

The Origins of the French Revolution

The Last Years of the Old Regime

Marxist historians define the French Revolution as a class conflict between nobles and bourgeoisie. Revisionists argue that all sections of French society were divided. In the first of two articles on the most famous Revolution of them all, Marisa Linton summarises the latest thinking.

The Revolution which broke out in France in 1789 was the first of its kind anywhere in the world and it changed the course of history irrevocably — not just in France, but also in the rest of Europe and beyond. The old order based on the authority of king, nobles and clergy, which had dominated Europe for many centuries, was shaken and would never regain its old unchallenged pre-eminence.

The French Revolution brought new political ideals into being — ones which would dominate the subsequent history of Europe. During that first heady summer of 1789, when it seemed that anything was possible — even the transformation of the whole corrupt order of the world — the French revolutionaries set out a statement of the aims of the Revolution. This document, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, emphasised the principles of liberty and equality for all (in theory, if not in practice). It helped to transform the nature of politics in the modern world.

The Declaration enshrined the belief in political democracy: the idea that governments should be answerable to ordinary people, even to the poor and obscure, and that they did not exist just to sustain the power of the rich and privileged.

Louis XVI

PETER NEWARK

(Left) *The Paris Parlement in session.*

In many ways the French Revolution was to witness the catastrophic failure of its own principles, put forward with such optimistic idealism in 1789. The revolutionaries wanted to give the people of France their political rights — but they also gave France the Terror, during which thousands of people perished. Their revolutionary and nationalist fervour led to a series of wars which traumatised Europe for many years.

Why did revolution break out?

The causes of revolution in 1789 have long been hotly contested. Some historians have seen the issue in terms of deep-seated economic crises and social inequalities. Others emphasise the specific political circumstances of the period immediately prior to the Revolution. In place of the Marxist view, of a Revolution made by a capitalist bourgeoisie and directed against the landed and semi-feudal nobility, the current emphasis has shifted much more towards political explanations. Overall, a complex picture is emerging, in which no one all-embracing cause was responsible. Instead, historians emphasise a variety of long-term social, economic, financial and cultural factors, which meshed in the particular circumstances of a political crisis from 1786 to 1789.

The final outbreak of revolution involved two quite distinct processes. The first was the breakdown of the Old Regime itself. The second process was the emergence of a revolutionary ideology and of men prepared to put it into effect. The roots of both these developments went back many years before 1789. This does not mean, however, that revolution had long been 'inevitable', but it does mean that we need to consider the impact of long-term causes in conjunction with the particular short-term circumstances which finally pushed France over the brink. In this article we will consider long-term causes; in the next issue we will examine the specific political circumstances that led to the Revolution.

The political structure in France

In the last years of the Old Regime the French people had no suspicion that the prevailing political and social system was about to be swept away by a revolutionary torrent. They assumed, naturally enough, that the world in which they lived, as their ancestors had done before them, would be the same one that their children would see. The 'Old Regime' was a term coined in 1789 to describe this world which had been so abruptly shattered.

It was a system based on the ultimate authority of one man, the king, who in 1789 was the well-meaning, but weak and vacillating, Louis XVI. His authority was based on 'divine right', which meant that it was believed to derive ultimately from God. He ruled, in theory at least, as an absolute monarch. He alone had political authority in his realm. He held both executive

and legislative power and it was in his name that all laws were carried out.

The structure of society in the Old Regime was hierarchical. It was divided into three orders, or estates, to which everyone belonged. The first was the clergy, the second was the nobility, and the third estate consisted of everyone else. The nobility and the clergy dominated society and their power and influence was out of all proportion to their numbers. They occupied the most privileged social positions and between them owned a sizeable proportion of the country's wealth, particularly of its most valuable commodity, the land.

Below the two most powerful orders, but dominating the third estate (to which, of course, they belonged) were the bourgeoisie. This was a general term for a diverse social group whose members, whilst they did not work with their

Marie-Antoinette

hands like peasants and artisans, did not possess the legal entitlement to nobility and neither had they taken holy orders. This broad group included people from a wide social spectrum, ranging from financiers and bankers who possessed more wealth than many nobles, to more humble officials, provincial lawyers, wealthy urban tradesmen, and people just one generation away from forebears who had worked the land.

By far the most numerous social group was the peasantry. Eighteenth-century France was still largely a rural society and most people made their living on the land. Many peasants lived out a precarious existence, in conditions of extreme poverty.

Politically there was no national representative body which corresponded even to the limited representation of the English parliament. Nor was there any uniformity in the way in which government was carried out. Different regions and social groupings all had their own particular corporate rights and privileges, which they defended fiercely against encroachments by the central authority of monarchy.

There was provincial representation in some regions in the form of provincial assemblies, also known as estates. There were thirteen higher

courts of law known as *parlements*, each of which had its own areas of jurisdiction, and of which the most important was the Paris *Parlement*. The Paris *Parlement* had a certain degree of political power, by virtue of the fact that it had the responsibility of registering laws put forward by the king. Both the provincial estates and the *parlements* were dominated by noble families.

There was no universal body giving national representation. The nearest that France came to a national representative body was an archaic institution, known as the Estates General, which had consisted of representatives from all three orders or estates and which had periodically been called as a consultative body by the monarch. But Louis XVI's predecessors had managed to govern without calling this body since 1614. It seemed to be a relic of the past, and had never been a radical institution. But would-be political reformers in the 1780s began to hope that the Estates General might one day be revived and become a catalyst for political and constitutional change.

The administrative system of the Old Regime

Instead of asking why the Old Regime fell in 1789, it might be better to ask instead why it lasted so long. In theory government administration was held to be the business of the king alone (and hence of his appointed ministers and agents). A complex bureaucracy existed to carry out the tasks of administration but, in practice, politics under the Old Regime was based on privilege, patronage, faction and corruption, in the sense that this was how things actually worked and the process of government was carried out.

There was little notion of serving the state, even amongst government officials. Those people who held official posts (mostly purchased as venal offices) saw them as a means of advancing themselves and their families, rather than as a public responsibility. When not under external pressures, this system functioned reasonably well. But it was vulnerable to particular stresses.

The most obvious stress point was at the pinnacle of government. Because final responsibility rested exclusively in the hands of one man, the success of administration depended in great part on the personality of the king himself, especially on his ability to select capable ministers to act on his behalf. It was imperative that ministers should not be swayed too far by the various factions and interest groups at court.

Louis XIV had made effective use of ministers. But Louis XV and Louis XVI chose men from a limited range of courtiers, distinguished more for their court connections than for their ability. Ministers of the 1780s were mostly cautious, limited and narrow in their outlook, seeking only to work within the regime as it existed and proving incapable of adapting government to the stresses of the time.

None of Louis XVI's ministers made a deter-

mined effort to avoid catastrophe until it was too late. Had ministers had greater backing from the king, they could have operated more effectively; but that kind of help was rarely forthcoming from Louis. For example, the Swiss banker, Necker, proved too original a mind and was ejected from office in 1781 for attempting to introduce fundamental financial reforms.

Social antagonisms in the Old Regime

The origins of the Revolution are sometimes depicted in class terms, as a struggle between nobles (including the upper clergy), who monopolised privileges such as tax exemptions and professional opportunities, and the hard-working bourgeoisie, who made money in trade and capitalist enterprises but were still looked down upon as socially inferior and were excluded from positions of power. This was the argument, in particular, of many Marxist historians, but it is a view which has been subject to much criticism in recent years.

Revisionist historians such as Alfred Cobban and William Doyle argued that, whilst eighteenth-century France was indeed rife with social tensions, these divided society at all levels and were much more complex than a straightforward class antagonism between a feudal landed nobility and a rising capitalist bourgeoisie.

It is true that the traditional division of society into three orders exacerbated resentment at the many exclusive rights enjoyed by the nobility and clergy. But there was a blurring of distinctions between nobles and bourgeoisie at many levels, particularly between the lower provincial nobles and the higher bourgeoisie. Some nobles engaged in capitalist enterprises to augment their incomes, even at the risk of demeaning their noble status. The bourgeoisie, far from aiming to overthrow the nobility, aspired rather to join their exclusive ranks. Those bourgeois who could afford to do so took the earliest opportunity to abandon commerce and 'live nobly' on income from land and investments.

The fiscal, judicial and administrative structure of the Old Regime was based on principles of particular rights, exemptions and privileges, within which there were many regional variations. Nobles and clergy were known as the 'privileged' orders, since they had accrued the most rights. They remained to a great extent exempt from the most important direct taxes — notably the personal *taille* — and they vigorously resisted the imposition of more equitable taxation. But every social group had its own distinctions, and members of the bourgeoisie had their own privileges.

The rituals of deference with which the social structures of the Old Regime were permeated were increasingly seen as archaic and outmoded. Many observers felt that the two 'privileged' orders occupied a social position which was not justified by their contribution to society. For those bourgeois who failed to succeed socially, there was undoubted resentment at the nobility

The palace of Versailles in the eighteenth century.

preserving its own interests and dominating the higher echelons of society — a resentment expressed in 1789 with the demand for careers 'open to talent.'

The bourgeoisie and the provincial nobility were, however, united in their resentment of the highest nobles, those at the pinnacle of the Old Regime, the court nobility. Lower down the social scale, there was increasingly open resentment amongst the peasantry at the continued exaction of feudal dues. To peasants it mattered little if the *seigneur* was noble or bourgeois: he still had to be paid.

Opposition from the *parlements*

Whilst in theory the power of the king was absolute, in practice he had to work within existing laws and customs. He needed, therefore, the cooperation of powerful corporate bodies and interest groups, notably the provincial estates, and the *parlements*. Throughout the eighteenth century, crises periodically arose between monarchy and *parlements*. The noble magistrates of the *parlements* did not want to threaten the power of the monarchy as such, but they were prepared to fight to defend their judicial and corporate status. Struggles focused on the two issues of toleration for Jansenists (adherents to a puritanical form of Catholicism) and taxation. They led to wider political debate and challenges to royal authority.

The most serious of these crises (prior to the final confrontation on the eve of the Revolution) had been that precipitated by the exiling of the Paris *Parlement* by Louis XV's minister, Maupeou in 1771. In their defence, apologists for the *parlements* spoke of the magistrates as defending 'nation' and '*patrie*' against the encroachments of the monarchy. The aim of the magistrates themselves was primarily to preserve their power as a judicial elite. But the employment in a series of pamphlets of the rhetoric of constitutionalism awakened a much wider circle of readers to new ways of thinking, both about politics and about themselves as active participants in political life.

On his succession to the throne in 1774, Louis XVI, in a bid to court popularity, reinstated the

Paris *Parlement*, which resumed its old functions. This gave the appearance, at least, of victory in a battle of words against absolutism. From 1770 to 1789, for many in France the struggle seemed to be between liberty and 'patriotism' on the one hand against the 'despotism' of monarchy on the other.

Do ideas make revolutions?

In the second half of the eighteenth century, France was the focus of a heightened interest in ideas about science, society and morality, known collectively as the Enlightenment. Much has been said about the relationship between these ideas and the Revolution, but it would be difficult to prove that ideas themselves were its main cause. The most famous Enlightenment thinkers, the *philosophes* — men like Voltaire, Montesquieu and even Rousseau — were reformists, not revolutionaries. They campaigned against the excessive power of the Church, but they did not seek to overturn society.

Nor were Enlightenment ideas themselves necessarily revolutionary: opponents as well as advocates of revolution would appeal to the works of the *philosophes* to back their arguments. But Enlightenment concerns with universal rights, toleration, civic equality and natural law did provide the basis for a common ideological framework within which it was possible, given the right circumstances, to conceive of a revolution taking place.

All publications were subject to censorship, but this did little to curb publication. On the contrary officials and clergy, the very people who helped to administer censorship and would be horrified that potentially subversive works should get into 'the wrong hands', were often those who secretly enjoyed such works themselves. Indeed, censorship resulted in a variety of works, from materialist philosophy to radical politics, from pornography to anti-clerical propaganda, being brought into an ironic juxtaposition, by virtue of their prohibition. Books with such names as *The Nun in a Nightgown* rubbed shoulders under the counter with d'Holbach's *System of Nature*.

Knowledge of political ideas did not stem

from works of theory alone. It was not necessary to read such radical works on political theory as Rousseau's *Social Contract* in order to acquire a knowledge of political ideas. A vast range of pamphlets and popular literature introduced readers to practical polemics. The publication of the legal briefs for famous trials (which often contained quite radical ideas) proved particularly fascinating to the public.

It was not just that political ideas grew more radical in the last years of the Old Regime, but that a wider range of people had access to them. Many more books, journals and pamphlets were being published, and were reaching an expanding reading public, both bourgeois and noble. Within the world of ideas a sort of theoretical equality existed, a little 'republic' of intellectuals, known as the 'republic of letters.'

By the 1770s the 'republic of letters' had spread out well beyond a select group of theorists. Its ideas were disseminated at the theatre, at the art salons and in the works of hack writers. Words such as patriotism, virtue, constitution, nation and citizenship (derived from Jansenist and *parlementaire* rhetoric, as well as Enlightenment theory) began to be used freely in public life. Sociable networks encouraged the cultural diffusion of Enlightenment ideas. Freemasonry, salons, reading rooms and the growing network of provincial academies, all provided tangible forms of the 'republic of letters', where bourgeoisie and nobility could mix relatively freely in seeming equality. But the theoretical equality which operated within the 'republic of letters' made the persistence of social inequalities outside it all the more galling to many observers.

A demystified monarchy

The French monarchy always had its critics. The sexual and financial corruption associated with it was a perennially popular subject in the scurrilous and pornographic press. In his later years Louis XV was particularly vulnerable to this kind of attack, not merely because he kept a succession of official and unofficial mistresses

(this in itself was fairly accepted practice for a monarch), but because he was believed to let them have too much say in his political decisions.

His successor, Louis XVI, lived a much more respectable life: he took no mistresses and was faithful to his wife, the Austrian princess, Marie-Antoinette. Politics bored Louis, and the intricacies of finance puzzled him. He preferred to spend his days in hunting and his evenings in over-eating at royal banquets. But whilst Louis lived a blameless — if rather dull — life, damaging rumours circulated about Marie-Antoinette and her supposed extravagance and sexual promiscuity.

Although she was much maligned in many respects, both the king and queen bore some responsibility for these very damaging rumours, in that they both lacked the necessary tact and skill in dealing with court politics. Marie-Antoinette was arrogant and not very astute. She showed little understanding of the French court and how to balance and appease its various factions, choosing instead to surround herself with a few particular intimates, such as the Duchess de Polignac, and the king's brothers, the Counts of Artois and of Provence. Much of the most scandalous gossip about her originated from disaffected courtiers, who felt excluded from the charmed inner circle of intimates of the king and queen and sought revenge by blackening her reputation.

The stories found their way into scurrilous pamphlets and were widely believed by the public, despite government efforts to clamp down on the unceasing rumours. Marie-Antoinette was depicted as taking an active role in political affairs, in particular the appointment of ministers, at a time when the duties of a queen were supposed to consist entirely of bearing children, showing exemplary piety and conducting herself with public propriety. In fact she does not appear to have played a leading role in political decisions until as late as 1787 — but few people believed this.

The public discrediting of Marie-Antoinette culminated in the Diamond Necklace affair of

1785, when she was compromised by a scandal involving an elaborate plot to purloin some fabulously expensive jewels. The gullible Cardinal de Rohan was duped by the plotters into acquiring a unique diamond necklace, supposedly for Marie-Antoinette, believing that he was acting in accordance with the queen's secret wishes. He even had an assignation in the gardens of Versailles one night, with an actress impersonating the queen.

Although Marie-Antoinette was guiltless and, indeed, had known nothing of the affair until the scandal broke, the tangled tale of sexual intrigue and greed which emerged when the cardinal was brought to trial before the Paris *Parlement* appeared to many hostile eyes to involve her too. Rohan's triumphant acquittal, and the public jubilation with which this news was received, confirmed the extent of public animosity towards the queen.

These circumstances contributed to the wider issue of the gradual demystification of kingship. The court of Louis XIV, the 'Sun King', had systematically stressed the divine and mystical aspects of monarchy, cultivating a public image of aloofness. But fashions changed. Increasingly the monarch was portrayed by his supporters as a man who sympathised with his people — who was, like them, merely mortal — and the traditional veneration for monarchy, so necessary to the preservation of the theory of divine right, was weakened.

The king was seen as a more human and sympathetic figure; but he also came to be regarded in some quarters with increasing contempt. The press built up the notion of 'public opinion' as a tribunal and as a source of authority for the public good, more legitimate than that of the king himself. Royal authority was undermined and the judgement of the nation seemed more valid. It was in this climate of ideas that a major political crisis occurred which, this time, the monarchy would be unable to surmount.

Further reading

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The opening of the Estates General at Versailles, 5 May 1789.