

PROJECT 4

Interpreting the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

The premier political manifesto of the French Revolution was the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen**. Written in 1789, the Declaration still holds the force of law in France today.

Read through the declaration on pages 98–99 of the appendix to answer these questions:

1. In what way is the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen “Enlightened”?
2. Which passage endorses the Enlightened principle of “equality”? How is “equality” consistent with the other modern humanist ideals of freedom, reason, and individuality?
3. It is plain to see that people are not equal in the sense that all people have the same abilities, skills, shapes, sizes, backgrounds, and so on. What, then, do the American humanists mean when they claim that “all men are created equal”?

(continued)

7. DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND OF THE CITIZEN

Prepared by Gerald Murphy. Distributed by the Cybercasting Services Division of the National Public Telecomputing Network (NPTN).

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The following French declaration was one of the great political works of the French Revolution, which threw off the rule of kings (called the Old Regime or the ancien régime) and replaced it with a nation of citizens. The statement is one of the milestones in the history of humanism and stands today as a model for democratic societies.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen Approved by the National Assembly of France, August 26, 1789

The representatives of the French people, organized as a National Assembly, believing that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments, have determined to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man, in order that this declaration, being constantly before all the members of the Social body, shall remind them continually of their rights and duties; in order that the acts of the legislative power, as well as those of the executive power, may be compared at any moment with the objects and purposes of all political institutions and may thus be more respected, and, lastly, in order that the grievances of the citizens, based hereafter upon simple and incontestable principles, shall tend to the maintenance of the constitution and redound to the happiness of all.

Therefore the National Assembly recognizes and proclaims, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and of the citizen:

Articles:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.
2. The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
3. The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.
4. Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law.
5. Law can only prohibit such actions as are hurtful to society. Nothing may be prevented which is not forbidden by law, and no one may be forced to do anything not provided for by law.

6. Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally eligible to all dignities and to all public positions and occupations, according to their abilities, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents.
7. No person shall be accused, arrested, or imprisoned except in the cases and according to the forms prescribed by law. Any one soliciting, transmitting, executing, or causing to be executed, any arbitrary order, shall be punished. But any citizen summoned or arrested in virtue of the law shall submit without delay, as resistance constitutes an offense.
8. The law shall provide for such punishments only as are strictly and obviously necessary, and no one shall suffer punishment except it be legally inflicted in virtue of a law passed and promulgated before the commission of the offense.
9. As all persons are held innocent until they shall have been declared guilty, if arrest shall be deemed indispensable, all harshness not essential to the securing of the prisoner's person shall be severely repressed by law.
10. No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law.
11. The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.
12. The security of the rights of man and of the citizen requires public military forces. These forces are, therefore, established for the good of all and not for the personal advantage of those to whom they shall be intrusted.
13. A common contribution is essential for the maintenance of the public forces and for the cost of administration. This should be equitably distributed among all the citizens in proportion to their means.
14. All the citizens have a right to decide, either personally or by their representatives, as to the necessity of the public contribution; to grant this freely; to know to what uses it is put; and to fix the proportion, the mode of assessment and of collection and the duration of the taxes.
15. Society has the right to require of every public agent an account of his administration.
16. A society in which the observance of the law is not assured, nor the separation of powers defined, has no constitution at all.
17. Since property is an inviolable and sacred right, no one shall be deprived thereof except where public necessity, legally determined, shall clearly demand it, and then only on condition that the owner shall have been previously and equitably indemnified.

PROJECT 5

American Humanism

1. What can you identify (historical or present) in the United States that demonstrates continuity with humanist values? Explain how each item you name endorses humanist thinking.

Institutions:

Values:

Laws:

People (individuals):

2. What elements seem to break with humanist values? Explain how each item you name breaks with humanist thinking.

Laws or policies:

Institutions:

Popular culture:

People (individuals):

THE UNITED STATES IN WORLD HISTORY: HUMANISM

Historians look for institutions, traditions, rituals, laws, vocabulary, and so on, that perpetuate or promote patterns and establish continuum in culture and society. For example, institutions of education, military, law, and advertising have promoted concepts of nationalism and patriotism in the United States of the twentieth century, but how have religious institutions participated in encouraging or discouraging national or patriotic ideals?

Historians also look for exceptions in history, such as objectors, innovators, revolutions, or changes. What might cause a tradition to endure in one society but to disappear in another? These are often difficult questions and can draw in many factors.

The United States presents some interesting problems in world history. The United States entered the world scene as an independent state founded on the humanist principles of the Enlightenment: freedom, individual citizenship, and equality. Yet the nation was built on economic systems of slavery and the oppression of native people. The United States has fought international wars against oppressive regimes and promoted democracy throughout the twentieth century, yet segregated its own population. As a result, the United States stands as a symbol of freedom and progress to some around the world, but to others it appears antihumanist. Such complexity and paradox is the type of problem historians seek to understand.

The tradition of humanism has dominated political and social understanding in European societies for more than two hundred years, but the record is not absolute. Within and among humanist societies, there are differing interpretations of freedom, the individual, and the use of reason. Censorship is greater in one European society than in another, freedom of speech is stronger in some European societies than in the United States, and one society interprets the role of women differently than another. Furthermore, within single national traditions there have been different interpretations of humanism from one era to the next. Germany in the twenty-first century has one of the world's most egalitarian societies and has been a major contributor to every phase of humanism since the sixteenth century. Yet in the 1930s in Germany, fascist parties that opposed democracy, freedom, and the use of reason abolished the rule of law and came to power with the support of a large section of the German electorate, though not a majority. Clearly the historical record in Germany has been mixed. The pattern has been equally uneven in other national examples. Yet overall, more than any other single feature, European and American societies share the pursuit of humanist ideals.

In Chinese civilizations, on the other hand, humanist ideals have not prevailed. If there is a dominant set of cultural and political traditions around which to define Chinese civilizations, it would be the teachings of Confucius and the Tao. These two principles have worked to define the foundations of Chinese traditions far longer than the traditions of humanism have defined "the West," and Confucian influence covers much of the rest of Asia as well. Chinese society has applied the two guiding principles continuously, if somewhat unevenly, for more than twenty-five centuries. As with the West, Confucian and Taoist traditions have been interpreted differently from century to century but overall have survived and are still central to Chinese thinking today.

Confucianism grew out of teachings of Confucius, while the Taoist tradition emerged over time from a collection of writings attributed to the (probably legendary) Lao-tzu. The two schools are complementary but deal with different aspects of life and society. The Tao (or Dao) refers to a path leading to spiritual harmony with all things related as male and female, dark and light, yin and yang. Balancing these elements leads to a mystical sense of internal harmony of the person with the universe. Since the Tao seeks to balance all things, the teaching might include political teaching as well as spiritual, but according to the Tao, true harmony cannot be gained by building a better society. Harmony is attained internally when one understands and accepts the harmony of a universal, divine order. In Tao, human beings do not create or establish paths to harmony; it is instead for people to accept their proper positions in "the natural state" of things. It is for people to listen and understand. The principal text of Tao teaching is the Tao Te Ching.

Confucian teaching has been interpreted and reinterpreted for more than two thousand years but has always been based on the teachings of Confucius,

a Chinese civil servant who lived five hundred years before Christ. The principal texts of the Confucian tradition are the Analects of Confucius, the Doctrine of the Mean, and the Mandate of Heaven. Confucius taught that the ancient ancestors held a more pure understanding of correct behavior that should always correspond to the underlying nature of the universe. But unlike Taoism, Confucianism deals with external behavior more than with personal, internal development.

Confucianism maintains that every person, like every creature in the universe, has a specific nature that brings it into accord with a universal order. If one deviates from one's nature, he deviates from the inherent truth that defines him, and order begins to collapse. Every person carries therefore a responsibility, not each according to his own choice, but according to his nature. In Confucian tradition, a person does not defy his fate, as with the Greeks. On the contrary, each person embraces his or her fate to make the most of it.

Confucian teaching has direct application in the social and political spheres; it is not overtly religious and addresses the external person more than the internal person. It is less "religious" than the writings of the Tao. Confucianism admonishes rulers to behave well and for superiors to treat subordinates fairly. Confucianism seeks harmony, as does Taoism, only the former seeks external harmony first, while the latter seeks internal harmony. But harmony brings greater harmony in both teachings, and the path to a harmonious society, government, and world begins with individual responsibility or duty to follow the right path.

The contrast between Confucianism and humanism should be apparent. Whereas the former directs an individual to comply with a natural order of things, the latter encourages the individual to define the order and his place within it. There is little encouragement of the "heroic" individual in Confucian teaching, and there is little promotion of a "natural harmony" in humanism, except to say that humans are born free. While there might be a concept of free will in Confucianism, individuals are not free to forge their own paths. The path is laid out; it is up to the individual to accept it or not.