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Louis XVI and the French Revolution

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John Hardman, a biographer of Louis XVI, argues that the king at the time of the French Revolution fails to live down to his abysmal reputation.

Louis XVI of France wearing a phrygian cap, drinking a toast to the health of the sans-culottes.

The reputation of Louis XVI resembles an Adam cornice whose outlines have been obscured by many layers of paint over the two centuries of its life. Stripping away the paint has not been easy and few have attempted it. Indeed until recently the prevalent view of Louis XVI was that he was stupid, indecisive and governed by Marie-Antoinette. An examination of the evidence shows that he was fairly intelligent (and fairly hardworking). He was indecisive but this was exacerbated by the structure of decision-making. Before 1787 Louis firmly kept Marie-Antoinette out of policy-making but thereafter (when he was traumatized by the rejection of his reform programme by the Assembly of Notables) he was dependent on the Queen. Something more will be said about these three aspects.

Intelligence

Louis' tutors, when he was dauphin, found him proficient in Mathematics and excellent at geography, and in particular in cartography and what is today called oceanography. He taught himself to read English because his mother disapproved of the language of radicals. He read very little fiction and, if he bought the *Encyclopedie* out of his pocket money, it was to know the enemy. For he never had any doubt that the *philosophes* were the enemy. His aptitudes were exactly what was needed as king. His proficiency in mathematics translated into an excellent grasp of public finance, which was at the heart of government under the *ancien regime* because it was the regime's Achilles heel. His interest in cartography translated itself into a knowledge of naval matters (one hostile witness conceded that he knew as much about naval matters as one could without having gone to sea). He drew up the orders for armed naval manoeuvres in 1776 himself (they are in his hand as well as being signed with his approve. His interest in England, her history and institutions led him to read assiduously the debates in both Houses of Parliament as a guide to English policy over her American colonies. He often read the English political scene better than did Vergennes, his foreign secretary. And his judgements as against those of his ministers are often right. For example his reluctance to recall the Parlement in 1774 was vindicated: the *ancien regime* could only be reformed over its dead body.

However one does not want to make him out to be a genius, as P. Girault de Coursac does. (She also makes him out to be a saint.) He often lacked imagination, was hostile to abstract reasoning and had what might be called the mind of an accountant before the profession glamourized itself in recent years. This comes over in his hunting/engagement diary, a numbing catalogue of trivial achievement, which contains such gems as (on the death of his mother-in-law Maria-Theresa) 'respects of 319 men in the morning and 256 women at six o'clock'- and only one display of feeling, the entry for 9 July 1786: 'The Queen gave birth to my second daughter... there were no congratulations, no firework display and no Te Deum'. The famous entry of 'rien' on 14 July 1789 is not significant – his was an engagement diary and the storming of the Bastille was not an official engagement.

Indecisiveness

There is no doubt that Louis XVI was indecisive. He hated making decisions. The old minister Maurepas, whom he called in as a special adviser on his accession at the age of 19 in 1774, was so exasperated by his procrastination that he had to remind him that 'time is not a commodity with which you can play'. Of the three major decisions he took before the Revolution, the recall of the Parlement in 1774 took six months of constant discussion; the entry into the American War of Independence in 1778 took two years, off and on; whilst the convocation of the Assembly of Notables in 1787 (where there was urgency) took five precious months. What made Louis' indecisiveness worse, during the crucial period of Autumn 1788 to autumn 1789, was that his leading minister, Necker, was equally indecisive and, like Louis, was able to see the objection to a course of action in all its ramifications.

Louis' indecisiveness, however, was to an extent institutional as well as personal. It was reinforced by the structures of government. Thus kings of France were expected to abide by the majority opinion of their council, whether or not they shared it. (This did not affect the 'absolute' quality of the monarchy to which the personal views of the monarch were irrelevant; meetings of the council were in any case secret and minutes not taken.) This being the case, if the council were split down the middle and its majority opinion vacillated over short periods, as during much of the crisis period 1786-89, the king himself appeared indecisive. A variant of this phenomenon explains Louis' indecisiveness over the recall of the Parlement in 1774. Here Louis' official advisers, the council, dominated by Louis XV's old ministers, wanted to retain the fruits of the Maupeou coup d'etat, whilst the man Louis had called in as a special adviser, Maurepas, wanted to recall the old Parlement. Louis wanted to preserve Maupeou's work but his difficulty was this. What was the point of calling in a special adviser to teach him the metier of kingship and then reject his advice? Then again, when Maurepas complained that Louis was taking a long time to make up his mind, what was really happening was that he was fighting for his basic beliefs and would have preferred rather to have been able to convince Maurepas.

Marie-Antoinette's influence

The Empress-Queen Maria Theresa had brought up her daughters (Marie-Antoinette was the youngest) to act in the Austrian interest with the various foreign rulers they married. Louis XVI, who had been brought up to believe that the Franco-Austrian alliance of 1756 was one-sided enough as it was, was determined to resist this. Indeed until 1787 he managed to exclude her from all major policy decisions, foreign and internal, allowing her the exercise of court patronage as a substitute. This, to be fair to her, is all that left to herself she would have wanted, for as she put it: 'There has been no happiness for me since they turned me into an intriguer... the Queens of France are only happy when they meddle with nothing, just keeping enough credit to set up their friends and a few devoted servants'.

In one way, however, Marie-Antoinette was different from the colourless queens of Louis XIV and Louis XV. Louis XVI never took a mistress and (once sexual intercourse became possible after his minor but painful operation in 1777) she became, as it were, both queen and mistress. This meant that when he became despondent after the rejection of his reform programme by the Notables, Louis turned naturally to her. The prime minister Lomenie de Brienne was her protégé and she even started to attend meetings of the council. When Brienne was forced to resign in August 1788, it was Marie-Antoinette who brought back Necker, the popular finance minister of 1776-81. 'I tremble', she wrote, '... that it is I who am bringing him back. My fate is to bring misfortune.' During the period 1787-9, Marie-Antoinette had a veritable ascendancy over the king. This diminished somewhat during the later stages of the Revolution, because she was more implacably opposed to it than Louis and far readier to have the foreign Powers intervene to support the French monarchy.

What went wrong?

If Louis was intelligent and hard-working. If, just as important, he had the sort of skills (financial and naval) which were required of a French king in the eighteenth century; and if, unlike Louis XIV and Louis XV, his major war was successful, why did his reign end in catastrophe? In

answering this question one must steer between the Scylla of determinism and the Charybdis of triviality (for example, 'too much was spent on the Court' – in fact only 6% of total expenditure). Above all one must try to establish demonstrable links. It is best to see the fall of the ancien regime (which occurred in 1787 or 1788) and the outbreak of the Revolution (which occurred in 1789) as two separate phenomena. The philosophes and political thinkers such as Rousseau played little or no part in the fall of the *ancien regime* (though Montesquieu may have done by giving theoretical justification for the practices of the group to which he belonged, the parlementaires). However these ideas rushed into the vacuum of power and experience caused by the collapse of royal authority and were found suitable to give a theoretical justification to new political realities.

It is accepted that the immediate cause of the collapse of the *ancien regime* was a financial crisis – the one which the finance minister Calonne revealed to the Assembly of Notables in 1787. However, the royal debt was in 1787 (after the successful American war) no greater than it had been in 1763 (after the disastrous Seven Years' War) and considerably less than it had been in 1713 (after the equally disastrous War of Spanish Succession). The Crown, however, had less resources for dealing with the problem and the reasons for this may help to elucidate the malaise which now infected the regime. One of the first decisions Louis XVI made on his accession was to end the practice of reducing the rate of interest paid by the Crown at the end of a war. Such a reduction, a forced conversion, was called a 'bankruptcy', though there was generally no confiscation of capital. Louis did this partly out of a sense of honour and partly for the practical consideration that his stand would make it easier to raise future loans.

Opposition from the Parlements

Shortly after Louis voluntarily surrendered this weapon in his grandfather's armoury, he gave up another when he replaced the compliant Parlement Maupeou with the old Parlement which, within a year, was displaying resistance to Turgot's measures. By 1786 the Parlement was blocking all the Crown's financial legislation, whether it be new taxes or loans. This (and in particular the expiry of a tax, the third vingtieme, with no hope of getting a replacement) was the immediate reason why Louis XVI turned away from traditional structures to an Assembly of Notables and so started the train of events which ended with his execution in 1793.

Why was the Parlement resistant to new taxation and even new loans (which would ultimately require taxes to repay them)? Partly for selfish personal reasons. Louis had decided that the peasantry could not pay any more (the take of the taille was frozen in 1780), and since it was administratively difficult to tax the towns that only left the landed wealth of the nobility. The parlementaires were leaders of the noblesse de robe and great landowners. Whenever the royal government made serious attempts to end tax evasion by the landed nobility (by a land survey or cadastre), the parlements deployed all the weapons in their armoury from the judicial strike to arresting royal officials or engineering the fall of the finance minister.

Not everyone saw the Parlement's resistance to royal financial legislation as self-serving; nor do all historians today. They took and take the Parlement's claim to be defending the constitution and the people seriously. The rights and wrongs of it do not really matter. What mattered was that the Parlements were able to enlist substantial public support for their position. If we can explain why they were able to do this, we might obtain some insights into the fall of the *ancien regime*. The Parlement's place in the legislative and political process depended on the absence of the representative institution of the Estates-General between 1614 and 1789. I define this period as that of the *ancien regime* since the absence of the Estates presented a series of characteristic problems which were solved by their meeting in 1789, only to give way to others. Technically the Parlement, whose members bought their offices, represented not the nation but the Crown, but increasingly it stood proxy for the nation, giving what was known as 'simulated consent' to royal legislation. Since such consent often made it easier to enforce legislation, the kings generally acquiesced in this situation. Prom the mid-century, however, relations between Crown and Parlement became increasingly fraught, largely because the crown had been driven by increased military spending to end the tax exemptions of the nobility. War had become more expensive because of the expansion of the navy, which required capital outlays on the ships as

well as recurrent spending on the troops. In 1749 the finance minister Machault introduced the vingtieme, the first permanent tax payable by the nobility (others had taxed them only in war in lieu of their military service). From that time on relations became difficult between crown and Parlement. The Parlement never actually accepted the permanence of the vingtieme.

However their complaints (or remonstrances) could have been safely ignored had they not found a resonance in the body of the nobility as a whole, roughly one fiftieth of the population including not just the peers, courtiers and noblesse de robe but the equivalent of the English landed gentry. Members of this large and powerful group were increasingly stirred by the sentiments uttered by England's American colonists with whom Louis XVI sign d an alliance in 1778: 'no taxation without representation'. These feelings were sharpened by the apparent ease with which Louis XV destroyed the Parlement in 1771. People felt that they were left without protection if the Crown could, without the need to employ force, destroy an institution almost coeval with the monarchy itself. Prominent parlementaires, too, such as Malesherbes, began to turn their attention towards a revival of the Estates-General as a protection against what was increasingly perceived as a royal despotism. Malesherbes wrote to a friend that 'Louis XV is not particularly attached to Maupeou, but he is attached to his despotism'. Little help was expected, either, from Louis XV's grandson and heir, the dauphin, later Louis XVI. In the Bibliotheque Nationale one can still see Louis' copy of Maupeou's disciplinary edict against the Parlement, inscribed in his own hand: 'this is the true public law of France; I am enchanted with M. le Chancelier (Maupeou)'.

In fact Louis XVI reversed his grandfather's measure but this only gave him the worst of both worlds. People did not forget their near escape from despotism (as they perceived it); but the loyal magistrates and military commandants who had supported Louis XV and were called the king's party felt betrayed and., worse, disinclined to make the sacrifice a second time because, from 1750 onwards, the king always backed down. In 1774 Louis XVI had dismissed his grandfather's finance minister, Terray, though he had the greatest respect for his abilities. Terray greeted talk of his being recalled in 1777 as follows. 'Do you think that having been insulted by the people, having been forced to rely on the protection of troops, I would return there again? … No, no, I am content with my obscurity. I have said goodbye to the Court for ever.'

Divided loyalties

The reluctance to serve the absolute monarchy of men who believed in it was unfortunately matched by the willingness to seek ministerial office of those who did not. We have talked about a generalised disquiet among the nobility and a turning in their minds towards the Estates-General. The effect of this is hard to assess. But when such men achieved ministerial office then decay stemmed from the top down. Louis XIV had deterred the military aristocracy from seeking ministerial office by stressing the menial nature of the posts: the lordly surintendant des finances became a mere controleur. But by the 1750s the court families were creeping back – not indeed to the finance ministry which remained to the end a bastion of the old administrative monarchy, with Calonne its last and ripest if slightly rotten fruit, but to the ministries of war, marine and (sometimes) maison du roi (Interior).

Defeat by the Notables

This would not have mattered so much as long as the king was pursuing socially neutral policies. But when Louis XVI presented the Notables with a programme of fair taxation assessed, to prevent rigging, by Provincial Assemblies in which the Third Estate would have double representation, he could expect to see his measures undermined by his own ministers. This happened in the persons of Castries, the naval minister, Breteuil, the minister for the Interior, and Miromesnil, the Keeper of the Seals – the latter the former head of the Parlement de Rouen which had been abolished by Maupeou in 1771 as the most obstreperous of the provincial Parlements. They objected not only to the fiscal measures but to Calonne's attempt to restrict provincial autonomy. They advocated aristocratic constitutionalism at national and provincial level.

Louis XVI naturally supported Calonne, made his measures his own and defended him to the point where the fate of the monarchy itself was called into question. Miromesnil's opposition was subtle, but not so subtle that Louis did not catch him out and dismiss him. Bitterly, Louis told him: 'The nobility opposes everything and pays nothing; the people pay everything'. Castries' opposition was blunt and to the king's face, lacking in respect one might say: 'To constrain the parlements you must destroy them; do you want to arm 100,000 troops and leave a stain on your reputation? Your monarchy is absolute but it is not despotic.' When Castries resigned later in the year he told Marie-Antoinette that his resignation would end the constant strain between his duty as a minister and his patriotic duty as a Frenchman. As a Frenchman he wanted the meeting of the Estates-General; as a minister he had humbly to advise the queen that they would destroy the royal authority. He was relieved that he would not have to participate in the disciplinary proceedings under discussion against the Parlement. Other ministers, such as Malesherbes (who considered Louis XV to have been a despot), Turgot and Breteuil felt the same conflict of loyalty. It did not make for strong government.

Louis discovered during the Assembly of Notables that the ideological basis of the absolute monarchy had gone. It was not just that the aristocracy was in the ascendant. The Intendants, the heart of the administrative monarchy, what Louis called the best part of my system', fearing another royal retreat as in 1774, were silent. They were bitterly attacked in the Notables and did not have the will to defend themselves. The defeat of his cherished reform plans at the hands of the Notables was the watershed of Louis XVI's reign. It was the first time since the Fronde that a king of France had been forced to dismiss a minister in whom he retained confidence. Misidentification with Calonne's measures left him with no easy way of climbing down. Calonne was subjected to a witch-hunt so that the king would turn against him: it was the only way out of the constitutional impasse of an absolute monarch being forced to dismiss a man in whom he retained confidence. But the process must have harmed the king's psyche. He went to pieces; hunted more, ate and drank more; became fat; literally cried on Marie-Antoinette's shoulder; became sentimental and maudlin; in short became the king people have assumed he always was. And he began the long march towards constitutional monarchy.

Louis XVI and the Revolution

Louis' main handicap in the period after 1789 was that he was not trusted (a sad outcome for a man who had always tried to behave honourably). This lack of trust was twofold, ideological and personal. Eighteenth-century political thinkers had a strong distrust of what they called the Executive Power. This derived from England's unfortunate experiences with the Stuarts (as rationalized by Locke), Montesquieu's misunderstanding of the English experience (put at the disposal of the Parlements) and the demonization of George III by France's American ally and its constitutional theorists. Rousseau's Du contrat social was merely the icing on the cake of discontent. Once the National Assembly by its Tennis Court Oath of 17 June 1789 decided that it would draw up a new constitution, the role of the king (or First Functionary as they pompously and rudely termed him) was bound to be circumscribed.

Added to this ideological distrust was the particular distrust of the incumbent king, Louis XVI. How had this come about given Louis' popularity up until May 1789? The explanation lies in ambiguities in Louis' relationship with the Third Estate in the period May-July 1789, from which he never really recovered. In the period of the revolte nobiliaire, 1787-8, Louis had fought the nobility who had forced him to convoke the Estates-General, which they expected to dominate, as on previous meetings. Louis had enlisted the help of the Third Estate, notably by the Avertissement defending his reform plans, which he had caused to be read from the pulpits on Palm Sunday 1787, and by the Declaration of 5 July 1788, lifting censorship of the press and inviting comment and on the future organization and composition of the Estates. The Resultat du conseil of December 1788 had accorded the Third double representation in the forthcoming Estates.

The deputies of the Third Estate who gathered at Versailles could legitimately expect the king's support over the final question (without which their increased representation would be of little help) of whether voting in the Estates was to be by 'head' or 'Order'. Louis was silent on this

question for six weeks and the Third Estate took the law into its own hands. When, in response, Louis finally pronounced on 23 June, he offered an unsatisfactory compromise. The king's perceived volte-face produced a sense of betrayal and (after Louis brought up troops, though their orders were strictly defensive) fear and a thirst for vengeance. By the time of the storming of the Bastille all the ingredients of the later Reign of Terror were in place. The early radicalism of the French Revolution is striking.

We don't really know what Louis was thinking at this time. As regards the conflict between the Orders my guess is that whereas he was in favour of fiscal and political equality, he did not want to undermine the social position of' the nobility. This, however, was already in question. Within a twelvemonth, in June 1790, titles of nobility and the use of armorial bearings were actually outlawed, Equally important was the question of legislative power, concerning which we have the only direct evidence for Louis' views in the summer of 1789. Returning Necker's draft for Louis' opening speech to the Estates he commented: 'At the beginning I have inserted "at the request of the Estates" because, as they cannot make laws by themselves, it is necessary to put that it is at their request, in accordance with their wishes, or something similar.' The Assembly, however, decided unilaterally that Louis should have no part in the legislative process (save a suspensive veto) and none in the drafting of the Constitution (save the choice of acceptance or rejection, which would lead to his abdication and possibly death).

The constitutional issue gives the clue to his subsequent conduct. His resistance over this issue (not over the August Decrees which he largely accepted) provoked the October Days, when he and his family were taken from Versailles and placed under effective house arrest in the Tuileries in Paris. The Flight 'to' Varennes in June 1791 (his actual destination was Montmedy in Lorraine) coincided with the final stages in the drafting of the Constitution. Louis believed that if he could escape to a fortified town like Montmedy he could negotiate the articles of the constitution with the Assembly from a position of equality, rather than simply being given the option of accepting or rejecting them en bloc. Moreover if he were demonstrably free, people would believe that he had accepted it genuinely and the cycle of mistrust would be broken. The manifesto he left behind is not a programme of counter-revolution but contains a list of specific modifications to the constitution with a view to strengthening the Executive.

Funnily enough, after the Royal Family had been dragged back from Varennes, entering Paris in what has been called a 'coronation in reverse', the left-centre members of the Assembly did attempt to include some of Louis' suggestions in a revision of the Constitution. A 'deal' had been struck in the grimy coach between Marie-Antoinette and Barnave to the effect that the Assembly would revise the Constitution in the light of Louis' criticisms and in return the queen would prevail on her brother Leopold, the Emperor, to renew the 1756 treaty of alliance and thus give the French Revolution international legitimacy. The revision was defeated by an unholy alliance between the extreme Right and the extreme Left (though Louis obtained a Bodyguard and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which everyone knew he hated, was no longer enshrined in the actual constitution).

The Constitution was really unworkable because it institutionalised discord. (The only surviving eighteenth-century constitution, the American, had given us the word 'gridlock'). Ministers could not be chosen from the Assembly and (unlike George III) the king did not have the right to initiate legislation. Certainly the evolution of an English-style parliamentary system was excluded. Nevertheless, Louis was prepared to give the Constitution a go or, rather, to demonstrate its inadequacies by a literal application of its provisions (which he carried in his pocket). He hoped that over time people would see its inadequacies and correct them. But time, as Maurepas had reminded him, was not on his side.

What brought about the final fall of the Monarchy was the outbreak of war in April 1792 with Austria. The war, in Reinhard's phrase, 'revolutionized the Revolution' and put Louis in an impossible position. His wife was Austrian and rightly suspected of treasonable correspondence with the enemy. Also the self-righteous cynicism which Louis had displayed since his defeat at the hands of the Notables, the feeling that he was no longer responsible for the success of his reign, was not acceptable at a time of national crisis. Even as the crowds massed for the final

assault on the Tuileries in August, the Girondin Vergniaud had to remind him: 'The King has been cruelly deceived if he has been led to believe that not to deviate from the line of constitutional rectitude is to do all that be should'. The King's reply to this overture was summarised by the intermediary: 'This reply would satisfy neither a friend of liberty nor a man of ambition. It is dry and negative'.

With hindsight, it would have been better if Louis XVI had emigrated or abdicated after the fall of the Bastille. During the crisis meeting of the council on 15/16 July, Barentin, the Keeper of the Seals, told the royal historiographer that 'we must have recourse to a new dynasty'. That meant the king's cousin, the duc O'Orleans. Although his liberal politics must have been anathema to Barentin, for months the leader of the right-wing faction in the ministry, Orleans already possessed many of the secret levers of revolutionary power and immense (if bought) popularity. Such a man (as opposed to the distrusted incumbent king) would have been given adequate powers to govern France and since the Revolution legitimated his reign, no one could have suspected him of seeking to reverse it. However Louis disliked his cousin and one of the reasons why he rejected the alternative of flight was fear of leaving him a vacant throne.

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