“Everything is rooted in politics...a people will never be other than the nature of its government makes it...What is the nature of government most likely to produce the most virtuous, the most enlightened, wisest and in short, the best people?”
– Rousseau, Confessions, Book IX, p. 395

Objective: To explore questions of injustice and inequality in the Confessions, Rousseau’s legacy in eighteenth century revolutionary history, and the paradoxical legacy of Enlightenment thought and history for the development of human rights.

The French Revolution was a watershed moment in the history of the world, its effects felt from Europe to the Americas. It was but one of many revolutions, both social and political, that took place in the eighteenth century. As Paul Hyland, Olga Gomez and Francesca Greensides have observed,

Alongside the development of ‘Enlightened’ philosophies of law, government and kingship, the eighteenth century witnessed major social changes, political unrest and conflict – most famously in North America and France, but also in England, Ireland, Switzerland, Corsica, the Austrian Netherlands and other places. There were also numerous slave revolts in North America and the Caribbean [the most successful of which resulted in the establishment of the first independent black republic, Haiti. There were] “peasant revolts in Hungary, Russia, Bohemia and Sweden...Shortly after the close of the century, the great revolutionary leader Simon Bolívar, well schooled in the Enlightenment, would begin the process of liberating half of South America from Spanish rule. Of course, these conflicts were not all inspired by Enlightenment texts and reasoning. However, through the North American and French Revolutions – particularly the latter – new thinking emerged about the power and rights of people to transform their societies, rather than seek the restoration of a prior order, and to become the citizens of secular republics rather than the subjects of ancient monarchies. These radical ideas were rehearsed (and often rejected) in many works of the Enlightenment, but they became explosive through the experience of the revolution and would give rise to new ways of thinking and writing about human society and history. (328)

This Unit explores Rousseau’s legacy for the French Revolution and for eighteenth century revolutionary history. It also explores the claim that the philosophers, novelists and revolutionaries of the Enlightenment, Rousseau chief among them, “invented” human rights; Rousseau, indeed, is often credited with being the first to coin the phrase “rights of man” in The Social Contract. In the centuries since, human rights have become part of international law, and speaking of “human rights abuses” a powerful rhetorical tool in advocating for the rights of people across the world.
Yet the concept of “human rights” rests on a powerful but problematic assumption: that human beings have rights strictly by virtue of being human. Well, what does it mean to be “human”? Who gets to count as “human?” Women? Slaves? In the eighteenth century, most (white) men would have answered in the negative to both questions, at least in so far as “human” constituted the right to exercise agency and self-determination (slaves), or vote and participate in the civic life of the nation (women). Jefferson could draft the Declaration of Independence, declaring “all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” but he did not free his slaves. Indeed, in the years 1775-1800 alone, European and American slave-traders shipped two million, eight thousand, six hundred and seventy Africans across the Atlantic to plantations throughout the Americas and the Caribbean. In 1794 the French National Assembly did abolish the slave trade in France, but it took a slave revolt to transform the French plantation colony of St. Domingue into the free, independent black republic of Haiti. The Rousseau-reading revolutionaries of the National Assembly, meanwhile, proposed an egalitarian politics for their new republic that nonetheless did not include women. The legacies of Rousseau, the Enlightenment and of the American and French Revolutions are powerful – ethically, socially and politically. They are also highly paradoxical.

“Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains.” – Rousseau, The Social Contract
(This first line from the Social Contract became one of the most widely disseminated slogans of the French Revolution; see Hesse)

“Every period and every party of the Revolution made some claim upon the heritage of Rousseau...reference to Rousseau [became] an obligatory part of political debate...”
- James Swenson, On Jean-Jacques Rousseau, p. 172

“After 1789, many French revolutionaries would take public and vociferous stands in favor of rights for Protestants, Jews, free blacks and even slaves, and at the same time actively oppose granting rights for women”
- Lynn Hunt, Inventing Human Rights, p. 67

“In the second half of the eighteenth century, six imperial systems straddled the Atlantic, each one sustained by a slave trade. The English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and Danish all...produced a range of plantation produce - sugar, rice, Indigo, coffee, tobacco, alcohol...It is extraordinary that consumers’ pursuit of this limited range of exotic goods, which collectively added so little to human welfare, could have generated for so long the horrors and misery of the Middle Passage and plantation slavery.”

Handout:
• Key Excerpts from Rousseau’s Philosophical Work
Preparatory Reading

  This website, a collaboration between the Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University and CUNY, contains **all you might need to understand and teach the French Revolution**. The “Explore” link takes you through entries such as “Social Causes of the French Revolution” to “The Monarchy Falls,” among others, offering links to images, important documents (such as the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*) along the way. There’s also a timeline and a useful glossary of terms. Excellent, accessible site.
- “Enlightenment and Human Rights” from *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. Brief and useful overview. Webpage links to the UN’s *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as well as France’s 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* and Olympe de Gouges’s critique of the *Declaration*.
  Fascinating account of how Rousseau’s works are turned into sound-byte length slogans by French revolutionaries in order to promote and legitimize the revolution after 1789.

Additional Resources

  Provides a very short history of the drafting of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” after the end of WWII, along with the full text of the declaration itself.
  Makes the claim that eighteenth century novels, such as Rousseau’s *Julie*, “taught their readers nothing less than a new psychology and in the process laid the foundations for a new social and political order” (Hunt 39). Hunt wrote *Inventing Human Rights* for a general audience, and it is a brisk, engaging and accessible read.
Open-access online resource of papers by a number of Rousseau scholars, many of them in English, on the topic of “Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the French Revolution.”


To commemorate Bastille Day (the day the revolutionaries stormed the Bastille and symbolically inaugurated the French Revolution), Oxford UP on July 14, 2014, made the following excerpts available online: “Why it Happened” from *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, by William Doyle; “Rights, Liberty and Equality” from *Revolution and the Republic* by Jeremy Jennings; “Marie Antoinette as Tribade in the Pornography of the French Revolution” from *Homosexuality in Modern France* by Jeremy Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan; and a chapter on the Terror, “Off with their Heads” from Dan Edelstein’s *The Terror of Natural Right*. All published by Oxford UP.


Briefly reflects on the legacy of the French Revolution for contemporary revolutions around the world today, such as the Arab Spring. By a leading historian of the French Revolution.

PBS. “Global Revolution.” *Marie Antoinette and the French Revolution*.

This webpage, from a PBS site and feature film about “Marie Antoinette and the French Revolution,“ provides an interactive timeline and global map that details the revolutions across the world that occurred from the 1770s on through the nineteenth century. It also features a good short summary and analysis of the similarities and differences between the American and French revolutions, and a short list of “Educator Resources.”

*The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database.*

Excellent site, product of a multi-year ongoing collaboration between researchers, historians, librarians and cartographers, it provides a historical overview of the transatlantic slave trade, maps of slave trading routes, estimates by country and year, links to teacher resources and to other websites and resources.

*The Louverture Project.*

This wiki project “collects and promotes knowledge, analysis and understanding of the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804.” Open content resource built and maintained by community of users. Provides access to lots of key documents pertaining to the Haitian Revolution.

Interview with French intellectual Louis-Georges Tin about the legacy of French slavery and colonialism.

- Declaration of Independence. July 4, 1776.

Images

  A collaboration of the Stanford University Libraries and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. 14,000 searchable images, prints, illustrations, medals, coins and other objects pertaining to the French Revolution. Excellent, illustrated timeline.
  Foundational image for the rising cult of the nation and the (male) republic.
  Focused on African-American life, this searchable database also contains several thousand images pertaining to the transatlantic slave trade and European colonization.

Films

  The recreations are a bit dubious, but it’s a solid effort on an important subject.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24U156LHXYM


- **PBS. Marie Antoinette and the French Revolution.** 2006. DVD only.

- **BBC. The French Revolution: Tearing Up History.** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78u2nOEZIiE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78u2nOEZIiE) Tells the story of the Revolution through the destruction of art, symbols and buildings.


- **Dir. Benoît Jaquot. Farewell, My Queen.** 2012. Bastille Day, as told from the perspective of Marie Antoinette’s servant.

- **Dir. Steve McQueen. 12 Years a Slave.** 2013. Slavery in 19thc US.

- **Dir. Steven Spielberg. Amistad.** 1997. Uneven portrait of the famous slave revolt. Too many heroic white people. See Rediker’s *Amistad*, an excellent history meant for a general audience by a leading historian of the slave trade, for comparison and historical contextualization.


**Discussion Questions and Suggestions for Close Reading**

**Confessions**

- Rousseau dates his first, formative experience of injustice to being falsely accused of having broken a comb and then beaten when he refused to confess to a crime he had not committed. Read about this incident with your students (p. 18-19), paying particular attention to the bottom of p. 19, where Rousseau talks of “feelings, originally excited on my own behalf, hav[ing] acquired their own integrity, and [...] become so detached from any self-interest that my heart begins to burn with indignation whenever I see or hear of any unjust action, whatever its object and wherever it occurs, quite as much as if I were myself to suffer its effects,” and so forth; he speaks of anger at tyrants, treacherous priests, and animals tormenting each other simply by virtue of being stronger. What is Rousseau describing here? What does it mean to experience an injustice visited upon someone else as if it were visited upon yourself? What value system does Rousseau seem to be advocating for here? What does “justice” in this brief description look like? Who are the victims and who the perpetrators, as Rousseau conceives of it here?

- On p. 65-67, while in Turin to be converted to Catholicism, Rousseau encounters
three other male would-be converts whom he variously identifies as Slavonians, Jews and Moors. What does his attitude toward them seem to be? What might account for it? What was the status of the latter two in eighteenth century Europe?

- Rousseau also has his first involuntary homosexual encounter with one of these fellow would-be converts. How does Rousseau seem to feel about the young man involved? Rousseau never identifies him by name, but how does he identify him? Do those identifications change? What is the significance of the young man variously being described as Moorish, Jewish, and a “false African?” Why these three apppellations and why the progression from Moor – to Jew – to not just “African,” but a “false African?” What value system and regard for those outside the pale of white Christian Europe is Rousseau revealing here?

*Note: Consider supplementing discussion by asking students to look up the word “Negro” in d’Alembert and Diderot’s Encyclopédie.

- On p. 552, what does Rousseau diagnose as characterizing the state of affairs in France? What does he predict will occur?

- What happens to Rousseau in Book XII and why? Where is Rousseau by the time he is writing the Confessions? What specifically were the authorities in France and Geneva afraid of?

Rousseau and Human Rights

- Ask students to pair up in groups of two or three and discuss what they think “human rights” are. They will need to define both “human” and “rights” in their own words. Discuss their conclusions with the rest of the class, paying particular attention to definitions and rights that come up repeatedly, and the ones that are only mentioned by one or two students (assuming the latter occurs).

- Read with your students the Declaration of Independence (US, 1776) the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (France, 1789) and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Geneva, 1948), Articles 1-27 (the “articles” are very short). What differences are there between these ostensibly very similar texts? What might those differences suggest about how each “declaration” is conceiving both of human beings’ “inalienable rights” and, significantly, of community – that is, not only of rights per se, but of how each person (you, me) has the right to be treated by others? Who drafted these documents, in each case? (Gender, class – in addition to nationality) Does that affect – should it affect – how we read them? Who is excluded from each text? Who is included?

- Now add excerpts from the Social Contract (1762) (See hand-out or excerpt available on GWT website). What definitions and ideas emerge in Rousseau that the drafters of the Rights of Man and Citizen clearly adopted? What does
Rousseau seem to advocate for? What does he not advocate for? How realistic does he ultimately seem to have felt that his proposed just and equal government was? Who does he include in his republic? Who does he exclude?

After 1789, editions of Rousseau’s works...flooded the nation...[there were] rapidly multiplying and increasingly modest editions of The Social Contract in small format – the original ‘little red book’ – and the many abridgements of his words and ideas into simple maxims for everyday life...

The opening phrase of book I, chapter I of The Social Contract, “Man is born free...” rapidly appeared as an epigrammatic devise on everything from revolutionary identity cards, processional banners, and public podia to paper money and festive altars...”

- Hesse, “Reading in extremis,” p. 148, 149

- Share with your students some of the details from Hesse, Swenson and Cranston about how Rousseau influenced the drafters of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen; include the eighteenth century “Twitter-feed” manner that the Social Contract was disseminated during the Revolution, perhaps after watching the BBC documentary on the destruction of art, statues and symbols during the Revolution, Tearing Up History. Why did the revolutionaries adopt Rousseau, among all the philosophers of the Enlightenment, as their prophet? What does the propaganda campaign for which they used his words tell us – about the Revolution, about Rousseau, about politics, symbols, national myth-making, about the power of language to persuade, inform, and create belonging?

- Do politics work similarly or differently today? Who or what today possesses the kind of authority and power that Rousseau’s words did in the eighteenth century?

[In revolutionary France], Rousseau’s name...enjoyed extraordinary prestige, a prestige even among those deputies in the Assemblée who did not think at all as he did. For example, as early as December 1790, his bust was installed in the meeting place of the Assemblée, with copies of Emile and Du Contrat social placed beneath it...similar busts were placed in provincial buildings...Outside the Assemblées, people made busts of Rousseau from the stones of the Bastille for private veneration. This is perhaps more significant...Rousseau, the self-styled plebeian, was a people’s philosopher. He was also the favorite plebeian philosopher of a certain type of nobleman, just as in real life, he had been the darling of the Luxembourgs, of Malesherbes, of Conti, of Mesdames de Bouffiers, de Verdelin, de Crequi, de Chenonceaux and the rest of them...

The Comte de Ségur in his Memoires speaks of Rousseau’s writings as prompting the action of those noblemen in the Assemblée who voted on the memorable night of 4 August, 1789 to renounce their own titles and “feudal rights:” The concept of liberty, however it was expressed, attracted us by its audacity...Men are happy to lower
themselves from their customary rank, as long as they feel they can easily resume it at will... - Maurice Cranston, “Vincennes to Varennes,” p. 16-17

Rousseau and Slavery
- The famous first lines of the Social Contract are “Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains.” For Rousseau, these chains were metaphorical. For the millions of Africans shipped across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century, they were decidedly literal. Rousseau speaks of metaphorical slavery all the time in his philosophical work. But why did he never extend his critique to slavery? [Note that there were persons in the eighteenth century who did advocate for the abolition of slavery, such as Olympe de Gouges and Rousseau’s friend the Abbé Raynal]. What might account for his and others’ obliviousness? How could Enlightenment thinkers, from Rousseau to Kant to Jefferson, advocate for liberty and self-determination, for both persons and nations, and not advocate for the abolition of slavery?

Such a question might seem like mere intellectual sophistry, but it actually gets at the heart of the question of who counts as human; who determines that humanity and what that humanity subsequently enjoins. For instance, on the continent of Africa itself, while any number of variables could determine who ended up getting sold into slavery (war and crime were common causes), West Africans appear rarely to have sold into slavery persons who were members of their own tribe. This did not extend to members of other tribes: there was no sense of an “Africa,” of blackness in and of itself as an identifier; “Yoruba” wasn’t one tribe: there were multiple different tribes that spoke variations of Yoruba and who came to identify themselves as a result of the slave trade as “Yoruba.” All of these identifiers, modes of belonging or personhood, were products of the slave trade. The point here is that just as the one slave trader would not have sold a member of his own tribe, so would a British slave-trader not have sold another white British person into slavery – but selling a black African was legal, lucrative and acceptable. What accounts for our inability or refusal to recognize another’s humanity?

And what had happened that by the 1790s, abolition had reached peak fervor in Britain and slavery would only a few years later be abolished in the country that had profited from the slave trade the most? (In France, slavery was first abolished in 1793, then reinstated by Napoleon.)

- How does humanity’s relentless penchant for dehumanizing others complicate any possible notion of “universal” human rights? Or is this precisely what makes human rights legislation so important?

Assignments and Project Ideas

A few teaching suggestions from the web
*Note: this is a very small sample: there are numerous suggestions and resources available on these topics online

  Links to “historical narratives,” both fiction and primary documents; lesson plans for different grade levels; tools for students to create their own virtual museum, etc.
  Notes for teaching students about contemporary slavery and human trafficking.
- “Teaching Social Inequality.” *Introduction to Sociology.*
  http://www.asanet.org/introtosociology/studentresources/Simulations/SimulaCoinToss59on032408.html
  This series of coin-toss activities, meant to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of resource distribution, can be used to teach any number of issues pertinent to this Unit: human rights issues such as who has access to clean water; social inequality in Old Regime France, etc.

Additional Suggestions

- Ask students to individually research a contemporary human rights issue, using sites such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, PEN Center America, etc., to get started, then return to class ready to present and argue for an issue that the entire class will adopt, research, strategize and organize a human rights campaign around for the duration of the semester. Issues can be local, national or international (all three have benefits and disadvantages, obviously, when it comes to what you’re hoping your students will learn). The class can then vote on which project they want to work with; assign roles such as research, fundraising, writing, organizer (etc), or map out a campaign in which everyone engages in some aspect of all of these (with your help, of course). Alternately, if you have a large class, students could select a geographic area or country.
- Supplement this activity by teaching students about the huge grassroots effort to abolish the slave trade that took place in the late eighteenth century in Europe, an effort the writer Adam Hochschild has called “the first human rights campaign
in history.” His *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves*, is a very good, lively account of British abolition.

**Eighteenth Century Grassroots Movements**

In 1787–1788, during the heady period between the American and French Revolutions, a huge grassroots movement against the slave trade burst into life in Britain, startling abolitionists and slave traders alike. There was a solidarity across racial lines that often seems elusive in our own time. Some British radicals later began to point out similarities between the plight of slaves and British factory workers, some of whom marched under banners calling for ending slavery “both at home and abroad.” Antislavery fervor spread quickly in Ireland, where people felt they, too, knew something about oppression by the English. In 1792, more Britons signed petitions to Parliament against the slave trade than were eligible to vote. In the same year, more than 300,000 people refused to buy West Indian sugar. This was the largest consumer boycott the world had yet seen, and for tens of thousands of women—none of whom could vote—the occasion for their first political act.

The movement was led by an extremely imaginative, hard-working committee of activists, most of them Quakers, who pioneered tactics that are still used by human rights groups today. The committee’s moving spirit and traveling organizer, Thomas Clarkson, was for much of his life a staunch radical who kept in his living room a stone he had proudly removed from the ruins of the Bastille a few weeks after its fall.


During the French Revolution of 1789, people of color from Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe, and Martinique living in France organized themselves into the Société des citoyens de couleur (Society of Colored Citizens), headed by mulatto Julien Raimond…It worked closely with the Société des amis des noirs (Society of the Friends of the Blacks), which asked for equal rights for free people of color, the immediate abolition of the slave trade, and a gradual abolition of slavery….

The Légion franche de cavalerie des Américains et du Midi (Free Cavalry Legion of the Americans and the South) was led by Joseph Bologne de Saint-George. Born in Guadeloupe in 1739, he was the son of an enslaved Senegalese woman and a French nobleman…On May 17, 1793, the Legion sent an “Address to the National Convention and to all the patriotic clubs and societies on behalf of the Negroes held in slavery in the French colonies of America.” It was written in the name of “one million slaves” and asked for the immediate abolition of slavery. A delegation of black men and women was received by the Convention in Paris on June 4. Among them was Jeanne Odo a woman born in Saint-Domingue, who claimed to be 114. The delegation carried a new flag: a black man on the blue stripe, a white man on the white stripe, and a mulatto on the red stripe, with the slogan “Our union will be our strength.” The flag symbolized the end of the colonial order, as well as general freedom and equality.
Following the black citizens’ campaign, the new constitution enacted on June 24, 1793, specified that no one could be sold.

- Sylviane A. Diouf, “Black Abolitionists in France,” *The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Schomburg Center

• Script, dramatize and stage your own Bastille Day in class. Learn about what led to this seminal event in the history of the Revolution first; then transfer it to the contemporary United States. The Bastille was a popular symbol of oppression and state stagnation. Is there anything similar in your town or community? What would “storming the Bastille” look like today? Occupy Wall Street? Occupy the Capitol?

• Robespierre, remembered as one of the architects of the Terror, carried his pocket Rousseau with him always; Marie Antoinette visited Rousseau’s grave at Ermenonville. Assign students the task of researching both of these historical figures and then imagine a conversation about Rousseau taking place between them. What about Rousseau’s work and person appealed to both these radically different historical figures? Students could write the conversation as a play, as a lengthy interview; Rousseau himself could make a deus ex machina appearance.

• Can revolution produce lasting change? Or is the hope for radical change unleashed by revolutionary forces merely succeeded by a period of violence and repressive terror, and finally a return to the old regime, albeit perhaps wearing a new face and a different name? (Mubarak succeeded by General el-Sisi, for instance; the Russian Tsar by Stalin). Assign students the task of researching the progression and result of the French and Haitian Revolutions, and write an analytic research essay comparing these with a contemporary event of similar magnitude, such as the so-called “Arab Spring” in Tunisia and Egypt a few years ago. What creates societal change? Is freedom and equality possible in countries – like ancien regime France, like Egypt – so long accustomed to veritable dictatorship, stark inequality and an oppressive status quo?

• Rewrite the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* to encompass animals and/or other non-humans, the environment, the ecosystem. What would such a declaration look like? Who counts? What are the rights of the non-human?