

A Day . . .

Al-Wadi, 14 July 1934

A day on which history came to know that peoples can accomplish what they will, and carry out what they intend — indeed, on which history came to know that peoples can discover themselves, and recognize that there are rights they must attain, a dignity that must be preserved, and a sanctity that must be honored. Indeed, on which history came to know that peoples can look at themselves in their own mirror, and see there that they are the true source of sovereignty — where once they had been the very object of enslavement; and see there that they are the true source of honor — where once they had been the abyss into which humiliation was cast; and see there that they are the true wellspring of authority — where once they had seemed created only to obey and submit. History had seen, before that day, many days of different kinds, in which the freedom of communities had appeared, in which the rights of peoples had been respected, and the sanctities of the human spirit honored — but it had never seen a day whose impact on people's lives ran deeper than that day, nor one that did more to awaken people to the dignity owed their own selves, and to achieve equality among them despite the differences in their stations and the disparities of their classes. On that day, equality among people came about as fully as it possibly could: the gap between the extremes of human society closed as far as it could ever close, and the highest-standing among people, the most illustrious in name, the most exalted in reputation, came to strive, alongside the lowliest, the most obscure, the most wretched in fortune, and to be just as far as those humble men from indulging or wronging any human being. These two men, distant as they stood from one another, now sought each other out like loving brothers, wanting nothing to divide them, desiring nothing but to tear down the edifice of tyranny — and the days that followed announced that mankind had come at last to know it was made to live free, honorable, and noble.

The people of Paris, on that day, and in the few days that preceded it, in the year 1789, stood unarmed, powerless, with no weapon in hand, destitute, finding nothing to eat, scarcely able to shield themselves from the elements or the accidents of the times. And yet they still managed to find strength, to seize weapons by force, to lay siege to the Bastille, to bring its garrison down under their own command, and to convince the tyrants that the age of unpunished oppression, and of wrongdoing that

answers to no one, had come to an end; that the age of division among people, of some ruling over others and lording it over others, had ended; that the system of divine right had fallen; and that the king no longer draws his authority from God, no longer represents God on earth, but draws his authority from the people, and represents the people before nations and kings.

There would be no point in lengthening this article by dwelling on the particular events of that day, and it would be an excess for the writer to claim this day was entirely good, that it had been cleansed of every notorious evil and great corruption. It was indeed a day of great evil, whose sins are beyond counting — yet it remains, despite this, a day immortalized in history, because it stood out through what none of the days before it had achieved: it showed man honoring his own dignity, and it proved what the days that followed have gone on confirming ever since — that whatever weakness a people may show, it remains strong; that however humbled it becomes, it remains dear; and however incapable it may declare itself, it remains capable; and whatever oppressors may believe of it — that it has despaired and given up — it remains rich in hope and expectation.

Everyone knows that this day opened a new gate in the history of mankind, through which freedom and equality entered, and through which the systems of government in Europe began, at first, to change; then began changing beyond Europe too, in other lands of the earth. And everyone knows what befell the French people because of these events, and what different fates struck them as a result of their revolution — none of which changed anything in what the revolution had already set in motion, for it remains a force still at work, going its own way, leading toward the liberation of communities and individuals alike, and carrying its message to people, as latter-day writers put it: that everything that happens has some connection, near or far, to the system of governance, and that the freedom of individuals and communities is affected, strengthened or weakened, precisely by the results of the French Revolution — and it was that great day, on which the people of Paris triumphed over the fortress of the Bastille, that set those results in motion. It is not important that a writer speak in praise of this day and its effects, whether praiseworthy or blameworthy — what matters is that people ask themselves to what degree this day has managed, in the end, to secure for mankind the true freedom and the equality that deserve those very names. To what point has this day, with all its promise for

humanity, delivered what was hoped of it — the preservation of dignity in full, the safeguarding of sanctity in abundance, and the attainment of the loftiest ideal of justice, in its most beautiful, purest, most refined form, farthest removed from oppression and corruption?

The questions people will keep asking, day after day, will draw answers that vary with circumstance — but there is one thing about which people cannot possibly disagree: that the French Revolution, while it liberated individuals in Europe and America to a considerable degree, and liberated communities there to a certain degree, nonetheless remains as far as ever from its natural purpose. Every effort has fallen short of the goal it ought to reach. Individuals are free in some parts of the earth and not others; communities are free in some countries and not others.

But the overwhelming majority of people still remain as far as ever from enjoying what these privileged Europeans enjoy of their own freedom, vast or narrow. So long as colonialism continues to stand, so long as it remains one of the established systems of public human life, so long as it remains, at root, one of the foundations of the relationship between nations and peoples, and so long as some strong nations on this earth can accomplish anything they wish while other, weaker nations can accomplish nothing at all — then the French Revolution has not reached its full term, has not achieved its purpose, and has not delivered its message to mankind. For the Rights of Man that the French Revolution proclaimed spoke of Man, yet never mentioned the Frenchman; spoke of Man, yet never mentioned the European; spoke of Man, and drew no distinction between race and race, or between generation and generation. So long as those rights remain, even now, confined to certain generations of people and not others, then they are not truly the Rights of Man, but rather the rights of whichever generations happened to win them, and taste their fruits — or say, rather, that they are indeed the rights of Man entire, but that some peoples have claimed them, and thereby grown happy, while other peoples have failed to claim them, and thereby remained wretched, still forced to strive toward these rights, to labor in pursuit of them until they are won, and to keep struggling until they too can taste those fruits called liberty, fraternity, and equality.

It is not true that the French Revolution liberated Man, for Man still enslaves Man; and the French people themselves, who once saw themselves as the messengers of liberty, still enslave generations of people in distant lands — enslaving them in the very name of the

Revolution, enslaving them in the very name of liberty, fraternity, and equality. It is not true that the French Revolution abolished slavery, for individuals may no longer be bought and sold in civilized countries, and yet great nations, and vast peoples of ancient civilization and once-honored glory, still live a life of servitude, and taste every shade of humiliation and disgrace, at the hands of these very Europeans who see themselves as the messengers of liberty, fraternity, and equality.

It is not true that the French Revolution brought people out of darkness into light, for the shadows of tyranny, brutality, cruelty, and violence, and the darkness of injustice and oppression, still hang thick over nations that have every right to enjoy the light just as Europe enjoys it, and just as the French themselves enjoy it.

No — certainly not. It is good, wholly good, that people should know they have risen, that their affairs have improved, and that their lives have truly changed. But it is evil, wholly evil, that people should let this progress deceive them, that this change should seduce them into folly, and that it should be sheer stupidity on our part to let ourselves be enchanted by the words liberty, fraternity, and equality, so long as we do not truly enjoy them ourselves, do not live under their shade, and cannot feel that there is any difference at all — small or vast — between us and these Europeans.

It would be sheer madness for us to consider ourselves free simply because the word 'liberty' has become common currency among us, and because the French, celebrating today the anniversary of their own liberty, are careless enough to expect us to sit waiting for liberty, believing in it, confident that it will one day, of its own accord, favor us with a visit, and choose our own country as its home.

Liberty does not visit any country unless it is invited to it, and it does not settle in any country unless a place has been prepared for it there. If we truly love liberty, then let us invite it; and if we love it enough to want it settled among us, then let us prepare a home for it in Egypt — for its home has not yet appeared, has not yet been built.

The French Revolution did not bring people all the way to liberty, but it did open the gates of liberty to them. Some among mankind pass through those gates; others stand before them, bewildered, dazed, astonished.

Taha Hussein

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