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Organisation and Social Order

Chapter XIX

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF MONARCHISM IN FRANCE

Any account of the decline and fall of the monarchy and of the *ancien regime* in France must deal with several different aspects, strands, or levels. The number of these strands that might be distinguishable in the whole process could be multiplied easily enough, but five will do for present purposes.

The conflict between sovereignty and interests (I) is central, but the critical situations and the actions taken to deal with them which made it central and which finally brought the constitutional issue to a head were provoked by the desperate financial straits to which the government was reduced so frequently during the eighteenth century (II).

The disorders which spread throughout the country in 1789 in the wake of the last economic crises (III) added more fuel to the constitutional and fiscal troubles. The worst effects of 'economic crises' fell on the peasantry and the labouring poor - as well, of course, on the government.

By 1789 the growing divide between the privileged and propertied rich and the deprived and propertyless poor was reaching down to the very foundations of sovereign power: the armed forces (IV). Not only did the loyalty of conscript troops become suspect, but some of their officers refused, or showed clearly that they were disinclined, to order them to fire on demonstrators and rioters. When foreign troops were used instead in Paris, they were mobbed.

The upper orders (the three 'estates') had their troubles, too, though of themselves they were hardly serious enough to count as a threat to the safety of the state or the stability of the social order until the 1780's. By then the spectacle of numbers of rich bourgeois buying into the upper ranks of society was putting the institutional structure of society under some strain. A blatant manifestation of the growing divide between rich and poor, it exacerbated the increasing sense of relative deprivation among the poorer sections of the nobility, the parish clergy, and the professions, providing fertile ground for what has become known as the politics of envy (V). The damage done to the institutional structure showed itself first in the split in the ranks of the first two Estates when the States General was finally convened.

These five levels, aspects - or strands - hardly amount to an exhaustive account of the sequence of circumstance and events leading up to the Revolution. What eventually made for radical political change was the articulation in political terms of aspirations for

social and political improvement together with the mobilisation of previously separate, even disparate, sections of the population in support of them. This forms the subject matter of Chapter 21.

All five strands, or categories, outlined above were, of course, interconnected, but the first two - the constitutional and the fiscal strands - are so intertwined that that any account of the development of the crisis in chronological terms is bound to switch continually from one to the other. So, in what follows, the first two sections deal with the development of the constitutional-fiscal confrontation during the reigns of Louis XV and the first twenty-four years (1774-1788) of his grandson. The other strands - 'economic crisis', the role of the army, the mounting discontents within the nobility and bourgeoisie - yield more easily to separate treatment, since each of them emerged into public notice and discourse at different times. Even so, all five strands interacted more and more closely with each other as the process of disintegration speeded up in the later years of Louis XVI's reign, reaching their climax as if orchestrated in the disturbances and the demolition of the institutional framework of state and *ancien regime* in 1789.

I

The first and critically important stage of the French Revolution was the transfer of sovereignty from the King to a legislature representative of the people of France. While it took three full years for the transfer to be completed and formally declared, and the monarchy abolished, the first steps were all accomplished fact by the late autumn of 1789.

Not that the transfer of sovereignty in its entirety was uppermost in the minds of those who forced it through. There was some division of opinion between the 'traditionalists', who saw the aim as the restoration of the 'ancient constitution' of France (much as the English parliamentarians had insisted was their purpose 150 years earlier), and the 'patriots' of the Society of Thirty, who saw sovereignty as vested, ultimately, in a rather vaguely defined 'nation'. But there was no demonstration, or public evidence, of republican feeling. The transfer of sovereignty was an implication that could be read into the resolutions and legislation passed by the Assembly during August and September - and accepted by the King - rather than some explicit declaration.

Sovereignty was an issue, but it was the absolute sovereignty claimed by the King rather than his right to rule over the country which was being challenged. This was nothing new. Disputes about royal claims to absolute sovereignty had in fact attained serious dimensions at the beginning of Louis XV's reign and again towards the end, but had never threatened to become anything like as disruptive as that endured in England in the previous century.

The irony of it is that it was the unremitting pursuit of absolutism which itself gave birth to the modern idea of sovereignty as the unitary possession of supreme power and authority, something which was in the end wrested from monarchy and lodged with the representatives of the whole people ("Eighteenth century France learned the idea and the practice of sovereignty from the absolute monarchy."[1]) At the same time, absolutism had been contested in France and elsewhere for some two hundred years, with notable success in some countries, and with enough stubbornness elsewhere for it to be limited, if not reduced to 'constitutional' monarchy. The prolonged battle between monarchic rule and privileged interests, never quite settled, was resumed with vigour after the death of Louis XIV, when the regent, the Duke of Orleans, restored their former rights and powers to the *parlements*.

For most of the eighteenth century after the death of Louis XIV, opposition to royal supremacy was focussed in the parlements. The political importance of the parlements was founded on their constitutional role and their judicial functions. Both derived from their medieval origins, when the *parlement* of Paris had been an integral part of the functions of the *conseil du roi*. This first *parlement* had been made up of lawyers who had been recruited to serve the *conseil* in handling the legal affairs of the crown - far more complex, as we have seen, than they were in medieval England - and to exercise the jurisdictional authority of the *conseil*. Twelve other *parlements*, modelled on much the same lines, had been created as former quasi-autonomous dukedoms and lordships were integrated into the realm. Constitutionally, their consent was necessary before royal decrees could be promulgated; they had to 'register' them, and, in the process, could debate their contents and advance objections in the *remontrances* they presented to the King and his ministers - and which they also published. Their judicial authority was very extensive, covering not only a broad range of criminal and civil cases, especially those affecting the privileged classes or involving royal prerogatives, but 'police' matters such as public order, public morals, the provision of food and material supplies in towns, fixing prices in times of shortage, and the conduct of markets and fairs.

The principal use to which they put their constitutional right in the eighteenth century was to stand, as they had stood in 1648, in defence of their traditional rights of 'registering' new laws and *'remontrance'* against their provisions. As for their jurisdictional rights, these had, by the eighteenth century, attracted not only fees and 'fines', as of old, but sweeteners (*epices*). Both constitutional and juridical powers had become property rights vested in the privileged position of the *parlementaires*. They were also a challenge to the absolutism claimed by the King. As late as 1766, Louis XV issued a declaration which began with the statement that sovereign power resided in his person. "Legislative power, integral and untrammelled, belongs solely to myself, it is by my authority that the officers of my courts proceed not to draft but to register and publish my law....Public order emanates entirely from myself; I am its supreme guardian."

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[1] A. Cobban, "The Enlightenment and the French Revolution", in Aspects of the French Revolution, Cape, 1968, p.24.

A proclamation in such terms might have gone without serious challenge in the Frances of the 1680's, when monarchism was at its high-water mark and approximated most nearly to absolutism. Bossuet's thesis of the Prince and the State as being two notions compounded in the one person, published twenty years later, is a celebration of Louis XIV's achievement in overcoming the more vocal and militant of the interests which had stood out against the monarchy during the King's childhood. But towards the end of Louis XV's long reign, which saw absolutism increasingly challenged, it amounted to no more than a volley of blank shots directed in defiance against the *parlements*. When it came to Louis XVI, his attempt in 1787-8 to override the opposition of the *parlements*, curtail their constitutional rights and force through new taxes, all in the name of his absolute powers, led to a nationwide uproar of protest.

While the constitutional difficulties which repeatedly beset the government were rooted in the absolutist claims of the French monarchy, they were more directly the consequence of increasing opposition to heavier taxes imposed with little or no regard to the readiness of the people who had to pay them. On their side, ministers either forced their way through by virtually disenfranchising their political opponents in the *parlements* and elsewhere, or by bargaining for consent against the offer of restoring or even extending their constitutional rights. Ultimately, conflict over taxation eroded confidence in the machinery of government and in the ability of Louis XV and XVI and their ministers to run it.

There is in this an implication that there had been a time when taxes were imposed with the consent of the taxpaying public and that governments ruled with the confidence and support of the people. The truth is, though, that such questions had arisen in past centuries, they had not been asked by so many, or achieved the same political prominence. By the eighteenth century, however, new factors had entered in.

First, there had developed in the latter part of the previous century new ways of meeting any large excess of expenditure over revenue by borrowing. Governments had always borrowed money, of course, but usually from specialist finance houses within their territories or, often enough, in Italy, Holland and Germany. A final solution of the financial problems which had sometimes proved overwhelming was simply to default. This had happened, and not only in France, in the sixteenth century. Now it was possible to borrow by means of loan stock issued and backed by government and sold through banks or government offices to any number of merchants, bankers, wealthy citizens or to agents who speculated on rises and falls on their current exchange value. Such financial reliefs could, however, be pushed to dangerous lengths, and governments accumulate an overwhelming mass of debt.

Secondly, since by far the biggest government expenses were incurred by war, the willing consent of the people (especially those who were called upon to pay the new taxes) was largely dependent on military success. In the aftermath of a successful war and with the prospect of commercial advantages and other economic gains that went with it, governments might expect higher taxes to be paid with something approaching a good

grace. On the other hand, military failure meant loss of confidence and considerable reluctance to pay heavier taxes, or even buy government loan stock. During the course of the eighteenth century, when France so often found itself on the losing side in a succession of wars, government finances were an almost perpetual cause of contention and the most frequent proximate occasion for outright confrontation.

What is evident to us, now, is that the tax base was too small and too constrained. Louis XIV had pursued administrative centralisation with much obstinacy throughout his reign, but had not been put it to use as an instrument for raising money, despite the wars he carried on - with even greater obstinacy - from 1689 until 1713, and, after 1700, with much less success. He did force through a levy on landholdings (the principal source of wealth of the nobility) in 1695, and in 1710 he imposed a tax on all landed property apart from that held by the Church (the *dixieme*, one tenth of the annual yield). This did not avert financial disaster, and he bequeathed his heir a colossal debt of well over two million *livres*. Even finding the money to 'service' the debt (pay the interest on it) was taking up five-sixths of the annual revenue.

It was not therefore the Regent's generosity or liberal views which lay behind the return of all rights and privileges to the *parlements* at the start of the new reign. It was a matter of sheer financial necessity. The thousand-odd members of them were prominent among the aristocrats and ennobled magnates and financiers who were the government's creditors, and whose assent to measures to reduce the burden of debt had to be bargained for. There was some renunciation of debt, but the strategy consisted mainly of loan conversions and consolidations which reduced the burden of 'servicing' by more than a half by 1726. Such measures were by now traditional and therefore half-expected. In any case, they hardly warrant the 'bankruptcy' label commonly attached to them; sovereign states do not go into receivership. The trouble was that the whole exercise was carried through amidst the utter confusion wreaked by the failure of John Law's plan (sponsored by the Regent) for a national bank operated by a joint-stock company and of his 'Mississipi scheme' - a double disaster far worse than the 'South-Sea Bubble' which burst in England at the same time. It left an enduring distrust of public banks and paper money, as well as of government loans. And the debt still stood at 1,700,000 *livres*.

The government's financial situation did ease somewhat during the fifteen years or so after 1726, but the war, or wars, which began in 1741 and lasted almost continuously until 1763 brought fresh problems. The *dixieme* imposed in 1744 proved insufficient, and a further tax - a *vingtieme* - was introduced in 1749, again in 1756 for the duration of the war (this time with no exemptions allowed for), and yet again on top of the previous two in 1760. All three were carried through in the face of stiff opposition, led of course by the *parlements*. By the end of the war, the king was laying claim to a quarter of the income of all his non-clerical subjects, as well as raising more money through loans. Nor had the rude and high-handed manner adopted by the Controller-General of the time, Machault, made matters easier. Not only had the *parlements* and the provincial estates been provoked into opposition, but the clergy and the financial world had also been antagonised.

Choiseul, who followed Machault, did his best to mend fences, abandoning the third *vingtieme* of 1760 and promising not to revise existing tax assessments. By that time, however, the *parlements* had become too wary, or too set in their role of licensed opposition, to do anything but take advantage of the crown's weaknesses. One success was registered in 1764, when the dissolution of the Society of Jesus in France put an end to the repeated efforts to re-establish the hegemony of the Church of Rome over the well-established Gallican clerical regime - a victory which the *parlements* ensured by siding with the latter, a due return for the church's support for resistance in previous years to the *vingtieme*. Not surprisingly, Louis XV took no part in any conciliatary moves; the formal reassertion of his claim to absolute sovereignty had been made in 1766.

Both Maupeou, who became Chancellor in 1768, and Terray, who succeeded Choiseul as Controller-General of Finances, made use of the king's reassertion of absolutism to go into the attack on both the jurisdictional rights and privileges of the *parlements* and the farmers-general and the 'accountants' who exploited the public finances they managed. Armed with royal writs, Terray resorted to loan conversion, foreign loans, and land taxes (the *vingtieme*) in his efforts to restore the country's finances into something like a viable condition. The reign ended, as it had begun, in the familiar coupling of constitutional conflict and a crisis of financial confidence. Maupeou dissolved the *parlements*, exiling their members from the towns in which they had customarily met. The *parlementaires* protested to the last, calling, as they departed, for the ultimate 'intervening power', the Estates-General, to be summoned.

It also happened that Louis XV managed, in his last years, to lend credibility to the claim of the *parlementaires* to be the principal defenders of public liberties against monarchic (and ministerial) despotism by a renewed attack. The Paris *parlement* was actually provoked into going on strike; *lettres de cachet* followed and, when the magistrates refused to return to duty, they were deprived of office and 'exiled' to distant provinces. Following this up, Maupeou, the new reforming Chancellor, abolished the central criminal court of the Paris *parlement* and the court which dealt with fiscal cases, and broke up the Paris jurisdiction into six, each under a royal court.

From the late 1750's on, there developed a special quality of falsity, of anomaly, in the part played by the *parlements* in French politics. They began to appeal to the rights of the nation, taking on the guise not just of champions of the people but of representatives of the people against the monarchy. The writings of Montesquieu (himself a president of the *parlement* at Bordeaux) had become a major topic of political discussion, with the focus on identifying the government of France with his definition of despotism. The kind of argument now being put forward rested not so much on their historic rights and privileges under the 'ancient constitution' (rights whose origins were now being credited to the assemblies of the Franks in pre-Merovingian times) but on the case made out by Montesquieu for the necessity of some form of 'intermediary powers' to intercede between ruler and people if monarchy was to be restrained from despotism. There was even mention in the *Grandes Remontrances* of 1753 of 'a kind of contract' between king and people'.

By this time, the *parlementaires* were taking their stand not only on their traditional rights, now invoked as 'constitutional', but also on appeals to 'the will of the people' and 'the general will' which even smacked of Rousseauism. In formal terms, it was a contest between the King and his ministers and the *parlement* of Paris, principally, but backed by a dozen provincial *parlements*. In practice, it meant that those who were beneficiaries of the government and the royal court were set against those whose property rights in the exemptions and privileges won, granted or sold to them or their forebears were threatened, in particular by new taxes on land.

The strategy adopted by the *parlementaires* shows distinct traces of opportunism. A claim to represent the interests of the people was hardly compatible with the privileges belonging to them as of noble rank and as royal *officiers*, and exemption from certain taxes, less still with their entitlement to bribes and *épices*. The justice exercised in their courts - as in others - was notoriously corrupt: 'profligate and atrocious' were Arthur Young's words. Even so, their stand, on constitutional grounds, against the absolutist claims of the monarchy won them popular support - support which they had consciously looked for: they had ordered 20,000 copies of their *Grande Remontrance* of 1753 to be printed and distributed.

II

The attack on the *parlementaires* was reversed by the new king, Louis XVI, in 1774. Turgot, the new broom brought in to clear up the financial mess, was a convinced 'physiocrat', seeing redemption in abolishing the multiplicity of tolls and customs-duties and removing price restrictions so as to liberate the natural productivity of agriculture. The 'Six Edicts' went further, abolishing the corporations (trade and craft guilds) in the towns and ending the *corvée* (the forced labour required of peasants, mostly in the repair and maintenance of roads and bridges).

Unfortunately, Turgot's reforming moves, though they made sense in themselves, depended for their success on an understanding and support which simply were not there. He had even worse luck with his timing. The 1773 harvest had been a bad one. The freeing of trade in foodstuffs ended in the 'flour war' and a kind of free-for-all, with charges of hoarding and profiteering on one side and attacks on food-trains and barges on the other; crowds bent on attacking the palace at Versailles were bought off with the promise of cheap flour. The Six Edicts came under fire from employers and master-craftsmen in the towns, for whom enrolment in a corporation had meant a license to trade, and also from journeymen (*'compagnons'*) and apprentices, who in some industries had their own form of corporation for negotiating wages and conditions.

Opposition to the plan to abolish the *corvée* was tougher, since it came from the nobility, especially the poorer sort, who saw their rights to unpaid labour services from the peasantry on their estates disappearing along with the king's.

Frustrated, and also piqued, by what he saw as unreasoning opposition, Turgot urged the king to use his prerogative powers to force his policies through, just as his predecessor had done - and was accordingly dismissed. His successor, in 1777, was Necker (entitled Director-General and excluded from the royal council on account of his Protestantism), more experienced, more knowledgeable, and more circumspect. He appears to have shared the same view as Turgot concerning the need to foster the growth of agricultural production and of primary and secondary industrial production generally, but was more inclined to put first things first. He began by reducing expenditure and maximising revenue in terms of the fiscal circumstances existing at the time. Scores of 'offices' which served no apparent purpose were abolished - much to the king's approval and the disgruntlement of those made redundant and those who feared for their own places. Necker refrained from any direct attack on the Farmers-General, but handed over a number of the indirect taxes they administered, as well as management of the royal domains and some other sources of revenue, to *regies*, managed by his own senior officials. The Farmers-General, with their army of customs officers and tax collectors, remained responsible for the work, but their profits were limited to a percentage of the excess of revenue collected over the fixed sum designated for the Treasury.

Necker's campaign to eliminate pointless and frivolous official positions at court and elsewhere, although large-scale, was piecemeal rather than wholesale, like Turgot's, and was carried through with the King's approval. Nevertheless, it brought retribution on him as hostility spread through the court, the super-rich of Paris, among whom the Farmers-General were both prominent and spectacularly unpopular, and other ministries, especially those, like Vergennes, whose management of the war with England made them powerful and popular. When Necker added to his offences by asking for a place in the *Conseil Royale*, the two most prominent ministers threatened to resign if he were given one, and, in May 1781, Necker himself handed in his resignation.

Longer term purposes were to be served under Necker's plan by adopting what was by now conventional joint-stock and banking practice and compiling a statement of government financial accounts for the year. There was an ulterior motive: publishing the accounts would be a first step towards establishing understanding and, it was hoped, re-establishing confidence in the government's handling of money matters. The first *Compte Rendu* was published in 1781 in the form of budget statement which added up total ordinary expenditure and total expected ordinary revenue for the year. It showed a modest surplus, became an instant best-seller, and did much to restore confidence - in accordance with Necker's expectation that the true remedy for the country's fiscal difficulties lay in more open government. There was, however, a snag. Whatever surplus of ordinary revenue over expenditure there might have been, it was swamped by the extraordinary expenditures which entry into the American War of Independence had incurred. These were not shown in Necker's published accounts, something which apparently passed unnoticed at the time. Five years after Necker's resignation, the revelation of a deficit of over half a billion *livres* (the result of the enormous peacetime loans raised by his successor rather than of Necker's wartime borrowings) was used by his opponents (and by later historians) as proof of his duplicity, on top of the effrontery which had caused his fall from grace.

After Necker came Joly de Fleury, who cancelled Necker's arrangements for tax collecting, and restored the receivers and 'accountants'. Calonne, who was next, indulged the King and the country in an extravagant bout of spending after the war ended. The opportunity of retrieving a desperate financial situation which ending a war on the winning side at long last might have offered was thrown away. In a triumphal rampage of extravagant purchases and undertakings, Rambouillet and Saint Cloud were bought for the King; great military works were promoted at Toulon. An enormous harbour was begun at Cherbourg for an enlarged fleet to beat the English navy and cover an eventual invasion; ambitious, badly designed and ruinously expensive, the harbour was left unfinished and in ruins.

Far from restoring the balance of ordinary revenue and expenditure, the peace proved to be financially disastrous, running up a monumental deficit - which was not revealed, however, until 1786. Before this transpired, Calonne had devised a remedial programme of his own. With financial confidence at the low ebb it had reached inside France, immediate relief was sought in foreign loans, Dutch as well as Swiss. Major reforms of indirect taxation were launched, with a single tariff replacing the multiplicity of local customs duties - with Paris the one exception, to placate the Farmers-General, who had a formidable customs-wall built around the city for them. A sliding scale was imposed to regulate the export of grain. A trade agreement was concluded with Britain.

The new laws incorporating the major changes in the domestic economy were to be imposed by decree, albeit under the guise of public support.

It was for this that Calonne persuaded the king to convene the Assembly of Notables which met in 1787. Delegates, drawn exclusively from the upper ranks of the nobility and church hierarchy, were nominated by the king; the seven sections into which the Assembly separated for discussion were headed by princes of the royal family, seconded by seven archbishops. The intention seems to have been to reinforce absolutism by enlisting the support of the upper tiers of the establishment. (Given the membership of the Assembly of Notables, and the way its proceedings were organised, it hardly fits Schama's description of it as "an exercise in what might be called popular absolutism"[2].

Whatever the intentions of the king and his ministers, members of the Assembly at all levels of rank soon showed that they saw things differently. Only one of the seven princes was prepared to support the government, and one or two were openly critical. There was general acceptance of the principle of equality of taxation and of the elimination of privileged exemption from tolls. It was argued that the *corvée* should be replaced by a general tax to pay for public works, and that the proposed property tax should be levied on urban property, where the new wealth was concentrated, as well as on land. What is more, debates revealed an altogether unexpected level of sophisticated understanding of fiscal and economic matters.

In fact, the Assembly of Notables turned out to be a ceremonial baptism through which awareness of its own existence was conferred on the new political nation. Not that

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[2] S.Schama, Citizens, Penguin edn., 1989, p.238.

anything like a consensus emerged among its members. The church (represented solely by the higher clergy) was solidly against all reforms which reduced or undermined its privileges. The nobles, while agreeing to the new and comprehensive land tax, drew the line at the proposed provincial assemblies which were to assess it, since they were not guaranteed representation in them. Worst of all, the pronouncement of a deficit of 140 million *livres* forecast for 1788 came as the nastiest of unexpected shocks. Nor were the members convinced by the claim that it was all Necker's fault for his misleading *Compte Rendu* of 1781. The overriding consideration now was that, under Calonne's proposals, the people - who were now being called on to bail out government from the consequences of its errors and misdeeds - were to have no say in determining or controlling government financial policy.

Everything was going wrong. Calonne's mounting unpopularity, well publicised in prints and pamphlets, sober and scurrilous alike, was now matched, though for contrary reasons, by the disfavour of Louis and his queen. He was dismissed 'in disgrace', to be followed by Brienne, the Archbishop of Toulouse who had been leader of the recalcitrant clergy in the Assembly. Not to waste time, Brienne adopted Calonne's measures for free trade in grain and for a unitary system for customs, and his land tax. This last was recast in more acceptable form as a specific liability corresponding with each year's revenue needs instead of the proportional sums of the *dixieme* and *vingtieme*. Calonne's proposal for replacing the *corvée* with a tax was also taken over and made acceptable, this time by making it universally applicable, not just to those who had previously been liable for *corvée* duties. Beyond this, there were proposals for a measure of emancipation for Protestants and judicial reforms, including the abolition of torture to get criminals to inform on accomplices.

Unfortunately, while Brienne's revised programme was being prepared, the Notables had spent a good deal of time scrutinising the accounts. The deficit of 140 million *livres* had been revised, but upwards. Before even considering the merits of the revised proposals, they argued, the true financial situation had to be established beyond doubt. A growing number of notables were convinced that the only way of doing this was through a permanent commission of auditors. The king saw this as infringing his prerogative, and vetoed the proposal - with the upshot that a large number of delegates, led by Lafayette, declared that the proper body to consider and decide whether to approve the new system was the States-General. On May 25, 1787, consequently, the Assembly was dissolved. But by then its real work had been done. During its lifetime of three months, its proceedings had opened up to public view and discussion the depths of the country's financial plight, questioned the government's capacity to remedy it, discredited the king's choice of advisers, and popularised the demand for the States-General.

This left the fiscal crisis unresolved, and reaching a climax which brought the constitutional crisis to a head. Brienne pushed ahead and submitted the various measures to the provincial *parlements* for registration in the traditional way. With the Paris *parlement* in the lead, they refused to sanction anything the Assembly of Notables had turned down and reiterated the demand for a meeting of the States General, as the only deliberative body appropriate for the government to consult in the present juncture.

The government's response was for the king to hold a lit de justice at Versailles and use the royal prerogative to force the *parlements* to register the new legislation. The Paris *parlement* refused to do so, condemned the forced registration, and voted to impeach Calonne for criminal mismanagement. The king's next move, following precedent, was to exile all its members to Troyes. Despite hostile demonstrations and confrontations with the police by large numbers of people, the government persisted with its show of strength. All the clubs were closed, booksellers forbidden to deal in unauthorised publications, the crowds were cleared out of the *palais de justice*, troops patrolled the streets of Paris day and night. On its side, the *parlement* ordered the other Parisian courts subordinate to it to refuse the registration of the edicts now demanded of them by government.

The government was now entirely dependent on short-term loans in the guise of levies on wealthy landowners, having defaulted on its creditors in 1786. The Church Assembly, led by the noblemen who filled its higher ranks, offered less than a quarter of the *'don gratuit'* that was asked for. There were riots in a number of towns - the first sign of popular unrest. The Dutch revolt (see below, p.) followed a few weeks later, a further blow to any confidence, or self-confidence, left in the government.

Now, more than ever, the *parlements* occupied centre stage as the champions of resistance to despotism. By November, 1787, the King was reduced to the shift of convening the Paris *parlement* - with which Brienne had been negotiating to some effect while it was in Troyes - as a royal court, with himself present. This unprecedented move was taken, it seems, in the hope of getting the edicts registered without a vote. When the Duke of Orleans took it on himself to point out that a form of registration of this kind would be illegal, the King's response was both petulant and facetious. The exchange won recognition as a text which, embroidered with all its implications, became exploited by all dissidents, conservative as well as radical. Nothing was achieved by the meeting, except to unite the Paris *parlementaires* of all shades of opinion against royal absolutism.

It was not any dispute about sovereignty but the need to resolve the long-drawn-out fiscal crisis which led to the final moves towards constitutional crisis. Yet the fiscal crises of the eighteenth century were not unprecedented. What made the difference, as Professor Bosher has pointed out, was that the instant remedies which had worked by finding scapegoats for the government in the financial crises which afflicted the last years of Louis XIII and the first years of Louis XIV were no longer feasible. Then, as in previous reigns, the blame for irremediable insolvency had been laid - not without justification - on tax farmers and other financiers. They were arraigned before a special Chamber of Justice, which "had provided a convenient legal means for cancelling debts to the financiers and forcibly recovering large sums from them." But during the eighteenth century, financiers had gained admission to the nobility in large numbers - had indeed "merged with the ruling classes to such an extent, that the Crown was no longer in a position to establish a Court of Justice against them." [3] It was the failure to come up with any solution that precipitated the crisis and led to the desperate (and fruitless) appeal to the Assembly of Notables and on, finally, to the summoning of the States-General.

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[3] J.F.Bosher, French Finances, 1770 - 1795, C.U.P., 1970, pp.304 and 305.

Yet, in the end, their very success in winning popular support, as the *parlementaires* read it, proved their undoing. A fresh attempt in May 1788 to dissolve the *parlements* and replace them by royal courts met with the same resistance as before, this time more widespread and with the backing of many of the 'old' nobility. Many of them made plans for local resistance, and took steps to concert them; a number resigned from public office, army officers refused to order troops under their command to fire on crowds demonstrating against the government. A programme to replace the jurisdictional authority of the *parlements* by minor provincial courts, with the 'registration' of new legislation reserved for a central court appointed by the government was no more successful than the previous year's attempt to replace them by provincial assemblies convened by the *intendants* and drawn from the lower ranks of the nobility and bourgeoisie. During the summer, a great wave of resistance built up, ending up with rioting at Grenoble on the day the order for the members of the *parlement* was to be enforced - with military backing. Truly revolutionary rhetoric was in evidence in the meetings of the *parlement* which followed. In August, the King threw in his hand, announcing that the States-General would be convened in May, 1789. Until then, there world be no move to inaugurate the new central plenary court.

It was now that the 'facing both ways' posture characteristic of the *parlements* became apparent to everybody. For when, in accordance with their constitutional right and duty, they came to 'register' the decree to convene the States General, they not only insisted on the forms of 1614 being adhered to, but went on to reject a proposal which would expand the role of the Third Estate and allow its representatives to discuss all subjects. "In so doing, they revealed themselves as the mere spokesmen of the privileged orders."[4] For a precedent for opposing that particular proposal, and, beyond that, for doubling the number of representatives of the Third Estate, had already been set by the provincial *parlement* at Grenoble, a precedent which other *parlements* had soon followed.

A storm of protest arose, led by prominent men of the Third Estate. Alfred Cobban writes of them as 'directing the mob against the buildings which housed the provincial *parlements'* - a phrase which, perhaps unintentionally, illuminates the role designated for the common people to play by those who were to become its political leaders.

III

Apart from Russia, France was the largest independent state in eighteenth-century Europe, both in territory and population, which by 1780 had risen to some 28 million. It was also the richest. What is perhaps more striking is its extraordinary diversity; the jigsaw puzzle of administrative arrangements which is made so much of is simplicity

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[4] A. Cobban, "The Parlements of France in the Eighteenth Century," in Aspects of the French Revolution, p.81.

itself compared with the number of variants which obtained in social and economic conditions within each category of its people. The nobility, old as well as new, had its millionaires and super- millionaires, but also among its members were people who were worse off than many peasants. It was the same with the First Estate, the Church. At the top were archbishops, with stipends which could amount to 450,000 *livres*, supplemented usually by profitable royal and other official appointments; at the bottom were the 20,000-odd parish *vicaires*, with 300 *livres* a year. Disparities were in general smaller within the bourgeoisie, although wealthy financiers and entrepreneurs not yet ennobled lived in a different world from the teachers, minor clergy, and small-town lawyers who lived off their professional earnings.

When it comes to the four fifths of the population who lived off the land, the distance between the top and bottom of the pyramid were just as gross as with the clergy, with much more dire consequences for the vast majority. Most peasants were smallholders, with less than the bare minimum of land needed to support a family. They had nevertheless to find money for rents, tithes, seigneural dues and taxes; which meant that they and their families had to take on what other work they could find. Metayeurs (sharecroppers) were even worse off, landless labourers worst of all. The balance altered geographically, too; people living in the north were in general better off than those in the south. This was partly owing to the generally more effective agricultural methods practised in Normandy, Picardy and the *Ile de France*, but also because the concentration of the textile industry in northern towns provided opportunities for women to supplement family income by outworking.

The point of central importance in all this is that the disparities of wealth and income were increasing, and at an accelerating pace in the last third of the century. France as a whole had prospered throughout the century, along with most other countries of western Europe. Even so, France faced an economic crisis in the last years of the 1780's. Incomprehensible though this may be in the context of the advanced economies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (though it has become easier to grasp in America and Britain, at least, during the last few decades) it makes sense for eighteenth-century France. For what obtained then was essentially a dual economy.

Traditionally, and still to a large extent fundamentally, France was an agrarian economy and, beyond that, a subsistence economy for the majority of the 20 million or so people who lived off the land. French agriculture was notoriously backward, and although more and more marginal land was taken over, and agriculture more and more labour intensive, returns diminished inexorably. (The yield of grain harvested is said to have been no more than six times the grain sown - "even in good years".[5])

Over and above this rural economy there was commerce, mining and manufacturing industries, together with the building and service industries which grew alongside them, and this is where eighteenth- century economic growth was concentrated. Banking and finance predominated in the service industries, especially if one includes the 60,000 employed by the Farmers-General in the administration and collection of taxes, although

[5] P.McPhee, Social History of France, 1780-1880, Routledge, 1992, p.11.

larger numbers were engaged in law, teaching, administration and ancillary occupations. The two economies were of course connected, with the agrarian economy supplying food and other commodities to the population as a whole (and supporting commercial undertakings) through the market, but there was a further overlap in that most of the income of the wealthier sections of society came directly or indirectly from dues and tithes paid in cash or produce by peasants to their seigneur landlords, tithes paid to the church, rent, and interest on loans.

The wealthy prospered as never before. The growth of trade and industry was fundamental, but it also acted with a kind of ratchet effect to increase disparities in the distribution of wealth and income. Moneylending played a great part - to the state in the first place (it was then that rentier first came to denote a wealthy bourgeois). But wealthy merchants and businessmen lent money to everyone, including the nobility, who borrowed to indulge their taste for new houses, consumer goods, gambling, and to provide for dowries. Landowners made loans to peasants who had to borrow from them to meet their dues, or rents, or taxes. (The target of the incendiary attacks on the chateaux in 1789 was the documentary evidence concerning loans rather than deeds or titles to the dues and tithes they had to pay to seigneurs).

The profits accumulated through commercial and industrial expansion ended up in the hands of men of property, both aristocratic and bourgeois, members of the court nobility who were shareholders in the larger trading companies as well as bourgeois merchants and financiers. Great wealth displayed itself in town houses, new or rebuilt chateaux, the great gardens with which they were embellished, and the furniture, decorations, ornaments, fabrics and paintings which filled them. At the other end of the scale were the greater number of nobles not only without the means to profit from investment in commerce, industry, or loans, but unable to afford to attend court, live in the capital or the larger towns where the good things, and the ability to acquire them, were to be had. Alongside them were the *petite bourgeoisie*, including the poorer professionals, who had to watch their richer and more astute acquaintances ascend to greatness.

On the other hand, the subsistence economy within whose framework the great majority of country people lived, was near collapse. Smallholding peasants, sharecroppers, and landless labourers in town and country were not only by far the worst off, their condition was deteriorating. Wages were falling after 1770, and more and more of the propertyless were being reduced to destitution. Combined with the confusion wrought by Turgot's reforms and their abrupt reversal and with periodic shortages and high prices, especially for bread, the effect was calamitous. Unendurable hardship provoked bread riots time and again. Indebtedness increased. More and more peasants and landless labourers moved into the towns, where they simply augmented the numbers of urban poor, finding themselves excluded by the corporations and similar bodies from all skilled and most semi-skilled jobs, and surviving as best they could on labouring work, begging, or prostitution.

Things got even worse towards the end of the 1780's. The harvest of 1788 was exceptionally bad. What is more, it was the last of a series of bad harvests. People did

not starve to death in great numbers, as they had in the famine of 1709-10, but prices, which had been rising steadily for over fifty years, reached their peak in 1789; and the steepest rises were in necessities - food, fuel, clothing. Added to this, there were, by the summer, actual shortages of bread, the main food of the great mass of people. Riots and occasional banditry broke out early in the summer, as they had in many previous years.

News of events in Paris reaching the provinces was supplemented by rumours of plots to subdue the Third Estate and their supporters throughout the country by armed forces of foreign troops and 'brigands'. There followed by a wave of local peasant uprisings which swept through Normandy and Maine, Flanders, Alsace and Franche-Comté, the Maconnais and Dauphine. Throughout the month, bands of villagers and peasants - not all of them poverty-stricken - careered about the countryside sacking *chateaux*, looting their wine-cellars and granaries, and burning title deeds, charters, and account-books.

It is apparently customary to regard the disorders, attacks on chateaux, skirmishes and outrages of the *'Grande Peur'* as somehow unrelated to the 1789 Revolution - as not in themselves revolutionary in intention or meaning. This seems to give far too much weight to the conception of revolution as a political process with its own recognisable sequential structure and political leadership - almost as if revolution had a known institutional form. It also - possibly - gives too much weight to the 'historic symbolism' of events in Paris. And it certainly gives too little weight to the incitement to protest which talk and discussion about the contents of the *cahiers des doleances* being prepared for the States General must have provoked as they were being composed during the winter of 1788-9 in the 234 constituencies. As well as providing material for the speeches made in the Constituent Assembly in August, they remained behind as a fuse, lit by the misery of the near-famine of the spring and summer of 1789, and exploding in the violence of the *'Grande Peur'*.

Of course, the message was rammed home to in the centre of political affairs by a string of incidents like the storming of the Bastille and the march of the women of Paris to Versailles. These, on top of what was happening in the countryside, had a meaning and significance it was impossible to misinterpret, initiating the first performance of what has become the classic repertoire of revolutionary acts.

Demonstrations, rioting, looting and defiance of armed defenders of public order were the only ways in which it was possible for the mass of the people to represent hostility towards governmental authority; it is better read as a form of alienation from the regime rather than of anomistic despair. There was ample evidence of the strength of local ties in the towns and the countryside, and of the affirmation of sympathy among groups who recognised a common interest. If it is to be given a label, however, it is as a 'popular', even 'populist', movement, rather than 'working class'.

IV

An economic crisis affecting only the poor, even though they made up a majority of the population, was of no immediate consequence for the nobility and bourgeoisie. The disturbances in town and country which followed in its wake, however, were. For they brought into question not only the stability of public order but the ability of the army to act as its ultimate guarantor.

France's standing army had been created, or rather re- created, by Louis XIV. By the end of his reign it had grown to over half a million men. Immense as it was for the time, it had failed conspicuously to fulfill his ambition to make France the dominant power in Europe. For one authority, the continued failure of the army during his reign and that of his successor "played a large part in undermining France's social and political structure."[6] The worst humiliations came with the 'cataclysmic' defeats, and the loss of most of the French overseas empire during the Seven Years War from 1756 to 1763.

During the eighteenth century, too, the army had become a well-publicised arena for the otherwise outdated conflict between the 'old' nobility and the newly ennobled. Repeated edicts - in 1718, 1727 and 1781 - barred any but those of noble family from most commissions in the army and navy. The last of these, the *loi Segur*, restricted appointment in most regiments to men with at least four generations of nobility on the father's side. Not surprisingly, the discontents of the excluded were exacerbated by the army's lack of success in the lengthy and debilitating wars in which the government had involved the country from the first years of the century. Now came the failure of the army to do its job inside the country.

The attacks on the provincial *parlements* had been isolated affairs. The more widespread disturbances of 1789 produced not only renewed evidence of the extent to which the mass of people had become alienated from the authorities but clear indications that alienation had spread so as to include army conscripts. There existed standing arrangements in times of food shortage by which the government bought food supplies and moved them to the worst-hit areas. Reports came in from different parts of the country of attacks on the food trains by starving peasants. In 1789, in expectation of this fairly common danger in the early summer, the time of most acute food shortage, the usual practice had been followed by which the army provided guards en route. Soon there were more reports, this time of troops siding with the peasant bands attacking the food trains.

Worse followed. By July. the main body of troops stationed in Paris to maintain order had been withdrawn, their loyalty to the government now suspect. Their place was taken by German mercenaries, who were mobbed when, on July 12, news of the dismissal of Necker was interpreted as the signal for a new round of repressive measures. Soldiers of the French Guard joined in the looting which went on through the night. Two days later the Bastille was stormed - with a hundred men of the French Guard, the permanent Paris garrison, manning the guns they had brought up. Two months later, the arrival of new

[6] C.H.B Behrens, Society, Government and the Enlightenment, Thames and Hudson, 1985, p. 165.

troops at Versailles and their over-exuberant welcome by the officers of the King's Bodyguard turned a Paris bread riot into the march on Versailles. But the lesson had already been rammed home. "After 14 July any chance of halting or controlling the revolutionary movement by use of the Royal Army was lost."[7]

It was the fiscal crisis which in fact provided the last straw which ended any hope that the army could provide the overwhelming show of force with which the government might seek to impose its will. It so happened that the Dutch revolt of 1788 - a patriotic rebellion, like the great Dutch Revolt, but against the controlling oligarchy rather than a foreign imperial regime, though nevertheless implicating the Hohenzollern princess of Orange - had brought Prussia, backed by England, to the point of intervention. Any hope of a counter-move by France, which the rebels might have hoped for, and indeed expected, was put out of the question by sheer lack of money. 'Not a sou,' was the message the French ambassador at The Hague was told to deliver. The popular clamour in Paris and elsewhere for action by the army stayed just that. The Prussians marched in, and the revolt was suppressed within a month.

V

The nobility represented less than one per cent of the population of eighteenth-century France, a smaller proportion than was the case in most of the rest of Europe. It was also ordered in strictly hierarchical fashion. At the top were the princes and dukes of the royal blood and some 47 dukes and peers; below them were the grades of marquis, count, viscount, baron, and others. All took precedence according to their rank at ceremonies and on other public occasions, had their own coat of arms and were entitled to special treatment in courts of law. Every level of nobility carried with it exemption from the *taille*, the basic tax, and their contribution to other taxes was levied at special rates. On the other hand, they paid the *dixieme*, first raised by Louis XIV in 1695, and the subsequent *dixiemes* and *vingtiemes*, carried through under Louis XV and XVI in spite of the united opposition of the *parlements*.

During the second half of the century, France was falling - administratively, financially, and industrially - into the hands of a plutocracy. This consisted almost by definition of the wealthier nobility. And while only a fraction of the two hundred thousand or so noblemen in France were rich, many of the richest perhaps most, were at the top of the hierarchical order, taking a major share of the increasing wealth of the country. The larger commercial, manufacturing and mining undertakings all required letters patent and royal authority to set themselves up, and princes of the royal blood, dukes and peers, and many of the wealthier nobles took full advantage of their position at court to take part in them. They did so as partners, of course, rather than as shareholders, but there was no call for them to enter into entrepreneurial practicalities. There was even less taint of the derogation which direct involvement in trade brought with it from their other sources of

[7] S.F.Scott, The Response of the Royal Army to the French Revolution, O.U.P., 1978, p. 59.

income: rents from their country estates, profits from urban properties, government loan stock, and moneylending.

At the same time, increasing wealth intensified the scramble to purchase titles of nobility. Ennoblement was the passport not only to distinction and social precedence but to privileges such as substantial exemptions from taxes, trial in special courts of law, and commissions in the army and navy. Nobility was the kind of embellishment which the wealthy felt entitled, even obliged, to adopt. And while it has been argued that the character of the French nobility was changing in the latter part of the century, with advancement more and more dependent on service, talent and merit,[8] it remains true that such qualities gained their mark of recognition in the wealth which they brought their possessors.

As the pursuit of aristocratic titles and privileges became increasingly feverish, the dissatisfactions generated by the swollen number of new nobles among the poorer of the old nobility and the bourgeoisie left behind were increasingly bitter. Within the nobility itself, the flood of new entrants revived some of the feelings of mutual contempt and animosity between the old and new nobility which seem to have subsided earlier in the century. The edict of 1781 which restricted commissions in the better regiments to those who had three generations of noble ancestors must have been scored a minor victory by the old nobility, though it was hollow enough. Commissions went by purchase (as they did in England). So it was still impossible, or at best difficult, for the younger members of the poorer nobility to enter the services, or to gain promotion if they did manage to do so; and men who had entered previously without that qualification saw their promotion prospects vanish. The notoriety of the *loi Segur* (above, p.642) was achieved mainly through the use to which it was put in criticism of the army's failings.

So, while the structure of the nobility was no more rigid than elsewhere, perhaps, it was enough to breed resentment against the intruders who simply bought their way in. It put under strain the institutional superstructure of the complicitous order of society existing in eighteenth-century France.

Much the same division between rich and poor applied to the First Estate, the clergy. It too had its upper crust of titled archbishops, bishops, abbes, and other nobles who had acquired well- endowed sinecures. They inhabited a different world from the *cures* and *vicaires* who attended to the needs of the people in the 60,000-odd parishes, and made do on an annual stipend of a few hundred *livres*.

The gradations of the bourgeoisie were more complex, but the extremes of rich merchants and financiers on their way to the nobility and the provincial professionals in the legal and teaching professions were just as far apart. Among those who felt hardest hit in the scramble for wealth and ennoblement were the professional classes, for whom the stakes were too high, and who saw financiers and businessmen, their social inferiors, buying their way into ranks of society well beyond their own reach. How far the 'politics of

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[8] See S.Schama, Citizens, pp. 118-9, citing G.Chaussinand-Nogaret, The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century; From Feudalism to Enlightenment, (trans. W.Doyle) C.U.P., 1985

envy' entered into later developments it is impossible to say, but some interest, if not significance, attaches to the fact that a number of later revolutionary leaders sought relief by ennobling their surnames: "Before 1789 we meet D'Anton, de Robespierre, and de Marat, while Brissot qualified himself de Warville, and Roland, de la Platiere." [9]

VI

The French Revolution as the outcome of a critical breakdown of confidence in the state and the *ancien regime* is a motif which can be read in all interpretations, romantic, Tocquevillian, Marxist. It is repeated in latterday versions which, adapting Tocqueville's thesis of the essential continuity of political and economic reform from the pre-revolutionary to the post-Napoleonic decades, stress the "destabilizing effects of modernization before the revolution... (M)uch of the anger firing revolutionary violence arose from hostility towards that modernization, rather than from impatience with the speed of its progress."[10]

'Modernisation' is a rather vague, perhaps even vacuous, concept which nowadays does duty as a neutral term for an essentially Whig view of history as progress. 'Modernisation' put its mark on other countries too, but it was hardly the same brand of mark, and certainly evoked nothing like the same reaction. It has to be remembered too that, along with the experience of scientific progress and the expectation that the approach and methods of natural science could be applied to human affairs, people in eighteenth century France looked back to classical Rome for models of political and moral virtue.

Yet none of these renderings seems to give enough weight to the sheer scope of the wholesale destruction of the institutional framework of state and society or of the kind of reconstruction achieved by the revolution in its first two years; nothing was left to intervene between the individual citizen and the state. And while both crisis of confidence and liberal tendencies show through in the five strands which have been outlined, they fall short of a fully satisfactory explanation.

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[9] W.Doyle, Oxford History of the French Revolution, O.U.P.,1990, pp.26-7.
[10] S.Schama, Citizens, Penguin edn., 1989, p. xv.