Evolution Of "Democracy" In The French Revolution

"Democracy," a substantial word and an everchanging, contested concept demanding constant political, social and historical analysis. A fairly fragile concept with a complex, multidimensional historical idea that has perpetually grown, evolved and transformed over time and space. Whenever the term "democracy" was utilised, it was applied in a variety of contexts. Prominent terms which are associated with and attempt to illuminate the meaning of the concept of "democracy" are "rule by the people," "popular sovereignty," "general will," "separation of power," "rights of citizens," "equality," "liberty" and many more. It has been understood, interpreted and re-evaluated by the greatest scholars allowing to delve into its multiple layers. Particularly, a study of the French Revolution inspired by liberal and radical ideas, as a profound phase of a social and political transformation offers an insight into how difficult, repudiating and contradicting the concept is. As stated by Blaufarb, "The French Revolution is generally taken as the advent of European popular democracy" (Blaufarb, 1995, p.608). Through a genealogy of 'democracy' as it developed throughout the French Revolution in 1789 until 1795, I will provide understandings into how this concept evolved in general additionally showcasing how it shifted from a liberal (individual) to a Republican (collective) interpretation. My main aim is to uncover how the transformation in the conceptualization of sovereignty in the French Revolution influenced the development of democracy as a political principle, and how it shapes the modern-day appearance and interpretation of the concept. By relying on enlightened thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Sieyès, I will elucidate what "popular sovereignty" is, and the manner by which and where it may be effectively applied. I will also be utilising the Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizen along with the works of Robespierre, Hobson, Scurr, Oosterhuis, and Dahl who provide historical background and information on the forms of dominating governing powers. I will delve into the strength and flaws of "democracy," and lastly present a critical elaboration of its outcomes by exploring the present circumstances.

The Ancien Régime was a social and political system of France which eventually led to the abolition of hereditary monarchy, the feudal system of the French Nobility, any distinctions of orders, titles, privileges etc. When defining a concept like "sovereignty" it is frequently accompanied with terms like "authority" or "supreme power." In pre-revolutionary times in France, these were characteristics that stood conjoined with Sun King Louis XVI (Hobson, 2015, p.75), who was basing his position, power and authority all in respect to divine right. In this monarchical and absolute principle of sovereignty, he was the quintessence of all power and its implementation. Even the legislative power, the Parisian parlements, were to be considered under his direction. Bearing this in mind, it is not a surprise that the French connotation of démocratie was during that time negatively associated with anarchy, corruption, ancient "instability, chaos, and irrelevance" (Hobson, 2015, p.76). Pre-revolutionary France was moulded by the feudal aspects of the hierarchical social structure of the three Estates. These were composed of the Catholic clergy and the nobles directly under the King as the first and second Estate responsible for all diplomatic challenges and the governance of the country and middle-class merchants, and peasants forming the third. Through this structure the political principles of an absolutist monarchy were established.

During the turmoil and mayhem of the French Revolution by the end of the 18th century France was deep in a socio-economic crisis and piles of debt. France was stuck between an absolute

monarchic appearance and an aristocratic rule, especially after having watched how the American Revolution had turned a former English colony into an independent republic (Hobson, 2015, p.78). Finally, due to these domestic and international failings, King Louis XVI in August 1788 demanded change, formulated in terms of the enlightenment and called for the convocation and merge of the Estates-General (Hobson, 2015, pp.79). European enlighten intellectuals like Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Sieyès persistently argued for diverse forms of what we today would call an archaic liberal form of "democracy". While they all comprehended the democratic system as a form of self-government, they could also be recognized within the acknowledgement that a form of liberal "democracy" can be achieved through self-determination and assurance placed on the individual just as well as on the aggregate and collective level (Oosterhuis, 2019). While Hobbes, in his Leviathan (1651), Locke, in his Two Treaties of Government (1690) and Montesquieu in his De l'esprit des lois (1748) were showcasing crucial, key liberal principles, contending for the priorities of individuals self-determination, rights and liberties and a governmental force that is restricted, secularized and constitutional, Rousseau in his Du contrat social (1762) and later Sieyès in his Qu'est-ce que le Tiers État? (1789) provided a far more radical, inclusive republican theory of "democracy", based on popular sovereignty and general will, reasoning for the significance of collective self-determination keeping in mind national interest and working towards the common good. Through exploring the Estates-General and its outcomes, the division of contemplations becomes more clear: Hobson explains that the merge of the three Estates "had quickly outgrown its original purpose of finding a solution to the debt crisis, and had instead come to represent an opportunity to liberalize the French state" (2015, p.82). Long stretches of bad harvests exacerbated by the deregulation of the grain industry, poor regressive tax schemes and the increasing apprehension amongst the populace, just as the flare of the prevalent political dogmas introducing a new sense of political mindfulness, were undermining the assembling. With the first and the second Estate both preferring a vote per Estate, the third Estate understood that they could not get fair portrayal, consequently severed and proclaimed themselves the Assemblée Nationale and pledge to draft new constitutive powers embracing at last the name National Constituent Assembly. In a very polemical and persuasive way, Abbé Sieyès in Qu'est-ce que le Tiers État? (1789) stressed the importance of the nation, moving sovereignty from King Louis XVI towards the people who were "living under common laws and represented by the same legislative assembly" (Mason & Rizzo, 1999, p.51). Sieyès argued for democratic universalism and a representative "democracy" which is a natural law of society and the only one that conforms with reason. He wished for a shift from having people to vote directly on issues to people voting for representatives who contributed to the creation of laws in institutions and argued for them in the parliament. Sieyès talks about a nation that is formed by a collection of self-determined equal and involved individuals. Sieyès also states that "The Republicans of France do not desire the pure democracy of the old Athens" (Ronsanvallon, 1995). This is also officially stated in the Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizens from 1789, article three: "The source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation; nobody no individual can exercise authority that does not proceed from it in plain terms" (Mason & Rizzo, 1999, p.103). Ruth Scurr explicates popular sovereignty "as society's right and opportunity to create its own rules and institutions by exercising its inalienable and historically unconstrained constituting power" (Scurr, 2013, p.58). The moderate liberal period of the French Revolution arrived at its stature in 1790 with the abolishment of absolutism, feudalism and privileges. The leap forward of the possibility that state, and its government legislature should be ruling in the interest of people and their concerns through the rule of law protecting civil rights, liberties, inclusivity and ensuring social equality. Along with the association of numerous opposing political parties (radical left-wing revolutionaries and right-wing royalist democrats), and a

constitution in favour of a constitutional monarchy. Popular sovereignty combined with a representative "democracy" system through (restricted) suffrage which was only for male adults with taxable property, and elections distinguished the French constitution from the unequivocal, initial ancient Greek democratic forms (Hobson, 2015, p.89). Nevertheless, France was a European nation in transition where trouble was brewing along with the happening of the recently formed Legislative Assembly led by Maximilien Robespierre, the leader of the left wing radical political group the Jacobins, who supported and reinforced the principles of a French Republic with the priority and obligations of serving collective national interest and collective self-determination.

The Storming of the Bastille in July 1789 was a pulverization of an image of imperial force, subsequently an extraordinary indication of a revolutionary push. Nevertheless, the King's endeavour, who progressively served only as a nonentity figurehead, to escape the country in 1791 urged radical Revolutionaries to envision and build a France without a monarch. With commotion about a Republic and anti-monarchy ideals in the air and France attempting to fortify its position, declaring war to Austria and Prussia, the country long before ended up confronting the strain and tension between its interpretation of popular sovereignty (sovereignty by the nation and its people) opposed to the monarchic forms that were manifested in Europe just as the rest of the world. The Left wings' sense for republicanism developed with national mobilization and enrolment in order to outshine any representative sense that was established by the National Assembly and any form of a counterrevolution, permitting ultimately the presence of a new National Convention with a novel constitution, abolishing the monarchy and eventually declaring France a Republic in 1792 (Hobson, 2015, pp.91-92). The understanding of popular sovereignty changed, becoming absolutely focal and crucial for the ascent of a democratic government as a constitutional structure also to be seen in Robespierre's "Report on the Principles of Political Morality" from 1794 (Mason & Rizzo, 1999, p.255). He states that the revolutionary government should be based on the union of (civic) virtue and terror to allow a nation of "free" and "equal" citizens (Mason & Rizzo, 1999, p.257). Civic virtue was to be comprehended as the unified devotion and complete loyal to the Revolution and the nation through an active citizenship and complete political commitment (Oosterhuis, 2019), while any opposition or resistance was treated as treachery deserving no mercy. This spirit eventually led to state intimidation, coercion and terror in the name of "the people." With the enactment of this second face of popular absolute sovereignty during this state, the conflict between direct and representative forms of democracy (Hobson, 2015, pp.99-100) and the tension between collective and individual self-determination was amply clear and apparent. While Scurr affirms the associated change of the description and position of "democrat" in the Jacobin Phase towards a positive implication and a "popular use" (Scurr, 2013, p.61), it is the shift and alteration in the conceptualization of sovereignty with the affiliated interpretation of a "general/collective will" in the French Revolution that is vital for the growth of "democracy" as a political principle. Allowing and assisting it to move from a liberal towards a totalitarian, republican interpretation. "Democracy" was no longer just as a term that individuals could relate with but was moreover utilised for disputation, controversy and conflict. The French Revolution was the demand for a state that secures basic personal rights and collective interests, with general freedom, self-determination, autonomy, human advancement, political equality, creating a state liberated from tyranny. Contrary to this was the effort to achieve all this using exactly what tyranny associates to, oppression, mistreatment, corruption, and duress. Furthermore, it was the failure of these measures that truly result in a (successful) democratic process, it is all the more essential if the members are to be politically equivalent in defining the policies of the association as defined by Dahl: effective participation, voting equality, enlightened

understanding, exercising final control over the agenda and the inclusion of adults (Dahl, 2000, p.38). The success or failure of a democracy reliant on the "general will" for the sake of freedom, constantly swings between the greater good and the room for dissent which have historically led to several conflicts that persisted until today.

Conclusion

The French Revolution brought about a paradigm shift from a decline in absolute monarchies to the emergence of Republic and Liberal democracies. The course of the French Revolution presents two opposing forms of popular sovereignty that further influence the (modern) appearance of "democracy" as a political regime. In the moderate liberal stage, just as in the radical republican phase, sovereignty was placed within the individuals, however, while at the start of the Revolution the understanding was of a substantially indirect form, where individuals in spite of retaining power still played a partially restricted role in the government through representative association, individuals in the second stage of the Revolution enforced and authorized their sovereignty through the unpleasant characteristics of fear and terror in a straightforward manner (Hobson, 2015, p.104). Historically, it is very vividly demonstrated what locally dedicated contribution and participation in political decision-making means for the authenticity of the constitution to render it legit. It was indeed the citizen movements, activities and initiatives that tore open the unbending resistance between representative and direct "democracy", an aristocratic parliament and radical 'extra-parliamentary opposition.' While some persistently demanded justification of the separation and expert measures, others sought to make political representation unessential substituting it through direct participation. Contradictory to the system that had existed under the monarchy was the construction of revolutionary politics. As Harry Oosterhuis (2019) asserted, "fundamental tension between individual autonomy and freedom and the public commitment and responsibility towards the community" we wind up in the inertness of politics, legislative issues, state failure and political unconcern that serve the dismantling and the rising disappointments concerning the concept of "democracy." There is a strong need for a change in the political attitude and mindset rather than a rise of a new political concept; it is crucial to understand "democracy" in the context in which it is presented. The "crisis of democracy" is about the extent to which we are able to listen to all groups in the society and still appear to be fair and just. The French Revolution can be taken as evidence of the consistent and enduring subject and struggle of fair and unfair, equal and unequal, right and wrong, just and unjust. We live in a world where face a daily reality of generally underestimating and taking "democracy" for granted, as if it was a certain assurance. We seldom squander an idea or thought about what "democracy" needs in order to be preserved. Whilst some are rejoicing in the triumph of liberal democracy, we must return to a place where we value diversity and the possibilities of compromises amongst society individual, since our differences matter, not only in a political dynamic but a whole lot more. As, humankind is still seeking clarity on the nature of "democracy" we must always realise and keep in mind that we are coming from different perspectives that should be considered.

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