French Revolution

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AOS 1 – WEEK 1 only

Student Name: __________________________

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THE ORIGINS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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Adapted from DuncanTownson, France in Revolution, (First edition 1990)
France in the 1780s

The most important feature of eighteenth-century France was that it was essentially a rural society. Ten times as many people inhabited France’s villages and farms as do today. Perhaps 28 million people inhabited France in 1780: if we define an urban community as one with more than 2,000 people, then only two persons in ten lived in an urban centre in the eighteenth century. The great majority inhabited 38,000 rural communities or parishes with, on average, about 600 residents. A glimpse of two of them reveals some of the central characteristics of that distant world.

The tiny village of Menucourt was typical of the Vexin region to the north of Paris. It was situated between bends in the Seine and Oise rivers, a few kilometres west of the nearest town, Pontoise, and 35 winding kilometres from Paris. It was a small village: there were just 280 inhabitants in its 70 households (but it had grown from 38 households in 1711). The ‘seigneur’ or lord of the village was Jean-Marie Chassepot de Beaumont, aged 76 in 1789. In 1785 he had successfully applied to the king for authority to establish a ‘livre terrier’ in order to systematize the extensive feudal dues his villagers were reluctant to recognize. The seigneur’s cereal-growing farm dominated the village economically, just as the chateau dominated the squat houses of the villagers. Cultivated fields covered 58 per cent of the 352 hectares of the surface of the tiny parish; forest covered another 26 per cent. Some inhabitants were involved in winegrowing, or in working wood from the chestnut trees to the south of the village into wine barrels and stakes; others quarried stone for new buildings in Rouen and Paris. This market-oriented activity was supplemented by a subsistence economy on small plots of vegetables and fruit-trees (walnuts, apples, pears, plums, cherries), the gathering in the forest of chestnuts and mushrooms, and the milk and meat of 200 sheep and 50 or 60 cows. As in villages everywhere in France, people plied several trades: for example, Pierre Huard ran the local inn and sold bulk wine, but was also the village stonemason.1

Different in almost every way was the village of Gabian, 20 kilometres north of Béziers, near the Mediterranean coastline of Languedoc. Indeed, most people in Gabian could not have communicated with their fellow subjects in Menucourt, for like the mass of the people of Languedoc they spoke Occitan in daily life. Gabian was an important village, with a constant supply of fresh spring water, and since 988 its seigneur had been the bishop of Béziers. Among the dues payable to him were 100 setiers (a setier was about 85 litres) of barley, 28 setiers of wheat, 880 bottles of olive oil, 18 chickens, 4 pounds of bees-wax, 4 partridges, and a rabbit. Reflecting Gabian’s ancient role as a market between mountains and coast, it also had to pay 1 pound of pepper, 2 ounces of nutmeg, and 2 ounces of cloves. Two other seigneurs also had minor claims over its produce. Like Menucourt, Gabian was characterized by the diversity of its polycultural economy, its 770 inhabitants producing most of what they needed on the village’s 1,540 hectares. Whereas Menucourt was linked to wider markets by the timber and quarrying industries, Gabian’s cash economy was based on extensive vineyards and the wool of 1,000 sheep which grazed on the stony hillsides which ringed the village. A score of weavers of the sheep’s wool worked for merchants from the textile town of Bédarieux to the north.2

The monarchy had long sought to impose linguistic uniformity on villages like Gabian by requiring priests and lawyers to use French. However, most of the king’s subjects did not use the French language in daily life; indeed, it could be argued that the language almost all French people heard regularly was Latin, on Sunday mornings. Across most of the country French was the daily language only of those involved in administration, commerce, and the professions. Members of the clergy also used it, although they commonly preached in local dialects or languages. Several million people of Languedoc spoke variants of Occitan; Flemish was spoken in the northeast; German in Lorraine. There were minorities of Basques, Catalans, and Celts. These local ‘parlers’—or, more pejoratively, ‘patois’—were infinitely varied within regions. Even in the Île-de-France around Paris there were subtle differences in the French spoken from area to area. When the
Abbé Albert, from Embrun in the southern Alps, travelled through the Auvergne, he discovered that:

I was never able to make myself understood by the peasants I met on the road. I spoke to them in French, I spoke to them in my native patois, I even tried to speak to them in Latin, but all to no avail. When at last I was tired of talking to them without their understanding a word, they in their turn spoke to me in a language of which I could make no more sense.  

The two most important characteristics the inhabitants of eighteenth-century France had in common were that they were the king’s subjects, and that 97 per cent of them were Catholic. France in the 1780s was a society in which people’s deepest sense of identity attached to their particular province or pays. Regional cultures and minority languages and dialects were underpinned by economic strategies which sought to meet the needs of the household within a regional or micro-regional market. The rural economy was essentially a peasant economy: that is, household-based agrarian production which had a primarily subsistence orientation. This complex, polycultural system sought to produce as much as possible of a household’s consumption needs, including clothing.

An insight into this world is provided by Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, born in 1734 in the village of Sacy, on the border of the provinces of Burgundy and Champagne. Restif, who moved to Paris and became notorious for his ribald stories in Le Paysan perverti (1775), wrote of his recollections of Sacy in La Vie de mon père (1779). He recalled the suitable and happy marriage his relative Marguerite was making to Covin, ‘a great joker, well-built, a vain country-bumpkin, the great local story-teller’:

Marguerite had about 120 livres worth of arable land, and Covin had 600 livres worth, some in arable land, some under vines, and some fields dispersed in the grasslands; there were six parts of each type, six of wheat, six of oats or barley, and six fallow... as for the woman, she had the profit of her spinning, the wool of seven or eight sheep, the eggs of a dozen hens, and the milk of a cow, with the butter and cheese she could extract from it... Covin was also a weaver, and his wife had some domestic work; her lot in consequence must have been pleasant enough.

Urban people commonly referred to the rural population as ‘pay-sans’, that is, ‘people of the land’. However, this simple term—like its English counterpart ‘peasant’—disguises the complexities of rural society which were to be revealed in the varied behaviour of rural people during the Revolution. Farm labourers were as much as half the population in areas of large-scale agriculture like the Île-de-France around Paris. In most regions, however, the bulk of the population were either smallholders, tenant-farmers, or sharecroppers, many of whom were also reliant on practising a craft or on wage-work. In all rural communities there was a minority of larger farmers, often dubbed the coqs du village, who were large tenant-farmers (fermiers) or landowners (laboureurs). Larger villages also had a minority of people—priests, lawyers, artisans, textile-workers—who were not peasants at all, but who commonly owned some land, such as the vegetable garden belonging to the priest. The peasantry made up about four-fifths of the ‘Third Estate’ or ‘commoners’ but across the country it owned only about 40 per cent of the land outright. This varied from about 17 per cent in the Mauges region of western France to 64 per cent in the Auvergne.

Paradoxical as it may seem, rural France was also the centre of most manufacturing. The textile industry in particular was largely based on women’s part-time work in rural areas of Normandy, the Velay, and Picardy. Rural industry of this type was linked to regional specialities centred on provincial towns, such as sheepskin gloves in Millau, ribbons in St-Étienne, lace in Le Puy and silk in Lyons. A recent study of rural industry by Liana Vardi focuses on Montigny, a community of about 600 people in the 1780s located in the northern region of Cambrai, only part of France since 1677. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, its population of essentially subsistence landowners and tenants had been one-third that size. Across the eighteenth century, large owners and tenants monopolized the land, increasingly specializing in corn; the middling and small peasants instead found spinning and weaving linen the answer to poverty and land-hunger.

A flourishing if vulnerable rural industry in Montigny was based on merchants ‘putting out’ spinning and weaving to rural households. In turn, the textile industry provided the incentive for farmers to increase crop yields substantially to feed an increasing population. A key role was played by middlemen, merchant-weavers from places like Montigny who mortgaged small family holdings to join the rush to be rich. These people remained rural in their links and economic
strategies at the same time as they demonstrated a remarkable entrepreneurial ability and enthusiasm.

However, Montigny was an exceptional case. Most of rural France was a place of unremitting manual labour by tillers of the soil. A rural world in which households engaged in a highly complex occupational strategy to secure their own subsistence could inevitably expect only low yields for grain crops grown in unsuitable or exhausted soil. The dry and stony soils of a southern village like Gabian were no more suited to growing grain crops than the heavy, damp soils of Normandy: in both places, however, a large proportion of arable land was set aside for grain to meet local needs. Consequently most rural communities had restricted ‘surpluses’ which could be marketed to substantial towns. Far more important to most peasants were nearby small towns or bourgeois, whose weekly, monthly, or annual market-fairs were as much an occasion for the collective rituals of local cultures as for the exchange of produce.

Rural communities consumed so much of what they produced—and vice versa—that towns and cities faced both chronic problems of food supply and a limited rural demand for their goods and services. However, although only 20 per cent of French people lived in urban communities, in a European context France was remarkable for the number and size of its cities and towns. There were eight cities with more than 50,000 people (Paris was easily the biggest, with perhaps as many as 700,000 people, then Lyons, Marseilles, Bordeaux, Nantes, Lille, Rouen, and Toulouse), and another seventy with 10,000–40,000. These cities and towns all had examples of large-scale manufacturing involved in an international trading framework, but most were dominated by artisan-type craftwork for the needs of the urban population itself and the immediate hinterland, and by a range of administrative, judicial, ecclesiastical, and policing functions. They were provincial capitals: only one person in forty lived in Paris, and communication between the capital Versailles and the rest of its territory was usually slow and uncertain. The size and topography of the country was a constant impediment to the rapid movement of instructions, laws, and goods (see Map 1). However, improvements to roads after 1750 meant that no city in France was more than fifteen days from the capital; coaches travelling at 90 kilometres a day could in five days bring travellers from Paris to Lyons, with 145,000 inhabitants France’s second largest city.

Like many other cities, Paris was ringed by a wall, largely for the collection of customs duties on goods imported into the city. Within the walls were a number of faubourgs or suburbs, each with its distinctive mix of migrant population and trades. Paris was typical of France’s major cities in its occupational structure: it was still dominated by skilled, artisanal production despite the emergence of a number of large-scale industries. Some of the most important of the latter were in the faubourg St-Antoine, where Réveillon’s wallpaper factory employed 350 people and the brewer Santerre had 800 workers. In the western neighbourhoods of the city, the building industry was booming as the well-to-do constructed imposing residences away from the teeming medieval quarters of the central city. However, most Parisians continued to live in congested streets in central neighbourhoods near the river, where the population was vertically segregated in tenement buildings: often, wealthy bourgeois or even nobles would occupy the first and second floors above shops and workplaces, with their domestic servants, artisans, and the poor inhabiting the upper floors and garrets. As in rural communities, the Catholic Church was a constant presence: there were 140 convents and monasteries in Paris (housing 1,000 monks and 2,500 nuns) and 1,200 parish clergy. The Church owned one-quarter of the city’s property.

Paris was dominated by small workshops and retail shops: there were thousands of small enterprises employing on average three or four people. In skilled trades, a hierarchy of masters controlled the entry of journeymen, who had qualified by presenting their masterpiece (chef d’œuvre) on completion of their tour de France through provincial centres specializing in their trade. This was a world in which small employers and wage-earners were bonded by deep knowledge of their trade and of each other, and where skilled workers were identified by their trade as well as by whether they were masters or workers. Contemporaries referred to the working people of Paris as the ‘common people’ (messe peuple): they were not a working class. Nevertheless, frustrations between workers and their masters were evident in trades where entry to a mastership was difficult; in some industries, such as printing, the introduction of new machines was threatening the skills of journeymen and apprentices. In 1776 skilled
wage-earners had rejoiced at the prospect of the abolition of guilds and the chance of establishing their own workshops, but the project was suspended; then in 1781 a system of livrets, or workers’ passbooks, was introduced, strengthening the hand of masters at the expense of fractious employees.

Social relations focused on the neighbourhood and the workplace as much as the family. Large cities like Paris, Lyons, and Marseilles were characterized by tightly packed, medieval centres where most families occupied no more than one or two rooms: most of the routines associated with eating and leisure were public activities. Historians have documented the use made of streets and other public spaces by working women to settle domestic disputes as well as issues to do with rents and food prices. Men in skilled trades found their own solidarities in compagnonnages, illegal but tolerated brotherhoods of workers which acted to protect work routines and wages and to provide outlets for leisure and aggression after working days of 14–16 hours. One of these workers, Jacques-Louis Ménétre, recalled later in life his apprenticeship as a glazier before the Revolution, in a rebellious milieu of compagnons which relished obscene pranks, casual sex, and ritualized violence with other brotherhoods. However, Ménétre also claimed to have read Rousseau’s Contrat social, Émile and La Nouvelle Héloïse and even to have met their author.

Provincial cities were often dominated by specific industries, such as textiles in Rouen and Elbeuf. Smaller, newer urban centres had sprung up around large iron foundries and coal mines, such as at Le Creusot, Niederbronn, and Anzin, where 4,000 workers were employed. However, it was particularly in the Atlantic ports where a booming colonial trade with the Caribbean colonies was developing a capitalist economic sector in shipbuilding and in processing colonial goods, as in Bordeaux, where the population expanded from 67,000 to 110,000 between 1750 and 1790. This was a triangular trade between Europe, North America, and Africa, exporting wines and spirits from ports such as Bordeaux to England and importing colonial produce such as sugar, coffee, and tobacco. One leg of the trade involved scores of purpose-built slave-ships which carried a human cargo from the west coast of Africa to colonies such as St-Domingue. There as many as 465,500 slaves worked in a plantation economy controlled by 31,000 whites according to the rules of the Code Noir of 1685. The code laid down rules for the ‘correct’ treatment of the slave-owners’ property, while denying slaves any legal or family rights: slaves’ children were the property of the slave-owner. In 1784 there were 143 ships actively engaged in the slave trade: 48 of them from Nantes, 37 each from La Rochelle and Le Havre, 13 from Bordeaux, and several from Marseilles, St-Malo, and Dunkerque. In Nantes, the slave-trade represented 20–25 per cent of the traffic of the port in the 1780s, in Bordeaux 8–15 per cent and in La Rochelle as much as 58 per cent in 1786. Across the century from 1707, these slave-ships had made more than 3,300 voyages, 42 per cent of them from Nantes: their trade was essential to the great economic boom of the Atlantic ports in the eighteenth century.

However, most middle-class families drew their income and status from more traditional forms of activity, such as the law and other professions, the royal administration, and from investment in property. Perhaps 15 per cent of rural property was owned by such bourgeois. While the nobility dominated the most prestigious positions in the administration, its lower ranks were staffed by the middle classes. The royal administration at Versailles was tiny, with only about 670 employees, but across a network of provincial cities and towns it employed many thousands more in courts, public works, and government. For bourgeois who had substantial means, there were no more attractive and respectable investments than low-return, secure government bonds or land and seigneurialism. The latter, in particular, offered the hope of social status and even marriage into the nobility. By the 1780s as many as one-fifth of the seigneurs in the countryside around Le Mans were of bourgeois background.

Eighteenth-century France was characterized by the multiplicity of links between town and country. In provincial towns, in particular, bourgeois owned extensive rural property from which they drew rent from peasant farmers; in turn, domestic service for bourgeois families was a major source of employment for young rural women. Less fortunate girls worked as prostitutes or in charity workshops. Another important link between town and country involved the practice of working women in cities such as Lyons and Paris sending their babies to rural areas for wet-nursing, often for several years. Babies had a greater chance of survival in the countryside, but one-third would die while in the care of the wet-nurse (conversely, the glazier
Jacques-Louis Ménestra’s mother had died while he was in the care of a rural wet-nurse. A human trade of another kind involved scores of thousands of men from highland areas with a long ‘dead season’ in winter who migrated to towns seasonally or for years at a time to look for work. The men left behind what has been called a ‘matricentric’ society, where women tended livestock and produced textile fabrics.

However, the most important link between urban and rural France was the supply of foodstuffs, particularly grain. This was a link which was often strained by competing demands of urban and rural consumers. In normal times urban wage-earners spent 40–60 per cent of their income on bread alone. As prices rose during years of shortage, so did the tension between urban populations dependent on cheap and plentiful bread and the poorer sections of the rural community, threatened by local merchants seeking to export grain to lucrative urban markets. Twenty-two of the years between 1765 and 1789 were marked by food riots, either in popular urban neighbourhoods where women in particular sought to impose taxation populaire to hold prices at customary levels, or in rural areas where peasants banded together to prevent scarce supplies from being sent away to market. In many areas tension over the food supply aggravated suspicion of large towns as parasitic on rural toil, for elites in the Church and nobility drew their wealth from the countryside and consumed it ostentatiously in towns. In the process, however, they created work for townspeople and the promise of charity for the poor.

Eighteenth-century France was a land of mass poverty in which most people were vulnerable to harvest failure. It is this which explains what historians have called the ‘demographic equilibrium’, in which very high birth rates (about 4.5 per hundred people) were almost matched by high mortality rates (about 3.5). Men and women married late: usually between 26 and 29 and 24 and 27 years respectively. Especially in devout areas, where couples were less likely to avoid conception by coitus interruptus, women conceived as often as once every twenty months. Across much of the country, however, as many as one-half of all children died of infantile diseases and malnutrition before the age of 5. In Gabian, for example, there were 253 deaths in the 1780s, 134 of them of children younger than 5 years.

While old age was not unknown—in 1783 three octogenarians and two nonagenarians were buried—the average life-expectancy of those who survived infancy was just 50 years.

After 1750 a long series of adequate harvests disturbed the demographic equilibrium: the population increased from perhaps 24.5 million to 28 million by the 1780s. However, the vulnerability of this increasing population was not simply a function of the ever-present threat of harvest failure. It was the rural population above all which underwrote the costs of the three pillars of authority and privilege in eighteenth-century France: the Church, nobility, and monarchy. Together, the two privileged orders and the monarchy exacted on average one-quarter to one-third of peasant produce, through taxes, seigneurial dues, and the tithe.

The 169,500 members of the clergy (the First Estate of the realm) made up 0.6 per cent of the population. Their calling divided them between the 81,500 ‘regular’ clergy (26,500 monks and 55,000 nuns) in religious orders and the 59,500 ‘secular’ clergy (39,000 priests or curés and 20,500 curates or vicaires) who ministered to the spiritual needs of lay society. There were several other types of ‘lay’ clergy. In social terms the Church was sharply hierarchical. The most lucrative positions as heads of religious orders (often held in absentia) and as bishops and archbishops were dominated by the nobility: the archbishop of Strasbourg had a stipend of 450,000 livres per year. Although the minimum annual salaries of priests and curates were raised to 750 and 300 livres respectively in 1786, such stipends made them little more comfortable than most of their parishioners.

The Church drew its wealth largely from a tithe (usually 8–10 per cent) imposed on farm produce at harvest, bringing in an estimated 150 million livres each year, and from extensive landholding by religious orders and cathedrals. From this was paid in many dioceses a portion congrue or stipend to parish clergy, which they supplemented by the charges they levied for special services such as marriages and masses said for departed souls. In all, the First Estate owned perhaps 10 per cent of the land of France, reaching up to 40 per cent in the Cambresis, on which the dues and rents it levied accounted for up to 130 million livres annually. In provincial towns and cities, parish clergy and nuns and monks in ‘open’ orders were a frequent sight: about 600 of the 12,000 inhabitants of Chartres, for example, were religious personnel. In many provincial cities, the Church was also a
major proprietor: in Angers, for example, it owned three-quarters of urban property. Here, as elsewhere, it was a major source of local employment for domestic servants, skilled artisans, and lawyers meeting the needs of the 600 clergy resident in a town of 34,000 people: clerks, carpenters, cooks, and cleaners depended on them, as did the lawyers who ran the Church’s fifty-three legal courts for the prosecution of rural defaulters on tithes and rents on its vast estates. The Benedictine abbey of Ronceray owned five manors, twelve barns and wineries, six mills, forty-six farms, and six houses in the countryside around Angers, bringing in to the town 27,000 livres annually.

Many male religious orders were moribund by the 1780s: Louis XV had closed 458 religious houses (with just 509 religious personnel) before his death in 1774, and the recruitment of monks declined by one-third in the two decades after 1770. Female orders were stronger, such as the Sisters of Charity in Bayeux who provided food and shelter to hundreds of impoverished women through extensive lace-works. Throughout rural France, however, the parish clergy were at the heart of the community: as a source of spiritual comfort and inspiration, as a counsellor in time of need, as a dispenser of charity, as an employer, and as a source of news of the outside world. During the winter months, it was the parish priest who provided the rudiments of an education, although perhaps only one man in ten and one woman in fifty could have read the Bible. In areas of dispersed habitat, such as in parts of the Massif Central or the west, it was at Sunday mass where the inhabitants of outlying farms and hamlets felt a sense of community. In the west parishioners and clergy decided on the full range of local matters after mass in what have been described as tiny theocracies. Even here, however, education was of marginal importance: in the devout western parish of Lucs-Vendée only 21 per cent of bridegrooms could sign the marriage register, and only 1.5 per cent in a way that suggests a degree of literacy. Most Parisians could at least read, but rural France was essentially an oral society.

The Catholic Church enjoyed a monopoly of public worship, even though geographically segregated Jewish communities, in all 40,000 people, preserved a strong sense of identity in Bordeaux, the Comtat-Venaissin and Alsace, as did the approximately 700,000 Protestants in parts of the east and the Massif Central. Memories of the religious wars and intolerance following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 remained powerful: the people of Pont-de-Montvert, in the heartland of the Protestant Cathars rising in 1700, had an army garrison and a Catholic seigneur (the Knights of Malta) to remind them daily of their subjection. However, while 97 per cent of French people were nominally Catholic, levels of both religiosity (the external observance of religious practices, such as attendance at Easter mass) and spirituality (the importance that individuals accorded to such practices) varied across the country. The substance of spirituality is, of course, largely beyond the reach of the historian; however, the decline in faith in some areas at least is suggested by increasing numbers of brides who were pregnant (from 6.2 to 10.1 per cent across the century) and a decline in priestly vocations (the number of new recruits declined by 23 per cent across the years 1749–89).

Catholicism was strongest in the west and Brittany, along the Pyrenees, and in the southern Massif Central, regions characterized by a strong clerical recruitment of boys from local families well integrated into their communities and cultures. In the west, too, priestly stipends were far higher than the requisite minimum; moreover, this was one of the few parts of the country where the tithe was paid to the local clergy rather than to the diocese, hence facilitating the capacity of priests to minister to all the needs of the parish. Everywhere, the most devout parishioners were more likely to be older, female, and rural. The theology to which they were exposed was marked by a ‘Tridentine’ mistrust of worldly pleasures, by emphasis on priestly authority, and by a powerful imagery of the punishments awaiting the lax when they passed beyond the grave. Yves-Michel Marchais, the curé of the devout parish of Lachapelle-du-Génet in the west, preached that ‘Everything that might be called an act of impurity or an illicit action of the flesh, when done of one’s own free will, is intrinsically evil and almost always a mortal sin, and consequently grounds for exclusion from the Kingdom of God.’ Once excluded, sinners were left in no doubt about the punishments which awaited them by preachers such as Father Bredine, a veteran of 256 missions:

Cruel famine, bloody war, flood, fire . . . raging toothache, the stabbing pain of gout, the convulsions of epilepsy, burning fever, broken bones . . . all the tortures undergone by the martyrs: sharp swords, iron combs, the teeth of lions and tigers, the rack, the wheel, the cross, red-hot grills, burning oil, melted lead . . .”
The elite positions in the Catholic Church were dominated by members of the Second Estate or nobility. Historians have never agreed on the numbers of nobles in eighteenth-century France, in part because of the numbers of commoners claiming noble status in an attempt to obtain the positions, privileges, and standing which were beyond the reach of wealth alone. Recent estimates have suggested that there may have been no more than 25,000 noble families or 125,000 individual nobles, perhaps 0.4 per cent of the population.

As an order, the nobility drew on several sources of corporate wealth and power: fiscal and seigneurial privileges, the status which went with insignia of eminence, and exclusive employment in a range of official positions. However, like the First Estate, the nobility was characterized by great internal diversity. The poorest provincial nobles (hobereaux) on their country estates had little in common with the several thousand courtiers at Versailles or the magistrates of the high courts (parlements) and senior administrators, even though their noble status was usually far more ancient than that of those who had bought a title or been ennobled for their administrative services (noblesse de robe). Entry of a son into a military academy and the promise of a career as an officer was one of the favoured ways in which provincial nobles preserved status and economic security. Their standing within the army was buttressed by the 1781 Ségur ordinance requiring four generations of nobility for army officers. Within the elite of the nobility (les Grands), boundaries of family and wealth were further fractured by intricate hierarchies of position and prerogative; for example, between those who had been formally presented at court, those permitted to sit on a footstool in the queen’s presence, and those allowed to ride in her carriage. What all nobles had in common, however, was a vested interest in a highly complex system of status and hierarchy from which came material privilege and preferment.10

Most nobles also drew a significant proportion of their wealth from the land. While the Second Estate owned outright perhaps one-third of the land of France, it exerted seigneurial rights over most of the rest. The most important of these rights was regular payment of a harvest due (champart, censive or tasse) on the major crops produced on all land within the seigneurie; this was normally between one-twelfth and one-sixth, but up to one-quarter in parts of Brittany and central France. It was bolstered by other significant rights, such as a monopoly (banalité) over the village oven, grape and olive presses, and mill; financial levies on land transfers and even on marriages; and the requirement of unpaid labour by the community on the lord’s lands at harvest time. It has been estimated that the value of such dues was as high as 70 per cent of noble income in the Rouergue (where the champart took one-quarter of peasant produce) and as low as 8 per cent in the neighbouring region of the Lauragais to the south.

The solution to the paradox of how an essentially peasant society could sustain so many substantial towns and cities lies in the functions of these provincial centres in the eighteenth century. In an important sense, inland towns were dependent on the countryside, for the bulk of the seigneurial dues, rents, tithes, and fees collected by the elite of the first two estates of the realm were spent in urban centres. For example, the cathedral chapter of Cambrai drew its wealth from its properties in villages like Montigny, where it owned 46 per cent of the total area in 1754. It was also the seigneur of the village, though this was a region where the feudal regime weighed relatively lightly.

Rural people were born into a world marked by physical statements of the sources of authority and status. Everywhere the parish church and chateau dominated the built environment and recalled the duties of commoners to labour and defer. While seigneurs were less likely to reside on their estates by the 1780s than earlier in the century, they continued to exercise a maze of prerogatives reinforcing the community’s subordinate position, whether by reserving a pew in the parish church, wearing a weapon in public, or naming the village officials. We cannot know the extent to which the deference on which they insisted was a sincere recognition of their eminence; certainly, however, there were repeated instances of peasant animosity which made members of the elite despair. In Provence, for example, local communities were required to respect a death in the seigneur’s family by refraining from public festivals for a year. Here a bereaved noble complained that, on the day of the patron saint’s festival in the village of Sausse in 1768, ‘people had beaten drums, fired muskets and danced the whole day and part of the night, with a remarkable éclat and conceit.’11
Eighteenth-century France was a society of corporations, in which privilege was integral to social hierarchy, wealth, and individual identity. That is, people were members of social orders born of a medieval conception of a world where people had duties to pray, to fight or to work. This was an essentially fixed or static vision of the social order which did not correspond with other measures of personal worth, such as wealth. The Third Estate, about 99 per cent of the population, included all commoners from beggars to the wealthiest financiers. The first two estates were internally united by privileges belonging to their estate, and by their vision of their social functions and identity, but they, too, were divided internally by differences of status and wealth. In particular, at the summit of every form of privilege—legal, fiscal, occupational, regional—was the noble elite of the first two estates or orders. These ancient and immensely wealthy noble families at the pinnacle of power shared a conception of social and political authority which they expressed through ostentatious display in their dress, dwellings and consumption of luxuries.

The First and Second Estates were privileged corporations; that is, the monarchy had long recognized their privileged status through, for example, separate law codes for their members and tax exemptions. The Church paid only a voluntary contribution (don gratuit) to the state, usually no more than 3 per cent of its income, by decision of its governing synod. Nobles were generally exempt from direct taxation except for the modest vingtième surcharge imposed in 1749. However, relations between the privileged orders and the monarch—the third pillar of French society—were based on mutual dependence and negotiation. The king was head of the Gallican Church, which had a certain measure of autonomy from Rome, but in turn was dependent on the goodwill of the personnel of the Church for maintaining the legitimacy of his regime. In return the Catholic Church enjoyed a monopoly of public worship and moral codes. Similarly, in return for the obedience and deference of his fellow nobles, the king accepted that they would be at the pinnacle of every institution, from the Church to the armed forces, from the judiciary to his own administration. Jacques Necker, a Genevan banker who was Finance Minister 1777–81 and Principal Minister from 1788, was Louis XVI's only non-noble member of cabinet.

The king’s residence at Versailles was the most imposing physical statement of power in eighteenth-century France. His state bureaucracy was, however, both small in size and limited in function to internal order, foreign policy, and trade. There were only six named ministries, and three were devoted to Foreign Affairs, War, and the Navy; the others were concerned with Finances, Justice, and the Royal Household. Much of the collection of taxes was 'farmed out' to private fermiers-généraux. Most important, every aspect of the institutional structures of public life—in administration, customs and measures, the law, taxation, and the Church—borne the imprint of privilege and historical accretion across seven centuries of territorial expansion by the monarchy. The price the monarchy had paid as it expanded its territory since the eleventh century had been to recognize the special 'rights' and 'privileges' of new 'provinces'. Indeed, the kingdom included an extensive enclave—Avignon and the Comtat-Venaissin—which had continued to belong to the papacy since its fourteenth-century exile there.

The constitution by which the king governed France was customary, not written. Essential to it was that Louis was king of France by the grace of God, and that he was responsible to God alone for the well-being of his subjects. The royal line was Catholic and passed only through the oldest sons (the Salic Law). The king was head of the executive: he appointed ministers, diplomats, and senior officials, and had the power to declare war and peace. However, since the high courts or parlements had the responsibility of registering the king's decrees, they had increasingly assumed the right to do more than vet them for juridical correctness; rather, the parlements insisted that their 'remonstrances' could also defend subjects against violations of their privileges and rights unless the king chose to use a lit de justice to impose his will.

The historic compromises which French monarchs had had to make in order to guarantee the acquiescence of newly acquired provinces across several centuries was manifest in the complicated tax arrangements across the country. The major direct tax, the taille, varied between provinces and some towns had bought their way out of it entirely. The major indirect tax, the gabelle on salt, varied from over 60 livres per 72 litres to just 1 livre 10 sous. Olwen Hufton has described bands of ostensibly pregnant women smuggling salt from
Brittany, the lowest taxed area, eastwards into areas of high taxation in order to profit from clandestine sales of this necessity.\footnote{25}

In administration, too, the keywords were exception and exemption. The fifty-eight provinces of eighteenth-century France were grouped for administrative purposes into 33 généralités (see Map 2). These units varied enormously in size and rarely coincided with the territory covered by archdioceses. Moreover, the powers the king’s chief administrators (intendants) could exercise varied considerably. Some of the généralités, known as the pays d’état (such as Brittany, Languedoc and Burgundy), claimed a measure of autonomy, for example, in the apportionment of taxation, which other areas, the pays d’élection, did not. Dioceses ranged in size and wealth from the archdiocese of Paris to the ‘évêchés crottés’ or ‘muddy bishoprics’, tiny sees which were the result of political agreements in earlier centuries, particularly in the south during the fourteenth-century exile of the papacy to Avignon.

The map of France’s administrative and ecclesiastical boundaries did not coincide with that of the high courts (parlements and conseil souverains). The parlement of Paris exercised power over half the country, whereas the conseil souverain of Arras had only a tiny local jurisdiction. Commonly, the centre of administration, the archdiocese, and the judicial capital were located in different cities within the same province. Moreover, cutting across all these boundaries was an ancient division between the written or Roman law of the south and the customary law of the north. On either side of this divide were tens of local law codes; the clergy and nobility, of course, had their own specific codes as well.

Those involved in trade and the professions complained of the difficulties created for their businesses by the multiplicity of legal jurisdictions and codes. Further obstacles were posed by the multiplicity of systems of currency, weights, and measures—there was no commonality in measures of size or volume across the kingdom—and by internal customs houses. Nobles and towns imposed their own tolls (pâtes) as produce moved across rivers and canals. In 1664 much of northern France had formed a customs union; but there were customs houses between it and the rest of the country, though not always between border provinces and the rest of Europe. It was easier for eastern provinces to trade with Prussia than with Paris.

Every aspect of public life in eighteenth-century France was marked by regional diversity and exceptionalism, and the continuing strength of local cultures. The institutional structures of the monarchy and the corporate powers of the Church and nobility were everywhere complicated by local practices, exemptions and loyalties. The Corbières region of Languedoc provides an example of this institutional complexity and of the limitations on the control of the monarchy over daily life. Here was a geographically well-defined area whose 129 parishes all spoke Occitan with the exception of three Catalan villages on its southern border. Yet the region was divided for administrative, ecclesiastical, judicial, and taxing purposes between offices in Carcassonne, Narbonne, Limoux, and Perpignan. The boundaries of these institutions were not consistent: for example, neighbouring villages administered from Perpignan were in different dioceses. Across the Corbières, there were ten different volumes for which the term settier was used (normally about 85 litres), and no fewer than fifty different measures of area: the sétèrèe ranged from just 0.16 hectares on the lowlands to 0.51 in highland areas.

Voltaire and other reformers campaigned against what they saw as the intolerance and cruelty of the judicial system, most famously in the case of the torturing and execution in 1762 of the Toulouse Protestant Jean Calas, condemned for allegedly killing his son to prevent him from converting to Catholicism. The system of punishments which Voltaire and others castigated was a manifestation of the regime’s need to instil control of its large, diverse kingdom through intimidation and awe. Physical punishments were severe and often spectacular. In 1783, a defrocked Capucin monk accused of sexually assaulting a boy and stabbing his victim seventeen times was broken on the wheel and burned alive in Paris; two beggars from the Auvergne were broken on the wheel in 1778 for threatening a victim with a sword and rifle. In all, 19 per cent of the cases before the Prevoatal Court in Toulouse in 1773-90 resulted in public execution (reaching 30.7 per cent in 1783) and as many again to life imprisonment in naval prisons.

However, to most contemporaries the monarchy of Louis XVI appeared the most stable and powerful of regimes. While protest was endemic—whether in the form of food-rioting or of complaints about the presumptions of the privileged—this was almost always within
the system: that is, against threats to idealized ways in which the system was believed to have once worked. Indeed, during the most extensive popular unrest in the years prior to 1789—the ‘Flour War’ in northern France in 1775—rioters shouted that they were lowering the price of bread to its customary price of 2 sous per pound ‘in the name of the king’, tacit recognition of the king’s responsibility to God for his people’s well-being. By the 1780s, however, a series of long-term changes in French society was undermining some of the fundamental bases of authority and challenging a social order based on privilege and corporations. Deep-seated financial difficulties would further test the capacity for elites to respond to the imperatives of change. An abrupt political crisis would then bring these tensions and problems to the surface.

Notes


7. Jean-Michel Deveaux, La Traite rochefaise (Paris, 1990); Roche, France in the Enlightenment, ch. 5.

8. Among the important studies of the grain trade are Steven Kaplan, Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Flour Trade during the Eighteenth Century (Ithaca, NY, 1984); Cynthia Bouton, The Flour War: Gender, Class, and...
Overview

The first and most obvious change caused by a revolution is the transformation of a nation's political system. It is important to understand the nature of this system because it provides clues about the reasons for the revolution. We should ask what sorts of pressures were being placed on this government and why it was either unwilling or simply unable to make changes that might have saved it.

In France, the political system was an absolute monarchy, in which the King ruled with almost complete personal authority, unaccountable to a parliament. The French monarchy had been progressively formed during the 15th and 16th centuries, but it was forged into a powerful regime during the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715), the 'Sun King'.

Although the power of the monarchy declined slightly during the period of the Regency and the reign of Louis XV, this alone does not explain the sudden crisis and collapse of this regime in 1787–1789. The King's authority was considerable because it was made up of a number of interwoven elements of power. The first of these was the political theory of absolutism itself. The second was its religious support, the belief that the King ruled by the will of God, hence, 'rule by divine right'. The third was the dynastic authority enjoyed by a King who belonged to a long line of rulers from the Bourbon royal family. The fourth was the military authority enjoyed by the King, who was supreme commander of the armed forces. Before a revolution can occur, all of these elements of royal power would have to be seriously weakened.

Flow of chapter

THE 'STRANDS' OF ROYAL AUTHORITY

THEORETICAL

POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Religious Authority

THE LINEAGE OF THE ROYAL FAMILY

DIGNITY AND MAJESTY

LEGITIMACY

PUBLIC PERCEPTION

COMPETENCE

BENEVOLENCE

Common beliefs about the King

The belief that the King can rule well

The King is a loving father of his people

A pure royal bloodline
In a quiet corner of the park at Versailles stands that delightful little pavillon of honey-coloured stone known as the Petit Trianon. Designed for Madame de Pompadour, King Louis XV's entertaining mistress, it had become His Majesty's favourite retreat. He was staying here in April 1774 when it was noticed by the light of a candle as he bent over a table that his cheeks were blotched with red marks, symptoms of smallpox. At sixty-four, with a constitution weakened by excess, he was not expected to recover. With little hope of doing so himself he said that he would like to die where he was. He was advised, however, that the setting was inappropriate. So the doctors wrapped him in a cloak, carried him down to a waiting coach and had him transported back to the palace. And here, in his bedchamber, while priests listened to his confession and his face became swollen and dark, a candle was placed in the window to be snuffed out when he died.

His grandson, who was to succeed him, repeatedly glanced at the candle through the windows of his own room. It was still burning when he went to bed on 9 May. But in the early hours of the following morning the flame was extinguished. The Lord Chamberlain came out into the antechamber known as the Oeil de Boeuf to announce to the courtiers waiting behind the railings, 'Gentlemen, the King is dead.' (1774)

The new King, Louis XVI, was nineteen years old. Although kind and generous by nature, his manner was usually brusque, cold and formal, marked by fits of ill humour and sharp retorts. His Keeper of the Seals had 'never known anyone whose character was more contradicted by outward appearances'. He was 'really good and tender-hearted'. You could 'never speak to him of disasters or accidents to people without seeing a look of compassion come over his face, yet his replies [were] often hard, his tone harsh, his manner unfeeling'. Hesitant, reserved and ungainly, his appearance, too, was unprepossessing. He had clear blue eyes and abundant fair hair, but his mouth was over-full and flabby and his chin was pale and fat.
The French Revolution

He was so short-sighted that he could not recognize anyone at a distance of more than three paces [one of his wife's ladies-in-waiting, the Comtesse de La Tour du Pin, wrote in her memoirs]. He was stout, about five foot six or seven inches tall, square shouldered and with the worst possible bearing. He looked like some peasant shambling along behind his plough. There was nothing in the least stately in his clothes, putting on whatever was offered to him... His sword was a perpetual embarrassment to him.

Possessed of great physical strength, he spent days on end hunting, galloping at reckless speed through his forests after stags and deer, roebuck and boar, but he could never keep his weight down for his appetite for rich food was voracious. Religious and most exact about Mass, he ate nothing between breakfast and supper in Lent, but at other times of the year he indulged himself to the full. It was said that one morning before going down to the stables he had consumed 'four cutlets, a chicken, a plateful of ham, half a dozen eggs in sauce and a bottle and a half of champagne'. Even at his wedding banquet—though he had appeared nervous, embarrassed and gnomically apprehensive at the preceding marriage ceremony—the guests in their tiered boxes in the Salle de Spectacle had seen him put down his head with gusto at the royal family's balustraded table in the centre of the floor. 'You really should not stuff yourself so on a night like this,' his grandfather had admonished him. 'Why not?' he had asked. 'I always sleep better after a good meal.'

He had been fifteen then. His bride, Marie Antoinette, was just over a year younger, though she looked little more than twelve years old. Alert, affectionate, highly strung and wilful, she was the daughter of the formidable Empress Maria-Theresa of Austria who had given birth to her, the fifteenth of her children, in an armchair at the Hofburg and had then almost immediately returned to the examination of her state papers which the labour pains had briefly interrupted. Marie Antoinette had been extremely badly educated but, although she had few interests and was not in the least intellectual, her mind was much sharper and she was far more vivacious. When she had said goodbye to her family — and had been carried away in a vast cavalcade to an island in the Rhine where she had been stripped of all her Austrian clothing in a tent before being handed over naked to the French — she had burst into tears. But on arrival at Versailles she had soon recovered herself. She had found the Dauphin, whom she had been sent to marry, not nearly so 'horrid' as she had feared he might be, and on the day of the wedding she was seen to be looking quite happy and calm. Occasionally she betrayed a hint of nervousness during the service; yet, beside the trembling, blushing figure of her husband, she seemed a model of composure, and, indeed — with her lovely complexion, clear blue eyes and shining fair hair — of beauty.

The Dauphin's nervousness was understandable. Not only had he never known a girl of his own age, but he had been brought up in the belief that attractive women were a danger to the soul. His gloomy, fastidious father, who had died when he was eleven, had pointed out his grandfather's many mistresses to him as representatives of the kind of excess against which he himself must always be on his guard. So had his mother, a kindly, pious woman who had not long outlived her husband. So had his maiden aunts with whom he had spent much of his time after his parents' early death. Nor was it only attractive women against whom he had been warned; he had been taught to beware of the wiles of Austria, France's traditional enemy. A pretty Austrian girl was, therefore, doubly hazardous.

After supper on his wedding night he and his bride were escorted to the Dauphine's bedroom on the ground floor. Watched by numerous courtiers, the Dauphine's ladies ritually removed her jewellery, shoes and dress as custom dictated; the Dauphin then undressed while the King stood ready to hand him his nightshirt. Bride and bridegroom then climbed into the marital bed, whose sheets had been sprinkled with holy water, and were addressed by a bishop with reverentially hopeful prayers. The curtains were then drawn back to reveal the seated couple before being closed again. Soon afterwards the Dauphin went to sleep.

For a long time after their first uneventful night together, the Dauphin did not venture again into his wife's bedroom; and when, eventually, he did so, having overcome his early suspicions and fallen in love with her, it seems from Marie Antoinette's letters to
her mother that he derived as little pleasure from these visits as he was able to give her. It was the stated opinion of the Austrian Ambassador, Comte Florimond Claude de Mercy, who was naturally anxious to blame Louis rather than Marie Antoinette for their failure to have children, that the Dauphin was hampered by a physical deformity. Marie Antoinette's brother, who became Emperor Joseph II on their mother's death, believed, on the contrary, that Louis's 'laziness, clumsiness and apathy were the only obstacles'. 'As for my sister,' he added, 'she is not amorously inclined and when they are together they are a couple of awkward nincompoops.' Certainly Marie Antoinette appears to have been extremely modest; in her bath she wore a flannel shift, buttoned from neck to ankle, and when she emerged she required her maids to hold up a sheet as a screen between her body and her ladies. But there were those who hinted that this modesty was merely the affectation of a fundamentally libidinous nature. It was rumoured not only that the King was impotent but also that the Queen sought her pleasures elsewhere, both with men and with women.

Neither the King nor the Queen was an unpopular figure with the people as a whole in the early years of their marriage; on their first visit to Paris they were warmly welcomed by cheering crowds in streets decorated with flowers and triumphal arches. But pamphlets, at first attacking Marie Antoinette as a meddlesome, troublesome foreigner, then accusing her of adultery and libertinism, had already begun to appear and were soon in wide circulation. Her passionate friendships with the excessively sensitive widow, the Princesse de Lamballe, the Superintendent of her Household — who lost consciousness so readily that she once swooned away at the sight of a lobster in a painting — and with the pretty, high-spirited Duchesse de Polignac, were described in these pamphlets in obscene terms that gave much satisfaction to her enemies. It was said that these two ladies, on whom she lavished money, offices, apartments and gifts, helped her widen 'la porte de Cythère' so that her husband's 'jaunchouart', 'toujours molle et toujours croche', could more easily enter it.

Whatever the difficulties of the young couple may have been, it was not until August 1773, over three years after the marriage and thanks, so some reports had it, to an operation performed on the Dauphin's foreskin, that Marie Antoinette was able to report to her mother, and then rather doubtfully, 'I think our marriage has been consummated.' And a further four years were to pass before she could write more confidently that the marriage had at last been 'parfaitement consommé', that she was 'dans le bonheur le plus essentiel pour toute ma vie'. In the spring of 1778 she discovered herself to be pregnant, and just before Christmas that year, following the accoucheur's announcement, 'The Queen is entering labour', a crowd of Ministers, Court dignitaries and others rushed into her bedroom to witness the delivery, two men clambering on to a sofa to obtain an unobstructed view of the bed, which had been placed near the fire, behind a low screen. So intense was the crush, so hot the room that the Princesse de Lamballe lost consciousness for several hours. For fear lest his wife might suffocate, the King with unaccustomed decision tore off the tapes which hermetically sealed the windows to let in some air. A few moments later, the child, a daughter, was born.

Three other children followed her, a brother in 1781, another brother, the future Louis XVII, in 1785 and a sister in 1786. But, while his family grew, the King's self-assurance did not. He continued hesitant, undignified, clumsy, reticent and self-doubting. He appeared to have no will of his own, to act only under pressure. 'Imagine,' said one of his brothers, 'a handful of oiled ivory balls that you are trying to keep together!' Had he had any choice in the matter he would certainly not have been a king: he once remarked to one of his Ministers who relinquished office, 'How lucky you are! Why can't I resign, too?' Still impressionable and sensitive, his true feelings remained concealed behind a façade at once blunt and severe. As kind-hearted as ever, he could not bring himself to be gracious to his courtiers, to offer them sympathy in grief or illness, to speak to them other than off-handedly or with harsh and tactless banter. He still indulged in horseplay and tiresome practical jokes, trying to trip his pages up with his cordon bleu, making a face and childish running away when his nightgown was handed to him, walking with his breeches hanging around his ankles. Laboriously painstaking, he occupied himself for hours with petty details, minor
In the afternoon the King and Queen sometimes went to a play performed for their benefit in the Salle de Spectacle; and in the evening the Court settled down to play card games, billiards, backgammon or Cavagnole, the King disapproving of—but refraining from objecting to—the high stakes gambled by his wife and his two brothers.

These two extravagant brothers, whose debts the King always paid, were the Comte de Provence, later Louis XVIII, and the Comte d'Artois, later Charles X. Providence, known as Monsieur, was a year younger than the King, an intelligent, sometimes witty, well-read, rather sickly young man with highly expensive tastes and a rigid belief in absolute monarchy. The Comte d'Artois was not so intelligent but much more athletic and dashing, taking a lively interest in women, clothes and race horses. He shared Monsieur's political views and was to be much given to declaiming his wish to fight for the monarchy, to draw 'the sword of his fathers'. The King was ill advised by both of them and trusted neither.

Marie Antoinette was as extravagant and as indulged by her husband as were her brothers-in-law. In the early days of their marriage, according to the Austrian Ambassador, there had been frequent squabbles between husband and wife. She had objected in particular to his passion for hunting and to his eating so much at hunt suppers at which he was led astray by his grandfather and his grandfather's sensual, grasping mistress—Madame de Pompadour's successor—the former prostitute, Madame Du Barry. After her husband had suffered from a particularly bad attack of indigestion, Marie Antoinette evidently had all the dishes containing pastry removed from his table and peremptorily forbade any more pastry to be served until further notice.

Other observers besides de Mercy had attributed Marie Antoinette's pert and saucy behaviour to her husband's failings as a lover. Insecure and dissatisfied, she seemed to go out of her way to shock and surprise. She did not attempt to conceal her impatience with the ridiculousness of Court protocol which required, for instance, that when she was being dressed in the morning her chemise had to be handed to her by her Dame d'honneur or, if a royal Princess were in the room, the chemise must first be passed to the Princess before
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being passed to the Queen. Once, when the dressing ceremony was about to begin, there was a scratch at the door and the Duchesse d'Orléans was admitted. The chemise was, therefore, passed to her for presentation to the Queen; but before the Queen could take it another scratch announced the entry of the Comtesse d'Artois who had precedence over the Duchesse. The Duchesse could not, however, hand it directly to the Comtesse but had to pass it first through the hands of the dame d'honneur. While these movements were being performed, with appropriately stylized emphases, the Queen stood shivering in the cold and draughty room, murmuring to herself in the German accent which she never entirely lost, 'C'est odieux!'

It was further held against the Queen that she made no attempt to disguise the feelings which were always reflected in the expressions that fleeted across her pretty face. If she felt like laughing she laughed. If she felt like teasing the King she did tease the 'poor man' as she called him. If the mood took her to throw her hat into a lake she did so. She thought it absurd that it was considered impolite to clap musicians and dancers at royal performances, so she applauded them. She considered it preposterous that she should always be expected to be driven about by a coachman, so she bought a cabriolet and drove it herself, extremely fast. She called one of the senior and most stal of the Court ladies, the Comtesse de Noailles, to whom a pin misplaced on a gown was a tragedy, 'Madame l'Étiquette.' And on one celebrated occasion when she fell off a donkey she laughingly refused to be helped to her feet. 'Leave me on the ground,' she said. 'We must wait for Madame l'Étiquette!' She will show us the right way to get up having fallen off a donkey.'

She was often bored and even more often frightened of being bored. 'To escape the terrible obsession,' she said, 'I must have bustle; I must have endless change.' She could not bear to be still. She played with children and dogs; she dressed up in a plain muslin dress, net fichu and straw hat and pretended to be a dairymaid in the miniature village she had built at enormous cost in the grounds of the Trianon; she took part in amateur theatricals; she arranged and rearranged the flowers in her room; she went to horse-races and to

Prologue

balls; she did embroidery and frustratedly put the silks and canvas down to play the clavichord, then left that to gamble. Looking for a part to play in life, she became a patron of the opera and of the ballet; she became a leader of fashion, rejecting the elaborate dresses of her day and choosing to wear those simple and natural clothes which so well suited her, buying three or four new dresses every week, and spending far more than her allowance permitted, turning to the King to supplement it and never turning in vain.

Indulgent as the King was towards her, however, and influenced as he was by her opinions, the King did not allow the Queen to interfere as meddlersomely in affairs of state as public opinion was led to suppose and her own naturally proud and authoritative nature seemed to suggest. Once, when she came into his room while he was working on some official papers, he said to her quietly but firmly, 'Madame, I have business to attend to.'

At the beginning of his reign he had called upon the services of the clever, witty Comte Jean-Frédéric de Maurepas, a former Minister who had been appointed Secretary for the Navy at the age of fourteen but who, having offended Madame de Pompadour, had been dismissed from office and had spent the past twenty-five years on his country estate. With the guidance of Maurepas, and of Maurepas's intimate friend and confessor, the Abbé Joseph Alphonse de Véri, Louis had gradually and nervously replaced his grandfather's Ministers with others more efficient and honest, including Anne-Robert Turgot, Baron de Laune, whom in 1774 he appointed Controller General of Finances. He had also decided to recall the parlements including the ancient Paris parlement.

This parlement, quite unlike the Parliament which had developed across the Channel, was one of thirteen appeal courts which had assumed the right of registering laws, principally royal edicts connected with taxation, but which aspired to the right of veto as well as of registration. Its jurisdiction covered about ten million people in northern France and since its influence was so much greater than the other provincial parlements, which were inclined to follow its lead in remonstrating against edicts its members disliked, it was usually referred to simply as parlement. Its members were far from being representative of the people as a whole. Their predecessors had been
France under Louis XVI

The king of France needed no coronation. He reigned by the grace of God. From the moment his predecessor breathed his last, and a coronation was purely customary, so the argument was heard, even in the highest circles, that the elaborate consecration of Louis XVI, arranged for 21 June 1775 in the traditional setting of Rheims cathedral, was a waste of public money. A month beforehand, the countryside around Paris, and many districts of the city, had been shaken by rioting against high flour and bread prices. The disturbances led to talk of postponing the ceremony, and the approaches to Rheims were ringed with precautionary troops. And far fewer people than expected made the journey to the capital of Champagne to witness the historic spectacle. Innkeepers complained of unlet rooms, and caterers of wasted supplies. But when, that brilliant morning, the cathedral doors were flung open to reveal the young monarch crowned and enthroned in glory, invested with the sceptre of Charlemagne and anointed with the holy oil of Clovis, men broke down and wept despite themselves.

The son of St Louis, the Most Christian King of France and Navarre, had sworn that day to uphold the peace of the Church, prevent disorder, impose justice, exterminate heretics, maintain forever the prerogatives of the Order of the Holy Spirit, and pardon no duellist. Three days later, in the summer heat, he ritually touched 2,400 stinking sufferers from scrofula, the disfiguring disease believed by countless generations to be curable through the miraculous touch of an anointed king. And all this still left him time to write letters to his 74-year-old chief minister, who had remained at Versailles; and to resist the attempts of an empty-headed queen to have her favourites given office. Court intrigues could not be expected to stop merely because the king was being crowned. And so the ceremonies that Louis XVI observed that week, the motions he went through, were a strange blend of momentous and trivial, significant, and purely formal, meaningful and empty. The powers he exercised, the promises he made, the regalia he wore, all resulted from a long, tortuous, and often haphazard evolution. Few knew or remembered why things had to be the way they were. And this was typical of the kingdom over which he had ruled since 1677.
The Coronation of Louis XVI from the Gazette of France (1775)

These two articles from the official newspaper of the day describe the coronation of Louis XVI at Reims, the city to which French kings had traveled to be anointed and crowned for a thousand years. Note the seriousness with which all the King's movements are described and how solemnly this ritual was taken—even though it no longer held its original meaning—demonstrating the consent of all three orders of French society to be ruled by their new King. Actually, the new King had already begun to govern France ten months earlier, upon the death of his predecessor.

Friday, 16 June 1775

While traveling from Compiègne to Frismes—where His Majesty spent the night on 8 June—, the King received the most dazzling, the most sincere and already the most deserved proof of love from His Peoples. The King left Frismes on 9 June to go to the City of Reims, and He arrived there in a ceremonial coach, accompanied by Monsieur, Monseigneur the Count of Artois, the Duke of Orléans, the Duke of Chartres, and the Prince of Condé. After the Duke of Bourbon, Governor of Champagne, gave him the keys of the city, the King entered Reims escorted by the troops of the royal household and made his way through a People intoxicated with joy—which did not decrease but rather intensified as the procession moved along. His Majesty entered the metropolitan church, where he was greeted by the Archbishop-Duke of Reims—who was at the head of his Chapter—and listened to the Te Deum. After the Benediction, the King withdrew to the archbishop's palace where all the Nobles complimented Him. The next day, the King listened to the first Vespers in the Cathedral, and on Sunday, June 11th, around seven o'clock, His Majesty—with the greatest pomp—went back to the same Church and was crowned in the usual ways.

The Queen arrived accompanied by Madame [Elizabeth, the King's sister], and despite the fact that she remained incognito, she was delighted at the most vivid expressions of love the French Nation devoted to her. She attended all the august ceremonies of this sacred feast. A stand had been set up for Her, Madame Clotilde and Madame Elizabeth.

At that point some interesting details were removed and will be talked about in a more lengthy Report.

The King gave permission to the Marquess of la Tour du Pin to take the name of the Marquess of Gouvernet—who requested it in his Will. His Majesty also allowed the Count of Charce, his son, to take the name of the Marquess of la Tour du Pin.

Monday, 19 June 1775

The day following the Coronation of His Majesty, the King attended Mass in the Room of the Archbishop's Castle. After the Mass, the Court Ladies had the honor to present their respects to him. In the afternoon, the Queen and Madame went a few miles away from the City and watched the Count of Esterhazy's regiment of hussars on maneuvers. The Counts of Artois and Provence, wearing cavalry uniforms, charged at the head of the company; the Duke of Chartres, the Prince of Condé, and the Duke of Bourbon, also wearing uniforms, took part in these attacks as well. The Duchess of Bourbon and many Court Ladies and Court Lords were at this warlike show.

On the 13th, the King allowed the clergy to compliment him. The Marquess of Dreux, Master of Ceremonies, and Monsieur Nantouillet, Master of Ceremonies, led the Clergy to an audience with His Majesty. They were introduced by the Duke of la Vrillière, Secretary of State, and the Cardinal of Luynes spoke for them.
Then His Majesty attended the Mass at the Saint-Niçaise Abbey and, on his way back, he laid the foundation stone of the University of Reims. In the afternoon of the same day, the Knights, the Commanders, and the Officers of the Order of the Holy Spirit gathered at the King’s—as he had ordered them—and His Majesty went to the Metropolitan Church in the ordinary walk, listened to Vespers, and with the greatest pomp became the Grand Master and Sovereign of the Order. When he returned, His Majesty delivered a speech and appointed the former Bishop of Limoges, the Archbishop of Narbonne, the Viscount of la Rochefoucault, the Count of Talleyrand, the Marquess of Rochechourat, the Marquess of Roche-Aymon, and the Viscount of Taladu, to be Knights of His Orders and to be Hostages of the Sainte-Ampoule. The Viscount of Taladu was also appointed to carry the rear of his coat, the day he became the Grand Master Sovereign of the order.

On June 14th, the King rode in a cavalcade to the Saint-Remi Abbey. His Majesty was accompanied by the Count of Provence, the Count of Artois, the Duke of Orléans, the Duke of Chartres, the Prince of Condé, the Duke of Bourbon and by many other Lords and great officers. He attended Mass in the Abbey and performed his Devotions through the Cardinal of la Roche-Aymon’s hands. Then, in the Park of the Abbey, he touched 2,400 people who had the disease of scrofula and distributed charity to them. In the afternoon, the King took a walk in the park and from there went to the camp of the French and Swiss Guard units. The People, who were following His Majesty, showed their Master how delighted they were because of his presence.

The day of Corpus Christi, the King accompanied by the Count of Provence, the Count of Artois, and Princes of Royal Blood, followed the procession and attended the Great Mass and the salvation in the Metropolitan Church. The Queen, Madame, Madame Clotilde, Madame Elizabeth, the Duchess of Bourbon, and many Court Lords and Ladies were also present.

The next day, June 16th, His Majesty left Reims with the Count of Provence, the Count of Artois and the other Princes who had accompanied him. He arrived in Compiègne and stayed there until Monday, June 19th. On that same day he left Compiègne for Versailles. Madame Clotilde and Madame Elizabeth arrived in Versailles in the morning. The Queen, accompanied by Madame and the Court Ladies arrived there in the evening of the same day.

Monsieur Hare, a lawyer at the parlement, had the honor to present an Ode to the King, entitled the "Coronation of Louis XVI."

In the last Gazette, the following information was forgotten: the Prince of Lambesc was appointed by His Majesty to carry the rear of the Royal coat during the Coronation ceremony. This information, along with many others, will be added to the general Report.

Source: Gazette de France, no. 48 (16 June 1775), 217; and Gazette de France, no. 49 (19 June 1775), 221.
And always the pamphlets poured forth their lubrurous slime. Artois in *L'Autrichienne en Goguette* took the Queen from behind in public with obscene exclamations about her ‘firm and elastic’ body. If not an ardent lover of men, Marie Antoinette was an ardent lover of women; the message was always hammered home that the Queen was insatiable — even when alone. In *Le Godoniste* [Dildo] *Royal* of 1789 the Queen was satirized as the goddess Juno, in a text which began with Juno sitting alone ‘with her skirts hitched up . . .’ and went on from there. Perhaps it was her ‘Germanic vigour’ that was responsible, which had led to her deflowering even before she left Austria. Now it led her to indulge in orgies with bodyguards where drink featured as well as constant sex, although Marie Antoinette was in fact, as has been noted, a teetotaller.

Who could respect such a creature as a woman, let alone a queen? A woman who, quite apart from her sexual appetites, was a dangerous agent of a foreign power. It all *had* to be true. The stories had, after all, been printed over and over again, repetition being a cynical substitute for veracity. In the words of the radical ‘Gracchus’ Babeuf about this time, Louis XVI was a donkey, weak and obstinate but not cruel, who should have been mated to a young and gentle she-donkey; instead he had been given a tigress.1

Gouverneur Morris summed up the situation harshly in a report back to the United States. Little was to be expected in any way from the King. As for Marie Antoinette, she was ‘hated, humbled, mortified’ and although she was intriguing to save ‘some shattered Remnants of the Royal Authority’, it was enough to know that she favoured a measure for that to be ‘the certain Means to frustrate its Success’.

Marie Antoinette was widely accused of lesbianism (as well as heterosexual promiscuity) in contemporary pornography; here the Queen and the Duchesse de Polignac embrace: ‘I live only for you . . . a kiss, my angel.’
Pornographic Pamphlets of The French Revolution

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The use of pornography as propaganda has a long history; from Aretino in the 16th century, who wrote scathing diaries detailing the sexual exploits of church leaders, to modern day flash artists who create web sites displaying homosexual acts between George W. Bush and Dick Cheney\(^1\). Pornographic depictions of persons in power are designed to alter the perception of those persons in the public eye, to lower their status and attack their credibility.

Historically, it has been speculated that the breakdown of social order, political power and cultural morality can be identified through the surfacing of pornographic materials, sexual deviancy and socio-sexual disorder. A rise in sexual debauchery, adultery, promiscuity, brazen homosexuality, etc. denotes social and political unrest. Pornographic materials become more available and pornographic representations / caricatures of cultural

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\(^1\) More information about Aretino can be found at [www.pornukrates.com/aretino.htm](http://www.pornukrates.com/aretino.htm) and a web search of 'George Bush porn' will bring up hundreds of examples of modern day political pornography.
ideals and appointed positions (clerics, aristocrats, monarchs, judges, etc.) become commonplace.  

The height of the use of pornographic materials to denote social unrest came just prior to, and during, the French Revolution. Numerous prints depicting Marie Antoinette engaging in subversive sexual activities such as incest, bestiality and various orgiastic rendezvous, could be found circulating throughout the streets of Paris, as illustrations to full texts on the subject of her sexual behavior to single images circulating. Peddlers and merchants would sell pamphlets made up of privately printed texts with illustrations aimed at damaging the reputation of both the Queen and her husband. Numerous other themes were to follow, such as portraits of aristocrats and courtiers made up of genitalia, soldiers raping women, impotent judges, homosexual orgies and incestuous scenes. It should also be noted that after the end of the Terror, pornographers became more interested in depictions of pleasurable acts, which is the basis of today’s pornographic structure.

Many of these prints were based on texts by such politically driven authors as the Marquis de Sade and various anonymous pamphlet writers, though none of the artists names are known. The pamphlets and their illustrations were created anonymously for various legal reasons. Authors, such as the Marquis de Sade, were imprisoned for their participation in creating these documents.

Many pamphlets, or mentions of them, made their way into police archives, as they were routinely confiscated due to their illegal nature; taken from peddlers carrying up to 100

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2 Merrick’s entire article deals with this subject, focusing on the sexual events of the French Revolution.
3 See Hunt’s article “The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution” which can be found in Eroticism and the Body Politic, 108-130
4 Gilles Neret’s books of erotica, Erotica: 17th-18th Century (2001) and Erotica Universals (2001) contain several of these types of images.
6 See nellschaeffer.com/sade/ for a short biography of the Marquis de Sade’s life, as well as his imprisonment.
pamphlets and brochures in their sacs, as well as merchants with up to 30 pamphlets set out on display boards in front of their businesses. The majority of these pamphlets were destroyed but record remains of their confiscation (in police registers)\(^7\) and many may have made their way into modern day private collections as well as into Special Collections in Parisian libraries\(^8\).

The Records

Pre-revolutionary restrictions on the press were lifted during the late 1780s which allowed for numerous printings and publications to appear. Few details are known about the actual creation of these images except that they tend to exist in relation to published pamphlets of various lengths (4-16 pages), such as *L’Antriebienne en gagettes* (The Royal Orgy)\(^9\), *Bord – R –* (The Brothel of the Queen), *Dom-Bongre aux Etats-Generaux* (, *La Godimache royal*, all 1789, and books like *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, 1795, by the Marquis de Sade.

The illustrations / prints are engravings, also known as *etchings*, which are developed through a process of printmaking that involves metal plates being engraved by hand and etched using chemicals. The plate is made of either copper or zinc and is engraved with a design of lines scratched into their surface. The plate is then submerged in acid, which attacks the lines and widens their size. When the lines are properly sized, the plate is then coated with varnish, which, when dried, creates a smoothly engraved surface upon which to apply ink. Ink is applied to the plate and wiped off sufficiently to ensure that enough ink has been caught in the grooves while wiping clean the flat, un-etched surface that will produce the negative / white space of the image. The plate is then placed, ink-side down, onto paper

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\(^7\) Hunt mentions the ‘fragmentary records’ of the Archives of the Prefecture of Police in Paris as having entries regarding the confiscation of these illustrated pamphlets. 1993, 311.

\(^8\) I have been unable to find any reference of ownership of any of the images I examined in the process of researching this subject.

\(^9\) Text can be found at chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/328/
and put through a press. The pressure causes the ink to adhere itself to the paper and the image is created. This process can be repeated several times though the ridges on the plate may become soft and the image may lose its precision. Trial prints are typically made, at which point changes are applied to the plates, whether through further addition of lines, or burnishing to remove unwanted ones.\(^{10}\)

The pornographic etchings would not have been of the highest quality, though they were better quality then most circulated pamphlets of the time, and would have been made of the same materials used for typical textual printing - simple paper and black ink. Some of the coloured portraits and other more substantial images were made of watercolours, colour prints and various other easily created, ‘lower art’ materials, easily produced and cheaply made. I am focusing on the etched, black and white prints though.

The black and white, etched prints were usually sold with an accompanying text, for about 5 soli (the contemporary French currency), as illustrations of the textual content, or they would have been sold and circulated individually without any textual accompaniment at all. These pamphlets / leaflets would have been typical pamphlet size, anywhere from 5” x 9” to twice that size, depending on the printmaker.

It should be noted that only about 200 of these prints remain today, though it is not possible to determine exactly how many there were in the streets of Paris over the course of the Revolution.

**Draft, Original and Copy**

The final, etched, metal plate used to create the prints would be the final draft of the prints and any previous incarnations of the plate, and any images produced with it, would be further drafts (though none of these remain to my knowledge). All circulating prints would

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\(^{10}\) See [www.memsnet.org/mems/beginner/etch.html](http://www.memsnet.org/mems/beginner/etch.html) for a full explanation of the etching process
need to be considered originals in their own right as none are numbered and therefore no identifiable original ‘first print’ could be identified. Any further uses and duplications of the prints, for books, magazines or articles, etc., would therefore be copies.

Preservation

Preservation concerns are basically the same as those for any paper printed during the period. Strategies for preservation would include low lighting, appropriate relative humidity, as well as flat, secure storage. By doing so the records could last for hundreds, if not thousand of years.

Functional Context

As mentioned above, in my introduction, these prints were produced before and during the French Revolution as sexual sensationalism attacking the church, court, aristocracy, academies, salons and the monarchy in order to undermine “the legitimacy of the ancien regime as a social and political system.”11 These attacks on individual character and ancien regime values were vital to the public’s opinion of the aristocracy and the motivations and abilities they had in the control and governing of the nation. Many of the pamphlets were confiscated by police agencies in an attempt to quell the uprising of the lower classes, though their attempts were useless.

The public face of the powers-that-be became one of ridicule, distrust and contempt and the ability of the revolutionary forces to sway the general public became simple and expedient.

At a time when literacy was not shared by all members of the public, images were vital in conveying messages. These pornographic prints depicted such scenes that no one could mistake their meaning or doubt their intended purpose. Those with opinions to share

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11 Hunt, 1993, page 301
regarding the state of their country, those with political and aristocratic insight, such as the Marquis de Sade, and many other literate men, could convey their message to the people and assist in the dethroning of those abusing their positions and power over the French people. The use of pornographic propaganda was important in lowering the status of a once great empire to the level of mockery and ridicule, which the people felt they could easily overthrow.

Archival Value

These images are used today as a guide to understanding the social climate of Paris before and during the revolutionary years. They show evidence of dissent, of political and social unrest, of a need for some sort of communication at a level that could be understood by all. Scholars such as Lynn Hunt and others have examined pornographic images in order to understand all of these things, and, fortunately, several of these etchings from the French Revolution remain for historians to examine, whether they are in archives or private collections.

The primary value of these records is their importance in understanding the frame of mind of revolutionary people during a tumultuous time in history, and how sexual imagery was used to convey their feelings regarding authority, as well an understanding the images as a tool of political merit. Essentially, they afford a look into the mental state of the people, the lengths that the general public took to undermine the authorities, and their ultimate intent to discredit them.

The items also provide information regarding the artistic style of printmaking, its rendering and techniques, uses and quality, as well as access to manufacture. By all accounts, just about anyone with anything to say could have a bit of text or an image printed and
published. We can also easily gather that this was a relatively cheap and effective use of a visual process and art form.

The records also imply evidence regarding the legal nature of pornographic materials as they pertain to slander and censorship, which was obviously not of high concern; save for the police confiscation of the materials, production numbers were quite high and could not adequately be stopped with policing activities.

As far as secondary value is concerned, some of these records can also be used for the value of their content — as reference for clothing, interiors, sexual activities and styles, and occasionally, portraits of some historical figures (such as Marie Antoinette and others.)

As above, that fact that these records were confiscated by the police shows us evidence of law enforcement during the years of the Revolution and the types of objects that were deemed illegal by the authorities, even if those objects were too prolific to stop.

The archival value of these records also lie in the use of them by historians in various fields, such as art, culture, politics, sexuality, and so on. Scholars have spent many years researching the importance of pornographic leaflets and propaganda as a way to understand the various opinions and socio-cultural views of a period, as well as the view of the female in that society.

**Appraisal Implications**

When considering the appraisal of pornographic materials, whether historical or current, it is important to examine the above values and consider why the items were created, how they were created, what implications they have concerning the political / social / etc. climate of the time and decide whether they will be relevant to the mandate of your archive as well as how they relate to the other records they are being acquisitioned with.
The simple fact that these records are pornographic brings up some questions: How should Archives deal with pornographic materials? How does an archivist determine the value of pornographic materials in contemporary times, and what elements would make it viable to retain and preserve these records?

From what these pornographic items from the French Revolution tell us, I think it is very important to consider legally and socially 'unacceptable' items into an archive, to maintain impartiality and to present the full picture of what will be the past with all available evidence from the present.
Bibliography


Overview

While revolutions change political structures, they also alter the social system in which people live. They often change the way in which social groups are named and defined, as well as the social values by which people live. Most importantly, revolutions cause changes in the way people feel about themselves and their relations with other citizens.

To properly understand the changes in France between 1789 and 1795 that will later be described, we need first to understand the social system of France during the old regime. To do this, we need to realise that this society was very different to our own in a number of important ways. This was a society in which, for example, there was no modern expectation of equal rights for all people, regardless of wealth: people were unequal, because different groups in society enjoyed their own privileges (special rights in matters of law and taxation). Moreover, people accepted inequality: these privileges were confirmed by law and strengthened by long tradition.

Flow of chapter

THE SOCIAL SYSTEM OF THE OLD REGIME

- A CORPORATE SOCIETY
  Different social groups have their own special rights

- AN OUTDATED SYSTEM OF ESTATES
  People are classified according to outdated social roles

- PRIVILEGE
  Legally based special treatment in law, taxation, employment

- A SOCIETY BASED ON LEGAL INEQUALITIES

- A CULTURE OF DEFERENCE
  Instinctive respect for your 'betters'
Figure 1.2: The structure of the ancien régime c. 1780

The First Estate
The First Estate was the clergy, which consisted of members of religious orders (monks and nuns) and clergy (parish priests).

A number of issues contributed to the Church being unpopular with many people. These were:
- plurality and absenteeism
- tithes
- its exemption from taxes
- its power over the people

Plurality and absenteeism
Many younger sons of noble families entered the Church and occupied its higher posts, such as bishops and archbishops, which provided large incomes. The Archbishop of Strasbourg received 400,000 livres per annum, which contrasted sharply with most parish priests (paroissiens) who only received between 700 and 1000 livres each year. Some bishops held more than one diocese, which meant they were bishops of more than one diocese. This is called plurality. Many never visited their diocese, i.e. absenteeism. This made the Church very unpopular with many ordinary people who considered that bishops were more interested in wealth than in the religious and spiritual needs of the people.

Tithes
The wealth of the Church came from the land it owned and the tithes paid to it. It was the largest single landowner in France, owning about 10 per cent of the land.

The tax was a charge paid to the Church each year by landowners and was based on a proportion of the crops they

Lieux
The currency of France during the ancien régime. One livre was made up of 10 sous.

Diocese
An area served by a bishop. It is made up of a large number of parishes.

Plurality
The holding of more than one diocesan by an individual.

Key Terms
Livres
Lieu
Diocese
Plurality

Key Question
Why was the First Estate unpopular?

Key Terms
The Origins of the French Revolution

with the First Estate. This charge varied widely. In Dauphine it amounted to about one-fifth of the crops produced, while in Brittany it was a quarter. In most parts of France it was about seven per cent of the crop. The income produced by the tithes provided the Church with 50 million livres each year.

Tithes were supposed to provide for parish priests, poor relief and the upkeep of Church buildings, but much of it went instead into the pockets of bishops and abbots. This was greatly resented by both the peasantry and the ordinary clergy and was one of the most common grievances made in their écrans in 1788.

Tax exemption
The Church had many privileges apart from collecting the tithes. By far the most important of these was its exemption from taxation. This added to its unpopularity. Its income from property was immense: around 100 million livres per year in the closing years of the Ancien Régime. Instead of paying tax the Church agreed to make an annual payment, which it determined, known as the dîme gracieuse. It was under five per cent of the Church's income and was much less than it could afford to pay.

Power over the people
France was a very religious country and Catholicism was the official state religion. The influence of the Church was considerable and touched many areas of people's lives.

It had wide-ranging powers of censorship over books which were critical of the Church, provided poor relief, hospitals and schools, and kept a list of the parish of all births, marriages and deaths. At a time when communication in general was very poor, the Church acted as a sort of Ministry of Information for the government, when parish priests informed their congregations about various policies and initiatives. The vast wealth of the Church and its resistance to new ideas made it unpopular with many people, which contributed to the long-term causes of the Revolution.

The Second Estate
Of the three estates, the nobility was the most powerful. Unlike the British nobility which numbered hundreds, the French nobility numbered hundreds of thousands, although the exact numbers are disputed. Figures for the numbers of nobles by 1789 vary between 110,000 and 350,000. Within the nobility there were great variations in wealth and status.

- The most powerful were the 4000 court nobility, restricted in theory to those whose noble ancestry could be traced back to before 1480; in practice to those who could afford the high cost of living at Versailles.
- Second in importance were the seigneurie de roya - local and administrative nobles which included the 1200 magistrates of the parlements.
- The remainder of the nobility - the overwhelming majority - lived in the country in various states of prosperity. Under the
law of primogeniture, a landed estate was inherited by the eldest son. Younger sons were forced to fend for themselves and many joined the Church, the army or the administration.

The main source of income for the Second Estate was land, and they owned between a third and a quarter of France. Nearly all the main positions in the State were held by nobles—among them government ministers, admirals and upper ranks in the army.

Privileges
In addition to holding most of the top jobs in the State, the nobility had many privileges. They:
- were tried in special courts
- were exempt from military service
- were exempt from paying the taille
- were exempt from the corvée (forced labor on the roads)
- received a variety of feudal dues (also known as seigneurial dues)
- had exclusive rights to hunting and fishing
- in many areas had the monopoly right (known as banalités) to operate mills, ovens and winepresses.

Perhaps their greatest privilege was exemption from taxation. Until 1660 they did not pay direct taxes at all. In that year the capitulation was introduced and, in 1748, the “light tax.” Even with these they managed to pay less than they could have done.

They were generally exempt from the most onerous tax of all—the taille.

Provincial nobles were strongly attached to these privileges, which represented a significant part of their income. It was the less wealthy of the nobles who felt that if they were to lose their tax privileges and their seigneurial rights that they would face ruination. They were determined to oppose any changes that threatened their positions and undermined their privileges, as these were all they had to distinguish them from the commoners.

The privileges relating to land ownership and tax exemption were resisted by many ordinary people who saw the Second Estate as avoiding their share of the tax burdens borne by others. These issues contributed to the cause of the Revolution.

Joining the nobility
There were various ways of becoming a noble besides the obvious one of inheritance. One of the main ways of acquiring noble status was either by direct appointment from the King or by buying certain offices that carried hereditary titles. These were called venal offices and there were 12,000 of these in the service of the Crown. They carried titles that could be bought, sold or inherited like any other property.

While gaining a title conveyed both status and benefits there were also limitations. Nobles were not in theory allowed to take part in industrial or commercial activities or they would suffer derogation (less of their nobility). In reality many did, as the rule was not rigidly enforced. In Paris in 1749 nearly all the people with an income of over half a million francs were nobles. Even in industrial centres such as Lyon the nobles were the wealthiest group.

It has been estimated that during the eighteenth century between 30,000 and 50,000 people became nobles. Although the nobility formed a distinct and separate order it was not inaccessible to men of wealth and social ambition.

The Third Estate
In essence the Third Estate consisted of everyone who did not belong to one or other of the two privileged estates. There were enormous extremes of wealth within this estate.

The bourgeoisie
At the top end were the rich merchants, industrialists and business people. This group of rich commoners, who were not peasants or urban workers, is frequently referred to as the bourgeoisie.

Among the wealthiest of the bourgeoisie were the merchants and traders who made vast fortunes out of France’s overseas trade. Others included financiers, landowners, members of the liberal professions (doctors and lawyers), lawyers and civil servants. Many were venal office-holders.

As a group the bourgeoisie were rising not only in wealth but also in numbers. There was a threefold increase in the number of bourgeoisie over the course of the eighteenth century to 2.5 million. Although the bourgeoisie was increasing in importance there was no real conflict between them and the nobility until at least the closing years of the Ancien Régime. They did, however, feel that their power and wealth should in some way be reflected in the political system as they bore a substantial part of the tax revenue paid to the Crown. This slowly simmering resentment contributed to the long-term causes of the Revolution.

The peasantry
At the other extreme of the Third Estate from the bourgeoisie were the peasants. They were by far the most numerous section of French society, comprising about 85 per cent of the population. This group, however, covered enormous variations in wealth and status.

At the top end was a small group of large farmers who owned their land, employed labourers and grew for the market. More numerous were the labourers who existed at, or near, subsistence levels. For much of the eighteenth century, and the larger farmers, did well as agricultural conditions were favourable, particularly in the 1770s. Half of the peasants were sharecroppers who did not own their land but farmed it and gave half of their crops to the landlords instead of rent. About a quarter of the peasants were landless labourers, who owned nothing but their house and garden.

In some parts of France serfdom continued to exist. There were a million serfs in the east, mainly in Franche Comté. They were at the bottom of the social structure and their children were unable to inherit even personal property without paying considerable dues to their lord. Poor peasants lived in state of chronic
uncertainty. Bad weather or illness could push them into the ranks of the vagrants, who lived by begging, stealing and occasional employment.

**Grievances**

In many ways the peasants bore the burden of taxation and this made them extremely resentful. All peasants had to pay tithe to the Church, feudal dues to their lord and taxes to the state. Nearly all land was subject to feudal dues. These included the _corvée_, _champart_ (a due paid in grain or other crops to the landlord which could vary from five to 33 per cent of the harvest) and _lois et servies_ (a payment to the seigneur when property changed hands).

A further grievance was that the peasant could be tried in the seigneurial court, where the lord acted as both judge and jury. Taxes paid to the state included the taille, capititation and _gabelle_. All these increased enormously between 1740 and 1783 to pay for the various wars France was involved in. Taxes took between five and 10 per cent of the peasants' income. The heaviest burden on the peasantry was the rent they paid their landlords. This increased markedly during the second half of the eighteenth century as a result of an increase in population, which is estimated to have risen from 22.4 million in 1701 to 27.9 million in 1790. This increased the demand for farms, with the result that landlords could raise rents. The increasing financial burden placed on the peasantry along with growing resentment of the feudal system was an important long-term cause of the Revolution.

**Urban workers**

The remaining part of the Third Estate was made up of urban workers. Small property owners and artisans in Paris were known as _sans-culottes_. The majority of workers in the towns lived in crowded insanitary housing blocks known as _souvenirs_. They were unskilled and poor.

On the other hand, skilled craftsmen were organised into guilds. In Paris in 1775, 100,000 workers – a third of the male population – belonged to guilds. The standard of living of wage-earners had slowly fallen in the eighteenth century, as prices had risen on average by 65 per cent between 1726 and 1789, but wages by only 22 per cent. In the years immediately preceding the Revolution the worsening economic situation caused considerable resentment among urban dwellers and contributed to the long-term causes of the Revolution. This helps explain their readiness to become involved in the popular demonstrations that helped bring about the overthrow of the ancien régime.

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**Summary diagram: Issues affecting French society before 1789**

- **First Estate – The Church**
  - Vast differences in wealth between the upper clergy and ordinary priests
  - Resentment against the Church regarding tithes and the _gabelle_

- **Second Estate – The Nobility**
  - Resentment against the nobility for non-payment of direct taxes
  - Feudal rights exercised by tenants

- **Third Estate**
  - Bourgeoisie had no political role under absolutism
  - Burden of taxation largely borne by Third Estate
and innocence of primitive morals... He showed to the astonished multitude a head worthy of the brush of Guido Reni on an erect and vigorous body clad in the simplest garments... he spoke little. He knew how to be impolite without being rude and his pride seemed to be that nature. Such a person was made to excite the curiosity of Paris. People gathered around as he passed and said: 'Who is this old farmer who has such a noble air?'

Dubbed the "Electrical Ambassador," Franklin was also acutely aware of the rage for scientific learning that gripped the French elite, and how to exploit it. "It is universally believed in France," wrote John Adams, "that his electric wand has accomplished all this revolution." And Franklin's science became a vital feature of his appeal because it seemed to be as much the work of the heart as the head: it was wisdom moralized. Hence his Poor Richard's Almanack was translated as *La Science du Bourboume Richard* and as such became a best-seller in 1778. Paris society at this time was, in any case, hungry for scientific learning and there was no shortage of both amateur and professional scientists, from the most implausible frauds to the most rigorous empirists, willing to popularize their findings. Virtually every issue of the daily *Journal de Paris* was packed with reports of experiments from the provinces as well as the capital and advertisements for series of public lectures to be given by the best-known luminaries, like Fourcroy and Pâtris de Rozier. So the image of Franklin, who could teach the heavens for the celestial fire of electricity, became woven into the celebration of his other "American" virtues, most especially that of liberty. Turgot may have coined the famous epigram *Eripit Coelo Fulmen, Sceptrumque Tyrannis* (He seized fire from the heavens and the scepter from tyrants) as an innocuous play on words, but it very rapidly became a kind of byword for Franklin's role as the harbinger of liberty. Popularized first on a medallion bearing his likeness, then on a number of engravings, the theme with its standard iconography of lightning bolts and striking British lions became a standard subject for painted porcelain and printed fabrics, even those displayed at Versailles. Made casually respectable, the link between the fall of tyrants and celestial fire had ominous implications in absolutist France. For it inescapably suggested, in a Romantic vein, that liberty was a natural and hence ultimately irresistible force, and contributed further to a growing polarity between things natural and artificial on the one hand ("Humanity"; "Freedom"; "Patriotism") and things artificial on the other ("Privilege"; "Despotism"; the court). Not surprisingly this equation of liberty and lightning was eagerly endorsed in the Revolution, so that in Jacques-Louis David's pictorial account of the Tennis Court Oath, for example, a bolt of electrically charged freedom cracks over Versailles as a great gust of wind blows fresh air through the crowd-filled window spaces.

To some extent, the infatuation of fashionable society with the American cause was a facile matter: the latest novelty to come along after English novels and Italian opera. It is hard to judge whether the beautiful textile designs manufactured by Jean-Baptiste Huet at Jouy in 1784, celebrating "American Liberty" and "America Independent" in allegorical devices and portraits of Washington and Franklin, are evidence of the seriousness with which the revolution was taken, or of a consumer fad. When Mme Campan describes the most ravishing of three hundred court ladies selected to adorn Franklin's venerable paire with a crown of laurel, the craze for the "Insurgents" seems reduced to the level of a beauty contest. Yet there are other indications of a more serious engagement with the American cause spreading well beyond le monde of the court and fashionable society. In March 1778, for example, the *Journal de Paris* advertised a complete set of engravings, with textual commentaries, of the battles of the American war for just one livre: a high price for an artisan to pay but well within the range of the broader reading public of the petty professions and trades. In Marseille, the unlucky associations of the number 13 were stood on their head by a group of citizens who expressed their solidarity with the insurgent colonies by fetishing their number. In this group of thirteen, each wore an emblem of one of the colonies and they went on picnics on the thirteenth of the month at which thirteen toasts to the Americans were drunk. At another festive performance on the thirteenth of December 1778, Pianzat de Marbeuf sat through an heroic poem of thirteen stanzas, the thirteenth of which was reserved for praise of Lafayette.

The consequences of French involvement in the revolutionary war were, in fact, profoundly subversive and irreversible. The American historian Forrest Macdonald attempted to show a high degree of correspondence between returning French veterans of the war and the outburst of rural violence in 1789. Recently, this has been shown by more careful research to be suspect, although there remain striking cases of returning soldiers who show up in the chronicle of the Revolution, most famously Lieutenant Elle and Louis La Reyne, both "conquerors" of the Bastille on July 14. But the case for an "American" cause of the French Revolution does not have to rest on this kind of geographical correlation. A more qualitative approach can hardly fail to register the extraordinary importance of the glorification with armed freedom to a section of the aristocracy that was rich, powerful and influential. On their own they could not conceivably have constituted any kind of independent "revolutionary" opposition to the crown. But once the
money crisis of the monarchy was transformed into a political argument, the vocabulary of "liberty" was apt to take on a life of its own — and become available to those who were prepared to play politics for very high stakes. Ségur, who was to be just such a participant, wrote to his wife in 1781, before he embarked with the French army, that "arbitrary power weighs heavily on me. The freedom for which I am going to fight, inspires in me the liveliest enthusiasm and I would like my own country to enjoy such a liberty that would be compatible with our monarchy, our position and our manners." The fact that Ségur, on the highest rung of the nobility, could blithely assume that such a transformation would be compatible with the monarchy may well suggest a myopic naivety, but it also explains how many of his peers could take the exemplary nature of America seriously without ever dreaming it would lead directly to a Dictatorship of Virtue.

In the euphoria that greeted a great military triumph and a brilliant peace in 1783, few commentators were wont to pour cold water on the elation. More commonly, writers like the Abbé Gentil saw the American example as contributing to some warm and woolly way to the "regeneration" of France or even, more generally, the whole world. "It is in the heart of this new-born republic," he wrote, "that the true treasures that will enrich the world will lie." And in 1784, a literary and debating academy at Toulouse set as its prize essay question the importance of the American Revolution. The winner was a captain in a Breton army, who saw it as the "regiment, evidently an ardent disciple of Rousseau who saw it as the model of virtue and happiness and a model to emulate in France. And the music, in particular, of the American played music.

Then, officers, soldiers, American men and women, all join and dance together. It is the Festival of Equality... These people are still in the happy time when distinctions of birth and rank are ignored and can see, with the same eye, the common soldier and the officer.

There were, however, some pessimists, who made up their minds in advance what they lacked in numbers. The Queen was said to have harbored distinctly mixed feelings about the enthusiasm with which she hoped to bring about the restoration of a monarchy. And commons alike rejoiced over the humiliation of a monarchy. And modern politicians, more to the point, the most intelligent of all Louis XVI's ministers, Turgot, had argued bitterly against active intervention in America, predicting that its costs would be so overwhelming that they would postpone, perhaps forever, any attempt at necessary reform. He even went so far as to suggest that the fate of the monarchy might hinge on this fateful decision. But he lost the argument to the immensely powerful Foreign Minister, Vergennes, for whom the embarrassment of the British crown in America was simply an opportunity so golden that it could not possibly be squandered. Vergennes was no warmonger. A lifetime professional diplomat, he was, in fact, a loyal adherent of the standard eighteenth-century concept of the "balance of power." But following the disastrous one-sided Seven Years' War he came to the not unreasonable conclusion that it was Britain that was the insatiable aggressive imperial power, and merely to hold the British at the limit set out in the Treaty of Paris in 1763 required some kind of salutary chastisement. In alliance with the "family crown" of the Spanish Bourbons, and with the Dutch Republic, Vergennes crafted a foreign policy designed to present Britain as the aggressor, and the Coalition as intervening only to preserve the justly claimed independence of the Americans. The reasons for which Vergennes took France across the Atlantic/Rubicon were, then, wholly pragmatic, and, as he supposed, ideologically risk-free. Nothing could have been further from his mind than the promotion of some vaguely defined message of "liberty." In 1782, after all, he intervened militarily on the side of reaction in the affairs of the strategically important Republic of Geneva, where the ruling patriots had been overthrown by a coalition of democratically minded citizens and artisans. And, as he explained, his reasoning in both the Genevan and the American cases was pragmatically the same:

The insurgen which I am driving from Geneva are agents of England while the American insurgents are friends for years to come. I have dealt with both of them, not by reason of their political systems but by reason of their attitudes towards France. Such are my reasons of state.

And, in truth, in 1778, when the crucial decisions were taken to enter into treaty relations with America, or even in 1783, when the Treaty of Fontainebleau was signed, Vergennes' sunny view of the war seemed to have been vindicated. For all the red ink on the government's account books, no one seriously dared to suggest that the American policy had been, for either fiscal or political reasons, a terrible mistake. France was a great power and had done, quite brilliantly, what great powers do to sustain their preeminence in the world and fend off the competition. It seemed likely that the British treasury was suffering quite as severely as the French and that their policies might even be in greater disorder. The French West Indies were pouring money from the sugar economy back...
CITIZENS

into the mother country and the successes of Suffren's fleet in South India suggested that even there the prospects for economic recovery were brighter. As the Vicomtesse de Fars-Faussebandry put it, "The American cause seemed our own; we were proud of their victories, we cried at their defeats, we tore down bulletins and read them in all our houses. None of us reflected on the danger that the New World could give to the old." Or, as another of the French "Insurgents," the Comte de Ségur, commented, in the rueful aftermath of the American Revolution, "we stepped out gaily on a carpet of flowers, little imagining the abyss beneath."

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Blue Horizons, Red Ink

1 LES BEAUX JOURS

Like all his generation, Louis XVI was brought up to worry about happiness. His grandfather, Louis XV, had redesigned Versailles around its pursuit and had a natural aptitude for its indulgence. But for his young successor, happiness was hard work, and being king of France put it virtually out of reach. Gradually enveloped by anxiety, he would later recall just two occasions when the business of being king actually made him happy. The first was his coronation in June 1775; the second, his visit to Cherbourg in June 1786. On the first occasion he wrapped himself in the mantle of arcane royal mystery; on the second he revealed himself as modern man: scientist, sailor and engineer. To onlookers on both occasions, the paradoxes of the royal personality were cause for comment, perhaps even for concern. But it was part of Louis' innocence that he never perceived a problem. If his authority owed everything to the past, his overdeveloped sense of duty pointed him firmly towards the future. The Revolution would represent this Janus-like quality as duplicitous rather than undecided. But it was only its equation of past-future with treason-patriotism that put the King in the dilemma that would end his reign and his life. He began, in 1774, with the highest expectations, echoed throughout France, that the future would be blessed with a renewal of the Golden Age.

The symbol of those hopes was the sun. At the coronation in Reims, when Louis was twenty, the sun's rays, rays most obviously recalling the apotheosis of the monarchy under Louis XIV, decorated every column and triumphal arch erected for the ceremony. And the theme of renewal was echoed on the pedestal of a statue representing Justice by an inscription proclaiming the dawn of les beaux jours. However, the coronation was not unmixed rapture. For tension between past and future played on concerns about the present, especially since, while the ceremonies were being planned, France was in the throes of the most serious grain riots seen for years. In the circumstances, the Controller-General, Turgot,