

This paper revolves around three main concepts: nationalism, the life of Jacques Louis David, and the historiography of the French Revolution. According to Anthony D. Smith, the author of *Nationalism*, the term “nationalism” is defined as: “An ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential nation.”¹ During the French Revolution the revolutionaries used the ideals of liberty, brotherhood, and equality to perpetuate Smith’s definition of nationalism. In order to further understand the nation’s conscience of the time I apply the revolutionary’s principals to David, a bourgeois painter and political activist during the French Revolution, since much of his artistic works and political actions between 1784 and 1793 focused on these concepts. The ideal of equality will represent social conflict between David and the Royal *Académie*, liberty will signify David’s political stance, and brotherhood will analyze unity and the type of atmosphere fostered by the subsequent co-operation or lack thereof. Therefore, my interpretation takes into account other factors like society, politics, and the economy in order to accurately explain the significance of each principal in regards to David’s life. The overall purpose of this case study is to shine more light on the historiographical debate amongst scholars of the French Revolution. I will do so by modifying points made by select authors who write about the French Revolution in order to conclude that this debate limits historians’ understanding of nationalism during this time.

For years the dominant interpretation of the French Revolution was the Marxist theory. Leading Marxist historians studied different groups of the French population. For instance, George Lefebvre focused a portion of his work on the rural peasants and the consequences the

¹ Anthony D. Smith, “Concepts,” in *Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 9.

“fear” they felt had on the revolution.² In contrast, Albert Soboul devoted his time to the importance of the sans culottes’ role in the revolution.³ Even though Marxist scholars focused on different members of society, their underlying argument was that the bourgeoisie led the French Revolution. Furthermore, these historians assert that their uprising could be explained through social and economic factors. According to them, just before the revolution the expanding capitalist economy provided the bourgeoisie increasing economic power. Such monetary gains caused a conflict between the nobles and the bourgeoisie because the bourgeoisie felt they should have political power equal to the nobles. As such, they revolted and won the struggle.⁴ However, according to Marxist scholar Henry Heller, “important political and ideological changes...in the world after 1968” led some historians like Alfred Cobban, Betty Behrens, and George V. Taylor to question the merits of the classical theory.⁵ Even with these doubts the study of the revolution was still dominated by the Marxist theory.

Marxist theory faded when François Furet wrote books like *La Révolution Française* and *Penser la Révolution Française*, which viewed the revolution as an ideological and cultural event instead of an economic and social phenomenon. He felt that the Marxist interpretation was merely a “narrative” that “re-told” the history of the revolution.⁶ He felt that because of this tendency to reiterate events, Marxists failed to truly analyze the revolution. According to Furet’s alternate examination of the revolution, the first revolution in 1789 was a necessary tool for extremists who used the revolution to promote their egalitarian causes. The extremists

² Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789*, trans. Joan White (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 210-211.

³ Albert Soboul, *The Parisian Sans-Culottes and the French Revolution 1793-94*, trans. Gwyne Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 249.

⁴ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 82.

⁵ Henry Heller, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France 1789-1815* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 13.

⁶ Furet, 167.

felt justified in using whatever means were needed to achieve their cause, which led to the “excess” seen during the anti-democratic Reign of Terror.⁷ The new interpretation was rejected at first. In fact an author of the Marxist school of thought, Albert Soboul, vehemently denounced Furet’s thesis. Despite such objections other scholars found the new theory to be of value.⁸

Since Furet’s books were published, many other authors have published literature that opposes the Marxist theory. Currently, there is no uniform theory behind the revisionist approach.⁹ Furet’s work, which only looked at culture and ideology, is considered to be a more radical revisionist approach. There are others who identify with this method. For instance, Mona Ozouf paid no attention to any analysis involving social or economic factors. Authors like her believed that the only factors that mattered were cultural factors to which Marxists did not pay enough attention. Since a revolution could not have occurred without a political culture, radical revisionists like Ozouf, view Marxist theories as “irrelevant” to the discussion of the French Revolution.¹⁰ Another radical revisionist, Sarah Maze, based her work on “cultural constructionism.” According to her the bourgeoisie did not exist because the group never recognized themselves as such a group. For Maze “class is a product of language,” and none of the language used by the bourgeoisie signified that they belonged to a bourgeois class. Such a belief led Maze to state that a bourgeois revolution was “impossible.”¹¹ Overall, these two

⁷ Heller, 16.

⁸ Joseph I. Shulim, “Marxist Historiography & The French Revolution,” *Literature of Liberty* 5, no 3 (1982):112, https://mailattachment.googleusercontent.com/attachment?ui=2&ik=5560bbf199&view=att&th=132880f7cd8d52a9&attid=0.1&disp=inline&safe=1&zw&saduie=AG9B_P937aaBOyaPvJiSttM8_h8q&sadet=1317959035753&sads=nXWOCVMJQnLLcbD7uqeK0HCzl0c&sadssc=1 (accessed September 20, 2011).

⁹ Heller, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 17-18.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 18-19.

authors exemplify how radical revisionists have no common ground with Marxist scholars.

In contrast, moderate revisionists acknowledge social and economic factors so they can cast doubt on the Marxist theory. For instance, Simon Schama used economic evidence to show that there was no sudden change in production that could have led to an uprising by the bourgeois class like the Marxist scholars believed. Furthermore, he argued that the bourgeoisie did not have to revolt for better property rights and laws, since there were few barriers between the upper parts of the third estate and the nobles.¹² Another moderate revisionist, William Doyle, furthers Schama's last point through his analysis of class conscience. According to Doyle, there was a lack of "class consciousness" among the bourgeois because they were trying too hard to be part of the second estate. This led the bourgeoisie to largely ignore their own class in favor of another.¹³ Similar points were advanced by other moderate revisionists such as Cobban, Behrend, and Taylor. This social debate is the most researched among the moderate revisionists.¹⁴

As of 2006 a Marxist historian, Henry Heller, tried to defend the Marxist theory against the upwelling of revisionist work. The failure of revisionist scholars to clarify the objections they raised in regards to Marxism has led to some revisionist authors contradicting one another. In Heller's eyes such instances prove that revisionist historians have yet to provide a strong alternative to the Marxist theory. Their failures lead to Heller's strong belief that Marxist historians should make efforts to "reassert the notion of the French Revolution as a bourgeois

¹² Shulim, 112-13.

¹³ Heller, 14.

¹⁴ Ibid.

revolution.”¹⁵ Heller’s book, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France 1789-1815*, does this largely by looking at the revolution through an economic scope. He finds this perspective to be of importance because many revisionists ignore economic factors in their theories.¹⁶ This focus used the most up to date economic research to clarify the economy of the time as a growing capitalist market. In this environment the bourgeoisie’s gains were sufficient to overthrow the ancient régime.¹⁷ Once overthrown, the revolution stayed democratic during the Reign of Terror. Such democracy was viable in Jacobin policies that brought about a more capitalist and equalitarian economy that directly served the interest of the bourgeoisie.¹⁸ Heller’s last point is that the restoration of political policies became more aligned with the start of the revolution for economic benefit once again because the policies of the terror and monarchy were a threat to the bourgeois class.¹⁹

My paper’s close examination of Jacques Louis David, takes into account that the debate between Marxist and revisionist historians remains alive today. The first section of this paper will be dedicated to whether or not David was a “pre-revolutionary” painter before 1789. Simply put, this debate focuses on whether a painter’s art contained a meaningful reflection on the revolutionary ideas before the revolution started.²⁰ A consideration of both sides of this argument demonstrates that David’s art was a “pre-revolutionary” by 1787. An examination of the relationship to *The Death of Socrates* between David, Jean-Francois Pierre Peyron (David’s rival), and Jefferson provides evidence that David and his audience were truly connected to this

¹⁵ Heller, 14.

¹⁶ Ibid, 23.

¹⁷ Ibid, 6-8.

¹⁸ Ibid, 91-2.

¹⁹ Ibid, 111.

²⁰ Ibid, 58.

art work specifically for the ideals. Therefore, the attraction of these ideals by segments of the bourgeois class indicates that there were signs of uniform thought prior to 1789. While David's early art does not point to a class conscience as revisionists like Doyle argued, his art did show there was still some sort of a conscience among the bourgeoisie before the revolution.

Identifying David as a "pre-revolutionary" painter then makes it possible to analyze how and why David agreed with the prominent ideals of the revolution. Therefore, the second part of this paper will show that David's support of the revolution was a class conflict as seen between him and the administration of the Royal *Académie*, an institution that educated, monitored, and regulated artist working for the royal court. However, this conflict was not one rooted in capitalist demands as Heller believed. Instead the dispute occurred because David perceived that he was better than what the *Académie* thought of him.²¹ Yet, David supported the revolution as a moderate rather than an extremist. Such a stance opposes how Furet categorized the original proponents of the revolution.²² An examination of brotherhood conveyed that David viewed the early followers of the revolution as strongly united against those who treated them poorly. Such unity then led to a period of peace and democracy between the revolutionaries. Yet, a further analysis of brotherhood within David's art showed that his definition of brotherhood changed to become more exclusive than the first revolution in 1792. A shift in power, which David supported, turned the revolution into a more anti-democratic totalitarian rule.²³ This is contrary to Heller's analysis and more in line with Furet's assertion. Just pointing out this break in David's concept of brotherhood does not explain why

²¹Roberts, 51-56.

²²Michael Scott Christofferson, "An Anti-totalitarian History of the French Revolution: Francois Furet's 'Penser la Revolution Francaise' in the Intellectual Politics of the Late 1970s," *French History Studies* 22, no. 4 (1999): 571-73. <http://www.jstore.org/> (acssed September 17, 2011).

²³ Ibid

David would switch his views that were aligned with the majority of the nation's conscience to ones that were then drastically different. In order to understand the shift within David, I veer from Furet's views by examining economic and social elements to find out why David changed. Such an explanation in the last part of this essay will display the importance of looking at the revolution through more than one set of factors. The extreme revisionists, who only analyze cultural and ideological factors, never explain the reason for the transformation in the revolution. Taken together each section reflects the importance of blending revisionist and Marxist theory when interpreting the atmosphere of the time in which David lived.

Section One: Pre-Revolution

Controversy among scholars exists over whether or not David is a "pre-revolutionary painter." Most art historians debate whether this title befits David by analyzing his 1784 painting of the *Oath of the Horatii* (Figure 1). According to art historian Thomas Crow, David was a pre-revolutionary painter because of the volatile political atmosphere of the period. Crow supported this point through a discussion of the radical critics. These radicals were part of a "new politicized public" that was hostile towards the *Académie* due to the critics' democratic undertone. At the unveiling of David's *Oath of the Horatii* these radicals felt an instant attraction to the art work, but none of the critics could properly verbalize why the *Horatii* appealed to them. Crow argued it was because David purposely created the painting with the critics in mind. When David worked on the *Oath* he refused to follow the *Académie's* canvas size restrictions, which angered many members of the institution. They even went so far as to try to ban David from exhibiting this piece of art. In need of an ally against the *Académie*, David

chose the critics. This strategy caused feelings and concepts that related to the revolution to shine through in the theme of David's composition. For instance, the painting depicted the Horatii's reaching towards their swords, ready to fight if the need to protect their country occurred. According to Crow, the brother's willingness to violently fight for their country was similar to the aggression seen later in the revolution during the bloody Reign of Terror.²⁴ However, this was only one side of the debate.

Anita Brookner's position contrasts Crow's view of David as a pre-revolutionary painter. Brookner asserted that those who view the *Oath* as revolutionary forced their argument with the hindsight of history. For a true examination of David's life in 1784 proved that David was not politically active. She substantiated this point by tracing David's life at the time he finished the art work to be in Rome. Italy was far away from the political pressures in France. Since David was unfamiliar with the political situation while in Italy, he was unaware of the critic's stance. Such a point weakens Crow's logic and helps further explain why the critics have an unexplainable attraction to David's *Horatii*.²⁵ Brookner also attacked the perception made by Crow that the revolutionary's ideals were present within David's art. She criticized this notion by analyzing the story of the same Horatii brothers David depicted because David made up his own artistic portrayal of events that actually took place in history. As Brookner noted there was no historic record of an oath ever being made by these brothers to their father. The true story of the Horatti took place during a time in history when the Romans argued with their neighbors, the people of Albania, over cattle. To avoid a war, the countries' leaders picked negotiators to

²⁴. Thomas Crow, "The Oath of Horatii in 1785: Painting and the Pre-Revolutionary Radicalism in France," *Art History* 1, no. 4 (1978): 428-38, <http://www.jstor.org/>(accessed April 26, 2011).

²⁵ Anita Brookner, *Jacques-Louis David* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 74-78.

resolve the issue. Rome sent the three Horatii brothers to talk with the three Curiatti brothers of Albania. In the end the Curattis killed two of the three Horatii. The last Horatii then killed the three representatives from Albania. When the sister of the surviving Roman found out the news, she became angry with her brother because she was betrothed to one of the Curiatti men. Such a reaction caused the brother to kill her too. This story showed how only the elite son's of the king resolved the problem without input for the non-elitist members of society. Also, the painting portrayed an absolute monarchy without negative comment, and the sister was brutally killed. Therefore, elements of this story were not in line with the ideals of equality, liberty, and brotherhood from the original revolution. For the original definition of these three ideals meant France would achieve a less elitist and more democratic government in a relatively peaceful manner.²⁶

Overall, Brookner's logic was more sound than Crow's. The evidence Crow used to support the undertones of David's political life was a stretch. If David painted the *Horatii* with the radical critics in mind, it stands to reason he would have addressed them in the painting in an obvious manner. Yet, the critics did not understand the source of their enthusiasm. Crow's argument was further weakened by David's lack of political interest while in Rome. Such apathy left David unaware of the critics' political stance, meaning he would not have catered to the critics. The final flaw in his argument is that concepts like violence were not considered to be in line with the ideals of equality, liberty, and brotherhood at the start of the revolution. Since Brookner had a firmer grasp on the original ideals and David's political life at the time, her argument was more persuasive. However Crow's stance, while unsound in the context of the

²⁶ Ibid, 69-70.

Horatii, does have some merit when one looks at David's painting *The Death of Socrates*.

Factors in David's life changed in 1787 so that David was a pre-revolutionary painter. During this year David joined the *société Trudaine*, an informal intellectually elite society that primarily discussed philosophy, but often addressed politics.²⁷ Through this club he also met Andre Chénier. Chénier frequently criticized the "privileged" after he was rejected from the navy due to his birth. Unable to serve, he turned to the arts where he wrote pieces like, *Liberty* and *The Republic Letters*. Both of these works reflected the notion that art cannot flourish under an aristocratic government. Rather art and society can only be healthy under a more republic and democratic rule. After the *Horatii* incident, such thoughts would appeal strongly to David. Also, David was very close to Chénier as he influenced David when he made *The Death of Socrates*. For example, David changed the position of Socrates' hand because Chénier did not approve. If Chénier could influence his artistic decisions, it is not a stretch to believe that he could affect David's political opinions too.²⁸

Another development occurred at the end of 1786. Despite David's conflict with the *Académie*, he wanted the position as head of the *Académie's* school in Rome. However, d'Angiviller, the director of the institution, gave someone else the job. He told David that he was too young for the role and did not have enough seniority within the hierarchy of the *Académie* to gain such a high post.²⁹ After the rejection David experienced bouts of hostile behavior towards everyone, including his long time friends.³⁰ This anger and the guide of the

²⁷ Warren, 30.

²⁸ Ibid, 30-32.

²⁹ Ibid, 31.

³⁰ Brookner, 87.

société Trudaine made David see the *Académie* as “aristocratic.”³¹ Both of these new circumstances increased his revolutionary thoughts. Thus, the ideals of liberty, equality, and brotherhood can all be found in his 1777 painting *The Death of Socrates* (Figure 2).

Liberty can be understood if one thinks about the historical moment displayed in this painting. This creation captured Socrates just as he was about to drink the hemlock that would kill him. According to history, Socrates was condemned to death by the government because he held different ideas than the authority of the time did. Yet, Socrates refused to back down from his beliefs despite pleas from his followers to flee the country. Instead Socrates died standing up for his cause.³² David glorifies this decision by enshrining Socrates and his followers in an illuminating white light.³³ His depiction of such a choice was favorable because David sympathized with someone who was being punished for his thoughts against the government. He went through a similar experience when he painted the *Horatii*. David felt that the “energy” of his art was more important than following the regulations in regard to canvas size. This position led him to his conviction that he would, “ceased to make a picture for the king, and did it for myself.” The end result was increasing hostility from the *Académie*.³⁴ Such hostility did not turn David against his government right away. Instead this event stayed with David for a time and surfaced when he was surrounded by others who disapproved of the government. This point was seen in David’s decision to reject the government in 1787. Right after he joined the *société Trudaine* David broke out on his own to paint. He passed over two other offers to

³¹ Ibid, 98.

³² Douglas Linder, “Trial Watch,” *The Trial of Socrates*, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/socrates/socratesaccount.html> (accessed October 17, 2011).

³³ Jacques Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, oil on canvas, 1787, (École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris), <http://www.jacqueslouisdavid.org/The-Death-of-Socrates.html>.

³⁴ Warren, 16.

paint for the king, and chose to paint the death instead for the Trudaine brothers.³⁵ Therefore, the *sociètè's* company allowed David to freely come to terms with his own distaste towards the government thereby causing the sympathy seen in the 1787 painting.

On closer inspection, Socrates himself was not glorified, which reflected David's liberal leanings. David placed Socrates against the dull grey cracking rocks of a jail cell. While some may argue David wanted to be authentic in his portrayal, the *Oath* shows how David was not afraid to reinterpret history. Therefore, Socrates was mindfully portrayed in a less glorifying manner. According to Douglas Linder, a law professor interested in the Socrates trial, the philosopher took a forceful stance against the more democratic government of the time in part because he was anti-democratic.³⁶ David hired an orator to research Socrates, one who "overwhelmed David with information." With a plethora of information about the philosopher at his disposal, David would be well versed in the subject to see the correlation that Linder made about Socrates' anti-democratic beliefs.³⁷ However, the company David surrounded himself with suggested that he wanted more democracy. Such a political preference caused the partly negative portrayal of Socrates.

The next ideal, equality, was evident though the clothes and positions of each member within the painting. Socrates dressed just as plainly as the rest, in simple cloth. He was also on equal ground level with the rest of the men. His followers touched him, while others crowd around him to the point that they were invading his personal space. This illustration showed how there was no barrier between leader and follower. This relationship among leaders and

³⁵ Warren, 33.

³⁶ Linder, "Trial."

³⁷ Brookner, 83.

followers can translate to David's own view of power. As mentioned in the *société Trudaine*, power between the absolute monarchies should become closer to that of the common people. A view David could relate to after having been rejected for a position he was talented enough to teach, but could not due to the hierarchic structure of the *Académie*.³⁸

Lastly, brotherhood was seen through an analysis of the people in the painting. Socrates' followers clearly did not like that he was about to die for his cause. They sobbed uncontrollably in grief at the thought of their mentor and friend's death. Yet, even though these people did not like that Socrates chose death over life, the majority of people stayed with him. In fact, Socrates' followers crowded tightly around Socrates giving him their unified support. Yet, only Socrates' companions surround him before the death sentence against the group leader's beliefs was fulfilled. Such a predicament displayed a lack of tolerance by the government. Given the stances on liberty and equality within this picture David was against such intolerance, hence his decision to glorify part of the painting.³⁹

Brookner still felt that David was not a pre-revolutionary painter in 1787. In fact, she maintained her belief that such insights were gained by forcing this term on David due to hindsight. However, a look at two people during this time cast doubt on this argument. Jean-Francois Pierre Peyron also painted a picture of *Socrates Death* (Figure 3) in 1787. In this work, there was less force behind the painting than David's work. Furthermore, the painting was much duller and made no attempt to glorify Socrates.⁴⁰ Unlike David, Payron had no reason to admire the actions of Socrates. He won the grand prix in 1773, beating out David for the award.

³⁸ David, *The Death of Socrates*.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Jean-Francois-Pierre Peyron, *The Death of Socrates*, oil on canvas, 1787 (Joslyn Art Museum), <http://www.joslyn.org/collections-and-exhibitions/permanent-collections/european/jean-peyron-the-death-of-socrates/>.

Then he spent the next portion of his life in a close amicable relation with the *Académie* as he studied in Rome. Once Peyron returned from Rome he commenced his project on Socrates. Between 1773 and 1787 Payron did not join any political circles.⁴¹ His life, void of conflict and politics, shined though in his art. Meanwhile Thomas Jefferson visited France in 1787 where he observed both paintings, but only overwhelmingly enjoyed one. According to David's critics, *The Death of Socrates* that David painted was "perfect in every respect." Jefferson seemed to agree with the critics. For his admiration for the piece was so strong, that Jefferson felt compelled to visit David so that he could compliment him in person.⁴² As someone who spent his past year focusing on a document that inspired the ideals of the revolution, it seems logical that Jefferson would be attracted to a painting with political substance. Such examples of these people's lives and actions support the notion that the ideals of the French Revolution existed and were not just construed out of hindsight.

Overall *The Death of Socrates* indicated signs of a conscience of thought. The Turdaine brothers, the individuals who first commissioned the art, were so satisfied with David's work that they compensated him 10,000 francs. This was 4,000 francs more than originally offered. Some may argue the increase in price was due to aesthetic appeal. All of the critics, even those who disliked David, thought that his picture was technically "perfect."⁴³ While the aesthetics of the painting were important, so was the message. David spent many hours gaining advice from the *société Trudaine* in order to portray Socrates just right. He even rejected two other expensive commissions from the king so he could focus his attention on this painting. For David

⁴¹ The National Art Gallery, "The National Art Gallery," *Jean-Francois Pierre Peyron*, <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/jean-francois-pierre-peyron> (accessed October 25, 2011).

⁴² Bryson Burroughs, "A Picture by Jacques Louis David," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 26, no.6 (1931): 142-43, <http://www.jstore.org/> (accessed October 17, 2011).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

to pass up such large sums of capital meant that this painting was also important to David, especially since he started painting only for himself in 1784.⁴⁴ Such factors demonstrate that there was an agreement in thought between the *sociètè* and David. So even though a total class conscience did not exist, as Doyle's work argued, one can see an emerging conscience of thought within portions of the bourgeoisie society.

Section Two: The First Revolution 1789-1792

The conflict between David and the *Académie* deepened after the creation of the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen." Shortly after the National Assembly introduced this egalitarian document, David sent a letter to the *Académie* asking for reform. His primary goal was to break the hierarchical structure of the institution by electing a new group called the commissaries. These individuals would then draft a new constitution so that anyone within the establishment could run for office. Hours later the head of the *Académie*, Vien, rejected the proposal. Once news spread of Vien's actions, David mobilized for support. Within the year David held meetings at his house. On one such occasion in March 1790, a member proposed that the constitution of the *Académie* be brought in line with the French Constitution. The group planned to appeal to the General Assembly if Vien did not acquiesce to their demands. However, this threat never came to light because a member of the assembly, Lepelletier de Saint-Fargeau, ordered the *Académie* to align itself with the principles of the new government. Two suggestions were sent to Lepelletier, one by David and the other by Vien. Almost all of the members of the *Académie* agreed with Vien's proposal. The only exception was David, who then went on to form the *Commune Des Arts*. Renou, secretary of the *Académie*, disdainfully

⁴⁴ Ibid

called David's following to be composed of "all the bad artists." Regardless of stature these men formed a loyal backing that continued to act in opposition of the *Académie* even after David's 1790 reforms failed.⁴⁵

David's motives for a more equalitarian institution had nothing to do with money as Heller and most other Marxists argued. Rather, he wanted the *Académie* to finally recognize his talent. David's strife with the *Académie* started in the early 1770's when he attempted to win the Grand Prix, a scholarship, four times. According to lore Vien gave a few older candidates the award because David was young enough for his education to be put on hold. David protested this loss with a hunger strike, for he firmly believed that the prize was rightfully his. In David's mind he was the one with the better piece of art not those other students' works.⁴⁶ A few years later, when the *Académie* tried to interfere with the *Horatii* David made a vow to himself; "never again will anyone make me do anything detrimental to my own glory."⁴⁷ Clearly, David had enough of being held back. In 1790, while David was in the mist of his battle with the *Académie*, David displayed his fascination with glory again when the Jacobin Club commissioned David to paint the *Tennis Court Oath*. A statement made by David years later when he tried to complete the portrait illustrated his true intentions during 1790. In 1804, David refused to finish the painting without being paid. His defense was that the only other benefit this painting could give him was "glory." He continued to say "that only wealth, which I aim, will compensate me."⁴⁸ Before, when the club wished to compensate David through

⁴⁵ Bookner, 97-100.

⁴⁶ Warren, 12.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁸ Jacques Louis David, *Documents Complémentaires au Catalogue de L'œuvre de Louis David*, Edited by Daniel Wildenstein and Guy Wildenstein, Translated by Amelia Najjar, Paris: (Fondation Wildenstein, 1973), 144.

monetary means, he prohibited anyone from paying him.⁴⁹ If only glory could be attained from his work without him being paid, then this quote implies David just wanted glory during 1790. Furthermore, the refusal of money prior to 1804 definitely demonstrates that David was not using the revolutionary ideals in the name of capitalism as Marxist believed. Therefore, during the revolution David was still the little boy who went on a hunger strike, in hopes that someone would recognize his true talent. According to Brookner, painting without profit enabled David to “cover himself with artistic glory.”⁵⁰ Therefore he accomplished his goal artistically despite his loss with the *Académie*.

During David’s battle with the *Académie* he was a moderate, despite Furet’s belief that the early supporters of the revolution were “extremists.” Deputies of the National Assembly created a document that allowed the king to still be in charge of the country.⁵¹ The Assembly tried to keep the traditional form of government partially intact by working with the king. Therefore, the Assembly did not try to completely overthrow the government as more radical proponents wanted. Such beliefs shined through in David’s actions during this period. As the last paragraph illustrated, David was willing to take a moderate stand with the *Académie* when he asked them to align themselves with the constitution. Yet, David’s sketch of *The Constitution to His Son* (Figure 4) shows that his moderate stance was not just a device to get his way with the *Académie*. The king commissioned the piece at the start of 1792. The king hoped that a painting, which displayed him accepting the new order, would calm those who feared that the king rejected the new constitution. However, David put his own spin on the situation. In David’s

⁴⁹ Brookner, 99.

⁵⁰ Brookner, 99.

⁵¹ Sylvia Neely, *A Concise History of the French Revolution*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 87.

first sketch, the king laid down the crown and scepter on a table beside a constitution. Across from the king was his son, to whom the king appeared to be explaining how the leader derived his power. This goes far beyond merely showing acceptance of the constitution. According to notes David wrote in his sketch book above the illustration, the art work was supposed to convey that the king understood he “can reign only by observing religiously the duties it {the constitution} imposes on him.”⁵² This voluntary portal of the king meant that David had moderate preferences during the first revolution rather than extremist ones.

In David's *Tennis Court Oath* (Figure 5), moderates and radicals were unified. The painting depicted all the politicians of the Third Estate on the day they swore to meet until they created a constitution. Art historian Philippe Bordes identified the individuals standing at the forefront of the picture. According to him, many of these people were men who soon joined the Jacobin party mixed in with individuals who always remain moderate.⁵³ The way David integrated the men into the work furthered the feeling of unity. Rather than having the different groups standing on opposite sides of the room, the moderates and the radicals were placed next to each other. For instance, Robespierre, the leader during the reign of terror, stood to the left of DuPont De Nemours, an individual who favored law and order rather than hostile intervention.⁵⁴ Such a portal of brotherhood was not embellished by David. According to history the National Assembly quickly accepted the broad terms of the constitution with all the members in agreement. Such a united front made “everything that emerged from the National

⁵² Warren, 58-9.

⁵³ Philippe Bordes, “‘*Serment du Jeu de Paume*’: Propaganda Without a Cause?” *Oxford Art Journal* 3, no. 2 (1980): 19-22, <http://jstor.org/> (accessed March 7, 2011).

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 21-22.

Assembly” take “on the aura of the will of the people.”⁵⁵

However, the unity captured in this picture was only among a segment of the population. The majority of the people portrayed in this Oath were members of the Third Estate. This was purposefully done because the Estate was united in their quest against the nobles, who denounced the existence of the National Assembly and their goals. Art historian Andrew Kegan furthered this point through his analysis of a blind man seen in the front left corner of David’s *Tennis Court Oath*. According to him the figure represented Appius Claudius, a Roman “champion of the people.” It seems possible this blind man was in fact Cladius since there was strong evidence that Claudius was well known to David. Also, David used mortifies in his art before.⁵⁶ This motif was important for it reflected the relationship between the Third Estate and the privileged members of society. Claudius stood for expansion of suffrage and a more equitable distribution of power. He was also famous for a speech, in which he advocated against the king’s position that the country should make peace with outsiders.⁵⁷ This signified how the revolutionaries, who also wanted the same goals as Claudius, were fighters. But rather than defying the king over outside invaders the revolutionaries disregarded their king’s orders through the continuance of the National Assembly.

The cooperative behavior seen in David’s painting also correlated with a peaceful democratic atmosphere. The Jacobin club commissioned David to paint the *Tennis Court Oath* and gave him full “freedom” to represent the event as he wanted.⁵⁸ No one challenged this lack of restriction, which meant there was a tolerance for other people’s viewpoints since there was

⁵⁵ Neely, 87-89.

⁵⁶ Andrew A. Kagan, “A Classical Source for David’s ‘Oath of the Tennis Court,’” *The Burlington Magazine* 116, no. 856 (1974): 395-396, <http://jstor.org/> (accessed March 21, 2011)

⁵⁷ Ibid, 396.

⁵⁸ Bordes, 19.

no guarantee that David completely shared the thoughts of the club. Regardless of David's opinion, he captured an event that historically led to more democratic actions. Soon after the oath, a semi-liberal constitution was created by vote through a committee within the National Assembly. Checks and balances were put in place also. By 1790, after these events occurred and David was still painting the *Tennis Court Oath*, he called the revolution the "happiest revolution" to date. This signified that David was content under the new democratic atmosphere of the time. Others shared David's appeasement of the time; a theory strengthened by a look at all five of David's other portraits from 1790. Each one was of actual people who lived in France and each of their composites emitted a sense of relaxation within their current environment.⁵⁹

Section Three: The Second Revolution 1792-1794

The *Tennis Court Oath* remained unfinished at the end of 1792 because the concept of brotherhood in David's painting changed. The moderates and the Jacobins no longer worked peacefully together towards a common goal. Rather, disputes occurred whenever the Assembly spoke of specific issues. These arguments became visible towards the end of 1791 just before the Jacobins split from the Assembly. While still called "friends of the constitution," the Jacobins were not. Instead their main purpose was to question all authority, especially the Assembly who still supported the constitution. The rift between the two groups continued into 1793, but by then a series of events caused the Jacobins to be the sole individuals in charge. With all the power, the Jacobins censored people's thoughts. They even went so far as to kill their "enemies," which the Jacobins classified as those who did not adhere to their believing for

⁵⁹ Warren, 53-55.

a people's republic.⁶⁰ Many of the moderates in David's painting were among the numerous people who faced the guillotine. "Heroes" David glorified in 1789 fell from grace, disrupting his theme of unity. Since his message no longer applied, David stopped his work on the *Oath* mid-portrait in 1792.⁶¹ Such an environment showed that the new form of brotherhood was far more exclusive and totalitarian despite Marxist claims to the contrary.

Having the more extreme individuals in charge was a shift that David supported. By 1793 he joined the Convention, voted for the death of the king, painted propaganda for the republic, and signed decrees for the Jacobins.⁶² He believed so strongly in the new authority that David even told Robespierre, the leader of the Jacobins, at the beginning of the Thermidor reaction, "If you drink hemlock I will drink it with you."⁶³ This quote illustrated a complete reversal from the more moderate individual who favored the king and the constitutional monarchy described in the last section. This change was also no longer in tune with the general will of the people, considering David was later jailed for his "crimes" of supporting Robespierre and signing warrants for peoples execution.⁶⁴

There are a couple explanations as to why David changed, but both are questionable. Brookner argued that he went mad. She provided a sample from a speech David delivered at a festival in 1793 welcoming the army. According to her this speech alone was sufficient in showing David's "increasing delirium."⁶⁵ Whether or not David was crazed matters less than the time line she gave. To her the break in David's life occurred in 1793, but by then he had already

⁶⁰ Neely, 134- 184.

⁶¹ Bordes, 22.

⁶² David L. Dowd, "Jacques-Louis David, Artist Member of the Committee of General Security," *The American Historical Review* 57, no. 4 (1952): 875-87, <http://jstor.org> (accessed March 7, 2011).

⁶³ Warren, 94.

⁶⁴ Warren, 95-96.

⁶⁵ Brookner, 107-08.

joined the Jacobins, lost his moderate mentor, and lost his wife. He voted to hang the king, accepted a position with the Convention, and left the *Académie* with his sights on destroying it. Most of these events occurred in 1792, which according to Brookner's logic, transpired when David was still supposedly sane. Since the break happened before he went mad, her argument lacks solid rational.

The other theory, by Robert Warren, was that David changed because of how impressionable he was in 1792. While Warren's timeline matched better, his logic was partially flawed. When David defended his actions during the Terror he claimed that his "heart was vulnerable" at the time.⁶⁶ Warren took these words at face value, but since David was defending himself his statement should be looked at with caution. During the time in question, the Jacobins were not the only people in David's life. His good friend, Andre Chénier was still in Paris. There was even evidence that the two argued over David's decision to help the Jacobin plan the Chateaufieux festival. In fact Chénier classified David's actions in favor of the "tyrants" as "stupid." Shortly after this exclamation the two's friendship dissolved.⁶⁷ Being "vulnerable" does not justify actions that led to the end of a relationship so important to David. Furthermore, if David was so impressionable, why was he no longer vulnerable to Chénier's views, but was susceptible to the ideas of the Jacobins? Thus, this logic on its own does not add up and leaves room for serious questioning.

A better interpretation relates back to David's relationship with his new found glory. After the *Tennis Court Oath*, David's fame started to increase dramatically. This was a new position for David, which he had to handle with care. As David recently had seen with his rival,

⁶⁶ Warren, 66.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 60-63.

Payron, a reputation could be severely diminished after one poorly received painting. Because of Payron's misstep in 1787, David overshadowed Payron in the following years.⁶⁸ Since David experienced this role reversal first hand, he understood the importance of successfully painting to please his audience. In fact, David claimed his art during the revolution was dictated by the "will of the people."⁶⁹ Adhering to these constraints showed David was capable of making strategic choices to benefit his career.

Similarly, David's choice to support the Jacobins was a strategic decision to advance his fame at first. Around the time that David joined the Jacobins, the moderate government started to crumble. Lafayette, a leader of the French National Guard, appealed to the king twice to disband the Jacobins, because he feared their increasing power. Also at this time there was an uprising by the sans-culottes on August 10, 1792. The end result caused the king to be removed from office for his fate to be decided by a Convention. The Convention was to write a new constitution, but ended up undertaking all of the affairs of the government. Such actions changed the power structure of France's government. Before the legislature was equally balanced, but now, the power distribution was unequally in the hands of one branch. A later election granted the Jacobin's a strong position within the Convention due to the support of the sans-culottes. According to historian Silvia Neely, even though the Jacobins had a minority "the power was now with the radical{s}." For this small window of opportunity was all that was needed for this raising threat to prevail and gain a majority soon after the elections just as

⁶⁸ Joslyn Art Museum, "Joslyn Art Museum," *Europea*, <http://www.joslyn.org/collections-and-exhibitions/permanent-collections/european/jean-peyron-the-death-of-socrates/> (October 17, 2011).

⁶⁹ David, *Collections*, 144.

Lafayette feared.⁷⁰ So if David wanted to have the most impact in his artistic life, it would be best to make ties with the Jacobins. Therefore, when offered a position on the National Convention, David accepted. He did this not because he cared about the Jacobins, but because, as David described himself to a prison mate, he was an “artist” first and foremost.⁷¹

After David’s motives for joining the Jacobins are evident, Warren’s argument that David was swept up in the extremist rhetoric makes sense. When still friends with Chénier, the only radical actions David took part in were planning a festival for the Jacobins and joining the Convention, at which time he signed no death warrants. Once David chose to let his companionship with Chénier end, David worked with just the Jacobins. David became increasingly close with these individuals; the most obvious friendship was his relationship with Lepelletier. As of 1792 the two men were a little more than acquaintances. Then on January 20, 1793 after Philippe Marie assassinated Lepelletier, David painted a scene without being commissioned that glorified Lepelletier’s death to look like he died serving the country. In reality Maire killed Lepelletier alone in his home because the assassin believed Lepelletier embodied what was wrong with France. David’s willingness to distort these events showed how important Lepelletier was to him, which means it only took a year for David’s friendship to flourish. Within this same year David also became more radical.⁷² Therefore, without his moderate companion, David seemed to rely more on his radical friends.

Overall, a look at David’s personal ties and career shed the most light on the change that occurred with David’s viewpoint. Yet, Furet disregarded those types of factors when he studied

⁷⁰ Neely, 155-63.

⁷¹ David, *Collections*, 144.

⁷² Warren, 59-78.

the revolution. Had I used Furet's usual approach to analyze the French Revolution much about David's life would have been overlooked, for my analysis would have stopped at the change seen in brotherhood within David's art.

Conclusion

This examination of Jacques Louis David's life from 1784-1793 adds a new perspective to the historiographical debate between Marxists, who view the revolution through social and economic factors, and extreme revisionists, who utilize cultural and ideological analyses. Both of these historians only use two lenses, which caused them to overlook important points about David's life. For example, extreme revisionists did not explain why David changed between the two revolutions since this explanation had more to do with social and economic factors, rather than cultural or ideological. Similarly, Marxists did not detect a change between the two revolutions since this shift was noticeable through an ideological observation rather than an economic or social examination. Such instances provide evidence that both Marxist and extreme revisionists have their set of limitations when using their separate techniques.

There is also an overarching problem among Marxist and extreme revisionist theories. Each set of French Revolution historians used sweeping generalizations to explain the events between the 1780's and 1790's, but many of the scholars' generalizations did not apply to David. For instance, David was an earlier supporter of the revolutionary ideals as seen through his painting of *The Death of Socrates*. Yet, David was not an extremist at the start of the revolution as Furet argued original supporters of the revolution were. Therefore, a more precise meaning of "original supporter" is necessary. David also disproved the Marxist notion of

bourgeois fighting for capitalistic gain since he fought for his self-worth. This discrepancy means that a better definition for who can be classified as a bourgeois could solve the problem. Hopefully with a better system of categorization, historians can unearth new phenomena. Already this paper's challenge of traditional Marxist vernacular of class conscience provides evidence of a conscience of thought among some individuals before the revolution started; a subject that has currently received little attention among scholars of the historiographical debate.

The solutions above will not solve the historiographical debate of the French revolution. However, as Heller mentioned, the revisionists have yet to provide any conclusive answers in regards to this subject. Instead, many of their works lead to discrepancies, which just caused more questions.⁷³ Such a tradition of research without answers cannot continue. This is why my paper gives insight about some of the flaws exhibited in this discussion so that historians can one day find a conclusive answer on the matter. For the historiography also affects other subjects such as nationalism. My paper was able to identify how David was involved in the nationalist movement during the revolution and how his notion of unity changed over time. However, these facts about David's life uncovered contradictions among other scholars' theories in regards to their work with larger populations. This means that without a clear historiography it would be more difficult to pinpoint exactly what type of "movement" occurred and what type of "unity" occurred on a larger more diverse scale during the French Revolution. As Smith's definition states both concepts are important to the notion of nationalism.

⁷³ Heller, 14.

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