Why Was There A French Revolution?

In this essay, I will explain what drove the common people of France to revolt, overthrow and ultimately kill their monarchy. I will also state which explanations I think are irrefutably the most accurate and give evidence. In my opinion, the best fitting reasons are the intellectual explanation (where it is explained as a clash of ideas) and the cultural explanation (where it is because of changes to normal peoples lives). I am going to tell you why I think these two are equally valid explanations for the French Revolution and how they link to one another. Also in this essay, I will write about why the Marxist theory (where the revolution is explained by class) is counterfactual when applied to the French Revolution.

Firstly, I think that the French Revolution began because of the rise in the use of logic over tradition that began in the age of reason (1600s–1700s), when philosophers started to create new ideas about the world. In 18th century France the power was shared evenly between 3 groups (estates) called the estates general: 1st estate consisted of the clergy; the 2nd estate was the nobles and royalty and the 3rd estate was everyone else. However, this system wasn't even at all because the 3rd estate made up 98% of the population and only had one third of all the power. Even then, in reality, they had no real power because the king had absolute power; therefore logically the estates general was against the 3rd estate’s best interests. This uneven power scale enraged the commoners but their higher class counterparts didn't care because they were blind to the struggles of the victims and by the privileges they gained from the unfair power system. The corruption and discrimination came into practice when the commoners were heavily taxed, paying half their income to the 1st and 2nd estates; whereas the nobles, who were supposed to pay taxes, and the clergy were excluded from the taxes. Even in the time of mass hunger among the commoners (the late 1780s) due to repeated crop failures, the taxes were not relaxed to give the commoners some respite and the higher estates did not help the most hard working estate out of starvation much at all. This fired up the commoners even more and they wrote in their cashier (letter of complaints to the estates general) that they wanted to have equal status in order to solve the problem of exploitation through taxes. They wrote, “his subjects of the third estate [should be] equal by such status to all other citizens... without distinctions”[1].I think these lines are very important because later the national assembly, formed by the 3rd estate, said very similar words in their social contract, which is one of the main enlightenment ideas, the Declaration of the Rights of Man. They wrote “men are born and remain free in equal rights”[2], which shows how much of the Revolution began directly because they were being subjected to inequality and they realised that logically they'd be better off with a more even power structure, rather than relying on the traditions of being ruled by a king and living in the estates general structure. That's another one of the main enlightenment ideas, and so the revolution must have started because of the new enlightenment ideas; hence one explanation for the French Revolution is the intellectual explanation.

In addition, I think that the cultural explanation fittingly explains the French Revolution because it so strongly links to the intellectual explanation. At the time of the beginning of the Revolution, the proportion of people from the third estate able to read was notably increasing. Evidence of this is that in Montmartre, 74% of men and 64% of women could sign their names; and in a fashionable street in St Honore, where one third of residence were from the third estate, the literacy rates were at 93%. This means that the literacy rate was higher in eighteenth-century France than late twentieth-century America [3].This evidence, when combined with philosophers’ enlightenment idea books, means that intellectual ideas were being spread by books. One of these philosophers from the time was Jacques Rousseau and his view was that people should rule themselves as a sovereign power system (where the general will of the people was expressed through laws that everyone follows on equal footings). His ideas spread and became the principles for the French Revolution because people saw there was a better system, which they fought for. Evidence for that is in the Rights of Man. It says “the law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to take part, in person or by their representatives must be the same for everyone” [3]. This is almost the exact thing Rousseau wrote, which leads to the conclusion that the common people were reading more, and reading an intellectual philosopher’s book and agreeing with it. Thus the Revolution began because of the intellectual event of the enlightenment ideas and the cultural event of the 3rd estate reading more.

Perhaps Rousseau gained his opinions from his childhood in Geneva, Switzerland. There the power system was as corrupt as France; the allegedly democratic government was based on the male “citizens” voting and the “inhabitants”(residing Genevan immigrants) having no suffrage and considerably fewer rights. The number of residents who were qualified as citizens became proportionately smaller and they were [constituted](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constituted) a minority [4]. Eventually, a council of 25 ran the city in usurpation with full control, like a monarchy, which could explain his anti-monarchy beliefs.

However, the opposing view- the Marxist view- is that the French Revolution was started because of the class struggles of the higher and lower estates over power. Marxist historians believe that, because the commoners didn't have as many rights as the 2nd and 1st estate, they gained a class consciousness (realisation that they could end the exploitation) and began the French Revolution, a theoretically classic Marxist event. However, “historians have shown that the more literate an area was ,the more it was likely to criticise the king and nobles”[5]; or in other words, gain what could look like a class consciousness in the eyes of a Marxist historian, but is in fact commoners reading more and learning new intellectual ideas from the philosophical books. The 3rd estate reading more is a cultural event and the enlightenment ideas are a big part of the intellectual explanation, so the French Revolution did not begin because of class and ergo is not a Marxist event.

Lastly, I think that the Revolution began because of the de-sacralisation (becoming less-sacred) of the king and monarchy. This came about partly because of the new enlightenment ways of looking at the world (the core of the intellectual explanation). But I think that an equal part of it was the behaviour of king Louis XVI. The king was seen as lackadaisical towards governing and the 3rd estate’s needs, despite France having an absolute monarchy (a monarchy where the king has all the power). This is because he discredited the monarchy supporting the American Revolution and almost bringing France to bankruptcy. As well as that, the commoners thought he and his wife were selfish, terrible leaders who spent lots of money on frivolous things (like expensive clothes and food), whilst letting the poor starve and adding to France’s bankruptcy. To make matters worse, in 1789 he asked the estates general to meet so he could propose tax increases in the midst of severe food shortages and starvation. This was the first time the body had met since 1614 but Louis would not let all three estates meet simultaneously so the Third Estate proclaimed itself a national assembly, declaring that only it had the right to represent the nation [6]. Propaganda was soon spread by the 3rd estate suggesting that he was under the thumb of Queen Marie Antoinette and inadequate to rule. Evidence of this is the picture of the 2 headed monster which says “the two make one”. It was drawn shortly after the two tried to flee the country and King Louis is depicted as a goat ,which is a traditionally stupid animal, and the Queen is seen as a cheetah, which is a symbol of slyness. The picture shows that the commoners thought they were sly and stupid, therefore bad rulers. Marie Antoinette was often depicted as horrid things like this harpy. In Roman and Greek mythology, the harpy was a bird-woman cross and means “snatcher”[7]. In stories they stole people’s food; this is significant because Marie Antoinette spent France’s money, which could have been spent on food for the starving. People saw her spending lots of money as taking the food from the poor. She was hated for that, along with her husband, which meant they weren't respected and so were rebelled against.

I conclude that the French revolution started because of both intellectual and cultural reasons and not Marxist reasons. I have explained in the above paragraphs that I think parts of the cultural and intellectual explanations capture the reasons behind what interminably altered the very structure of French power. I think that, after extensive research, the French revolution was caused by the 3rd estate reading more (a cultural event), therefore having more access to philosophical reading matter about enlightenment ideas against the King and France's estates general. Those new ideas spreading around gave the commoners, who already felt anger towards the King, inspiration to rally against the monarchy and obtain equality for all.

[1]1789, *adapted from a cashier*

[2]26thAugust1789, Deceleration-of-the-rights-of-man-and-citizen

[3]Simon Schama,1989, *citizens,*page180

[4]encyclopedia-Britannica-Geneva

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Geneva-Switzerland> [1stJune2018]

[5]scholars-handbook, *Why was there a French revolution?,*page26

[6]BBC-history-LouisXVI

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/louis_xvi.shtml> [3rdJune2018]

[7]study.com

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-a-harpy-in-greek-mythology-definition-origin.html> [3rdJune 2018]