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Teaching the French Revolution from a Global Perspective¹

Frank JACOB

Introduction

The French Revolution (1789-1799) is a process of events in world history that had a tremendous global impact. Regardless of this fact, it is, however, still rather taught in its European context. Without this revolution, it seems, Western modernity could not be the same and many countries in Europe remember the impact of the events at the beginning of the so called “long” 19th century in their national historiographies.² While the First World War, called “the seminal catastrophe”³ of the 20th century by George F. Kennan (1904-2005) in the late 1970s, marks the end of this long century, the French Revolution is considered to be the watershed from early modern to modern history. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in August 1789⁴ would eventually change the course of history to create the first equal society, and thereby surpass the impact of the American Revolution, which basically created an independent and free nation state, but not for all people in its borders. The events of the French Revolution are nevertheless important, of course, from a global perspective as well. This specific perspective should also be emphasized in the classroom, to outline the connectedness of historical events, which link the national histories throughout the world and are consequently able to create a transnationally perceived global historiography. In the following short presentation I would like to highlight some of the possibilities

¹ Presented at World History Theory and Practice 3 (April 29, 2017), St. John’s University, New York City.

² Franz J. Bauer, *Das lange 19. Jahrhundert (1789-1917): Profil einer Epoche*, third revised edition (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014) provides a good theoretical introduction to this specific periodization. For a discussion of the global perspective of this periodization see Frank Jacob and Gilmar Visoni-Alonzo, “Introduction: Conflict and Warfare in Latin America’s Martial Century,” in *Latin America’s Martial Age*, ed. Gilmar Visoni-Alonzo and Frank Jacob (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2017), 5-14.

³ George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875-1890* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 3.

⁴ For the text see http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp (Last access, April 29, 2017).

— and share some experiences — to incorporate this transnationality into the classroom, no matter if one teaches a European History survey or World History.

1. The Global Impact

One region that was tremendously impacted by the events in France was the most “successful“ and valuable colony of St. Domingue, which would eventually become the first independent state in the Caribbean, Haiti. While the Société des Amis des Noirs⁵ had advocated the abolishment of slavery and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in August 1789 had set an example for liberty, equality, and fraternity, it seems to be natural that the freed people of color demanded equality in the colonial environment as well. In 1789, around 600.000 men and women lived in St. Domingue, of whom only 40.000 were white, while the majority were African slaves and some 30.000 free blacks. The rulers were the white plantation owners, the so called “grand blancs.” While the revolution in the “mother country” was initially considered a possibility to gain independence, the colony was impacted by the enlightened declarations in Paris very fast. Wealthy and educated free men of color like Julien Raimond (1744-1801) and Vincent Ogé (1755-1791) actually went to France and demanded full equality for the colored people of St. Domingue. A law was achieved, but the white ruling class in the colony was naturally not interested in such reforms, since they were making their money by exploiting slavery in the plantation based economic system.

The revolution consequently reached St. Domingue, where Vincent Ogé, who had returned from France, planned to use force against the plantation owners. He, however, did not want to free the slaves, who were also possessed by the free people of color. While his small revolutionary force of 300 people was initially crushed very fast, the revolution began and others were continuing to

⁵ For a discussion of the role of this society see: Marcel Dorigny and Bernard Gainot, *Société des Amis des Noirs, 1788-1799: Contribution à l'histoire de l'abolition de l'esclavage* (Paris: Éd. Unesco, 1998).

succeed in the Battle of Pernier. In 1792, the French National Assembly would finally free the slaves and establish a full equality in the former colony as well. A revolutionary commissary, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, with 6,000 soldiers, was sent to the colony to make sure that the white upper class would now accept the decision of the revolutionary government in Paris. The following events, based on Toussaint Louverture's path to power and the war against Napoleonic France, will not be described in detail, but it has been shown so far, that the events in France triggered a transformation process in the Caribbean as well. After the war for independence Haiti would be an independent nation state, and one of the most valuable "sugar colonies" needed to be replaced. Cuba's importance grew and indirectly, the history of the Spanish colony was impacted by the events in France as well. Regardless of these aspects of an interwoven social and economic history, which connected the European and Caribbean theaters, these perspectives or angles are only a first option to globally teach the history of the French Revolution. A second option to broaden the students' perspectives for the events, is to use the revolution in France as a frame for a broader comparative approach.

2. The Comparative Approach

To show students that there exist historical factors, which are of transnational nature and appear in different chronological and geographical settings, it is suitable to compare the French Revolution with other revolutions in other national or international contexts. To provide a method for comparison I introduced a phase model for revolutions, which is apolitical and solely explains how revolutions develop and why they take place. In this step-model, a revolutionary cycle consists of the following ten steps⁶:

⁶ I discussed this model before. See: Frank Jacob, "Revolution, Emigration, and Anger: Angry Exile Groups in the Aftermath of the French and Russian Revolutions," in: *Understanding Angry Groups: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Their Motivations and Effects on Society*, ed. Susan C. Cloninger and Steven A. Leibo (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara, 2017), 169-188.

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- 1) violation of peoples' rights
- 2) disagreement
- 3) protest
- 4) reaction by the ruling power
- A) ignorance
- B) compromise
- C) violence
- 5) point of no return
- 6) struggle between people and government
- 7) change
- 8) internal power struggle
- 9) violence
- 10) establishment of a new regime

The French Revolution is used as the most suitable case study to first explain these ten steps related to a real historical event and to show how theoretical models are developed. Once the students understand the basic dynamics of the historical events in such a theory-based setting, one can also discuss, to name just one example, the impact of international intervention in several different steps, e.g. diplomatic pressure against the government at steps 1, 3, 4, 6, ... The model can eventually also be used to explain current events of world politics like the Syrian Civil War, the violence in Venezuela (step 6) or the situation in Ukraine (step 8). A historical case is consequently taken out of its past context to help to better understand current events of global importance.

In a European History course the model will later reappear when the Russian Revolution is discussed and help the students to compare the events of 1789 with those of 1917. The ten steps then function as some kind of guideline and help to stay in a chronological order of events. In World

History courses, it could either be compared to the American, and/or the Haitian Revolution to better emphasize the transformation of the Atlantic world at the end of the 18th century or, one could compare the French Revolution to the Chinese Revolution of 1911 to show, that revolutionary developments, regardless of different cultural and geographical settings, follow similar patterns. For students in both course formats, the similarities will be obvious and they will learn a theory, which they will be able to use as a frame for future events as well.

Due to the comparison, it of course is important to highlight differences in the specific national context, but the analysis would naturally target the similarities to show that the histories of Western and non-Western revolutions are quite close, when it comes to the forces that determine if a revolutionary movement becomes violent, is successful and ends the circle with step 7, or creates a power vacuum in the aftermath of an internal power struggle that makes the establishment of a new dictatorship possible.

3. Experiences

While students at the early college level are usually familiar with the American Revolution, which is part of their historical experience at the high school level, specifics of the French Revolution are mostly unknown to them. Consequently, the introduction of the theoretical model helps, since it reactivates their knowledge about the U.S. case, while it sensibilizes the student to think a little bit more intense about the technicalities of the development or course of a revolution. Ususally one hour is spent to answer the basic questions: Why does a revolutionary cycle begin? Is it inevitable to repeat itself? How and why could it stop? Which forces are at work?

Once these questions are answered and the model is set up, the next two hours are spent on the events of the French Revolution, which can always be connected to the theoretical model, which therefore does not only help the students to better understand the course of events, but also provides a better method for them to remember the chronology of the single steps in the French case. Exams

have also shown, that students work better with the theoretical model in hand than with a lecture not using such a “guideline.” The performance rate was much higher and several classes have proved that the model can be used in Western History surveys as well as intro courses in World History. To provide clear definitions of what a revolution really is, seems to be vital for students, whose language skills with regard to the historical discipline have not been specifically trained. To use a theory in an ahistorical sense first is a good attempt to stimulate critical thinking, before actually filling the steps with concrete event-based historical knowledge.

Conclusions

I hope it could be shown in this short survey that the French Revolution offers several possibilities to strengthen a course’s focus on world history and the transnational impact of national events. The French revolution seems to be an especially valuable topic to achieve this aim, because it is not only useful to show how developments in Europe changed the social and economic situation of people in the Caribbean, but also to establish a theoretical model that can be used for a comparative approach.

If this approach is used in a Western or global comparative perspective is up to the course and the instructors preference, but experiences with students have shown, that they gain from such comparisons, not only to understand the national events discussed, but the functionality of revolutions per se. The use of the theoretical model eventually also helps to connect the study of history to contemporary world politics, in which revolutionary movements and the turmoil that might be provoked by them still play an important role. What students eventually understand best is what historians try to do with their work: to better understand how and why things happen in the past, to have a better understanding of the present and hopefully a some advice for the future.