15.3: "Equality"

Of the three elements of the Revolutionary motto, “equality” was in some ways the most fraught with implications. All of the members of the National Assembly were men. Almost all were Catholic - a few were Protestants, but none were Jews. All were white as well, despite the existence of a large population of free blacks and mixed-race inhabitants of the French colonies (especially in the Caribbean). The initial claim that all citizens ought to be equal before the law seemed straightforward enough until the Assembly had to decide if that equality extended to those besides the people who had held a monopoly on political representation of any kind in most of French history: property-owning male Catholics. The eminent historian of France, Lynn Hunt, in her *The Invention of Human Rights*, traces some of the ways in which the promise of “equality” brought about changes that the members of the Assembly had never anticipated early on - some of her arguments are presented below.

While some of the early Revolutionaries had spoken in favor of the extension of rights to Protestants before the Revolution, fewer had spoken on behalf of France’s Jewish minority. Despite misgivings from Catholic conservatives in the Assembly, Protestants saw their rights recognized by the end of 1789 thanks in part to the fact that Protestants already exercised political rights in parts of southern France. In turn, while the idea of legal equality for Jews was practically unthinkable before the Revolution, the logic of equality seemed to acquire its own momentum over the course of 1789 - 1791, with French Jews winning their rights as French citizens in September of 1791.

For both Protestants and Jews, the members of the Assembly concluded that religious faith was essentially a private matter that did not directly impact one’s ability to exercise political rights. Having already broken with the Catholic church - and seized much of its property - the Assembly now created a momentus precedent for religious tolerance. Religion was now officially stripped of its political valence for the first time in European history. This was more than a “separation of church and state”: it suggested that religious belief was in fact irrelevant to political loyalty and public conduct. Clearly, much had changed in the centuries since the Protestant Reformation unleashed its firestorm of controversy and bloodshed.
In the case of the blacks and mixed-race peoples of the French colonies, however, the Assembly at first showed little interest in extending any form of political rights. Several members of the Assembly argued that slavery should be abolished, but they were in the minority. France’s Caribbean colonies, above all its sugar-producing plantation colony of St. Domingue (present-day Haiti), produced enormous wealth for the French state and for numerous slave-based plantation owners and their French business partners. Thus, even those in favor of major reforms in France itself often balked at the idea of meddling with the wealth of the slave economies of the Caribbean. Once again, however, the logic of equality worked inexorably to upset centuries-old political hierarchies. Free blacks and mixed-race inhabitants of the colonies, once learning of the events in France, swiftly petitioned to have their own rights recognized. Much more alarmingly to the members of the Assembly, the slaves of St. Domingue (who comprised approximately 90% of its population) also learned of the Revolution and of its egalitarian promise.

The Assembly took steps to recognize the rights of free people of color only slowly at first. In the summer of 1791, however, a slave uprising in St. Domingue forced the issue. The Assembly desperately scrambled to maintain control of the situation, hoping in part to win over the free people of color in the colony to fight alongside white plantation owners to maintain control. Over the course of the following years, the rebellion in St. Domingue saw French authority destroyed, plantations overrun, and hundreds of thousands of slaves seizing their freedom. Having already lost control, the Assembly finally voted to abolish slavery entirely in February of 1794. Thus, unlike the cases of Protestant and Jewish enfranchisement, racial equality was only “granted” by the Assembly because it could not be maintained by force.

In the rhetoric of the Assembly, missing from the emancipatory logic entirely however, were women. There were no debates on the floor of the Assembly having to do with women’s rights, in stark contrast to the lengthy arguments over religious minorities and the black inhabitants of the colonies. French men, radicals very much included, simply took it for granted that women were incapable of exercising political independence. Some women both in France and abroad, however, forcefully drove home the implication of the Revolution’s promise of “equality,” with the playwright Olympe de Gouges issuing a Declaration of the Rights of Woman in 1791 in parallel to the Assembly’s 1789 Rights of Man and Citizen. In England, the writer Mary Wollstonecraft wrote one of the founding texts of modern feminism, Vindication of the Rights of Woman, in 1792, that made a straightforward claim: the liberation of women would play a key role in the
disintegration of unwarranted social and political hierarchy for all.

Neither work, however, inspired sympathy among the vast majority of the male population of France (or Britain), and as the Revolution grew more radical (see below), the members of the Assembly grew ever-more hostile to the demand for rights for women. De Gouges was eventually executed on orders from the Assembly as a “counter-Revolutionary,” and the political clubs of women that had sprung up since 1789 were shut down. It would take the better part of a century for women to force the issue and begin the long, arduous process of seizing political rights.