Reasons That Forced French Revolution

While it is tenable to argue that political ideas were a significant cause of the French revolution, which began in 1789 (McQueen, 2018) and finished in 1799, it would be fallacious to argue that these were the only major driving force of the revolt. Similarly, it would not be sufficient to merely state that the uprising only happened as a result of the grave economic crisis either. Rather, one must recognise that the underlying factors in both, which was the third estate's want of freedom, equality and justice and the want to overthrow the old feudal system was a more significant cause of the revolt. Overall, rather than by political ideas or capitalism the French were driven by an idea of justice.

As demonstrated by many historians the third estate, unlike the first and second estates, was often wronged and taken advantage of. The start of the revolution meant the end of the Ancien Regime, a society that was primarily focused on the status quo. However, it is not sufficient to say that the revolution just put an end to the Old Regime, because its impact was much greater. As stated by Mignet, the revolution enabled people to be free and encouraged equality, 'renegade oppression' and the feudal system (Hobsbawm, 2004), hence a new governing structure that saw the end of the monarchy and the beginning of the republic (Anirudh, 2018) was being created. Thus, one cannot just assume that the revolution just happened; rather it could even be asserted that compared to other revolutions this was one of the most significant. So, it can be argued that the need for a fairer society is what drove the French populace to revolt. Society was divided into three estates: the first estate which was formed by the clergy, and owned 10% of the land, the second estate which was constituted by French nobles who owned 25% of the land, and finally the third estate, which formed 98% (Anirudh, 2018) of the population and included the working class and the bourgeoisie. The corrupt system, which favoured the wealthy can be simply understood through the unfair distribution of land. Peasants had to live in a society where the smaller percentage of the population owned the vast majority of land, and in which the clergy took 10% of their harvest (lecture 5); so although farmers were the ones to work the most, they were also the ones to gain the least. Consequently, the revolution can be understood as Frenchmen trying to free themselves from this feudal system which often looked down on them, due to the fact that it revolved around the principles of nepotism and favouritism, not allowing them to live a dignified life. As presented by Tocqueville, 'liberty is fundamental for the smooth running of a nation' (Tocqueville, 2020). This idea could be proven even further by the unjust tax system of the time. In fact, although being the ones that earned the least the third estate was the only class that paid taxes, whereas both the first and second estate was exempt from doing so. Hence, it could be asserted that after years of living in an unjust system, which did not help its citizens and with a clear cut class divide, the working class finally had the bravery to stand up for themselves and try to put an end to the exploitation of poorer classes. This idea could be proven through Labrousse's argument that 'the French Revolution occurred at the end of an acute social crisis resulting from the impossibility of transforming the Ancien Regime' (McPhee 2012). This idea of exploitation could be easily proven further with the fact that in front of Necker's proposition to reform the French tax system to include all three classes (Augustyn, 2020), those in power went against the reform. Overall, is plausible to argue that any pacifist attempts to change the way of life in France did not have any results; therefore the French had to find a more effective way to ensure that all citizens were treated equally, hence the revolution. Compared to political ideas and the problem of the

economic crisis during the 18th century, it is much more conceivable to argue that the strive of the third estate to live in a better society was a more significant cause. One could argue that this is because diverging political ideas and social status had always existed, however at the eve of the revolution people had come to the realisation that those in power were doing nothing to protect them or ensure their wellbeing so they had to act for themselves. To an extent, the revolution symbolizes the loss of trust in the governing body and so the realisation that perhaps as argued by Jean Jacque Rosseau in ‘social contract’ ‘sovereignty should be put on people in order for them to be treated equally and to be free. (Lewis, 1993). Revolutionaries used this idea proposed by the philosopher that true power resides within people to defend the revolution (Llewellyn, Thompson, 2020).

On the other hand, some could argue that the grave economic crisis that France encountered during the 18th century was a more significant cause. As a matter of fact, both kings Louis XV, and his successor Louis XVI pushed France to bankruptcy through a series of expensive wars such as the ‘Seven Years War’ and the ‘American War of Independency’. The strain on the finances of France was already huge as in addition to the great expenditure caused by the wars, France went through a phase of poor harvest causing peasants to struggle to survive. The lack of products to produce bread resulted in the famous bread riots, which was a response to the increase in the price of bread. Despite seeing their population struggle the sovereigns, Louis XVI, and his wife Marie Antoinette, did nothing to help the French population; and so, citizens had to spend 90% of their daily income on bread (Anirudh, 2018). Thus, it would be appropriate for some to argue that the French decided to revolt because they were struggling economically and so they had to do something to ensure their survival. The careless approach of the king throughout the situation would be a further reason why one could assume that the economic crisis was the most significant cause of the French revolution. While the population was suffering the King decided to remodel the palace of Versailles, which intensified the economic crisis of the country, and then move there with his family while people were struggling economically. By doing so the idea of a feudal system, which favoured the wealthy, was strengthened, as those in power were wasting money on lavish matters, while the working class was struggling to face the consequences of something, they did not have any control over. It cannot be disproven that what happened at Versailles angered the masses, in fact, this idea can be supported by the group of women that marched to bring the royal family back to the capital. Although some would argue that the depiction of a careless king is not accurate, in reality to an extent Louis XVI poor government of the country caused the third estate, who had also been influenced by ideas of the Enlightenment, to demand a say in the decision-making so that their interests would be taken into account (Wilde, 2020). The idea that the economic crisis was the root cause of the french revolution is most commonly associated with Marxist historians, as Lefebvre and Soboul, who follow Marx’s idea that the French revolution depended on the development of capitalism during the 18th century (Heller, 2010). Although, according to Lefebvre even the aim of the revolution was to ‘facilitate agrarian capitalism’ (McPhee, 1989) the actions of the populace eventually prevented it. Nevertheless, despite the ideas presented it would be fallacious to argue that the economic crisis was the major cause of the revolution, as ultimately the movement itself disrupted the French economy even further, by slowing it down (Hobsbawm, 2004). Therefore, it would have made null all that Frenchmen were fighting for.

Contrastingly, some are keener to argue that the different political ideas of the time were the most significant cause of the revolution. Gramsci put forward the argument that the elite controlled the cultural and political side of things, therefore one can easily deduce that the

people were not even considered when making a decision. However, in accordance with the argument that political ideas were fundamental for the revolution, some could use the fact that through the ideologies of enlightenment, Frenchmen became more aware of what they wanted, so they started to refute the political ideas forced upon them by the monarchy. Many would claim that revolutionaries rebelled because they did not want the monarchy as the main governing body. Despite the formation of the National Assembly, the third estate was still being left out of decision-making, in fact, the first and second estates often worked together without including the latter one. As a result, the third estate eventually took possession of one of the King's tennis courts, making an oath to not leave until the 'Declaration of the rights of man' was accepted. Thanks to the declaration, the advocate Robespierre fought for the abolition of the royal veto and to stop the abuses of power (Bouloiseau, 2020). The contemporary thinker, Furet put forward the idea that the revolution might have been caused by the different political ideas of the time. For Furet, the revolution was simply a struggle for political ideas which were emerging at the time, against what had been the norm for many decades (Just, 1997). However, despite the analysis put forward by thinkers such as Furet, the idea that political ideas were a more significant cause of the french revolution is falsifiable. This is primarily because since the beginning of the revolution there were always contrasts in the political ideas put forwards by the exponents, therefore the revolution failed to achieve any stability in regards to politics. Untimely, this idea demonstrated the reason why political ideas cannot be used as the primary cause of the revolution. Although, being central for the French population in order to fully explain the class disparity of the time, these did not drive the revolutionaries.

Albeit, political ideas and the economic crisis, as well as the influence of the enlightenment, is key to the development of the revolutionary movement, these are not its driving force. By way of contrast, the necessity of the French third estate to be recognised as a key part of French society and their want for equality and consequently a fairer treatment were what drove the first revolutionaries to begin the revolt. Overall, their ideas were the most significant cause of the revolution because, unlike the other two factors they considered every problem the populace had to face, which included poverty and class division.