Summary of key events, 1781–1789

1786
- 20 August: Calonne proposes financial reforms to the King.

1787
- 22 February: The King convenes the Assembly of Notables to discuss fiscal reform.
- 8 April: The King dismisses reforming finance minister Calonne and appoints Brienne in his place.
- 25 May: The King closes the Assembly of Notables.
- August: The law courts (*parlements*) of Paris and Bordeaux rebel against the King's authority and are exiled.
- 19 November: The King exerts authority upon the law courts in the 'royal session'.

1788
- 3 May: The Paris *parlement* states that the King has a duty to submit new laws to the *parlements* and that new taxes can only by imposed by agreement with the nation, as represented by the Estates-General.
- 8 May: The King tries to disempower *parlements* by redefining their role and powers.
- June–July: The first phase of the revolution is often referred to as the 'aristocratic' or **noble revolt**, referring to the fact that resistance came from the nobles in the Assembly of Notables and the *parlements*. Note, however, that even at this early stage resistance came from other social groups, such as the urban crowds that supported the *parlements*. These law courts defy the King; town populations demonstrate in favour of the judges.
- 8 August: The King calls a meeting of Estates-General for May 1789.
- 16 August: The royal treasury suspends payments, a near equivalent of bankruptcy.
- 24 August: Finance minister Brienne resigns; the more popular Necker is recalled.
- 25 September: The King reopens *parlements*. The Paris *parlement* demands that the Estates-General meet and vote by order.
- October–December: Assembly of Notables meets again to discuss the organisation of the Estates-General.
- 27 December: Concession of doubling of the number of deputies for the Third Estate.

1789
- 24 January: Formal call for Estates-General to meet.
- February: Publication of Sieyès' *What is the Third Estate?*
- February–May: Election of deputies to the Estates-General at Versailles. Drafting of Books of Grievances.
- 27–28 April: Crowds attack and destroy Reveillon factory. Class conflict?
- 5 May: Opening of the Estates-General. King maintains traditional honorific distinctions between orders.
- 6 May: Controversy over voting by order or by head. Third Estate demands voting by head.
- 20–22 May: Clergy and nobility accept principle of equality in taxation.
- 13 June: Some parish priests join the Third Estate.
- 17 June: The second stage of the revolution is often loosely referred to as the **bourgeois revolt**, referring to the fact that the deputies of the Third Estate now stepped forward and claimed a new constitutional role for themselves. Note, however, that other social groups, such as liberal nobles and liberal priests also supported them. The Third Estate declares that it virtually is the nation and declares itself to be a national assembly.
- 20 June: The Third Estate retreats to a commercial tennis court and swears not to disband until there is a constitution.
- 23 June: The National Assembly defies the royal order to return to discussion by order.
- 25 June: A deputation of nobles joins the Third Estate.
- 27 June: The three orders unite.
- 30 June: The King orders troops to Paris.
- 2–10 July: Despite popular protests against troop presence, the King refuses to withdraw them.
- 11–13 July: Increasing agitation in Paris. The King dismisses Necker. The third stage of the revolution is often called the **revolt of the urban working classes** – Desmoulins exhorts the people to arm themselves.
- 14 July: The capture of the Bastille.

THE POLITICAL ORDER IN FRANCE BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

Overview

HANDOUT 4.1.

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.

fiscal
relating to taxes

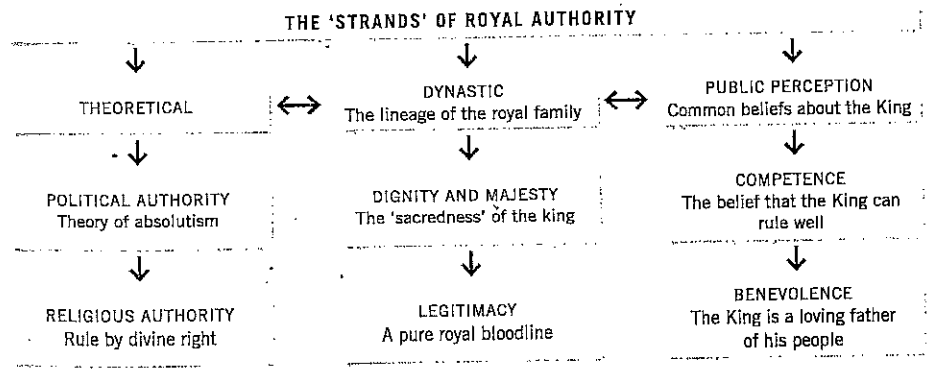
absolute monarchy
a political theory that allows a king to rule with personal authority

Sun King
in reference to Louis XIV, who reigned in the 17th century, being as all-powerful as the sun

absolutism
political system in which the power of a ruler is unchecked

rule by divine right
a political belief that the king had been placed on the throne by God's will

Flow of chapter



Key issues

- What were the elements that made up the King's authority?
- Limits to the King's power
- The contradictions and inefficiencies of the old regime
- The importance of public perception of the King

What were the elements that made up the King's authority?

It will be useful to start by posing an analytical question about the political structures of the old regime in France. What exactly constitutes the power and authority of any given political regime?

In modern times, political power is ultimately based on the command of armed force. In France, however, royal authority was made up of many interwoven elements. If we can define these elements, we will be better able to trace how, and why, each of these began to weaken, creating the crisis of the regime.

The political theory of absolute monarchy

The most important aspect of power is the theoretical basis of authority: the set of understandings about the King as an absolute ruler. These understandings were given their most forceful expression by the powerful Louis XIV during his long personal reign (1661–1715). His spokesman, the French bishop Jacques Bossuet, stated: 'In the exercise of lawful authority the king is, and ought to be, absolute; that is so far absolute that there is no legal authority which can delay or resist him.'[1]

France did not have a written constitution. The definition of royal power was contained partly in assorted documents – such as *The Fundamental Laws of the Kingdom* – and, more simply, in accepted practices. By these documents and understandings, the King had the power to pass laws, to appoint ministers, to declare war and peace, to impose taxes and to control the nation's currency.

The theory of rule by divine right

The political theory of absolute monarchy was reinforced by a second, religious belief. The French monarch was believed to have received his power directly from God and was deemed infallible and to rule by 'divine right'. Bossuet stated that 'the King in his palace is the image of God in his heaven, who sets the whole of nature in motion.'[2] This meant that, by implication, to criticise the King was to criticise God. The divine nature of the King was displayed in traditional ceremonies in which he cured the ill by the touch of his hand.

ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 1 Reading a primary source

An image of royal power

Figure 1.1 This official portrait shows King Louis XVI in the coronation robes he wore in 1775. The emphasis on the single figure of the King reminds us that absolute monarchy was a form of personal rule by one monarch, which could not be questioned by any representative body. In Louis XIV's *Reflections Upon the Role of a King*, he had stated, 'The Nation is not embodied in France, it resides entirely in the person of the King'.[3]

1 How does this painting remind people of the enormous personal power of the King in an absolute monarchy?
2 What 'messages' is the King trying to communicate to you, the viewer, by his pose, his expression and the symbols he holds?
3 How do some of the objects in the painting symbolise the King's royal powers?

ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 2 Reading a primary resource

The Speech of M de Lamoignon on Royal Authority, 19 November 1787

These principles, universally recognised by the Nation to be true, prove that sovereign [absolute Ed.] power in the kingdom belongs to the King alone. That he has only to account to God alone for the exercise of his supreme power. That the bond uniting the King and the Nation can never be dissolved. That mutual interests and duties between the King and his subjects assure the perpetuity of this union. That the Nation's interests require that the rights of its ruler should not be altered. That the King is the sovereign head of the Nation and is one with the Nation. Finally, that the legislative power resides in the person of the King, independently, and cannot be divided.[4]

1 **How does this document explain the principle of 'rule by divine right'?**
2 **How does this document explain the relationship between the King and the subjects who form 'the Nation'?**
3 **Does the writer believe that the King's legislative role (power to make laws) can be shared with anybody else?**

The King exercised complete control of the executive functions of government, such as declaring war and making peace. He ruled through a cabinet of ministers called the Council of State, to whom he simply issued orders. Since the King could replace minsters at will, few dared to reveal problems or suggest unpopular policies.[5] The King's personal authority was carried into the provinces of France by royal governors (intendants) chosen by him to implement royal policy in their appointed area. The King's understanding of the state of the nation was only as good as the reports he received from these ministers and governors.

Focus!

1 **Why was the King's authority a very personal, and almost absolute, form of rule?**
2 **In what way did the Catholic Church confirm and strengthen the power of the King?**

Limits to the King's power

The French distinguished between absolute power, which gave the King ultimate control, and arbitrary power (despotism), by which a King acted as he wished, without regard to existing laws. He still had to respect the nation's traditions and laws. In reality, he ruled beside provincial assemblies and other special groups enjoying their own traditional powers.

provincial assemblies established in the decade before 1787 to meet in the large towns of regional France

Historian William Doyle states that, while none of these groups actually challenged royal power between 1614 and 1789, they certainly placed some constraints on royal power.[6] The most significant were the highest law courts in the system of justice.

Flashpoint

The high law courts challenge royal authority, 1771–1774

In France, the highest courts of appeal were called '*parlements*' (not to be confused with the English word 'parliament'). These 13 supreme law courts checked and registered royal laws. This process simply ensured that all courts had received and understood copies of the laws, and was never intended as a check upon the King's powers. The courts were, however, given the power to make a *remonstrance* – a private memo informing the King that registration had been delayed because they had identified some technical problem in the wording of the law. During the reign of Louis XV, many judges decided that they should act to moderate the power of the King and began to use the *remonstrance* to express political opposition to the monarchy.

The flashpoint occurred in the 1750s and 1760s when the parlements had the power to actually prevent Louis XV from increasing taxes and from creating other law courts. In the provinces, the parlements also stood up to the King's governors. By 1770, the King was prepared to fight this opposition: he ordered his chancellor, Maupeou, to strip the courts of many of their powers, to dismiss half of the judges and to create new law courts. From 1771 until 1774, the flashpoint seemed to be over. In 1774, however, the new king, Louis XVI, made the mistake of trying to win over the parlements by giving them back their old powers. Although they were now more cautious and did not immediately resume opposition to royal policy, they would cause further problems at the time of the monarchy's greatest crisis.

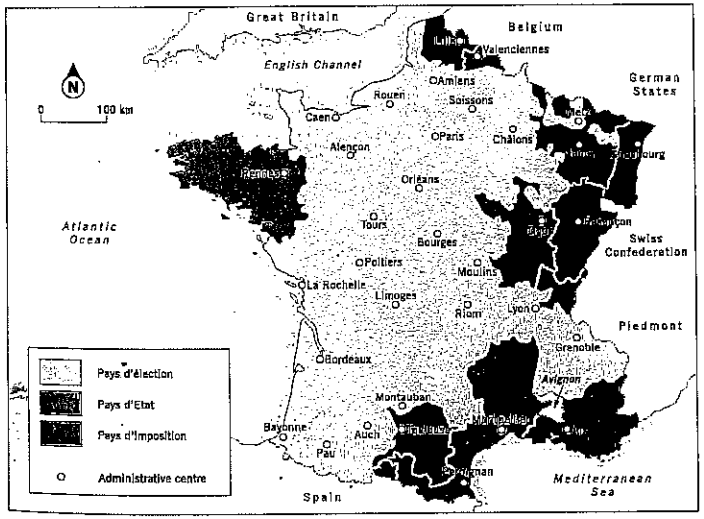


Figure 1.2 This map shows only some of the complexities of the old regime in France. The so-called 'Areas of Election' had one system of government and taxation, the 'Areas of Estates' had another, and the 'Areas of imposition' had yet another. To this must be added the chaotic system of 13 unequal legal zones, as well as 18 different religious administrative zones.

The contradictions and inefficiencies of the old regime

A final point needs to be made. To understand the discontent in France in the 1780s, we need to study not only the institutions of the old regime, but the way people experienced them and suffered from their inefficiencies, inequalities and contradictions. William Doyle's detailed depiction of the structures of the old regime makes it clear that it was not so much a system of government as a number of overlapping systems, many of them competing with each other. Administratively, the old regime was a chaotic jumble of administration, justice, local taxes and religious institutions. No single subject in 18th-century France could expect to have the same treatment as everybody else in administrative, religious or legal matters: it depended entirely upon where a person lived and which set of systems was in force there.

The importance of public perception of the King

public perception
commonly accepted beliefs

The King's absolute political authority was supplemented by **public perception** about his role. Common perceptions of power have to be created. Cultural historian Peter Burke has recently shown that Louis XIV not only forged the structures of monarchical power, but also created a convincing imagery of that power. He created the 'little academy', which, like a modern public image consultancy, was responsible for creating a coherent set of **representations** of the King. It created a vast, unified collection of paintings, statues, medallions and literary works to glorify the all-powerful 'Sun King'. Once culture had been adapted to the use of power, later kings, such as Louis XV and Louis XVI, would never fail to use it.

representations
a 'representation' of the king is designed to reinforce the impression of the monarch's power

Figure 1.3 In this image, the official royal artist is commenting on the activity of the King's 'little academy' in producing images of the monarch. The figures are symbolic rather than realistic and represent the Arts generally. Notice in the background the large printing press on which hundreds of copies of engravings could be made.

Public belief in the King's competence

Although ordinary people rarely glimpsed Versailles or the workings of royal government, there was nonetheless a common assumption that the King was capable of ruling competently. This assumption was reinforced by the production of large oil paintings and engravings showing the King at work, directing the affairs of the nation. The King could, therefore, rely on some public faith in his abilities but, should there be a serious crisis that becomes public knowledge, his credibility would then be seriously weakened.

Versailles
Louis XIV's palace near Paris

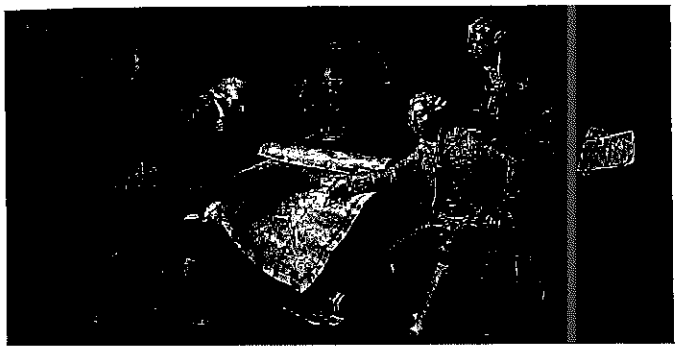


Figure 1.4 Monsiau, *Louis XVI traces the course of La Pérouse*, 1785. In this engraving, the King's official artist shows Louis XVI carrying out the duties of kingship, directing and controlling the government's activities in matters such as exploration of new lands.

Public belief in the royal dynasty

Compared with modern rulers, who often have no family history of power, the monarchs of the old regime enjoyed the prestige of belonging to a **dynasty**. Each decade of its rule reinforces the weight of continuity and tradition, so that successive monarchs are strengthened by added dynastic prestige. In the case of Louis XVI, the Bourbon dynasty dated back to 1589, when Henry IV ascended the throne.

dynasty
a sequence of kings going back hundreds of years

Figure 1.5 *The Presentation of the Portrait of Marie-Antoinette to the Dauphin, the Future Louis XVI*, 1769. French kings used engravings, such as this one, to show that they were a part of both a royal family and a long dynasty stretching back many years. Here, King Louis XV (seated) holds the hand of his grandson, the future Louis XVI, while they look at a portrait of his intended bride, Marie-Antoinette of Austria. The portraits on the walls depict previous members of the Bourbon dynasty.

Public belief in benevolence

The belief in royal legitimacy and competence was reinforced by a third belief, that the King was 'father' and protector of his people. Traditionally, people could go directly to their ruler to seek assistance in cases of misfortune or injustice. The King enjoyed the 'patriarchal authority' of a father over his family and was assumed to protect his subjects' welfare. He, therefore, drew upon a certain amount of trust but, if that sense of trust should be destroyed, public feeling could turn very strongly against him.

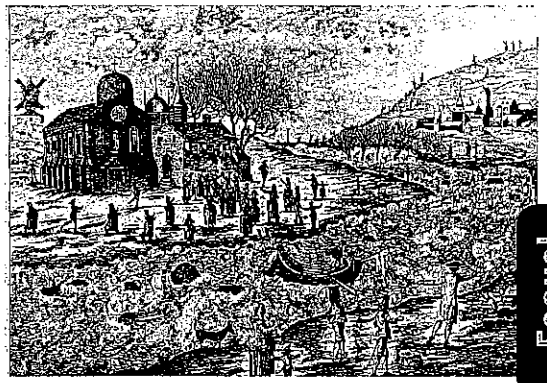


Figure 1.6 *An event that happened in the reign of Louis XVI, Called the Doer of Good Deeds*, 1784. The King's responsibility to be a benevolent, caring ruler is shown in this print, which depicts him visiting a flooded area of France to help the victims of a natural disaster.

Focus!

1. **What were the three main beliefs – and expectations – that the French people held of their King?**
2. **How did the King ensure that these beliefs – and public confidence – were maintained?**

Louis XVI first 'met' his intended bride, Marie-Antoinette of Austria, in 1769 when he was 15 years of age ... simply by being shown a portrait of her sent from the Austrian court. When they did marry, in 1770, Marie-Antoinette had to go through a ceremony of stripping off all the clothing that her family had provided, stepping naked – through a specially constructed cabin – across the French border and then putting on a new set of clothes provided by Louis XVI.

THE STORY SO FAR...

By the beginning of the 1780s, the French monarchy was still powerful and was supported by several forms of authority. The strength of absolute monarchy was that it drew on a number of different strands of power, ranging from a political theory, to religious authority, to common perceptions of the King's legitimacy, competence and benevolence. Its weakness was that only some of these understandings were documented. If, at some stage, the opponents of absolute royal authority were to question the origins and limits of power, then the system might be weakened.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Developing clear definitions

On a separate piece of paper write your own definition of each of the following key terms:

absolutism	**rule by divine right**	**despotism**
benevolence	**'fabrication' of the King's image**	

Practising paragraph answers

1. What was the **Council of State** (Council of Ministers)? How was it different to a modern government? Why did the position of ministers make it almost impossible for them to make unpopular recommendations to the King?
2. How did the common belief in the King's competence add to his authority? How did the King make use of forms of culture, such as large paintings, to strengthen this belief in his competence?
3. What did French people understand by their belief in the King's 'benevolence'? How did this 'paternal' image reinforce his royal authority?

Analysing historians' perspectives

In 'The Myth of Absolutism', historian Nicholas Henshall reminds us that the theory of absolutism was a respectable political theory, that the King had responsibilities as well as rights and that he could not brutally repress the opinions of other political bodies, such as the provincial assemblies. He argues that we should not look at absolute monarchy through the lens of 19th-century liberalism, which tended to be very hostile to this earlier form of political authority:

> In the last days of the [old regime], French kings did act despotically, in search of short cuts to desirable reforms for which no consent was forthcoming. But no Frenchman equated despotism with his constitution. Until quite late in 1789 the old constitution was what most wanted. Despotism was seen as its negation.[7]

1. According to Henshall, the 18th-century system of 'absolute monarchy' made sense to contemporary people and was not as bad as the 'absolutism' that historians condemned in the 19th century. How does Henshall see the differences between the two?
2. If the absolute monarchy was not itself a bad system, why did people in 1789 start to use the word 'despotism'?

Practice essay question

'While the French monarchy was strengthened by a number of forms of power, these same strengths were also potential weaknesses that might prevent the regime from responding effectively to a crisis.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Reading more deeply

1 EASY

- Peter Burke, 'The Fabrication of Louis XIV', *History Today*, February 1992, pp. 24–30.

CHAPTER REVIEW

2 MODERATE

- Nicholas Henshall, 'The Myth of Absolutism', *History Today*, June 1992, pp. 40–47.
- Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 1789–1799, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, Chapter 1, 'France in the 1780s'.

3 CHALLENGING

- William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, Chapter 1.

Endnotes

1 Nicholas Henshall, 'The Myth of Absolutism', *History Today*, June 1992, p. 41. (Please note: The wording has been altered for student reading.)
2 William Church, *The Greatness of Louis XIV. Myth or Reality?*, Heath, Boston, 1959, p. 7.
3 Miguel Ferreira, *La Révolution de 1789 vue par les peintres*, EDITA, Genève, 1988, p. 34.
4 Paul Beik, *The French Revolution. Selected Documents*, Macmillan, London, 1970. (Please note: The wording has been altered for student reading.)
5 *ibid.*
6 William Doyle, *The Ancien Regime*, Macmillan, London, 1986, p. 15.
7 Henshall, p. 47.

Figure 1.7 This formal portrait shows the Queen, Marie-Antoinette, with her children in 1785. These official images of royalty were a powerful way of showing the majesty and legitimacy of the royal dynasty.

THE SOCIAL ORDER IN FRANCE BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

2

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

Key issues

- The corporate society and privilege
- The culture of deference – respect for your 'betters'
- The Three Estates

The corporate society and privilege

old regime
French society before the Revolution

corporate society
a society in which certain groups can legally enjoy different conditions and laws that do not apply to the rest of society

First, the France of the old regime was a corporate society made up of a number of powerful groups, each enjoying special customs, laws and privileges. We, as citizens of a modern democratic state, expect that the laws of our nation to apply equally to everybody, rich and poor; people during the old regime accepted that inequality between them was right and natural.

Privilege – special rights for some social groups

The key concept of old regime society was privilege, literally, a private set of laws, a 'special deal' worked out between the King and a certain group. Privileges could be honorific, such as the noble's right to wear a sword in public. Usually, privileges entitled the owner to significant concessions. Some were legal: nobles and priests could be tried by special law courts made up of their own kind. The most significant concessions were fiscal: certain groups – nobles, clergy and rich bourgeois in towns – had negotiated with the French King to pay relatively little tax.

The result was a world in which no individual could ever expect equality of treatment in professional, legal or financial matters: it all depended which group he or she belonged to and what privileges the group enjoyed. The concept of equality of all citizens did not, therefore, exist: it would have to be invented and it would have to be implemented by destroying these deeply entrenched privileges.

The culture of deference – respect for your 'betters'

Second, this corporate society, which based inequality in law, was complemented by a culture of deference. This was not a legal but a social and psychological quality: people accepted that the rich and the powerful were superior and instinctively paid respect to the privileged by changing the way they spoke and behaved in their presence. You can see this culture of deference at work in a representation of a visit of a landlord to his tenants: they are not simply paying money, but are behaving respectfully in a manner that expresses their recognition of social difference.

French society was still structured upon an old-fashioned system of social classification known as the 'estate' (état). We usually now use the word 'class', meaning people enjoying much the same wealth, education and way of life. The 'estate' was a much larger category, based upon a definition of what role people were supposed to fulfil in society, according to a set of categories that had made sense in the Middle Ages, but were quite outdated by the 1780s.

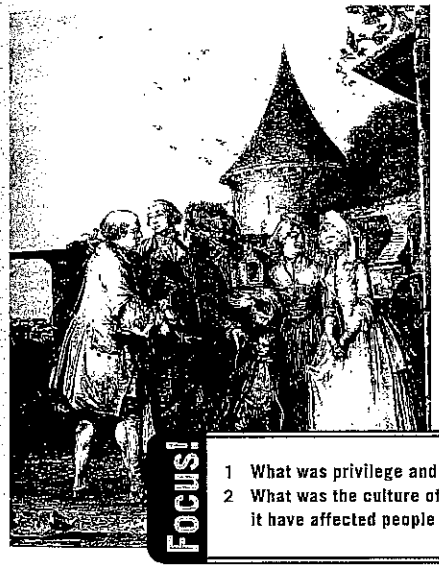


Figure 2.1 *The Landlord's Visit*, 1750. This engraving illustrates the social and the psychological aspects of a 'culture of deference'. Here, a farming family is being visited by their noble landlord. Apart from paying their rent, they show respect by their modest behaviour, including restrained gestures and downcast eyes.

Focus!

1. **What was privilege and what forms did it take**
2. **What was the culture of deference and how might it have affected people in their everyday lives?**

The Three Estates

In theory, France had three 'estates'. The First Estate was made up of all clergy, including every rank from archbishops to humble priests. In the traditional social plan that had existed since the Middle Ages, the task of the clergy was to pray and to keep the kingdom free of evil influences. The Second Estate was made up of the nobility, ranging from the most powerful nobles to impoverished minor nobles. Their traditional role had been to fight for the king and to maintain sufficient equipment and soldiers to contribute a contingent to the nation's army in time of war. The Third Estate was defined negatively as everybody who did not belong to the first two estates. In medieval society, this had meant primarily the peasants, whose task had been to produce food for the remainder of society.

The supporting role of the Third Estate is shown vividly in an image showing the three estates as three representative figures: the Third Estate (represented by the peasant in the centre) existed to 'carry' the First and Second Estates. Since

artisans
skilled workers

this social system had been defined, the Third Estate had come to include not only the majority of the population, but a vast number of people – artisans, shopkeepers, merchants, owners of land, lawyers, doctors, financiers, even some industrialists – who enjoyed far more wealth, education and influence than their peasant predecessors did.

Modern readers often confuse these estates, assuming that the First and Second were 'the rich', while the Third Estate was 'the poor'. In fact, each estate included an enormous range of wealth, from the very poor to the very wealthy.

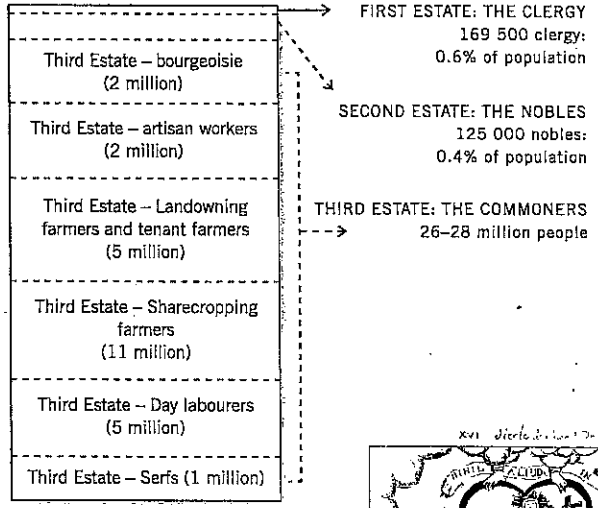


Figure 2.2 This diagram[1] shows the different groups in French society in 1789 and their relative numerical importance. While these figures are approximate, they do indicate the extreme minority of the two privileged estates and the overwhelming majority enjoyed by the Third Estate.

Figure 2.3 *Allegorical Engraving Showing the Three Orders* c. 1789, The Carnavalet Museum (Viollet Collection), Paris. This image depicts the three estates, or main groups, in French society by means of three representative figures. It clearly shows that the common people of the Third Estate (represented here by a peasant) were meant to do most of the work in society, while the 'privileged' estates of clergy and nobility fulfilled their responsibilities to pray and to fight for the nation.

The two privileged estates

The First Estate, the clergy, numbered only 0.6% of the population[2], yet the Church owned about 10% of the land in France. The church hierarchy was a small, privileged group of about 1000 high clergy, such as bishops and archbishops, all of them noble. It was virtually impossible for a person of common birth to rise to the top of the hierarchy. They were fabulously wealthy: while a humble priest earned about £750 per year, an archbishop might earn £450 000. The lower clergy included about 40 000 parish priests (*curés*) and another 18 000 assistants (*vicaires*).

The Church was wealthy, enjoying a special right to apply the tithe, a tax of between 8–10% of people's income, or of the value of their crops and livestock. Every peasant in France paid this tax. It was also completely exempt from the royal taxes, paying only a voluntary donation (*don gratuit*) of 1% of its income, about £3 million per year. Little of this wealth went to the to the parish priest, who could have used it to help the sick and the poor in his care.

tithes
one-tenth of somebody's income given voluntarily to a church

The Second Estate, the nobility, numbered only 0.4% of the population, but commanded disproportionate wealth, ownership of 30% of the land, and control of public office[3]. They too enjoyed tax exemptions, although they still paid certain taxes[4]. They dominated the highest administrative posts in government and the Church: in the army, navy and diplomatic corps, all senior officers were aristocrats who could demonstrate a lineage going back for generations.

The nobility included the older 'nobility of the sword' (*noblesse d'épée*) and the more recent 'nobility of the robe' (*noblesse de robe*). The nobility of the sword (also called the 'old nobility' or the 'upper nobility') were families that traced their ancestry back centuries to some military achievement. The nobility of the robe was a recent nobility of high civil servants, created only from the 17th century onwards. The King allowed wealthy bourgeois to buy positions in the royal bureaucracy and to buy a noble title.

Focus!

1 **What were the two 'privileged estates'?**
2 **What aspects of these two estates might have attracted criticism and resentment?**

The Third Estate

The Third Estate was the largest and most complex group of social classes. It included the vast majority of the population, ranging from the poor, peasants, urban workers, artisans, shopkeepers, middle-class professionals, bourgeois landowners and financiers to people who were virtually the millionaires of their age. Of a total population of 28 million people, the vast majority, some 22 million, lived in the countryside. The urban population accounted for the remaining 6 million and of those most belonged to one of several working classes.

bourgeois
a single member of the bourgeoisie

The towns were home to a wealthy group, about 2.75 million people, who owned substantial property, did not earn a living by working with their hands and possessed education and culture. A small minority of these were nobles or priests, but the majority were still members of the Third Estate and were referred to as the bourgeoisie or as a bourgeois. There were about 2 million bourgeois, making up about 10% of the population, living primarily in the capital, Paris, and in large cities such as Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux and Toulouse, but also in smaller market towns.[5]

the bourgeoisie
a wide range of people from wealthy bankers, merchants and some industrialists, to middling people of the professional classes, such as lawyers, to owners of small shops or businesses

The bourgeoisie: a revolutionary class in the making?

Many bourgeois families had made their fortune in the commercial and industrial expansion of the 18th century, often starting in humble enterprise such as a shop. By the 1780s, nearly all of France's commercial capital, and much of its industry, was in bourgeois hands, although certain industries, such as metallurgy, also involved some nobles. The ports, in particular, were the sites of the activity of this merchant bourgeoisie. As soon as a bourgeois family had consolidated its fortune it began to move away from its commercial origins and to invest its money in other forms of wealth.

Was there an industrial, or capitalist, bourgeoisie in France? These bourgeois lived before the development of large-scale industry in France, so most were not 'capitalists' in the modern sense of running large factories. The French economy remained one of small workshops, although it had begun to develop some larger factories, such as the iron works of Le Creusot.

The greatest aim of the bourgeois was to become noble. Their main activity was investment in land and in finance, allowing them to become rentiers, living completely from investments like a noble (*vivre noblement*). In the liberal professions, the successful bourgeois could hope to purchase venal public office, a position in the royal administration, costing £50 000 to £500 000. During the 18th century, 5000–7000 bourgeois entered the nobility of the robe. By the 1780s, merchants, industrialists and bankers were in a bidding frenzy for these positions, sending prices soaring and dashing the hopes of many ambitious bourgeois.

venal public office
an employment or position in the royal government, Catholic Church, army and other organisations that has been purchased by an individual

Working people in non-agricultural activities

The Third Estate also included all the working people of France. Some of these workers – about 2 million – worked in non-agricultural jobs, such as artisan trades and in the few industries that existed in France. Many were artisans with real trade skills and many owned valuable tools, even workshops. The word 'worker' (*ouvrier*) could be simply a wage-earner or labourer, but it could also mean a self-employed skilled craftsman or even the owner and master of a workshop, who usually worked beside his employees. These urban workers were significant not because of their numbers – there were about 500 000 in Paris – but because of their concentration in towns. Many were literate, most were militant and they would soon form powerful crowds in most cities.[6]

militant
an aggressive defender of a cause

These skilled, literate, propertied workers in no way resembled the crowds of 'rabble' imagined by romantic historians. There were desperately poor people in the cities, but they took little part in revolutionary events.

The peasants

The vast majority of workers lived in the country. There was a broad range of wealth amongst them: there were poor labourers, but many peasants owned some land – although often not sufficient to gain a living – and a few owned large estates. Many peasants were forced, however, to rent extra land from either noble, Church or bourgeois landowners, often under terms that we would now consider extremely unfair. In addition, peasants were subjected, as one image suggests, to a crushing weight of extra payments, including the tithe to the Church and a range of feudal dues to the nobles.

feudal dues
extra payments of money, food or labour

The peasant shown in the painting on the following page (Figure 2.4) is obediently working and paying the most taxes. In the background, we see a small scene occurring in front of a storehouse: a '*collecteur*', labelled, is taking the farmer's payment, as we see from the inscription on the building, '*Taille payée*' (Tax paid up). The presence of the church steeple in the background reminds us that the peasant farmer not only paid a number of taxes to the government, but also to the Church. Thus, the point of the image is indeed to convey the impression that the peasant works very hard, but few viewers would have thought to add that he was virtually 'carrying' the wealthy classes on his back, least of all to reflect that there was another way of arranging society. Later, as people became more conscious of the injustices of the old regime, this image was converted from a joke into a protest against the exploitation of the peasant.

Figure 2.4 *The Poor Peasant.* c. 1710 (Anonymous). This engraving hints at the three basic problems faced by the vast majority of the population: most peasants were forced to rent their land at high rates, all peasants did hard manual labour and most paid a large range of dues to the King, to the Church and to their local lord.

Focus!

1 **Which social groups were included in the Third Estate?**
2 **Why do you think this old, medieval category, applying to peasants, had ceased to be appropriate by the 18th century?**

While peasants struggled to grow enough food to survive, the royal family at Versailles was sitting down to 11-course feasts. One of these included the following dishes: egg soup, cock's comb, boiled chicken, boiled veal, a marrow bone, chicken fried in breadcrumbs, jelly and apricots, half a sugared chestnut in rosewater, preserved cherries, bread and fennel comfits.

On the other hand, Marie-Antoinette's infamous comment about peasants being hungry for bread ('Let them eat cake then!') was never actually said by the Queen: this line was taken from an imaginary character in an earlier play. Indeed, Marie-Antoinette was more prone to extreme sympathy for the poor, and had to be taught to restrain her generous impulses for the sake of royal decorum. She had a tendency to give her purse full of gold coins to the first beggar she saw!

CHAPTER REVIEW

Developing clear definitions

On a separate piece of paper write your own definition of each of the following key terms:

corporate society **honorific privilege** **legal privilege**
fiscal privilege **culture of deference** **First Estate**
Second Estate **Third Estate**

Practising paragraph answers

1 In what ways was the old regime a 'corporate society'? How does this sort of society differ from that of a modern democracy?
2 If land was the most basic form of wealth in the old regime, why was the distribution of land ownership in France bound to create serious tensions?
3 Would it be true to say that, in the old regime, the two privileged estates represented 'the rich' and the Third Estate represented 'the poor'?

Practice essay question

'Although people tend to accept the social system in which they live, the old regime in France contained inequalities which, sooner or later, had to cause conflict.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Reading more deeply

1 EASY
- George Rudé, *The French Revolution*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1988, Chapter 1, 'Why was there a Revolution in France?'
- Peter Robert Campbell, *The Ancien Régime in France*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988, Chapter 1, 'Economics and Society'.

2 MODERATE
- Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution, 1789–1799*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, Chapter 1, 'France in the 1780s'.

3 CHALLENGING
- William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, Chapter 1, 'France Under Louis XVI'.