

The French Revolution

1789–1799

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Introduction

The French Revolution is one of the great turning-points in history. Never before had the people of a large and populous country sought to remake their society on the basis of the principle of popular sovereignty. The drama, success, and tragedy of their project, and of the attempts to arrest or reverse it, has attracted students to it for more than two centuries. Although right-wing journalists at the time of the bicentenary of 1989 rushed to proclaim that 'the French Revolution is finished', its importance and fascination for us are undiminished.¹

Ever since several thousand armed Parisians seized the Bastille fortress in Paris on 14 July 1789 people have debated the origins and meaning of what had happened. All have agreed on the unprecedented and momentous nature of the storming of the Bastille and associated acts of revolution in the months between May and October 1789. However, such were the consequences of these events that the debate on their origins shows no signs of concluding.

In the years after 1789 successive revolutionary governments sought to remake every aspect of life in accordance with what they understood to be the principles underpinning the Revolution of 1789. However, because there could not be agreement on the practical application of those principles, the question of whose revolution this was quickly became a source of division, driving the Revolution in new directions. At the same time, powerful opponents of change inside and outside France forced governments to take measures to preserve the Revolution itself, culminating in the Terror of 1793–4.

Those in power during these years repeatedly asserted that the Revolution, having achieved its objectives, was over, and that stability was the order of the day. When Louis XVI entered Paris in October 1789; when the National Assembly resolved to disperse by force a crowd of petitioners calling for the king's overthrow in July 1791; when the National Convention introduced the Constitution of the Year III in 1795—each time it was asserted that the time had come to

stop the process of revolutionary change. In the end, it was Napoleon Bonaparte's seizure of power in December 1799 which was the most successful of such attempts to impose stability.

The first historians of the Revolution had by then begun to outline not only their narratives of these years but also their judgements about the consequences of revolutionary change. How revolutionary was the French Revolution? Did the protracted political instability of these years disguise a more fundamental social and economic stability? Was the French Revolution a major turning-point in French, even world, history, as its proponents claim, or a protracted period of violent upheaval and warfare which wrecked millions of lives?

This book is a narrative history of the Revolution which also seeks to answer the fundamental questions outlined above. Why was there a Revolution in 1789? Why did it prove so difficult to stabilize the new regime? How might the Terror be explained? What were the consequences of a decade of revolutionary change? The book draws on the great richness of historical writing of the past few decades, some of it part of the renewed debates at the time of the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1789, but much of it influenced by wider changes in approaches to the writing of history.

Four themes stand out among the rich diversity of approaches to the French Revolution in recent years. The first has applied a more imaginative understanding of the world of politics by placing the practice of power within the context of 'political culture' and the 'public sphere'. That is, this approach contends that we can begin to understand the French Revolution only by going beyond the court and parliament to consider a fuller array of ways in which people thought about and acted out politics. Linked to this is a second approach which has examined the masculine domination of institutional politics and the aggressive response to women's challenges to men's power. As a corollary, a third approach has been to reopen debates on the origins of the Terror of 1793–4: are the seeds of the deadly and repressive politics of that year to be found in the earliest moments of the Revolution, in 1789 itself, or was the Terror a direct response to the desperate military crisis of 1793? Finally, and rather differently, a renewed interest in the experience of 'ordinary' people has enabled historians to consider more broadly the rural experience of revolution. One dimension of that

experience which will be highlighted here concerns the history of the rural environment.

The decade of the French Revolution was significant, too, for the elaboration of some major statements of political ideas or ideologies, such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789 and the Jacobin Constitution of 1793. Contemporary descriptions of some of the most harrowing episodes of the Revolution, such as the 'September Massacres' in 1792, are unusually powerful. For that reason, key sections of a wide array of documents are reproduced here, the better to enable us to listen to the diverse voices of revolutionary France.

My colleague Chips Sowerwine has given the manuscript the benefit of his critical and knowledgeable gaze: I am grateful to him for that, as I am for his friendship and encouragement. The manuscript has also been improved by a critical reading by Charlotte Allen, Judy Anderson, Glenn Matthews, Tim Tackett, and Suzy Schmitz; none of them, of course, is responsible for the book's shortcomings. Further valuable assistance was provided by Juliet Flesch, Marcia Gilchrist, and Kate Mustafa.

Note

1. Steven Laurence Kaplan, *Farewell Revolution: Disputed Legacies, France 1789/1989* (Ithaca, NY, 1995), 470–86.

1

France in the 1780s

The most important feature of eighteenth-century France was that it was essentially a rural society. Ten times as many people inhabited France's villages and farms as do today. Perhaps 28 million people inhabited France in 1780: if we define an urban community as one with more than 2,000 people, then only two persons in ten lived in an urban centre in the eighteenth century. The great majority inhabited 38,000 rural communities or parishes with, on average, about 600 residents. A glimpse of two of them reveals some of the central characteristics of that distant world.

The tiny village of Menucourt was typical of the Vexin region to the north of Paris. It was situated between bends in the Seine and Oise rivers, a few kilometres west of the nearest town, Pontoise, and 35 winding kilometres from Paris. It was a small village: there were just 280 inhabitants in its 70 households (but it had grown from 38 households in 1711). The 'seigneur' or lord of the village was Jean-Marie Chassepot de Beaumont, aged 76 in 1789. In 1785 he had successfully applied to the king for authority to establish a 'livre terrier' in order to systematize the extensive feudal dues his villagers were reluctant to recognize. The seigneur's cereal-growing farm dominated the village economically, just as the chateau dominated the squat houses of the villagers. Cultivated fields covered 58 per cent of the 352 hectares of the surface of the tiny parish; forest covered another 26 per cent. Some inhabitants were involved in winegrowing, or in working wood from the chestnut trees to the south of the village into wine barrels and stakes; others quarried stone for new buildings in Rouen and Paris. This market-oriented activity was supplemented by a subsistence economy on small plots of vegetables and fruit-trees (walnuts, apples, pears, plums, cherries), the gathering in the forest of chestnuts and mushrooms, and the milk and meat of 200 sheep and

50 or 60 cows. As in villages everywhere in France, people plied several trades: for example, Pierre Huard ran the local inn and sold bulk wine, but was also the village stonemason.¹

Different in almost every way was the village of Gabian, 20 kilometres north of Béziers, near the Mediterranean coastline of Languedoc. Indeed, most people in Gabian could not have communicated with their fellow subjects in Menucourt, for like the mass of the people of Languedoc they spoke Occitan in daily life. Gabian was an important village, with a constant supply of fresh spring water, and since 988 its seigneur had been the bishop of Béziers. Among the dues payable to him were 100 *setiers* (a *setier* was about 85 litres) of barley, 28 *setiers* of wheat, 880 bottles of olive oil, 18 chickens, 4 pounds of bees-wax, 4 partridges, and a rabbit. Reflecting Gabian's ancient role as a market between mountains and coast, it also had to pay 1 pound of pepper, 2 ounces of nutmeg, and 2 ounces of cloves. Two other seigneurs also had minor claims over its produce. Like Menucourt, Gabian was characterized by the diversity of its polycultural economy, its 770 inhabitants producing most of what they needed on the village's 1,540 hectares. Whereas Menucourt was linked to wider markets by the timber and quarrying industries, Gabian's cash economy was based on extensive vineyards and the wool of 1,000 sheep which grazed on the stony hillsides which ringed the village. A score of weavers of the sheep's wool worked for merchants from the textile town of Bédarieux to the north.²

The monarchy had long sought to impose linguistic uniformity on villages like Gabian by requiring priests and lawyers to use French. However, most of the king's subjects did not use the French language in daily life; indeed, it could be argued that the language almost all French people heard regularly was Latin, on Sunday mornings. Across most of the country French was the daily language only of those involved in administration, commerce, and the professions. Members of the clergy also used it, although they commonly preached in local dialects or languages. Several million people of Languedoc spoke variants of Occitan; Flemish was spoken in the northeast; German in Lorraine. There were minorities of Basques, Catalans, and Celts. These local 'parlers'—or, more pejoratively, 'patois'—were infinitely varied within regions. Even in the Île-de-France around Paris there were subtle differences in the French spoken from area to area. When the

Abbé Albert, from Embrun in the southern Alps, travelled through the Auvergne, he discovered that

I was never able to make myself understood by the peasants I met on the road. I spoke to them in French, I spoke to them in my native patois, I even tried to speak to them in Latin, but all to no avail. When at last I was tired of talking to them without their understanding a word, they in their turn spoke to me in a language of which I could make no more sense.³

The two most important characteristics the inhabitants of eighteenth-century France had in common were that they were the king's subjects, and that 97 per cent of them were Catholic. France in the 1780s was a society in which people's deepest sense of identity attached to their particular province or *pays*. Regional cultures and minority languages and dialects were underpinned by economic strategies which sought to meet the needs of the household within a regional or micro-regional market. The rural economy was essentially a peasant economy: that is, household-based agrarian production which had a primarily subsistence orientation. This complex, polycultural system sought to produce as much as possible of a household's consumption needs, including clothing.

An insight into this world is provided by Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, born in 1734 in the village of Sacy, on the border of the provinces of Burgundy and Champagne. Restif, who moved to Paris and became notorious for his ribald stories in *Le Paysan perversi* (1775), wrote of his recollections of Sacy in *La Vie de mon père* (1779). He recalled the suitable and happy marriage his relative Marguerite was making to Covin, 'a great joker, well-built, a vain country-bumpkin, the great local story-teller':

Marguerite had about 120 livres worth of arable land, and Covin had 600 livres worth, some in arable land, some under vines, and some fields dispersed in the grasslands; there were six parts of each type, six of wheat, six of oats or barley, and six fallow. . . . as for the woman, she had the profit of her spinning, the wool of seven or eight sheep, the eggs of a dozen hens, and the milk of a cow, with the butter and cheese she could extract from it. . . . Covin was also a weaver, and his wife had some domestic work; her lot in consequence must have been pleasant enough.

Urban people commonly referred to the rural population as 'peasants', that is, as 'people of the land'. However, this simple term—like

its English counterpart 'peasant'—disguises the complexities of rural society which were to be revealed in the varied behaviour of rural people during the Revolution. Farm labourers were as much as half the population in areas of large-scale agriculture like the Île-de-France around Paris. In most regions, however, the bulk of the population were either smallholders, tenant-farmers, or sharecroppers, many of whom were also reliant on practising a craft or on wage-work. In all rural communities there was a minority of larger farmers, often dubbed the *coqs du village*, who were large tenant-farmers (*fermiers*) or landowners (*laboureurs*). Larger villages also had a minority of people—priests, lawyers, artisans, textile-workers—who were not peasants at all, but who commonly owned some land, such as the vegetable garden belonging to the priest. The peasantry made up about four-fifths of the 'Third Estate' or 'commoners' but across the country it owned only about 40 per cent of the land outright. This varied from about 17 per cent in the Mauges region of western France to 64 per cent in the Auvergne.

Paradoxical as it may seem, rural France was also the centre of most manufacturing. The textile industry in particular was largely based on women's part-time work in rural areas of Normandy, the Velay, and Picardy. Rural industry of this type was linked to regional specialties centred on provincial towns, such as sheepskin gloves in Millau, ribbons in St-Étienne, lace in Le Puy and silk in Lyons. A recent study of rural industry by Liana Vardi focuses on Montigny, a community of about 600 people in the 1780s located in the northern region of Cambrésis, only part of France since 1677.⁴ At the beginning of the eighteenth century, its population of essentially subsistence landowners and tenants had been one-third that size. Across the eighteenth century, large owners and tenants monopolized the land, increasingly specializing in corn; the middling and small peasants instead found spinning and weaving linen the answer to poverty and land-hunger. A flourishing if vulnerable rural industry in Montigny was based on merchants 'putting out' spinning and weaving to rural households. In turn, the textile industry provided the incentive for farmers to increase crop yields substantially to feed an increasing population. A key role was played by middlemen, merchant-weavers from places like Montigny who mortgaged small family holdings to join the rush to be rich. These people remained rural in their links and economic

strategies at the same time as they demonstrated a remarkable entrepreneurial ability and enthusiasm.

However, Montigny was an exceptional case. Most of rural France was a place of unremitting manual labour by tillers of the soil. A rural world in which households engaged in a highly complex occupational strategy to secure their own subsistence could inevitably expect only low yields for grain crops grown in unsuitable or exhausted soil. The dry and stony soils of a southern village like Gabian were no more suited to growing grain crops than the heavy, damp soils of Normandy: in both places, however, a large proportion of arable land was set aside for grain to meet local needs. Consequently most rural communities had restricted 'surpluses' which could be marketed to substantial towns. Far more important to most peasants were nearby small towns or *bourgs*, whose weekly, monthly, or annual market-fairs were as much an occasion for the collective rituals of local cultures as for the exchange of produce.

Rural communities consumed so much of what they produced—and vice versa—that towns and cities faced both chronic problems of food supply and a limited rural demand for their goods and services. However, although only 20 per cent of French people lived in urban communities, in a European context France was remarkable for the number and size of its cities and towns. There were eight cities with more than 50,000 people (Paris was easily the biggest, with perhaps as many as 700,000 people, then Lyons, Marseilles, Bordeaux, Nantes, Lille, Rouen, and Toulouse), and another seventy with 10,000–40,000. These cities and towns all had examples of large-scale manufacturing involved in an international trading framework, but most were dominated by artisan-type craftwork for the needs of the urban population itself and the immediate hinterland, and by a range of administrative, judicial, ecclesiastical, and policing functions. They were provincial capitals: only one person in forty lived in Paris, and communication between the capital Versailles and the rest of its territory was usually slow and uncertain. The size and topography of the country was a constant impediment to the rapid movement of instructions, laws, and goods (see Map 1). However, improvements to roads after 1750 meant that no city in France was more than fifteen days from the capital; coaches travelling at 90 kilometres a day could in five days bring travellers from

Paris to Lyons, with 145,000 inhabitants France's second largest city.

Like many other cities, Paris was ringed by a wall, largely for the collection of customs duties on goods imported into the city. Within the walls were a number of *faubourgs* or suburbs, each with its distinctive mix of migrant population and trades. Paris was typical of France's major cities in its occupational structure: it was still dominated by skilled, artisanal production despite the emergence of a number of large-scale industries. Some of the most important of the latter were in the *faubourg* St-Antoine, where Réveillon's wallpaper factory employed 350 people and the brewer Santerre had 800 workers. In the western neighbourhoods of the city, the building industry was booming as the well-to-do constructed imposing residences away from the teeming medieval quarters of the central city. However, most Parisians continued to live in congested streets in central neighbourhoods near the river, where the population was vertically segregated in tenement buildings: often, wealthy bourgeois or even nobles would occupy the first and second floors above shops and workplaces, with their domestic servants, artisans, and the poor inhabiting the upper floors and garrets. As in rural communities, the Catholic Church was a constant presence: there were 140 convents and monasteries in Paris (housing 1,000 monks and 2,500 nuns) and 1,200 parish clergy. The Church owned one-quarter of the city's property.⁵

Paris was dominated by small workshops and retail shops: there were thousands of small enterprises employing on average three or four people. In skilled trades, a hierarchy of masters controlled the entry of journeymen, who had qualified by presenting their masterpiece (*chef d'œuvre*) on completion of their *tour de France* through provincial centres specializing in their trade. This was a world in which small employers and wage-earners were bonded by deep knowledge of their trade and of each other, and where skilled workers were identified by their trade as well as by whether they were masters or workers. Contemporaries referred to the working people of Paris as the 'common people' (*menu peuple*): they were not a working class. Nevertheless, frustrations between workers and their masters were evident in trades where entry to a mastership was difficult; in some industries, such as printing, the introduction of new machines was threatening the skills of journeymen and apprentices. In 1776 skilled

wage-earners had rejoiced at the prospect of the abolition of guilds and the chance of establishing their own workshops, but the project was suspended; then in 1781 a system of *livrets*, or workers' passbooks, was introduced, strengthening the hand of masters at the expense of fractious employees.

Social relations focused on the neighbourhood and the workplace as much as the family. Large cities like Paris, Lyons, and Marseilles were characterized by tightly packed, medieval centres where most families occupied no more than one or two rooms: most of the routines associated with eating and leisure were public activities. Historians have documented the use made of streets and other public spaces by working women to settle domestic disputes as well as issues to do with rents and food prices. Men in skilled trades found their own solidarities in *compagnonnages*, illegal but tolerated brotherhoods of workers which acted to protect work routines and wages and to provide outlets for leisure and aggression after working days of 14–16 hours. One of these workers, Jacques-Louis Ménétra, recalled later in life his apprenticeship as a glazier before the Revolution, in a rebellious milieu of *compagnons* which relished obscene pranks, casual sex, and ritualized violence with other brotherhoods. However, Ménétra also claimed to have read Rousseau's *Contrat social*, *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and even to have met their author.⁶

Provincial cities were often dominated by specific industries, such as textiles in Rouen and Elbeuf. Smaller, newer urban centres had sprung up around large iron foundries and coal mines, such as at Le Creusot, Niederbronn, and Anzin, where 4,000 workers were employed. However, it was particularly in the Atlantic ports where a booming colonial trade with the Caribbean colonies was developing a capitalist economic sector in shipbuilding and in processing colonial goods, as in Bordeaux, where the population expanded from 67,000 to 110,000 between 1750 and 1790. This was a triangular trade between Europe, North America, and Africa, exporting wines and spirits from ports such as Bordeaux to England and importing colonial produce such as sugar, coffee, and tobacco. One leg of the trade involved scores of purpose-built slave-ships which carried a human cargo from the west coast of Africa to colonies such as St-Domingue. There as many as 465,500 slaves worked in a plantation economy controlled by 31,000 whites according to the rules of the Code Noir of

1685. The code laid down rules for the 'correct' treatment of the slave-owners' property, while denying slaves any legal or family rights: slaves' children were the property of the slave-owner. In 1785 there were 143 ships actively engaged in the slave trade: 48 of them from Nantes, 37 each from La Rochelle and Le Havre, 13 from Bordeaux, and several from Marseilles, St-Malo, and Dunkerque. In Nantes, the slave-trade represented 20–25 per cent of the traffic of the port in the 1780s, in Bordeaux 8–15 per cent and in La Rochelle as much as 58 per cent in 1786. Across the century from 1707, these slave-ships had made more than 3,300 voyages, 42 per cent of them from Nantes: their trade was essential to the great economic boom of the Atlantic ports in the eighteenth century.⁷

However, most middle-class families drew their income and status from more traditional forms of activity, such as the law and other professions, the royal administration, and from investment in property. Perhaps 15 per cent of rural property was owned by such bourgeois. While the nobility dominated the most prestigious positions in the administration, its lower ranks were staffed by the middle classes. The royal administration at Versailles was tiny, with only about 670 employees, but across a network of provincial cities and towns it employed many thousands more in courts, public works, and government. For bourgeois who had substantial means, there were no more attractive and respectable investments than low-return, secure government bonds or land and seigneurialism. The latter, in particular, offered the hope of social status and even marriage into the nobility. By the 1780s as many as one-fifth of the seigneurs in the countryside around Le Mans were of bourgeois background.

Eighteenth-century France was characterized by the multiplicity of links between town and country. In provincial towns, in particular, bourgeois owned extensive rural property from which they drew rent from peasant farmers; in turn, domestic service for bourgeois families was a major source of employment for young rural women. Less fortunate girls worked as prostitutes or in charity workshops. Another important link between town and country involved the practice of working women in cities such as Lyons and Paris sending their babies to rural areas for wet-nursing, often for several years. Babies had a greater chance of survival in the countryside, but one-third would die while in the care of the wet-nurse (conversely, the glazier

Jacques-Louis Ménétra's mother had died while he was in the care of a rural wet-nurse). A human trade of another kind involved scores of thousands of men from highland areas with a long 'dead season' in winter who migrated to towns seasonally or for years at a time to look for work. The men left behind what has been called a 'matri-centric' society, where women tended livestock and produced textile fabrics.

However, the most important link between urban and rural France was the supply of foodstuffs, particularly grain. This was a link which was often strained by competing demands of urban and rural consumers. In normal times urban wage-earners spent 40–60 per cent of their income on bread alone. As prices rose during years of shortage, so did the tension between urban populations dependent on cheap and plentiful bread and the poorer sections of the rural community, threatened by local merchants seeking to export grain to lucrative urban markets. Twenty-two of the years between 1765 and 1789 were marked by food riots, either in popular urban neighbourhoods where women in particular sought to impose *taxation populaire* to hold prices at customary levels, or in rural areas where peasants banded together to prevent scarce supplies from being sent away to market. In many areas tension over the food supply aggravated suspicion of large towns as parasitic on rural toil, for elites in the Church and nobility drew their wealth from the countryside and consumed it ostentatiously in towns. In the process, however, they created work for townspeople and the promise of charity for the poor.⁸

Eighteenth-century France was a land of mass poverty in which most people were vulnerable to harvest failure. It is this which explains what historians have called the 'demographic equilibrium', in which very high birth rates (about 4.5 per hundred people) were almost matched by high mortality rates (about 3.5). Men and women married late: usually between 26 and 29 and 24 and 27 years respectively. Especially in devout areas, where couples were less likely to avoid conception by coitus interruptus, women conceived as often as once every twenty months. Across much of the country, however, as many as one-half of all children died of infantile diseases and malnutrition before the age of 5. In Gabian, for example, there were 253 deaths in the 1780s, 134 of them of children younger than 5 years. While old age was not unknown—in 1783 three octogenarians and

two nonagenarians were buried—the average life-expectancy of those who survived infancy was just 50 years.

After 1750 a long series of adequate harvests disturbed the demographic equilibrium: the population increased from perhaps 24.5 million to 28 million by the 1780s. However, the vulnerability of this increasing population was not simply a function of the ever-present threat of harvest failure. It was the rural population above all which underwrote the costs of the three pillars of authority and privilege in eighteenth-century France: the Church, nobility, and monarchy. Together, the two privileged orders and the monarchy exacted on average one-quarter to one-third of peasant produce, through taxes, seigneurial dues, and the tithe.

The 169,500 members of the clergy (the First Estate of the realm) made up 0.6 per cent of the population. Their calling divided them between the 81,500 'regular' clergy (26,500 monks and 55,000 nuns) in religious orders and the 59,500 'secular' clergy (39,000 priests or *curés* and 20,500 curates or *vicaires*) who ministered to the spiritual needs of lay society. There were several other types of 'lay' clergy. In social terms the Church was sharply hierarchical. The most lucrative positions as heads of religious orders (often held *in absentia*) and as bishops and archbishops were dominated by the nobility: the archbishop of Strasbourg had a stipend of 450,000 livres per year. Although the minimum annual salaries of priests and curates were raised to 750 and 300 livres respectively in 1786, such stipends made them little more comfortable than most of their parishioners.

The Church drew its wealth largely from a tithe (usually 8–10 per cent) imposed on farm produce at harvest, bringing in an estimated 150 million livres each year, and from extensive landholding by religious orders and cathedrals. From this was paid in many dioceses a *portion congrue* or stipend to parish clergy, which they supplemented by the charges they levied for special services such as marriages and masses said for departed souls. In all, the First Estate owned perhaps 10 per cent of the land of France, reaching up to 40 per cent in the Cambrésis, on which the dues and rents it levied accounted for up to 130 million livres annually. In provincial towns and cities, parish clergy and nuns and monks in 'open' orders were a frequent sight: about 600 of the 12,000 inhabitants of Chartres, for example, were religious personnel. In many provincial cities, the Church was also a

major proprietor: in Angers, for example, it owned three-quarters of urban property. Here, as elsewhere, it was a major source of local employment for domestic servants, skilled artisans, and lawyers meeting the needs of the 600 clergy resident in a town of 34,000 people: clerks, carpenters, cooks, and cleaners depended on them, as did the lawyers who ran the Church's fifty-three legal courts for the prosecution of rural defaulters on tithes and rents on its vast estates. The Benedictine abbey of Ronceray owned five manors, twelve barns and winepresses, six mills, forty-six farms, and six houses in the countryside around Angers, bringing in to the town 27,000 livres annually.

Many male religious orders were moribund by the 1780s: Louis XV had closed 458 religious houses (with just 509 religious personnel) before his death in 1774, and the recruitment of monks declined by one-third in the two decades after 1770. Female orders were stronger, such as the Sisters of Charity in Bayeux who provided food and shelter to hundreds of impoverished women through extensive lace-works. Throughout rural France, however, the parish clergy were at the heart of the community: as a source of spiritual comfort and inspiration, as a counsellor in time of need, as a dispenser of charity, as an employer, and as a source of news of the outside world. During the winter months, it was the parish priest who provided the rudiments of an education, although perhaps only one man in ten and one woman in fifty could have read the Bible. In areas of dispersed habitat, such as in parts of the Massif Central or the west, it was at Sunday mass where the inhabitants of outlying farms and hamlets felt a sense of community. In the west parishioners and clergy decided on the full range of local matters after mass in what have been described as tiny theocracies. Even here, however, education was of marginal importance: in the devout western parish of Lucs-Vendée only 21 per cent of bridegrooms could sign the marriage register, and only 1.5 per cent in a way that suggests a degree of literacy. Most Parisians could at least read, but rural France was essentially an oral society.

The Catholic Church enjoyed a monopoly of public worship, even though geographically segregated Jewish communities, in all 40,000 people, preserved a strong sense of identity in Bordeaux, the Comtat-Venaissin and Alsace, as did the approximately 700,000 Protestants in parts of the east and the Massif Central. Memories of the religious wars and intolerance following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes

in 1685 remained powerful: the people of Pont-de-Montvert, in the heartland of the Protestant Camisard rising in 1700, had an army garrison and a Catholic seigneur (the Knights of Malta) to remind them daily of their subjection. However, while 97 per cent of French people were nominally Catholic, levels of both religiosity (the external observance of religious practices, such as attendance at Easter mass) and spirituality (the importance that individuals accorded to such practices) varied across the country. The substance of spirituality is, of course, largely beyond the reach of the historian; however, the decline in faith in some areas at least is suggested by increasing numbers of brides who were pregnant (from 6.2 to 10.1 per cent across the century) and a decline in priestly vocations (the number of new recruits declined by 23 per cent across the years 1749–89).

Catholicism was strongest in the west and Brittany, along the Pyrenees, and in the southern Massif Central, regions characterized by a strong clerical recruitment of boys from local families well integrated into their communities and cultures. In the west, too, priestly stipends were far higher than the requisite minimum; moreover, this was one of the few parts of the country where the tithe was paid to the local clergy rather than to the diocese, hence facilitating the capacity of priests to minister to all the needs of the parish. Everywhere, the most devout parishioners were more likely to be older, female, and rural. The theology to which they were exposed was marked by a 'Tridentine' mistrust of worldly pleasures, by emphasis on priestly authority, and by a powerful imagery of the punishments awaiting the lax when they passed beyond the grave. Yves-Michel Marchais, the *curé* of the devout parish of Lachapelle-du-Gênet in the west, preached that 'Everything that might be called an act of impurity or an illicit action of the flesh, when done of one's own free will, is intrinsically evil and almost always a mortal sin, and consequently grounds for exclusion from the Kingdom of God.' Once excluded, sinners were left in no doubt about the punishments which awaited them by preachers such as Father Bridaine, a veteran of 256 missions:

Cruel famine, bloody war, flood, fire . . . raging toothache, the stabbing pain of gout, the convulsions of epilepsy, burning fever, broken bones . . . all the tortures undergone by the martyrs: sharp swords, iron combs, the teeth of lions and tigers, the rack, the wheel, the cross, red-hot grills, burning oil, melted lead . . .⁹

The elite positions in the Catholic Church were dominated by members of the Second Estate or nobility. Historians have never agreed on the numbers of nobles in eighteenth-century France, in part because of the numbers of commoners claiming noble status in an attempt to obtain the positions, privileges, and standing which were beyond the reach of wealth alone. Recent estimates have suggested that there may have been no more than 25,000 noble families or 125,000 individual nobles, perhaps 0.4 per cent of the population.

As an order, the nobility drew on several sources of corporate wealth and power: fiscal and seigneurial privileges, the status which went with insignia of eminence, and exclusive employment in a range of official positions. However, like the First Estate, the nobility was characterized by great internal diversity. The poorest provincial nobles (*hobereaux*) on their country estates had little in common with the several thousand courtiers at Versailles or the magistrates of the high courts (*parlements*) and senior administrators, even though their noble status was usually far more ancient than that of those who had bought a title or been ennobled for their administrative services (*noblesse de robe*). Entry of a son into a military academy and the promise of a career as an officer was one of the favoured ways in which provincial nobles preserved status and economic security. Their standing within the army was buttressed by the 1781 Ségur ordinance requiring four generations of nobility for army officers. Within the elite of the nobility (*les Grands*), boundaries of family and wealth were further fractured by intricate hierarchies of position and prerogative; for example, between those who had been formally presented at court, those permitted to sit on a footstool in the queen's presence, and those allowed to ride in her carriage. What all nobles had in common, however, was a vested interest in a highly complex system of status and hierarchy from which came material privilege and preferment.¹⁰

Most nobles also drew a significant proportion of their wealth from the land. While the Second Estate owned outright perhaps one-third of the land of France, it exerted seigneurial rights over most of the rest. The most important of these rights was regular payment of a harvest due (*champart, censive* or *tasque*) on the major crops produced on all land within the *seigneurie*; this was normally between one-twelfth and one-sixth, but up to one-quarter in parts of Brittany and

central France. It was bolstered by other significant rights, such as a monopoly (*banalité*) over the village oven, grape and olive presses, and mill; financial levies on land transfers and even on marriages; and the requirement of unpaid labour by the community on the lord's lands at harvest time. It has been estimated that the value of such dues was as high as 70 per cent of noble income in the Rouergue (where the *champart* took one-quarter of peasant produce) and as low as 8 per cent in the neighbouring region of the Lauragais to the south.

The solution to the paradox of how an essentially peasant society could sustain so many substantial towns and cities lies in the functions of these provincial centres in the eighteenth century. In an important sense, inland towns were dependent on the countryside, for the bulk of the seigneurial dues, rents, tithes, and fees collected by the elite of the first two estates of the realm were spent in urban centres. For example, the cathedral chapter of Cambrai drew its wealth from its properties in villages like Montigny, where it owned 46 per cent of the total area in 1754. It was also the seigneur of the village, though this was a region where the feudal regime weighed relatively lightly.

Rural people were born into a world marked by physical statements of the sources of authority and status. Everywhere the parish church and chateau dominated the built environment and recalled the duties of commoners to labour and defer. While seigneurs were less likely to reside on their estates by the 1780s than earlier in the century, they continued to exercise a maze of prerogatives reinforcing the community's subordinate position, whether by reserving a pew in the parish church, wearing a weapon in public, or naming the village officials. We cannot know the extent to which the deference on which they insisted was a sincere recognition of their eminence; certainly, however, there were repeated instances of peasant animosity which made members of the elite despair. In Provence, for example, local communities were required to respect a death in the seigneur's family by refraining from public festivals for a year. Here a bereaved noble complained that, on the day of the patron saint's festival in the village of Sausses in 1768, 'people had beaten drums, fired muskets and danced the whole day and part of the night, with a remarkable *éclat* and conceit'.¹¹

Eighteenth-century France was a society of corporations, in which privilege was integral to social hierarchy, wealth, and individual identity. That is, people were members of social orders born of a medieval conception of a world where people had duties to pray, to fight or to work. This was an essentially fixed or static vision of the social order which did not correspond with other measures of personal worth, such as wealth. The Third Estate, about 99 per cent of the population, included all commoners from beggars to the wealthiest financiers. The first two estates were internally united by privileges belonging to their estate, and by their vision of their social functions and identity, but they, too, were divided internally by differences of status and wealth. In particular, at the summit of every form of privilege—legal, fiscal, occupational, regional—was the noble elite of the first two estates or orders. These ancient and immensely wealthy noble families at the pinnacle of power shared a conception of social and political authority which they expressed through ostentatious display in their dress, dwellings and consumption of luxuries.

The First and Second Estates were privileged corporations: that is, the monarchy had long recognized their privileged status through, for example, separate law codes for their members and by tax exemptions. The Church paid only a voluntary contribution (*don gratuit*) to the state, usually no more than 3 per cent of its income, by decision of its governing synod. Nobles were generally exempt from direct taxation except for the modest *vingtième* surcharge imposed in 1749. However, relations between the privileged orders and the monarch—the third pillar of French society—were based on mutual dependence and negotiation. The king was head of the Gallican Church, which had a certain measure of autonomy from Rome, but in turn was dependent on the goodwill of the personnel of the Church for maintaining the legitimacy of his regime. In return the Catholic Church enjoyed a monopoly of public worship and moral codes. Similarly, in return for the obedience and deference of his fellow nobles, the king accepted that they would be at the pinnacle of every institution, from the Church to the armed forces, from the judiciary to his own administration. Jacques Necker, a Genevan banker who was Finance Minister 1777–81 and Principal Minister from 1788, was Louis XVI's only non-noble member of cabinet.

The king's residence at Versailles was the most imposing physical statement of power in eighteenth-century France. His state bureaucracy was, however, both small in size and limited in function to internal order, foreign policy, and trade. There were only six named ministries, and three were devoted to Foreign Affairs, War, and the Navy; the others were concerned with Finances, Justice, and the Royal Household. Much of the collection of taxes was 'farmed out' to private *fermiers-généraux*. Most important, every aspect of the institutional structures of public life—in administration, customs and measures, the law, taxation, and the Church—bore the imprint of privilege and historical accretion across seven centuries of territorial expansion by the monarchy. The price the monarchy had paid as it expanded its territory since the eleventh century had been to recognize the special 'rights' and 'privileges' of new 'provinces'. Indeed, the kingdom included an extensive enclave—Avignon and the Comtat-Venaissin—which had continued to belong to the papacy since its fourteenth-century exile there.

The constitution by which the king governed France was customary, not written. Essential to it was that Louis was king of France by the grace of God, and that he was responsible to God alone for the well-being of his subjects. The royal line was Catholic and passed only through the oldest sons (the Salic Law). The king was head of the executive: he appointed ministers, diplomats, and senior officials, and had the power to declare war and peace. However, since the high courts or *parlements* had the responsibility of registering the king's decrees, they had increasingly assumed the right to do more than vet them for juridical correctness; rather, the *parlements* insisted that their 'remonstrances' could also defend subjects against violations of their privileges and rights unless the king chose to use a *lit de justice* to impose his will.

The historic compromises which French monarchs had had to make in order to guarantee the acquiescence of newly acquired provinces across several centuries was manifest in the complicated tax arrangements across the country. The major direct tax, the *taille*, varied between provinces and some towns had bought their way out of it entirely. The major indirect tax, the *gabelle* on salt, varied from over 60 livres per 72 litres to just 1 livre 10 sous. Olwen Hufton has described bands of ostensibly pregnant women smuggling salt from

Brittany, the lowest taxed area, eastwards into areas of high taxation in order to profit from clandestine sales of this necessity.¹²

In administration, too, the keywords were exception and exemption. The fifty-eight provinces of eighteenth-century France were grouped for administrative purposes into 33 *généralités* (see Map 2). These units varied enormously in size and rarely coincided with the territory covered by archdioceses. Moreover, the powers the king's chief administrators (*intendants*) could exercise varied considerably. Some of the *généralités*, known as the *pays d'état* (such as Brittany, Languedoc and Burgundy), claimed a measure of autonomy, for example, in the apportionment of taxation, which other areas, the *pays d'élection*, did not. Dioceses ranged in size and wealth from the archdiocese of Paris to the 'évêchés crottés' or 'muddy bishoprics', tiny sees which were the result of political agreements in earlier centuries, particularly in the south during the fourteenth-century exile of the papacy to Avignon.

The map of France's administrative and ecclesiastical boundaries did not coincide with that of the high courts (*parlements* and *conseil souverains*). The *parlement* of Paris exercised power over half the country, whereas the *conseil souverain* of Arras had only a tiny local jurisdiction. Commonly, the centre of administration, the archdiocese, and the judicial capital were located in different cities within the same province. Moreover, cutting across all these boundaries was an ancient division between the written or Roman law of the south and the customary law of the north. On either side of this divide were tens of local law codes; the clergy and nobility, of course, had their own specific codes as well.

Those involved in trade and the professions complained of the difficulties created for their businesses by the multiplicity of legal jurisdictions and codes. Further obstacles were posed by the multiplicity of systems of currency, weights, and measures—there was no commonality in measures of size or volume across the kingdom—and by internal customs houses. Nobles and towns imposed their own tolls (*péages*) as produce moved across rivers and canals. In 1664 much of northern France had formed a customs union; but there were customs houses between it and the rest of the country, though not always between border provinces and the rest of Europe. It was easier for eastern provinces to trade with Prussia than with Paris.

Every aspect of public life in eighteenth-century France was marked by regional diversity and exceptionalism, and the continuing strength of local cultures. The institutional structures of the monarchy and the corporate powers of the Church and nobility were everywhere complicated by local practices, exemptions and loyalties. The Corbières region of Languedoc provides an example of this institutional complexity and of the limitations on the control of the monarchy over daily life. Here was a geographically well-defined area whose 129 parishes all spoke Occitan with the exception of three Catalan villages on its southern border. Yet the region was divided for administrative, ecclesiastical, judicial, and taxing purposes between offices in Carcassonne, Narbonne, Limoux, and Perpignan. The boundaries of these institutions were not consistent: for example, neighbouring villages administered from Perpignan were in different dioceses. Across the Corbières, there were ten different volumes for which the term *setier* was used (normally about 85 litres), and no fewer than fifty different measures of area: the *sétérière* ranged from just 0.16 hectares on the lowlands to 0.51 in highland areas.

Voltaire and other reformers campaigned against what they saw as the intolerance and cruelty of the judicial system, most famously in the case of the torturing and execution in 1762 of the Toulouse Protestant Jean Calas, condemned for allegedly killing his son to prevent him from converting to Catholicism. The system of punishments which Voltaire and others castigated was a manifestation of the regime's need to instil control of its large, diverse kingdom through intimidation and awe. Physical punishments were severe and often spectacular. In 1783, a defrocked Capucin monk accused of sexually assaulting a boy and stabbing his victim seventeen times was broken on the wheel and burned alive in Paris; two beggars from the Auvergne were broken on the wheel in 1778 for threatening a victim with a sword and rifle. In all, 19 per cent of the cases before the Prevotal Court in Toulouse in 1773–90 resulted in public execution (reaching 30.7 per cent in 1783) and as many again to life imprisonment in naval prisons.

However, to most contemporaries the monarchy of Louis XVI appeared the most stable and powerful of regimes. While protest was endemic—whether in the form of food-rioting or of complaints about the presumptions of the privileged—this was almost always within

the system: that is, against threats to idealized ways in which the system was believed to have once worked. Indeed, during the most extensive popular unrest in the years prior to 1789—the ‘Flour War’ in northern France in 1775—rioters shouted that they were lowering the price of bread to its customary price of 2 sous per pound ‘in the name of the king’, tacit recognition of the king’s responsibility to God for his people’s well-being. By the 1780s, however, a series of long-term changes in French society was undermining some of the fundamental bases of authority and challenging a social order based on privilege and corporations. Deep-seated financial difficulties would further test the capacity for elites to respond to the imperatives of change. An abrupt political crisis would then bring these tensions and problems to the surface.

Notes

1. Denise, Maurice, and Robert Bréant, *Menucourt: un village du Vexin français pendant la Révolution 1789–1799* (Menucourt, 1989).

2. Peter McPhee, *Une communauté languedocienne dans l’histoire: Gabian 1760–1960* (Nîmes, 2001), ch. 1.

3. Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France*, trans. S. Reynolds, vol. 1 (London, 1988), 91–7; Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), chs. 1–2, 6, pp. 488–91.

4. Liana Vardi, *The Land and the Loom: Peasants and Profit in Northern France 1680–1800* (Durham, NC, 1993). On rural France in general, see Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, ch. 4, P. M. Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1988), ch. 1.

5. Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay on Popular Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. Marie Evans (Berkeley, Calif., 1987). Among the many other studies of Paris, see David Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community in Paris, 1740–1790* (Cambridge, 1986); Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power, and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, trans. Carol Shelton (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

6. Jacques-Louis Ménétra, *Journal of My Life*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 1986); Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, 342–6, ch. 20.

7. Jean-Michel Deveau, *La Traite rochelaise* (Paris, 1990); Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, ch. 5.

8. Among the important studies of the grain trade are Steven Kaplan, *Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Flour Trade during the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY, 1984); Cynthia Bouton, *The Flour War: Gender, Class, and*

Community in late Ancien Regime French Society (University Park, Pa., 1993); Judith Miller, *Mastering the Market: the State and the Grain Trade in Northern France, 1700–1860* (Cambridge, 1998).

9. Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789–1914* (London, 1989), 24, 27. For the Church in the eighteenth century see, too, Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, ch. 11; and the outstanding survey by John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1998). Ch. 46 of the latter analyses the position of Protestants and Jews.

10. See Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, ch. 12. One of many excellent local studies is Robert Forster, *The House of Saulx-Tavannes: Versailles and Burgundy 1700–1830* (Baltimore, 1977).

11. Alain Collomp, *La Maison du père: famille et village en Haute-Provence aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1983), 286.

12. Olwen Hufton, 'Women and the Family Economy in Eighteenth-Century France', *French Historical Studies*, 9 (1975), 1–22; Hufton, *The Prospect before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500–1800* (New York, 1996), esp. ch. 4; Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, ch. 7, 287–99.