

Darius von Güttner

French Revolution

the basics

FRENCH REVOLUTION

THE BASICS

French Revolution: The Basics is an accessible and concise introduction to the history of the revolution in France.

Combining a traditional narrative with documents of the era and references to contemporary imagery of the revolution, the book traces the long- and short-term causes of the French Revolution as well as its consequences up to the dissolution of the Convention and the ascendancy of Napoleon. The book is written with an explicit aim for its reader to acquire understanding of the past whilst imparting knowledge using underlying historical concepts such as evidence, continuity and change, cause and effect, significance, empathy, perspectives, and contestability.

Key topics discussed within the book include:

- The structure of French society before 1789.
- The long- and short-term factors that contributed to the French Revolution.
- How ordinary French people, including women and slaves, participated in the revolution.
- What brought about the end of the *ancien régime*.
- The major reforms of the National Assembly, 1789–1791, and how they led to the division and radicalisation of the revolution.
- How the alternative visions of the new society divided the revolution and what were the internal and external pressures on the revolution that contributed to its radicalisation.
- The forms of terror which enabled reality to triumph over idealism.
- The rise of Napoleon Bonaparte as military leader and Emperor.

This book is an ideal introduction for anyone wishing to learn more about this influential revolution in the shaping of modern Europe and the world.

Darius von Güttner is Principal Research Fellow (Associate Professor), School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, The University of Melbourne, Australia.

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FRENCH REVOLUTION

THE BASICS

Darius von Güttner

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PREFACE

The ideas that underpinned the French Revolution are still as relevant today as they were more than two hundred years ago. The principles enshrined in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* are as valid, and perhaps even more so, in the present day and remind those who study the revolution that all human beings ‘are born free and remain equal in rights’.

Since I tackled the subject of the revolution over a decade ago, some historical perspectives have changed, especially with the interest in the global impact of the events in France, the history of slavery and the role of women. These viewpoints are not overlooked in this book.

It is a pleasure to thank all those who have, in various ways, supported me in writing this book. I would especially like to acknowledge my students—their questions, curiosity and observations have shaped my teaching and provided the focus to all aspects of the text.

The staff of the University Library at the University of Melbourne very kindly enabled me to access books from the collection when the University and the library were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I should also like to express my gratitude to my teachers and colleagues, Peter McPhee, Adrian Jones and David Garrioch, whose scholarship has contributed to my interpretation of the causes, progress and outcomes of the French Revolution. To Adam Zamoycki, I also owe thanks.

In preparation of this text, I have had invaluable help from Michael von Güttner-Sporzyński and Nicholas von Güttner-Sporzyński, who re-read the whole text. I’m grateful as ever.

INTRODUCTION

The obliteration of the *ancien régime* in France is one of the great turning points of the modern era. The revolution transformed France with the principle of popular sovereignty giving political representation to its entire population. France was one of the most powerful states in eighteenth-century Europe and influenced European economic, political and cultural development. French was not only spoken at the court of Versailles, but across the courts of Europe. French culture, including arts and literature, was emulated by the European elites. The ruler of France, Louis XVI, was not a despotic tyrant, but a monarch pursuing an active reform agenda. In the 1780s, the financial situation of the French monarchy was the key reason for the monarchy seeking a new national consensus with the summoning of the Estates-General. The meeting of this representative institution, the first in more than 150 years, set in motion a chain of events that challenged the very foundations of absolute monarchy. Many underlying tensions in France's institutions made a revolution, if not inevitable, at least conceivable. Louis XVI's reform agenda was overtaken by revolution, as ideas became action. The year 1789 marked the transition of France from a kingdom ruled by a divinely ordained ruler to a constitutional monarchy, and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* heralded the birth of the new order. The establishment of the new society was marked by division and idealism, which turned into extremism. Religion, the position of the king and the definition of who could be considered a citizen each proved to be contentious. A series of political and economic crises forced the revolution onto the path of emergency measures and war. In 1793, terror became the 'order

of the day' as France's new republican government became more authoritarian. The revolution cannot be summed up in simplistic terms as the confrontation between feudalism and capitalism, or a bourgeois clash with nobles and the monarchy. It progressed in a complex and unpredictable way, often contradicting the revolutionary ideas of universal rights of man. The process of change exacted a high human cost. The violence of the Terror and the imperial ambitions of Napoleon were examples of the compromise of the revolutionary ideals that first proclaimed 'men are born and remain free and equal in rights'. One of the most significant outcomes of the revolution is the endurance of the principles of popular sovereignty and civil equality—the foundations of modern liberal democratic societies.

THE ORIGINS OF THE REVOLUTION

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the very roots of the long-established social, political and economic foundations of French society, based on privilege, hierarchy and tradition, were being challenged. The French king, Louis XVI, faced with pressure from elite groups in his kingdom, recognised the need for reform, which in his assessment was limited to the issue of taxation. In 1781, the *Compte rendu*, the first ever statement of the Crown's finances, reflected and encouraged the growing interest by the French public in economic affairs. These challenges, together with the Crown's financial difficulties as a result of France's involvement in costly foreign wars, convinced Louis XVI and his successive finance ministers to implement a range of radical reforms to increase the income of the Crown. Although there is no consensus among historians on the causes of the revolution, there is a broad acknowledgement of the complex nature of the tensions and problems that became apparent when an unfolding political crisis brought them to the surface.

FRANCE IN EUROPE

In the early eighteenth century, France was an absolute monarchy ruled by the Bourbon dynasty, which claimed the throne by divine right. As the century progressed, France's system of government, and indeed the whole structure of society, came under increasing pressure for change. It made the crisis possible, but not unavoidable; it was not evident that France was on the brink of a revolution. The fluctuating economic activity in the 1770s and 1780s had not made

most peasants poorer and had not prevented the bourgeoisie from increasing its wealth. The need for change was caused mainly by the financial difficulties King Louis XVI's government faced as a result of France's involvement in foreign wars such as the War of Austrian Succession (1740–1748), the Seven Years' War (1754–1763) and the American War of Independence (1775–1783). When the Crown could no longer afford to finance the operation of the government, the king attempted to force through a reform of the fiscal system. At this critical point, the financial crisis turned into a political crisis, with various sections of French society demanding a constitution to regulate the relationship between those governing and those being governed. When the monarchy and the nobility resisted such a change in 1789, the revolution began.

For centuries, France held a dominant position in European politics. Maintaining that status caused a permanent deficit in the royal finances, in particular because of an increasingly costly rivalry with Britain. While Britain's fast-growing economy allowed it to concentrate on building its colonial empire, France's overseas expansion always came second to competition with other European states on the Continent, such as Austria and Britain's ally, Prussia. The French monarchy was badly affected by the eighteenth century's most extensive conflict, the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), perhaps indicating that the French monarchs were unable to cope with the challenges posed by the growth of Prussia and the British capture of French colonial possessions in India, Quebec and the Caribbean. Another sign of France's decreasing international influence was its inability, just prior to Louis XVI's accession in 1774, to prevent annexation of territories belonging to Poland, one of its traditional allies, by Prussia, Austria and Russia. At the beginning of Louis XVI's reign, France attempted to recover its pride from these foreign policy defeats by supporting Britain's American colonies in their war for independence. A small French contingent significantly aided the Americans, and France hosted the peace conference at which Britain conceded the colonies' independence in 1783. Britain lost their thirteen colonies, but while France won a propaganda victory over Britain, its financial losses were huge. This diplomatic success brought no tangible rewards for France and its costs added to the growing pressure for reform of France's fiscal system, which by 1789, had developed into a political crisis.

The chain of events which brought about the political crisis surprised not only the elites of the kingdom but even more so the ruler of France and his immediate family. The Bourbon dynasty, which ruled France at the time of the revolution, was one of the most ancient European royal houses. It is a branch of the dynasty founded in 987 by Hugh Capet (c. 941–996), who was elected ‘King of the Franks’ after the death of Louis V, the last king of the Carolingian dynasty. In 1328, when direct male descendants of Hugh Capet did not produce a surviving male heir to the French throne, the succession passed to their cousin, the head of the younger branch of the House of Capet, the Valois dynasty. Similarly, in 1589, the Valois died out and the throne passed to Henry IV (1553–1610), the first French monarch of the Bourbon dynasty. The reign of Henry’s grandson, Louis XIV (1643–1715), provided the rest of Europe with an example of an absolutist style of government. During 72 years on the throne, Louis had personally ruled France for more than 50 years. This longest reign in European history was marked by the growth of France as one of the great powers of the Continent. Louis reformed the administration of justice and promoted commerce and industry, including the development of overseas colonies. As king, he established royal academies for architecture, art, literature, science and music, and built the royal palaces of the Louvre, now an art gallery, and Versailles, where he based the French court. Louis XIV outlived all of his immediate family with the exception of his grandson, Philip V of Spain, and a great-grandson, who became Louis XV when the Sun-King died in 1715. The name of Louis XIV became synonymous with greatness, power, splendour and glory.

In the course of the eighteenth century the Bourbons relied on the reflected glory of the Sun-King, yet for all the ostentatious display of power during the reign of his grandson, Louis XV, France could no longer halt the decline of its super-power status, as demonstrated in the series of military and diplomatic defeats. Shortly after the death of Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI in 1742, France in alliance with Prussia and Bavaria challenged the right of his daughter, Maria Theresa (1717–1780), to succeed to the hereditary lands of the Habsburg dynasty. In this War of Austrian Succession (1740–1748), supporting Maria Theresa’s claim were Britain, the Dutch Republic, Sardinia and Saxony. France aimed

at weakening Austria, her long-standing rival, through supporting various claimants to parts of the Habsburg inheritance, including election of Charles Albert of Bavaria as Holy Roman Emperor in 1742, in opposition to Maria Theresa's husband, Francis, grand duke of Tuscany. The war ended with the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748, which confirmed Maria Theresa's right of succession. France after some initial territorial gains was left without any material gains but Prussia acquired Silesia from Austria.

The Treaty did not resolve the French claims to hegemony in Europe and worldwide, and within a decade another major military conflict, which Winston Churchill called 'the first world war', began when the European powers sought to extend, and compete for, their influence both in Europe and overseas. The Seven Years' War (1756–1763) also became known as the 'French and Indian War', as fighting between Britain and France took place on the American and Canadian frontiers and in India. In the Treaty of Paris, which ended the war in 1763, France acknowledged the loss of all of its territory on the North American mainland and the Indian subcontinent, and Britain emerged as the dominant European colonial power. The French had been humiliated.

Under the direction of Count Vergennes (1719–1787), an influential foreign minister, French diplomacy began to pursue any means of revenge on Britain and her imperial ambitions. This opportunity arrived with a critical event, which had a major impact on Europe and the development of revolution in France. A rebellion against taxation without representation started in the British possessions on the other side of the Atlantic in 1773. The revolt turned to a revolutionary war and, on 2 July 1776, a convention of delegates from the thirteen British colonies in North America met in Philadelphia and adopted a resolution declaring the colonies' independence from Britain. Two days later, the delegates approved the Declaration of Independence in which they outlined the reasons for their renunciation of British sovereignty, providing the moral rationale for their decision and a list of grievances against King George III. The authors of the Declaration were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, and in particular the theories of English thinker John Locke and French *philosophe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In a clear break from the past, the colonists declared 'that all men are created equal' and were 'endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable

Rights'. They declared these rights to be 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'. In defiance of the divine right of kings, the American colonists argued that governments derive their powers from 'the consent of the governed', who have the right to abolish them when 'any form of government becomes destructive'. The ideals proclaimed in the Declaration and the subsequent development of the Constitution of the United States of America (ratified in 1788) had a profound impact on the *ancien régimes* of Europe. The American War of Independence, which began in April 1775, ended in June 1783 with the Treaty of Paris when Britain recognised the establishment of the United States.

The court of Louis XVI celebrated the humbling of the British as a major victory. In reality, the support given by France to the American rebels stretched France's ability to finance operation of its administration beyond breaking point. Unaware of the consequences for France, Parisians were greatly interested in the revolt of the American colonies against Britain. The American agent Silas Deane (1737–1789) arrived in France in 1776 to lobby the French for aid. Deane was involved in recruiting officers and engineers and sourcing supplies to support the rebellion. The first foreign volunteers, writes historian Adam Zamoyski, were French. Officially, France maintained its neutrality, but some of the French officers, who desired glory on the battlefield or who had little chance of advancement in the French army, enlisted to help the Americans. Perhaps the best example is Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834), who had no hope of gaining meaningful military experience as a soldier in peacetime, but his American experiences not only exposed him to the ideals of 'Liberty, Equality and the pursuit of Happiness', but also positively instilled the 'spirit of America' in his psyche. Lafayette and other returning European volunteers who had served in the American War of Independence spread the ideas of liberty and popular sovereignty.

For Zamoyski, the American revolt was seen by Europeans as a 'dramatic condemnation of the evils of Europe', and this echoes the earlier assessment of Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote in 1835 that 'the Americans appeared to be doing no more than carrying out what our writers had conceived'. Indeed, Tocqueville suggests a direct link between the ideas of the *philosophes* and the revolutionary action. The American rebellion demonstrated to the world that

there was an alternative to the *ancien régime* and, even more significantly, it was within reach.

KEY INDIVIDUAL: MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE (1757–1834)

Lafayette was a volunteer who served on the side of the rebels during the American War of Independence. He was influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment and was one of the liberal nobles who recognised the need for reform. During the Assembly of Notables, Lafayette supported summoning the Estates-General. He was elected as a Second Estate deputy and, due to his popularity with the Parisian crowds, was acclaimed the commander of the newly formed National Guard. His actions perhaps saved Marie Antoinette during the dramatic October Days of 1789. He supported the constitutional monarchy and lost all public support after the royal family's flight to Varennes in 1791 when he ordered the shooting of unarmed demonstrators at the Champs de Mars. He commanded an army in the war against Austria, but in 1792 he defected to Austria and was imprisoned until 1797. On Lafayette's release, Napoleon allowed him to return to live on his estates in France.

ANCIEN RÉGIME

The French system of government before the revolution is best described as an absolute monarchy and is often referred to as the *ancien régime*. The term *ancien régime* was coined in 1789 by the revolutionaries who wished to distance themselves from the world they sought to reform. The kingdom of France was ruled by the king, the head of the Bourbon dynasty. King Louis XVI, whose reign started in 1774, was an absolute monarch who ruled by divine right; his authority and the right to rule were subject to the will of God alone.

In theory, there were no legal limits to the monarch's power over his realm. In practice, however, the king was bound by the laws and customs of the land, and exercising his authority depended on the agreement of France's elite: the clergy and the nobility. The king

could not on his own volition alter the rules of hereditary succession to allow his daughter to succeed him on the throne because the established law stipulated that the throne passed to a king's closest living male relative. The king resided in Versailles and from there he appointed his ministers to advise him on the government of the kingdom. The ministers did not form a collective group or a cabinet in the modern sense but were responsible to Louis XVI individually for the tasks assigned to them and their departments. The king was thus at the centre of the government, directing, if not formulating, government policy. The lack of a cabinet meant, however, that ministers and their supporters competed against each other for Louis' favour.

In the decades leading to the revolution, members of a number of institutions questioned the powers of the Crown and, in particular, the scope of the royal prerogative. The most prominent and repeated challenge for control of taxation came from the royal courts of law, known as the *parlements*. These 'last great relics of medieval French constitution'¹ played a role in promulgation of all royal edicts by performing the registration of the laws. Sometimes the *parlements* refused to register legislation pointing to a specific issue of law and petitioned the king with their *remonstrance* for an edict to be amended. This uneasy relationship between the king and the *parlements* 'produced more debate and conflict than might be expected within a theoretically absolute monarchy'.² During his reign, Louis XV (1715–1774) considered it necessary to remind the judges of the *parlements*, and his subjects in general, of the scope of his authority. On 3 March 1766, the Parlement of Paris, the most important of the royal courts, held a special session known as the *lit de justice*. During the *lit de justice*, a ceremony dating back to the Middle Ages, the Parlement of Paris held its session under the presidency of the king himself and in his presence the judges were compelled to register the royal edicts. During the session, Louis XV outlined his own interpretation of law. The event became known as the 'Session of the Scourging' because the king lashed out at the judges who objected to his will. Louis XV restated what he called the 'fundamental laws of the state' asserting that 'sovereign power resides' in the person of the king alone. The king, Louis XV reminded them, exercises that power through consultation and application of justice, and is guided by reason. What this necessarily

meant was that the 'public order in its entirety' originates from the Crown, and it is at the Crown's mandate that the courts 'derive their existence and their authority'; the judges administer justice in the name of the Crown. The king stressed that 'undivided legislative power' belonged to him alone and the *parlements'* right of remonstrance could not in any way challenge it. Finally, addressing his subjects, Louis XV reminded them that the 'rights and interests of the nation' were the same as those of the king. During the course of his education, the king's grandson and future successor, Dauphin Louis-Auguste, reflected on these principles and wrote in his journal that 'a key foundation of the French monarchy is that all power resides with the king alone, and that no body or person can make itself independent of his authority'.³ These tenets of the French constitution, unchallenged until the late 1780s, serve as a powerful reminder of Louis XVI's own concept of authority.⁴

THE KING AND THE QUEEN

The future Louis XVI, known before his accession as Louis-Auguste, was the eldest male heir of Louis XV, his grandfather. Before his ascent to the throne, on 10 May 1774, he was referred to as the Dauphin, which was the title of the heir to the throne of France, derived from the province of the Dauphiné and at the same time a reference to the depiction of the dolphin in the coat of arms of the province. Louis was well educated, with a particular interest in mathematics, physics and history. Although Louis was interested in technological innovations, his education and upbringing reinforced his own perception of the monarch's traditional position as an absolute ruler. From the beginning of his reign, Louis pursued a number of reformist policies, wishing to rebuild confidence in the monarchy. He often took the advice of his ministers but was not persistent when faced with firm opposition to his ideas. This inconsistency made him look indecisive and weak if not duplicitous.⁵

Abbé Jean-Louis Soulavie (1781–1813), who published his own account of the reign of Louis XVI in 1801, attributed the development of the revolution to the rigid social structure of the *ancien régime*. Abbé Soulavie pointed out that Louis XVI was unsuitable to lead his country in the time of crisis because of his indecisive personality. The king seemed unable to follow through his policy

decisions and defend them when faced with firm resistance. Abbé Soulavie portrayed Louis XVI as a scrupulous and morally irreproachable monarch, who could not choose between asserting the royal authority and consenting to the demands of public opinion.⁶

In 1770, Dauphin Louis-Auguste married Marie Antoinette. The marriage was intended to show the strength of the alliance between France and Austria. The alliance was established after the conclusion of the War of Austrian Succession in 1756 and was orchestrated by the dominant faction at Louis XV's court, led by the duc de Choiseul (1719–1785). Marie Antoinette was the youngest daughter of 16 children of Maria Theresa of Austria (1717–1780) and Francis I (r. 1745–1765), Holy Roman Emperor. Her parents were an unconventional couple who married for love, shared the same bed, and raised their children in an informal family setting. Marie Antoinette was educated by a French tutor who instructed her in history, the classics, and the arts.⁷

The marriage was contracted on 19 April 1770 at a ceremony held in Vienna, and the young Marie Antoinette arrived in Versailles on 16 May. On that day, the official wedding was held in the royal chapel. The celebrations included the reception of the ambassadors, a firework display and a lavish party in the royal opera house. The day concluded with the bedding ceremony ritual: the young couple were led into the bedchamber of Marie Antoinette; the bed was blessed by the Archbishop of Reims; and the newly married couple went to bed in the presence of all the court. The marriage was not consummated until 1776, which fuelled gossip about the sexuality of both Louis and Marie Antoinette. The delay in normal sexual relations between the couple was most frequently blamed on a genital anomaly, or a strict religious education, but was likely caused by the immaturity and ignorance of the couple; they were aged 15 and 14 respectively.⁸ In fact, the couple benefited from advice from the queen's brother, Emperor Joseph II, during his visit to Versailles in May 1777.⁹ The couple's first child was born on 19 December 1778.

The marriage was haunted by enmity towards Marie Antoinette from all sections of the French public. Until she gave birth to a daughter and later provided a dauphin, rumours of her infidelity and infertility circulated widely, despite the king's open affection towards her in public. In the 1780s, Marie Antoinette became the

subject of vilifying subversive pamphlets. These pamphlets portrayed her as immoral and self-indulgent, falsely insinuating that she had lesbian affairs, which eroded the prestige of the monarchy in the eyes of the public. The perception of her extravagance was so legendary that even when rumours were refuted, the public continued to believe the scandals.¹⁰ The disastrous 'Affair of the Diamond Necklace' (1785–1786) exposed Marie Antoinette to further public condemnation even though she was innocent of any involvement.

The public furore caused by the 'Affair of the Diamond Necklace' contributed to discrediting the queen in the eyes of the French people, although there was no evidence that she had done anything wrong. At the centre of the scandal was Cardinal de Rohan and the necklace ordered by Louis XV for his mistress, Madame du Barry. This piece of jewellery, with an estimated cost of 2 million *livres*, never reached its intended recipient because the king died of smallpox before it could be delivered. In 1785, Cardinal de Rohan hoped to gain the favour of the queen but was duped by Jeanne de la Motte. She pretended to act as a friend of the queen and convinced the Cardinal that the queen wanted him to negotiate the purchase of the necklace and pay for it in instalments. In the end Jeanne de la Motte's husband sold the necklace's diamonds separately in London. When the payment was not received, the jeweller approached the queen directly; she rejected the suggestion that she had ordered and received the necklace. Cardinal de Rohan was taken to the Bastille in August 1785, but he was acquitted after a trial in May 1786. Jeanne de la Motte was branded on each shoulder with a V mark reserved for thieves, and imprisoned.¹¹ The public image of the queen was however damaged beyond repair—Marie Antoinette could do nothing right!

FRANCE BEFORE 1789

When Louis XVI ascended the throne, France was the most populous and the largest state in Europe. The territory under his control (excluding overseas territories) covered some 717,944 square kilometres and had a population of more than 28 million; a nation which was growing rapidly. The kingdom extended from the lowlands of Flanders in the north to the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean Sea in the south, and from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Rhine

River and the Alps in the east. France also controlled overseas colonies in Canada, the Caribbean, and the Indian subcontinent. Louis' realm was not uniform, and its constituent parts had been accumulated by his ancestors through conquest and dynastic marriages since the Middle Ages. As recently as 1766, Louis' grandfather, Louis XV, had inherited the Duchy of Lorraine from his father-in-law, the former king of Poland, Stanisław Leszczyński, and 20 years later Louis incorporated the island of Corsica into his realm. The kingdom was thus an amalgamation of provinces that were progressively added, and the kings of France tended to adapt the existing institutions of these new territories rather than develop and impose new institutions. As a result, each province had different legal and administrative systems, and taxes levied at varied rates. This made Louis XVI's France a diverse and complex realm to govern.

For administrative purposes, the kingdom was divided into 36 *généralités*, each governed by an intendant, an administrator who reported to the Controller-General of Finances. The *généralités* as administrative units were not uniform in size and their boundaries seldom coincided with the geographical boundaries of the provinces. In the exercise of the royal authority the intendants competed with the *parlements*, the 13 appellate courts of law. The premier position among these courts was held by the Parlement of Paris whose jurisdiction covered a third of the kingdom. Among the prerogatives of the *parlement* was the registration of the king's edicts before they were promulgated as binding laws and, related to it, the right to remonstrate by rising legal objections to the king's legislation. To add to this complex administrative framework, the Roman Catholic Church maintained 18 archiepiscopal provinces and 136 dioceses across the kingdom. These complex connections and interdependencies were repeated in many different ways at the town and village level.

**DOCUMENT: LAMOIGNON ON THE
PRINCIPLES OF THE FRENCH
MONARCHY, 19 NOVEMBER 1787**

This extract is from a speech delivered by Chrétien-François de Lamoignon (1735–1789) at a sitting of the Parlement of

Paris on 19 November 1787. Lamoignon was the king's Lord Chancellor who customarily managed the system of justice.

These principles, universally acknowledged by the entire kingdom, are that the King alone must possess the sovereign power in his kingdom; that He is answerable only to God in the exercise of his power; that the tie which binds the King to the Nation is by nature indissoluble; that the interests and reciprocal obligations between the King and his subjects serve only to reassure that union; that the Nation's interest is that the powers of its head not be altered; that the King is the chief sovereign of the Nation and everything he does is with her interests in mind; and that finally the legislative power resides in the person of the King independent of and unshared with all other powers. These, sirs, are the invariable powers of the French Monarchy ... As a consequence of these principles and of our History, it is clear that the King only has the right to convoke an Estates-General; that he alone must judge if this convocation is necessary; and that he needs no other power for the administration of his kingdom.¹²

Louis XVI's subjects were all members of social groups that, except for the peasants, claimed certain special rights that set them apart from others. As such, the social structure of the *ancien régime* was rigid and built on notions of privilege and precedence. Originating in the Middle Ages, this structure divided French society into three estates or orders, known as the First, Second and Third Estates. The First Estate was made up of the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church. The Second Estate drew its membership from those who were born to a noble father or who had acquired nobility by the grace of the king. The Third Estate contained everyone else, those of common birth. Almost every group in eighteenth-century France could claim some sort of special privilege, but the most visibly privileged groups were the two so-called privileged orders, the clergy and the nobility.

The clergy of the Roman Catholic Church, which formed the First Estate, made up less than 1 per cent of the population. Numbering between 130,000 and 170,000, members of the clergy

comprised monks and nuns in religious orders and priests who ministered to the spiritual needs of lay society.¹³ The Church was a highly hierarchical organisation, with archbishops and bishops predominantly from the nobility in the high offices, and the priests and curates predominantly commoners. The influence enjoyed by the Church had its roots in the monopoly of public worship (97 per cent of Frenchmen were nominally Catholic) and its wealth was largely derived from extensive landholding, perhaps 6–7 per cent of the land of France, and the income from a tithe of 10 per cent imposed on farm produce at harvest. The most evident sign of the privileged status of the First Estate was its total exemption from paying taxes.¹⁴ The Church's General Assembly made a voluntary annual grant to the king.

The nobles derived their status as members of the Second Estate by birth (the *noblesse d'épée*, nobility of the sword) or by creation or ennoblement (the *noblesse de robe*, officials raised to nobility by the king either through merit or by the virtue of the office). In terms of social mobility, the creation of more than 4,000 venal offices out of 70,000 opened the way for wealthy commoners to acquire noble status. The French nobility could be likened to a club that the wealthy among the commoners felt obliged to join. In line with the trends in other European monarchies, while not all nobles were wealthy, most of the wealthy people, eventually, ended up becoming nobles. Membership of the nobility offered standing in society that was beyond the reach of wealth alone and assisted its holders in securing prestige, positions and privileges.¹⁵ Precisely how many nobles there were in 1789 is debatable. The estimates vary from no more than 25,000 noble families to between 140,000 and 350,000 individuals but perhaps not more than 1 per cent of the population.¹⁶

The nobles owned between a quarter and a third of all the land in France. Their greatest privilege was exemption from paying the *taille* and the *corvée*. The nobles as estate holders benefited from several sources of wealth and power. Notwithstanding great internal diversity of the nobility, they enjoyed the privilege of rank demonstrated by various insignia of distinction, fiscal and seigneurial privileges, and exclusive employment in a range of official positions, including the army. As members of the Second Estate, the nobles were seen as having a vested interest in an intricate hierarchical system

of status from which they derived their economic, political and social privilege.¹⁷ In their opposition to the reforms sought by King Louis XVI many nobles recognised that any significant changes in France's political institutions would most likely result in a decrease in their privileges. While some liberal nobles, influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, accepted the need for these reforms because they thought of themselves as the natural leaders of society, most nobles believed that reform was a threat to their position.

The Third Estate included every person who was not a member of the clergy or nobility, that is the commoners. Accounting for about 98 per cent of the French population, the Third Estate was a broadly defined group that included wealthy merchants, urban workers, peasants and beggars. The wealthiest group within the Third Estate was the bourgeoisie, or 'the citizens of a town', who represented the emerging middle classes mostly living in the towns. They accumulated their wealth through trade rather than farming. Among them were merchants, bankers, industrialists, business people, financiers, landowners, medical professionals, lawyers and civil servants. As a social group, they were growing in wealth and aspired to advance their social status in order to join the nobility. Yet, for all the aspirations to advance in terms of social status there was a growing frustration within the upper bourgeoisie, particularly those engaged in manufacturing. The causes of the dissatisfaction were deeply rooted in the structures of the *ancien régime* based on privilege. The expansion of overseas trade and the increase in the consumption of luxury goods were restricted by the rights and privileges of corporations, feudal landowners, and government. In short, the privilege of a few affected the job market, freedom of trade and thus commerce in general.¹⁸

Among those of the Third Estate who lived in the towns were urban workers who made their living working as servants, labourers, or industrial workers. Most of them were low skilled and survived on low wages. The burden of taxes that members of the other estates did not pay fell heavily on the Third Estate. The quality of life in the lower strata of the Third Estate depended very much on the price of food; when food prices went up, their lives got harder.

The most populous section of the Third Estate was the peasants, who constituted more than 80 per cent of the population.¹⁹ Across the country they owned about 30 per cent of the land outright,

although this varied between the provinces. They were smallholders, tenant farmers or sharecroppers; if they did not own or lease their land, they farmed at subsistence level.²⁰ Their low income depended on yields for grain crops and was subsidised by working on another's land or in the towns. Scarcity of food was a common feature of peasant life. Among their obligations were: feudal seigneurial dues to the lord of the manor (*seigneur*), including work on the lord's land; they had to be available for labour service on the roads (*corvée*); they paid the land tax (*taille*) and the salt tax (*gabelle*), the head tax (*capitation*), and the *vingtième* or twentieth tax as well as a tithe to the Church.

Most of the peasants survived by subsistence farming, their standard of living dependent on harvest yields and weather: crop failure and bad weather meant hunger. It is not an overstatement that the majority of peasants earned just enough to sustain their own existence. Poor harvests were a major reason for rural poverty as they reduced food supply and inflated prices. The testimony of Arthur Young, a British traveller through France in 1789, is often used to highlight the abject poverty of the rural population. Young described parts of France as backward and poverty-stricken, with farming practices not much further advanced than those of the Indigenous tribes of North America.²¹ At the same time, other visitors to France reported its progress and development.

INEQUITY OF THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SYSTEM

Eighteenth-century France was a rural society characterised by regional diversity. Many local traditions, practices and loyalties continued to influence the lives of individuals throughout France. The growth in population and expansion of the economy was not matched by reform of the increasingly outdated feudal structures in society. By the late eighteenth century, the perception of the need for change became a source of political tension.

The nobility, although fully aware of its privilege, rank and status, was removed from active participation in the government of France by lack of any representative institution able to influence the king. The laws and privileges of the provinces prevented the creation of a uniform national market, which frustrated the growing