

Why The Revolutionaries Are (Also) the Villains of Les Misérables

We Americans love a good revolution.

We can't help it. We're taught from early ages that revolutionaries founded the country and system we all live in. In any fight between incumbents and underdogs, our first instinct is to sympathize with the upriser.

So naturally, when we watch the musical and film adaptations of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, then, we're going to root for the young "freedom fighters" like the young leader Enjolras, Courfeyrac, and our hero Marius Pontmercy. In the movie these young men form a small conspiracy to launch a revolution in Paris in 1832 - one which ultimately fails, but which the adaptations paint in a glorious and sympathetic light.

I recently rewatched the great 2011 film adaption of this movie, and I frequently dip back into the film's excellent song soundtrack. But after some observation, I have a controversial opinion on the revolutionaries: while they are revolting against an unjust system, they're not much worth our sympathy.

There are a few reasons why the revolutionaries are also villains (of a sort) of this story. These also happen to be some of the reasons why in most wars, the revolutionaries are just as guilty as the state they're revolting against:

The revolutionaries are anti-individual.

"Who cares about your lonely soul?

We strive towards a larger goal

Our little lives don't count at all!"

- "ABC Café / Red And Black"

It's hard to call a movement "humanitarian" that tells its members that their "little lives don't count at all." This is textbook collectivism of a kind that leads to a stupid number of deaths.

Any group that claims to fight for freedom without also respecting individual dignity is lying. Only individuals can exercise freedom because only individuals can act, and if individuals are only to be treated as cannon fodder for a "larger goal" of social re-engineering, then the revolution is certainly not about freedom.

The revolutionaries are manipulative.

*“Will you give all you can give
So that our banner may advance?”*

In the film adaptation, we see that the heart of this revolution is planned by young men of middle class or even noble birth. They have all likely received fine educations and grooming for positions of power.

In order to promote **their** revolution, the young and wealthy (or at least well-off) revolutionaries of *Les Miserables* have to mislead whole swathes of poor people to have their lives and property destroyed for the sake of the doomed cause.

Like many revolutionaries, these ne'er do wells promise glory to martyrs and a “freedom” which they fail to define clearly.

The revolutionaries are power-hungry.

*“We need a sign
To rally the people
To call them to arms
To bring them in line!”*

- “ABC Café / Red And Black”

Like most political revolutionaries, the revolutionaries of *Les Miserables* appear to have radical ideas about how society ought to be structured.

It's notable that their plans for what comes after the revolution aren't mentioned - only lofty ideals like “every man will be a king”. Whatever these lofty ideals mean in practice (also unclear), it is clear that characters like Enjolras see themselves as the revolution's leaders. And that should tell us all we need to know.

Were their revolution successful, these young men who planned the revolution would - like all revolutionaries - become the enforcers of the revolutionary way. Whether for cynical reasons (like having less power in the current regime) or forgivable ones (wanting to make a better world), Enjolras, Marius, and the rest are after power.

They should know better. They're no more than 40 years out from the French Revolution, in which the anti-tyrants quickly became tyrants themselves.

Be skeptical of revolutionaries.

Revolution seems like such a romantic thing. We have stories like *Les Miserables* to thank for that. But if we can look more critically at *both* those in power and those who want to overthrow the power, we may find a third way beyond revolution. Let's make human flourishing, peace, and freedom our goals - not a new set of masters ushered in by a new wave of violence.