taxation.  
The new merchant nobility  
wanted whatever they wanted.

After a period  
of stormy politics  
and violence in Paris and the provinces,  
Louis XVI called for the first national assembly  
since 1614,  
the Estates General  
of elected representatives  
of the three social Orders:  
Clergy, Nobility, Commoners,  
with equal numbers,  
each having a single vote.  
He requested the conventions of taxpaying subjects  
electing representatives  
to record grievances and suggestions for reform:  
the cahiers de doléances.  
After 175 years  
a king wanted to hear  
from the people.  
They were ready.

Most propertied people  
wanted tax reform.  
Most wanted regular sessions  
of an Estates General with authority  
over taxation and law.  
Many wanted removal of internal tariffs.  
Urban Commoners  
wanted more delegates of Commoners  
and vote by individual member instead of by Order  
in the Estates General,  
access to public offices now monopolized by nobility,  
and reform of the economy to promote prosperity.  
Villagers  
wanted local and provincial assemblies  
to protect their interests  
and relief from forced, unpaid labor on the roads,  
layers and layers of taxes and “obligations.”  
Nobility  
wanted vote by Order,  
protection of property and traditional rights,  
and protection from arbitrary arrest.  
Upper clergy  
wanted Catholic Church affirmed  
as the state religion and anti-church speech  
suppressed.  
Lower clergy  
wanted Church reform  
to provide more resources for local services  
and a better living for themselves.

From deep resentment  
of being tossed around and robbed by officials,  
overwhelmed by the odor

of aristocracy rolling by in ornate carriages,  
extremely bad weather,  
and grain shortages,  
no bread,  
the minimal and unpropertied people  
were in a very  
foul mood.

A great season of debate  
throughout the country delivered  
1200 representatives to Versailles  
with Commoners granted numbers equal  
to Nobles and Clergy combined.  
They marched into Salle des États,  
in order of ascending importance  
and commenced to fight over how to vote.  
Commoners refused to proceed  
without voting by individual member,  
rejecting the traditional and unfair voting  
separately by Order.  
They took an oath  
not to leave until the Nation had  
a Constitution.  
For days they pleaded with Nobles and Clergy  
in their separate chambers  
to come let us take care of business.

Eventually  
after lockouts and threats,  
soldiers marching toward Versailles  
threatening the Assembly,  
thousands of Parisians flooding the streets  
destroying tariff tollgates,  
defacing symbols of subjugation,  
attacking officials,  
after the siege and capture of Bastille prison,  
a few Clergy joined them.  
A few Nobles joined.  
The king accepted.  
Delegates sat together.  
The National Assembly  
got down to work.

Events  
ignited a conflagration  
of social conversation,  
words driving masses of villagers  
against records of domination,  
the feudal registers,  
and the manor houses holding them,  
against speculative storehouses of grain,  
and to capture shipments of grain.  
They refused to pay taxes.  
They hunted the Lords' game,  
killed their grain eating pigeons,  
and cut their trees.  
Agents of the Lords  
ran for their lives.

The Assembly  
of lawyers and "men of intellect"  
debated  
formed committees  
negotiated  
voted

debated.

It legitimized National Guards  
formed out of Merchant Guards,  
the “Milice Bourgeoise,”  
to protect property in cities and towns.  
The Assembly decreed  
an end to “feudalism”  
with its privileges for nobility and clergy  
and its burdens on the peasantry.  
It prepared  
a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen  
to precede a Constitution  
forming the framework of a nation of uniform law  
toward a Constitutional Monarchy,  
with sovereignty in the Nation  
through its delegates.

Louis XVI,  
the wavering or duplicitous King  
and his Court,  
the Queen and the Princes,  
withheld sanction  
of the Decrees and the Declaration.  
More soldiers were called.  
Parisians and members of the Assembly  
feared conspiracy.  
Thousands, led by women, assaulted Versailles  
demanding bread  
and the return of the King to Paris,  
to keep an eye on him.  
Louis certified the acts of the Assembly  
and joined a jubilant parade to Paris  
with loaves of bread  
held up on pikes.

In response  
to the Parisian peoples’ assault  
on Versailles  
for bread and in support of the “Revolution”  
the Assembly authorized the declaration  
of martial law by municipal officials.  
It defined and limited  
the power of the king and his ministers.  
To restore financial order  
it took control of the Catholic Church,  
making it a Constitutional Church with  
elected bishops and paid priests  
and confiscating its properties  
as collateral for state currency.  
This severely reduced the consensus  
supporting the Assembly.

The Assembly  
continued to legislate:  
it abolished guilds and their privileges  
handing manufacturing  
to profit maximizers,  
it prohibited labor organizing,  
it decreed the structure and electoral process  
for municipalities,  
replaced provinces and their special privileges  
with departments of standard size and tax codes  
administered by professionals,  
abolished buying and selling  
judicial offices

forming standard, elected offices and legal code,  
abolished judicial torture and  
arbitrary arrest.

It replaced primogeniture allowing  
sons and daughters equal inheritance  
and investors increased opportunity.  
It granted equal rights to Protestants and Jews  
and debated abolishing slavery  
in the Caribbean colonies.

A central notion  
of the “Revolution”  
was assembly,  
a gathering  
of minds,  
a gathering of the  
Will of the People,  
a process allowing  
people to have a say  
in what happens to them  
and the country,  
a social method  
as old as people.

Most of the educated, propertied men  
of the “Revolution”  
in the first National Assembly  
May 1789 to September 1791  
had a great fear  
of democracy  
and limited assemblies  
to men like themselves.  
They communicated frequently  
with their electorate  
of men like themselves.  
Women were excluded.  
They made laws, institutions and change  
for themselves  
while giving urban and rural  
barely propertied people  
words rather than change,  
much “shuffling” over fine points of law,  
enough bread  
to muffle the crying.

Another central notion  
of the “Revolution” of the first Assembly  
was equal rights for men,  
“freedom, property, security, and  
resistance to oppression,”  
limited only by the needs  
of the common good.  
Subsequent Assemblies  
with shifting coalitions  
battling conspiracies  
right, left, up, and down  
found a lot of exceptions to those principles,  
failed to build a viable political middle  
for stability,  
threw the country into wars,  
lopped off a lot of heads  
and opened the door to  
Bonaparte.

Peter Kropotkin wrote that

“the reign of the ‘Kings by the Grace of God’  
was gone.”

He believed that the political expression  
of community and of human rights,  
like Earth,  
would evolve,  
that the best of the Left  
would lift people UP.

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