

Joachim Heinrich Campe, “Letters from Paris, 1789” (1790)

Abstract

Joachim Heinrich Campe (1746–1818), a prominent and peripatetic German writer and pedagogue, witnessed the opening stages of the French Revolution, which he celebrates here for its fulfillment of an Enlightenment program of democratic liberalism. He emphasizes the dignity of the Revolution and the role of the progressive intelligentsia in its leadership. In 1792, the French government bestowed honorary citizenship on Campe, together with Friedrich Schiller and others. Campe’s views, as here expressed, were widely shared among educated Germans.

Source

Paris, August 9, 1789

The good fortune, my dear T., to be in France right now, namely in the capital of this country, the birthplace and cradle of newborn French liberty, right now, when the eyes of all the world are directed, full of admiration and amazement, at the center of the biggest and strangest world events at this time; right now, when people have awoken from the stifling state of an existence frittered away in long and shameful bondage, into a life that even the Brutuses and the Catos themselves would not refuse to experience; right now, when all the spirits of this people, down to the lowest orders, have torn the limitations of their formerly small and miserable existence like spider webs, and have raised themselves from that hour to a height of feelings and ideas to which the squinting eye of the foreigner can barely accompany them – this good fortune I count thankfully among the manifold undeserved favors by which providence has thought fit to distinguish my unimportant life in nearly every of its periods. One feels here, even as a mere observer, in all one’s feelings, in all one’s powers and capacities – I know not how – simultaneously elevated, simultaneously ennobled, and if I do not return to you noticeably better, with a noticeable increase in communal spirit, courage, power, and drive for every act that calls for self-forgetfulness and sacrifices, the school in which I now find myself is not to blame.

The mere sight of an enormous mass of people blended together from people of every estate, of every age and both sexes, which seems animated by a common patriotic joy, as though by common sentiments of friendship, brotherhood, and sisterhood, has something humanly great and heart-lifting about it. And if one now immerses oneself fully in the softly undulating waves of this human ocean at the public gathering places of this city, the Tuileries, the Palais Royal, the boulevards, and so on, as everyone, even the most foreign foreigner can do here, without inhibition and without any concerns, and now examines up close this intermixing and melting together of all estates, especially of the military and civil estate, into a single, large family of citizens; if one sees how now the most common citizen and the man identified by ribbon and star, wherever both appear as human beings and not in their official capacities, walk as complete equals, without betraying insolence on the one side, insulting pride on the other; if one sees, how the *soldier of the fatherland* – this is the title of honor that is now given to the French guard who has joined the citizens – and the armed citizen compete with each other in magnanimity and gratitude, as well as their shared effort at achieving public quiet and order, not through bayonets, but through entreaties and friendly persuasion; if one sees how this persuasion and those entreaties are entirely sufficient to keep a mixed band of a hundred thousand effusive people within the bounds of order and propriety; if one sees how even the youngest boys, seized by their fathers’ high-minded civic spirit and enthusiasm for liberty, armed in their fashion and equipped with banners and drums, roam the

streets and seem to take part in maintaining peace and quiet; if one sees how at a time when all spirits are in seething ferment, when nearly complete anarchy prevails throughout the realm, and the great and terrible machine of the former Paris police, made up of several thousand gears, has been completely smashed, and yet everywhere, even at the greatest public gathering, everything comes off so calmly, so peacefully, so decorously and decently that one can stand there for hours and keep watching with a steady eye the swarming crowd of people animated by spirited emotions, without so much as noticing a single indecent or illegal action, without so much as once hearing an insulting, scolding, or quarrelsome word; if, I say, one sees all of this, which must seem exaggerated and unbelievable to anyone not present, if one sees it so often that in the end one can no longer think of it as an illusion, a dream, one would have to be, it seems to me, among all human blockheads the dullest and most unfeeling, if one did not often feel moved to the point of tears of joy by this awakening of humanity to a more beautiful, new, and noble life. What a spectacle who still has uncorrupted feelings for human ennoblement and human happiness, and a warm, empathic heart for everything that concerns the advancement of the great family of Adam! What an example for all the rest of Europe and for the human in all parts of the world deprived of their human rights and of the divine image, that is, of human dignity and autonomy! Truly, the worst despot, if he were here to be an eyewitness to all of this, and if his heart, shriveled and dried up by selfish and ambitious desires – he would, I believe, be seized by an irresistible power of sympathy, would feel inclined to voluntarily renounce his *unlawful* despotic rule, for where was there ever a *lawful* one, so as to enjoy once more the great sight offered by a people that has become free and thereby simultaneously been morally reborn, ennobled, and rendered happy, and this time with the addition of the paternal joy that would necessarily come with the awareness of being the author of this.

You say I am falling into raptures? Well then, my dear friend; I am happy that I can still warm to *such* an occasion, and feel sorry for the person who is no longer capable of that. You yourself, as I know you, would compete with me in rapture if you were here.

Farewell to Paris

Paris, August 26, 1789

I am keeping my word to you, dear St.! This last nocturnal hour that I am spending awake in Paris – where I have nearly forgotten how to sleep – shall be yours.

The longer I am here, the more attentively I examine the buds, the flowers, and the fruits of the young French liberty, and the longer I observe the labor pangs that have begun here of the human spirit impregnated by practical philosophy, and which promise to give birth to wise state constitutions, general enlightenment, and the happiness of peoples, the deeper and firmer becomes my conviction that this French revolution is the greatest and most general benefit that Providence has bestowed upon humankind since Luther's reformation of the faith, and that the entire white, black, brown, and yellow human race around the globe should therefore intone a solemn "Lord God, We Praise Thee." All former revolutions emerged in times and countries where the human mind had not yet attained sufficient maturity to create a constitution based on the purest principles of reason, law, and justice; all other nations that have cast off this yoke of slavery, saw themselves from the moment they had taken this bold step embroiled in protracted and bloody wars, under which their first, provisional institutions, with the errors of haste that are inevitable in such cases, were already given a certain solidity, which could not be readily overturned again, even with better understanding. Here, then, we have for the first time a revolution that was, from every perspective, begun under more favorable omens, which also naturally promises a constitution like none other that has ever existed, a constitution that encompasses all the perfections of the English and exclude all the shortcomings and imperfections of the same. Here is a people as enlightened, as noble, and as forbearing as there has ever been; a king as gentle, pliable, and devoid of ambition as there has ever been; an assembly of deputies of the nation composed of twelve hundred men, at least the great part of which is made up of very clear-thinking, clever, strong, and

courageous patriots, and what is the best of all, these three main figures in the great, interesting painting – people, king, National Assembly – embrace in the most lovely harmony and walk toward the lofty goal hand in hand. What is more: here there are who knows how many thousands of thinking and well-informed citizens, who through their debates in the Palais Royal, and countless attentive writers, who through leaflets, small tractates, and works, come to the aid of the deliberations of the people’s representatives, who guide their reflections, warn them against potential mistakes, and imbue them with as much enthusiasm for the good as caution and carefulness to avoid the bad. Here for the first time is a national assembly which, even though half of its members are nobles and priests, in its majority despises and curses the horror of hierarchy and of aristocratic despotism, from which mankind has suffered even more since time immemorial than from monarchic despotism and seems determined to get rid of it root and branch. Here everything is negotiated, contested, settled *in public* – what a wall of protection against hasty actions and self-interested intentions. Here, finally, come together such incredibly fortunate circumstances in all of Europe that they will hopefully accomplish the completion and establishment of the new constitution sooner than any important power should have the idea or ability to place obstacles in their way. What a happy confluence of circumstances, which have never coincided to this degree as long as the world has existed! And all the things one can hope, expect, and predict as inevitable from it! My heart warms and expands at the sight of this wonderful prospect. We will see for the first time a large realm in which the property of everyone is sacred, the personhood of everyone inviolate, thoughts free from customs, faith unstamped, the expression of that person in word, text, and actions completely free and no longer subject to the decision of any human judge; a realm in which there no longer are privileged, born oppressors of the people, no aristocracy other than that of talent and virtue, no hierarchy and despotism, where, instead, all are equal, all capable of holding all offices for which their accomplishments qualify them, and only knowledge, skills, and virtues offer an advantage; a realm in which law and justice are administered for all equally *and without any status of the person, and free of charge*, and where everyone, even the poorest peasant, will become the coregent and co-legislator of his fatherland. Who can remain with this delightful prospect, which is now truly more than mere hope, without his heart becoming too small for all the sweet human feelings that take hold of him in the process and want to leap from his chest! And now for the consequences that all of this will have for Europe, for the world! As I ponder them, I want to shout with joy, and like Asmus break a budding twig of liberty, and with it – as though with a staff – stagger toward the approaching spring of the general welfare of the peoples.

Source: Joachim Heinrich Campe, *Briefe aus Paris*. Braunschweig: in der Schulbuchhandlung, 1790. Reprint edited by Helmut König. Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1961, pp. 134–39, 274–77; reprinted in Jost Hermand, ed., *Von deutscher Republik 1775-1795. Texte radikaler Demokraten*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1968, pp. 101–04, 118–21.

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