



POWELL CENTER FOR
ECONOMIC LITERACY

Lesson Plan

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The Three Estates: Causes of the French Revolution

Time Required

15-30 minutes

Grade Level and Subject

High School; European History

Keystone Principles

Principle #4 – Economic Systems Influence Choices

Economic Concepts

Benefit - *The advantage(s) of a particular decision or course of action broadly measured; anything that aids or promotes well-being in a monetary and non-monetary sense.*

Choice – *A selection among alternatives. Scarcity requires individuals, businesses and nations to make choices.*

Consequence - *A result or effect of an action or decision may be positive or negative. All choices come with benefits and costs.*

Opportunity Cost - *The opportunity given up when choosing between two alternatives, with the decision in favor of one opportunity being at the cost of the other. The opportunity lost or given up.*

Productive Resources - *That set of resources that are utilized in to process of producing goods and services; land, Labor, capital, technology and entrepreneurial abilities.*

Overview

In order to understand the causes of the French Revolution, one must know how pre-revolution French society was structured. It is also essential to understand how class dynamics and economic and political systems can interact in positive or negative ways.

Objectives

Students will:

- Learn the characteristics of pre-revolution French society
- Understand the dynamics of the class conflict between the Three Estates
- Understand how the pre-revolutionary French economic and political system contributed to the outbreak of the French Revolution

Materials and Handouts

- Overheads of comparison between the Three Estates in pre-revolution France
- Handout of new rules, privileges, and grade policy for the class
- Student response handout

Teaching Activity

1. Ask all students to stand up and move to the back of the classroom.
2. Announce to the class that your school has made some policy changes that will affect all students and you have been asked to announce them to your class.
3. Either hand out or show on an overhead the New Grading Policy, the New Privileges Policy and the New Rules Policy.
4. Ask any students affected by these school policy changes to come to the front of the class. Tell them they may select any front row seat they wish.
5. Inform the non-chosen students remaining in the back of the class that they will no longer have desks – they may sit on the floor or stand, as they wish.
6. Do not give any reason for the changes being made. If you are challenged, say simply that you are the boss.
7. Pass out the response sheet and instruct the students to record their reaction to the new policies.
8. Display and explain the table comparing the three Estates of pre-Revolution France. Explain how the arbitrary nature of the “new school policies” coincides with the pre-revolution French class system.
9. Have students return to their own seats.
10. Review with your students the answers on their response sheet. Explain that whether or not Louis XIV really uttered the words, “L’Etat, c’est moi”, there is no question that the French kings ruled as absolute monarchs and evidenced a callous disregard for representative government and for the plight of the third estate.
11. To understand who had the power in pre-Revolutionary France, ask students these questions:
 - Who owned the resources (*land was the primary resource and most of it was owned by the king. The balance of the land was owned by the Church [the first estate] and the nobles [the second estate]*).
 - Who incurred the costs of resource utilization (which in France was primarily working the land)? (*Primarily, the peasants of the third estate.*)

- Who received the benefits from resource utilization (*Primarily the king, and secondarily members of the 1st and 2nd Estates.*)
- Ask students to identify the public goods that flowed to the Third Estate in exchange for the taxes they paid to the government. (*A circular flow model may be helpful at this point.*)
- Given the first three points, what realistic choices did members of the third estate have to better their situation?
- Ask students to imagine the choices available to the third estate if they had lived under a republic? (You may want to save these responses and review them when the students study post-Revolutionary France.)

Alternative Assignments

1. Students may use their response sheets to help them participate in a class discussion. The teacher may extend the lesson by class discussion.
2. Response essay- How does economic/political class affect ones view of wealth and opportunity?

Suggestions

The teacher may inform the chosen students ahead of time or not. The handout specifying the new rules, privileges, and grading policy should seem to be as official as possible and is under the teacher's discretion. The goal is to be as believable as possible and sell this activity to the students as reality. If the students do not buy it, the teacher should still run the activity and ask the students to participate as if it were a real exercise. The teacher must be careful not to make divisions based on race or cliques or use any segregation factor that might cause permanent resentment or pain.

Lesson Extensions

In general, the pre- and post-Revolutionary periods in French history provide many examples of our Keystone Economic Principles. The contrast between the French monarchy and the Republic taking shape in the United States illustrates the opportunity cost of centralized power. Certainly the entire bloody aftermath of the Revolution is fraught with the intended and unintended consequences of people's choices. You can play a "What if..." game with your students and imagine whether there were any incentives the French Monarchy could have introduced to forestall a Revolution. The French Revolution was about many things, and prominent among them was the desire of a people to enjoy the fruits of their labor and to participate fully in the economic life of their country.

New Grading Policy

All students whose last name begins with ____ will receive:
20 extra credit points per week
An automatic 5% percentage point bump for their final grades

New Privileges Policy

All students whose first name begins with ____:
May be five minutes each class period
May leave class five minutes early
May turn assignments in one day late with no penalty

New Rules Policy

All students who have live on a street starting with ____:
May talk in class
May go to the bathroom at will
May eat and drink in class