



Sister Revolutions: French Lightning, American Light

Susan Dunn

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What the two great modern revolutions can teach us about democracy today.

In 1790, the American diplomat and politician Gouverneur Morris compared the French and American Revolutions, saying that the French "have taken Genius instead of Reason for their guide, adopted Experiment instead of Experience, and wander in the Dark because they prefer Lightning to Light." Although both revolutions professed similar Enlightenment ideals of freedom, equality, and justice, there were dramatic differences. The Americans were content to preserve many aspects of their English heritage; the French sought a complete break with a thousand years of history. The Americans accepted nonviolent political conflict; the French valued unity above all. The Americans emphasized individual rights, while the French stressed public order and cohesion.

Why did the two revolutions follow such different trajectories? What influence have the two different visions of democracy had on modern history? And what lessons do they offer us about democracy today? In a lucid narrative style, with particular emphasis on lively portraits of the major actors, Susan Dunn traces the legacies of the two great revolutions through modern history and up to the revolutionary movements of our own time. Her combination of history and political analysis will appeal to all who take an interest in the way democratic nations are governed.

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