

Assignment: How accurate is Crane Brinton?

Consider what you know about the American Revolution and what you have learned about the **French Revolution** and write an essay discussing how accurate his theories are. Be sure in your essay to trace the course of the revolutions and use specific examples to illustrate your argument. Submit your completed assignment when finished.

Crane Brinton posited many ideas about revolutions in his *Anatomy of a Revolution*, basing his ideas off of the similarities of the English, French, and Russian Revolutions that he observed. Brinton's ideas included the ten prevailing conditions that exist prior to the starting of a revolution, as well as the ten steps that the revolutions he had studied had all been observed to take, from his perspective. The veracity of his theories on European revolutions may not be discounted, but when comparing his ideas to the course that the American Revolution followed, it becomes evident that discrepancies arise due to the differences between the French (as well as other European) and American Revolutions. Exactly how accurate was Brinton, however, and how much did he get wrong?

Examining the course of revolutions as posited by Brinton, the revolutions must, under his theory, begin with conditions in which the entirety of the populace becomes discontented, restless, and held down. Individuals, under Brinton's theory, also want to have a better future than what is being provided, and social classes cause tension. The government fails to respond and scholars and thinkers give up on the society; as a result of government failure to act, some leaders also join with the opposition, leaving the government without support necessary to prevent it from maintaining financial capability and therefore viability. With that description of Brinton's theory out of the way, it is best to first examine the accuracy of these claims in regards to the behavior exhibited by the French Revolution. The French Revolution did indeed see prior to its beginning heavy social stratification leading to tensions and high dissatisfaction amongst the populace. Many scholars became concerned, at the very least, about the course that the French government was taking, with Montesquieu worrying about the balance of power being broken and leading to a need for a revolution. Financial issues arose within France, such as war debts, that the government was unable to resolve, and the nobility, such as King Louis XVI himself, was far removed from the majority of the population. These qualities of the French Revolution are largely in line with what Brinton argued. The American Revolution meets with ideas that unjust taxation was a factor in the Revolution and that social classes became dissatisfied and wanted a better future, but in the colonies, there did not exist the same type of social stratification and tensions that existed between the nobility and peasantry of the French nation. This can perhaps be attributed to the youth of the colonies and the fact that they were indeed colonies and not typical European states, but it remains that Brinton was incorrect on several points. However, he remains quite accurate on other counts of government behavior in the leadup to the Revolution, with the British government experiencing similar financial issues to France and attempting to use taxation of the American colonies as a method of resolving such issues.

Looking towards Brinton's ten points of the course of Revolutions after they begin, Brinton posits as the first three steps revolutionaries making impossible demands of government, the government failing to suppress the revolutionaries, and the revolutionaries

succeeding in gaining power. This holds true with the French Revolution demanding drastic changes in government about the representation and role of common men, for example, and the French government did attempt to violently suppress the revolutionaries before the latter succeeded. In the American Revolution, the demands made of the British government largely centered around reduction of taxes, or at least representation in Parliament should the majority of taxes remain in place. These demands, unlike the sweeping reforms the French Revolutionaries desired, would not have ended the British government, and the colonies would have remained a minority in Parliament. Meeting the demands of the American Revolutionaries would have likely done nothing to harm the British government and simply resolve the concerns of the populace. Brinton is correct, however, in that the government did attempt to suppress the Revolution, but Britain moved to do it at first through an increase in military control before violence broke. Brinton is also correct in that the Revolution would succeed and appear united in its efforts.

The next three points of Brinton's course of the revolution are that the revolutionaries lose unity, moderates who gain power fail to satisfy the people, and a lunatic fringe seizes control of government. Again, this is reflective of the French Revolution with the arguments among the revolutionary government of how to deal with economic and military issues leading eventually to the Reign of Terror under which Robespierre advocated the use of terror to bring control. The American Revolution failed to follow the same course, as the Founding members of the American government remained united in their intent despite arguments. While there were Federalists and Anti-Federalists who disagreed on how the new government should operate, no group committed to the violent overthrow of the other; it was healthy debate. They drafted first the Articles of Confederation, which did lead to dissatisfaction, but the Constitutional Convention and the adoption of the United States Constitution maintained the unity of the government and the country. No lunatic group gained control in the United States. Despite some threats to the Revolutionary government, such as the Whiskey Rebellion, the American Revolution and the United States did not follow these points of Brinton's course of the revolution.

The next four points of Brinton's theory are that a strong man takes power, extremists try to create a heaven on earth, terror ensues, and order is restored under moderates who end the revolution. During the French Revolution, of course Robespierre was the man who took power. He and his Committee of Public Safety sought to punish all those who were perceived as harming ideals of the revolution, and the Reign of Terror was the result in which thousands upon thousands were executed on the orders of the government. Robespierre and his government believed that terror was a necessary means of moving the revolution forward. The Thermidorian Reaction ended the Reign of Terror and the reign of Robespierre, and the French Directory took over. In the United States, George Washington was considered a strong figure, but he did not assume the power Robespierre did and was elected to his position by the people of the United States and the Electoral College. The American Revolution see some punishment of dissidents with former British loyalists sometimes having land seized, for example, but treatment was not as bad for those who were revolutionaries of a different brand, with Vermont being allowed to retain its independence until it willfully joined the United States as the fourteenth state. No Reign of Terror occurred and the country established by the revolution moved forward. In the case of the American revolutionary government, the moderates never lost power to violent radicals. Brinton was very much inaccurate in these claims in regards to the American Revolution.

The American Revolution, in the course it followed, started similarly to the French Revolution, and Brinton was right on several points. However, Crane Brinton was incorrect on the latter half of the progression of the revolution when it came to the American Revolution. Despite the similarities, the American Revolution differed greatly from the French Revolution in terms of the social classes of the colonies, what the people wanted, and what people came to power and what government was instituted. Brinton is very much correct in his analysis of the course of a revolution in terms of the French Revolution, but his theories have several discrepancies with the course that the American Revolution followed.

Sources:

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