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JEAN-PAUL MARAT - A Swiss Revolutionary

by Dr. Geoffrey
Buchler Ph.D

During the six years of the great French Revolution there must have been at least 100 men who played a large enough part, and left a clear enough impression on the records of the time to repay historical study.

Few of them were great men, but they lived under the microscope of great times, which gave to their most insignificant qualities portentous proportions. Perhaps, too, their age and country, which subjected them to no standardised education or compulsory service, or industrial discipline, perhaps the general disuse of law and order to which the generation before the Revolution had grown accustomed, encouraged a peculiar variety and extravagance of colour.

Whatever the cause, there are few periods in history so rich in personalities as the years 1789-1795.

In fact, during those years three factors emerged that would profoundly influence future revolutionary ideologues and activists.

First, that violence controlled by centralised terror could, in the long term, be a viable political path.

Second, that eliticism as a concomitant of violence had sustained itself with marginal success; and thirdly, that egalitarianism was still the unfulfilled promise in the grand social design.

These were, perhaps, first perceived by that great revolutionary who played a dramatic role in the attempted execution of all three - Jean-Paul Marat.

Before 1789 he walked in the steps of the master, Rousseau. His formative experiences were a suitable preparation for those heady, turbulent days of 'sans-culottisme'.

He was born in Boudry, near Neuchâtel on 24 May 1743. His family lived in impoverished circumstances, and it was this penury that forced young Jean-Paul to leave home on the death of his mother in 1759.

From his own reminiscences we gather that he was a strong-willed, undisciplined youth, perpetually on the move, yet no professional layabout.

He worked, when he could, as a children's language tutor with limited teaching experiences in Toulouse and Bordeaux.

However, he quit teaching abruptly,

and for years appears to have continued a vagabond existence with ports of call ranging from Paris to Dublin. Yet these seemingly incoherent wanderings cannot have been purposeless.

As an intellectual with a highly receptive mind, he must have spent much time as a student in the centres of learning which he visited. It was in England that the first specific record of Marat's early career was noted. It was in London that he first made the acquaintance of such prominent artists as Chippendale, the sculptor Roubiliac, and the portrait painters Pine and Zucchi.

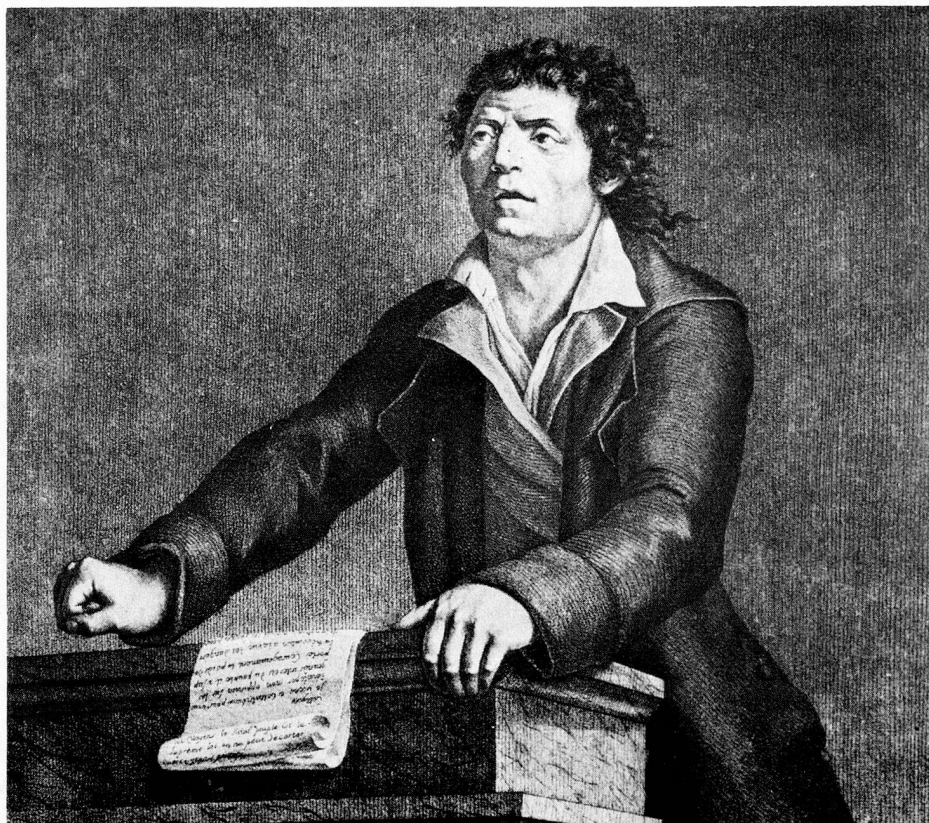
A couple of years later, in 1796, Marat was still in London, where aside from his political involvement as a follower of John Wilkes he claimed to have secured, as a medical man, a reputation for curing patients suffering from venereal disease.

It seems, furthermore, that the

degree of MD was conferred on him at the University of St Andrews in 1775. Here he was described as "*a very distinguished master in arts who has given all his attention to medicine for several years and has acquired great skill in all branches of the science*".

Enemies of Marat maintained that this high regard emanated from political sympathisers, yet Marat's own constant boasting of his medical prowess was later used as a weapon against him. The Girondist Brissot was to accuse him of being a charlatan and a quack.

Medicine and numerous writings were insufficient for this dynamic eccentric. In July 1774 Marat joined the Grand Lodge of Freemasons, then associated with the radical elements of London, in which he could actively participate in the fermentation of new ideas.



Jean-Paul Marat, 1744-1793. Photo by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.



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His own story reflects that some of his leisure hours were more romantically occupied in the fashionable apartment of the *avante-garde* painter Angelica Kauffmann. A member of the Royal Academy, and for some time a close friend of Sir Joshua Reynolds, she, like Marat, was also of Swiss birth, originating from Chur in the Grisons.

Be it as it may, Marat had already assumed his main role, that of political propagandist and agitator, albeit in a foreign land. It appears, moreover, that it is the deficiency of primary sources that tends to render Marat's pre-revolutionary career somewhat mysterious.

Some historians suggest that the 12 years spent in England were almost a closed book, opened here and there by Marat himself in speeches and articles.

Information is clouded by rumour or heresay during the peak of his revolutionary activities, and by excursions into calumny in order to de-canonise the saint after Thermidor.

In the storm of discontent gathering in France during those years he found his *metier* in political criticism.

In 1780 he produced a *Plan de Législation Criminelle* in which he conclusively takes his stand as an egalitarian and a revolutionist. His basis for a legal system was an *a priori* acceptance of equality of rights and opportunities; a recognition of the inability of the dispossessed to elevate themselves other than by illegal means, and finally, an open advocacy for equal division of property.

Up to the Revolution his interests seemed to be all-embracing, but it was in 1789 that he stepped on to the stage of history. He had already sounded his political credo.

"The lot of the poor, always down-trodden, always subjugated and always oppressed can never be improved by peaceful means . . . The great point is to enlighten them and make them aware of their rights, and then the revolution will function infallibly without any human power being able to oppose it."

This was to be his task.

Thus it was that the fashionable doctor (as he was) with a lucrative practice abruptly ceased to exist, and, in self-imposed penury, the watchdog of the Revolution took his place.

In August he was already formulating a *Project de Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen, suivi d'un Plan de Constitution juste, sage et libre*.

He repeated a now recurring theme. The social contract was to be based on the people's sanction; the nullification of inequality would be by division of property and the more equitable distribution of wealth. As a political directive for the choice of electors for the Estates General he had already, in a pamphlet *Offrande à la Patrie*, called for the freedom of the Press, the rights of habeas corpus, trial by jury, and the nomination of lawyers to undertake free service for the poor.



The assassination of Marat in 1793 drawn by Charlotte Corday. Picture by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.

The land-hungry peasants quickly learned Marat's lesson by taking affairs into their own hands. They rose, with the now well-worn cliché on their lips *Paix aux Chaumières, Guerre aux Châteaux*.

This was not lost on Marat, who redoubled his call for revolutionary violence. In September 1789 appeared the first edition of *L'Ami du Peuple*, the organ of "the just anger of the people", which became inseparable from the name of Marat.

He struck the note immediately — a note he would never cease to repeat. The workers of Paris were summoned as a sovereign entity to be their own vehicle of justice. Yet Marat, the *friend of the people* and an enemy of all aristocrats, financiers and profiteers, had no illusions as to the unfitness of the crowd for liberty or self-government and is as ready to denounce them, as their oppressors. He eventually made the discovery, on which more than one popular preacher has built up a reputation, that the crowd enjoys being abused.

Accordingly it is a mistake to look in Marat's writings for a system of thought. One idea, and one only, seems to string together his invective, and to give to his expression of proletarian class-feeling something of the consistency of a political programme. This is the notion of a dictatorship.

During the four-and-a-half years of his political career Marat developed his theory by asking whether it would have been better to have kept the privileged orders, rather than now to groan under the yoke of these *nouveaux riches*. He even appeals to the legislators not to deprive the workers of their political rights.

However, in September 1792 he still refused to support the Republican party, and during the winter of 1791-92 he never moved beyond the idea of a very

limited monarchy (*monarchie très limitée*).

Only after September 21 does he rename his paper *Journal de la Révolution* — being a reminder that he regarded the Republic as an opportunity for social equality, not for political power: "Let a man be elected, and let him govern" — was Marat thinking of anyone in particular for this post? Of Danton? or of Robespierre? or of himself?

He would have been a temporary dictator, kept in power by the people just so long as might be necessary to bring to justice the oppressors of the poor, and to establish a proletarian régime.

Yet, he left political theory to St Just and statesmanship to Robespierre, retaining for himself the gift of prophecy.

The *Day of the Lord*, which he foretold, was the 18th Brumaire and the *New Messiah* (Napoleon), whose unconscious forerunner he was, secured justice and the rights of the poor by levelling all rights and merging all justice in the dictatorship of the First Empire.

Any short sketch of the life of Marat would at this stage be lacking if it failed to portray the part that he played in the Prison (September) Massacres, for the very direct bearing it has on his actions, as opposed to his ideas.

The massacres were the after-effects of August 10 (the storming of the Tuileries) and the imminent fall of Paris.

As a result the revolutionary Commune and its Vigilance Committee decreed that the prisons ought to be combed out for its refractory elements. Unfortunately this became rather indiscriminate and led to no uncertain brigandage and irresponsible murders.

Marat maintained that the massacres were the work of the people as a whole and that no innocent persons perished; they were a first step towards

the democratic paradise — his only regret was that he had not been able to include amongst the victims some of the more prominent politicians.

It was partly the knowledge of this last circumstance which made Marat such an unpopular figure in the Convention that met two weeks after the massacre.

So far from ever having the appearance of fear, or of deference, he always seemed to contemplate the Assembly, from the tribune, either with eyes of menace or contempt ... he carried his calumnies so far that even the party which he wished to support were visibly ashamed of him. This may be one reason why his appearances were relatively rare both at the Convention or at the Jacobin Club, so that most of his work was done at home.

At the beginning of April 1793 Dumouriez, who was Commander-in-Chief of the Revolutionary armies, defected after his victories at Valmy and Jemmappes and thus gave Marat the chance as leader of the Jacobins to present the attack against the Girondin party in the Convention.

In fact, whatever fear or repulsion he may have inspired among his fellow-members, Marat's credit with the people remained high. The Girondins, though, unwisely brought him to trial, but he was triumphantly acquitted.

Yet he was not the man to forgive his enemies, thus subsequently organising and carrying through the popular revolt of 31 May—2 June 1793; (which a month later led to the beginning of the Reign of Terror).

The vengeance which Marat began in his life may be said to have been finished by his death on July 13; for his murder by Charlotte Corday, was taken as evidence of a general plot to assassinate the Jacobins and it was under this suspicion, three months later, that the Girondin leaders were put to death.

Marat's death had other consequences, equally unforeseen by the simple-minded girl who murdered him, and who went to the guillotine with a smile because she had rid the country of its worst oppressor.

Instead of a monster whom people had shunned, Marat became a worshipped martyr.

Even after the fall of Robespierre, when reaction swept the surviving *Terrorists* off their feet, Marat's reputation was still great enough to secure him an honour, at which he had scoffed in his lifetime — burial in the national Panthéon. However, Marat's canonisation was short-lived.

Exactly four months later he was burnt in effigy in the yard of the Jacobin Club, and the ashes thrown down the Montmartre sewer.

His body, unclaimed by any of his friends, was disinterred from the Panthéon and buried in the nearest cemetery. On reflection it is strange that only three heroes of the Revolution (Mirabeau, Lepeletier, Marat) should have found a place in the national hall of remembrance only to have lost it again. When the Revolution was over only two bodies remained there — and they were

those of men who had not lived to see the events which they did so much to prepare — Voltaire and Rousseau.

Though everything was done to obliterate Marat's memory his legend lived on. For some he remained a monster, whilst to others he appeared as a single-minded philanthropist and a prophet of modern socialism.

Even Napoleon I made an interesting observation — "I like Marat because he is honest; he always says what he thinks!"

Marat's strength, both for good and bad, lay in his refusal to believe or to do anything second-hand — to be anything but his own inconsistent self.

This simplicity characterised alike the person, his thoughts, words and actions. In everything his insight explained things by their most natural causes. As Marat was sincere in a world of hypocrites, so he was courageous in a society of cowards. But simplicity is not enough. It makes fools as well as saints; it turns sincere men into fanatics, and courageous men into criminals.

All that history can hope to do, in any case, is to describe the resulting character. Even that is, with Marat, nearly impossible. His speeches and books merely convey his opinions; his portraits merely show us his appearance; his letters throw practically no light on his real self — contemporary memoirs are often vivid but seldom intimate or fair.

The historian would give up all these sources of information for half an hour's talk with someone who really knew Marat.



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