The Causes of the French Revolution

The French Revolution was not the event of a single month or year. In its most novel, violent, or revolutionary aspects it lasted from 1789 to the rise of Napoleon; but just as its effects carried forward into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so its origins stretched back into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The prime cause was the existing system of government: the practices of what was afterwards called the *Ancien Regime* – the Old Regime. Indeed, these practices can hardly be called a system, for in general they came nearer to chaos. So chaotic were the legal arrangements that in 1789 there still existed 360 different feudal codes of law in different parts of France. In one town alone there were twenty-nine feudal courts! In taxation the chaos was such that when a geographer in 1789 tried to draw a map showing the customs duties of the various districts, he had to give it up as too complicated to attempt. A boat bearing wine from the south of France to Paris, for example, paid over 40 tolls and lost a fortnight in the process. In other fields of administration matters were no better, the government tried to regulate affairs on over 40,000 townships and struggled hopelessly against overwhelming arrears of business. One parish, for instance, which petitioned for a government loan to repair its leaking church roof, waited over ten years for an answer. In spite of all this utter inefficiency two principles stood out. Nearly all powers in national matters was in the hands of the king and his personal advisers; and the main burdens of taxation were borne by the classes least able to support them.

In the magnificent palace of Versailles, remote from contact with any but the nobility, the upper clergy and his officials, Louis XVI strove to control the destinies of France. There were several royal Councils, a royal Controller of Finances, royal deputies in the provinces known as Intendants, royal officials everywhere through whom the king governed – but the system rested primarily on Louis, himself, for his word was virtually law. 'The state', Louis XIV had said, with vanity but with accuracy, 'is myself'. Louis XVI was later on to remark, concerning a disputed issue, 'The thing is legal because I wish it'.

Such a statement sums up the whole nature of the government of the Ancien Regime. The mass of the people had no share in government, and even the rising middle classes had very little; for though there remained some of the old medieval institutions in which the wealthier bourgeois played a part, these had either lost the habit of opposing the king or else had themselves become largely aristocratic. Institutions which had lost the habit of opposition included many of the assemblies known as Etats (States or Estates), which still met in some of the provinces, and which were supposed to represent the local community in its three estates, or orders, of clergy (First Estate), nobility (Second Estate) and others (Third Estate). And as for the Etats-Genereaux, or States-General, the assembly of the three estates which was supposed to represent the whole realm, this existed only as a memory. It had last been called in 1614!

There were, however, still twelve provincial parlements, or legal corporations which acted as courts of justice and could theoretically disregard the royal wishes in reaching their decisions. Above all, there was the parlement of Paris, which also had the task of registering the king's edicts as laws, and claimed that its consent was necessary before this could properly be done. In point of fact, however, those members of the Paris parlement who were not nobles of the older sort (the nobility of the sword) had become nobles of a newer and lesser kind appropriate to magistrates and officials – the

nobility of the robe. They were a privileged group, normally content to go along with the king while he respected their privileges. When he did not, as in the years 1787-88, their opposition began the sequence of events which led to revolution.

In sum, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the will of the sovereign had become virtually law – so much so, that any critic of government or opponent of some favoured noble was liable to be arrested quite arbitrarily on the issue of a royal writ known as lettre de cachet (sealed letter). He could then find himself flung into prison without a trial or even an accusation of having committed any particular crime. Some 150,000 of these writs were issued in the reign of Louis XV and another 14,000 under Louis XVI. By no means all of these concerned cases which actually affected the government. Many were issued on the request of nobles wishing to discipline their sons or prevent an 'unsuitable' marriage.

As allies and buttresses in this system of royal power, the Crown had the clergy and the nobility – the First and Second Estates. Together the first two Estates numbered some 300,000 out of a population of around 25 million. Yet the Ancien Regime in France worked almost wholly to their profit. They owned about three-fifths of the land; many of the nobility were gathered around Louis at Versailles in useless attendance and did not work; the higher clergy drew property rents and shared the general characteristics of the nobility. The lower clergy, however, such as the parish priests, were poorly paid and had plenty to do. Often they received less than a hundredth of a bishop's income, and their sympathies consequently lay not with their superiors but with the Third Estate. Extraordinary privileges were possessed by the nobility and clergy, the most outstanding being exemption from the mean weight of taxation. The nobles were relieved of many taxes and paid others lightly. The clergy made only a 'free gift'.

The financial burden of the peasant, on the other hand, was crushing. Not only did he pay several taxes to the king – notably the twentieth (vingtience) of his income which most nobles paid, a land-tax (taille), and a poll tax (capitation), but in addition he paid a tithe of the produce of his land to the Church, a gabelle (or salt-tax – and everyone over seven years of age had to buy 7Ib of salt a year), a customs-duty if he took his goods through a village, and a money-due to the local lord when his grapes went to the wine-press or his corn to the Lord's mill (and usually they had to go). By a system of game-laws he had to be the powerless witness of game or its hunters destroying his crops; he alone of all classes was not exempt from military service. As if these burdens were insufficient, he was often liable to forced labour on the roads on public buildings (covvee). It is little wonder that the peasantry, taxed more and more heavily on the expenses of the French government mounted in the eighteenth century, and in many cases seeing their superiors living in the greatest luxury, were becoming ripe for revolt. Some 10,000 of them were annually imprisoned, 2,000 condemned to the galleys, and several hundred executed for offences against the salt laws alone.

Yet it was not so much from the peasantry as from the more prosperous members of the Third Estate – the educated section of lawyers and doctors especially – that the drive towards revolution came. Though not suffering the economic burdens of the peasant, these men resented their exclusion from official positions at the head of the army, the navy, and the diplomatic service. They resented not being able to criticize openly a ridiculous system of government. They resented the lack of religious freedom. If a Protestant service was discovered, the pastor might be hanged and the congregation all sent to the galleys. They resented the liability of the Third Estate to suffer torture, breaking on the

wheel, and forms of mutilation which were spared noble and clergy. Above all, they felt themselves unfairly excluded from all share in government. ‘What is the Third Estate?’ wrote one of their leaders in 1789. ‘Everything. What has it been hitherto in our forms of government? Nothing. What does it want? To become something.’ It is not surprising that almost all the revolutionary leaders came from this class.

There was a further reason, apart from their actual grievances to account for the leadership of the reform movement by the bourgeoisie. It was, of course, they, rather than the peasants or the urban poor, who enjoyed the possessions of self-confidence necessary to divert a revolution, but above all, it was they who had the political education. This they had found in the works of certain French writers or philosophers (Philosophes) of the eighteenth century. In the first place there was Francois-Marie Arouet, who later called himself Voltaire. Famous all over Europe as a historian, a populariser of science, a tragic dramatist, and a poet, he was also a conspiring critic of existing institutions, and especially of the Church. He himself had known the inside of the Bastille, the great prison of Paris, and what a lettre de cachet could mean. Over certain flagrant miscarriages of justice he fought for years to secure the reversal of the verdict and the rehabilitation of the honour of the wronged man. He became at once the most acclaimed and the most feared man of Europe, while the very classes he criticized, nobility and royalty, competed for the honour of entertaining him. Only his great enemy, the Church, could never forgive him for his criticism – and his deism. The fraud of the two most unscrupulous monarchs of the eighteenth century, Frederick the Great of Prussia and Catherine of Russia, he was equally willing to hold up a monarch to admiration for ‘enlightened’ intentions and to ridicule for unenlightened achievements. With four estates on the borders of France and Switzerland he could speed from one to the other when officials were on his track. Only at the end of his life could he come safely to Paris to see his last play produced, and then the populace thronged to welcome the man who had fought injustice so long and so bravely. But Voltaire knew humanity, ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘they’d come in just the same crowds to see me executed.’ Yet with all his devastating satire and his wit, and for all his campaigns against religious persecution, antiquated and unfair taxation, and torture, he had nothing positive to suggest to replace the monarchy. He was no democrat. ‘I had rather’, he remarked, ‘be ruled by one lion than by a hundred rats.’ His contribution, great though it was, was negative, not positive.

Together with Voltaire may be mentioned the work of the Encyclopaedists, led by Davis Dideot. They set out to compile an encyclopaedi which would be an account of all existing knowledge. As it went on its articles – on political and religious subjects gave increasing offence to the authorities – indeed, no faithful account of contemporary knowledge could be given which did not demonstrate the folly and injustice of many existing claims and practices in Church and State. Among the earlier contributors were some by a group often known as the Economists. They advocated the abolition of all taxation except that on land (which would be paid mainly by the clergy and nobility); but for a general scheme of government, they too had no other solution that enlightened despotism.

A more positive contribution was made by the Baron de Montisquieu who saw the importance of geographical conditions. After experimentally freezing a tongue, and observing that the taste-papillae were smaller and less sensitive in the cold than in the heat, he concluded that the people in hot climates would feel things more passionately than those in cold or temperate regions, and would be less able to keep themselves under control. So a strict despotism, he thought, would be best suited for them, while northern Europeans might be trusted with an element of democracy. Visiting England, he found the model he sought. In his chief book, De l’Esprit des Lois (which ran through

twenty-two editions in eighteen months), he held up the English constitution, with its parliament, its independent judges, and its constitutional king as worthy of imitation by France. He was especially keen on the idea of those various parts of the government acting as checks on each other, thus helping to preserve the liberty of the individual. His influence, both on the French and American revolutionary bodies, was profound.

But the 'philosopher' who, more than all others, provided a positive creed was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His stormy life, in the course of which he was drawn out both from his native city of Geneva and from his adopted France, typified the spirit of revolt. A poet and a musician who had written a successful opera, he turned to politics and preached the equality of men. In his greatest political work, Du Contrat Social, he seeks a justification for the fact that man, though 'born free, is everywhere in chains' (i.e. is everywhere subject to government). This justification he can find only if the ideas and desires of the people are really curved out by the government – or, as he puts it, if the General Will is sovereign. Only in this way is liberty returned, and equality realised. Obviously, however, the General Will is much less likely to be carried out in a monarchy than in a democracy, where all men actually decide issues, not a representative democracy, like that of Britain, where other people are elected to decide them. 'The English people', he wrote, ' is free only during the election of its MPs. As soon as they are elected, it is a slave, it is nothing.' He suggested dividing a large state into smaller direct democracies, and the binding of these into a federation. But it was the spirit of democracy, rather than the details, which affected the revolutionary leaders. Catching from Rousseau also a strong vein of emotion and love of nature, the revolutionary leaders developed the passion and violence needed for a revolution, Rousseau thus not only applied the main doctrine – the Sovereignty of the People, the Supremacy of the General Will – but also helped to create the emotional spirit which made people ready to rebel.

The philosophers, then, supplied much of the theory which underlay the Revolution, even though all the ones mentioned above were dead before the Revolution broke out. It was America, however, which supplied the main practical example. In 1776 the 'old thirteen' British Colonies, already in revolt, issued their Declaration of Independence, and by 1783 they had secured their freedom as the United States of America. From 1778 France, anxious to obtain revenge for the loss of her colonies in Canada and India during the Seven Years War (1756-63), willingly helped the Americans against Britain, and enjoyed her most successful war of the century. She little thought of the consequences. French soldiers who had served in America pouted back to France full of American democratic ideas. They had helped to free a nation whose only real grievance was not that the British taxed them, but that they might tax them! An extra tea-duty of threepence, the sole tax still payable by Americans to Britain in 1776, broke up the British Empire. When the French compared this with the overwhelming burdens of their own peasantry, it rapidly became apparent that if the Americans were justified in revolting against the British, the French were far more justified in revolting against the French. The Americans rebelled not so much against misgovernment as for the sake of self-government; the French, with the additional spur of misgovernment, were not slow to learn the lesson. It was no accident that one of the earliest leaders of the French Revolution was Marquis de Lafayette, returned six years before from the War of Independence.

But the influence of the American Revolution did not end there; perhaps more important, the cost of the war to France meant the last straw on the already cracking back of her finances. All the century the situation had been getting worse. The enormous luxury of the French court under Louis XIV and XV (and under Louis XVI, too, although he was by comparison very economical, and had only

2,000 horses and 200 carriages in the royal stables, while his Queen, Marie Antoinette, managed with only 500 servants and four pairs of shoes a week) alone accounted for one-twelfth of the whole income of the government. The ridiculously inefficient system of taxation (by which the nobles and clergy escaped extremely lightly, while the peasantry, owning about a third of the land, paid practically everything) had nothing to commend it. By 1785 even the nobles and clergy were beginning to see that the situation was impossible. Further, the cost of tax collection, sometimes done by selling the right of collection to the highest bidder, who made what he could, swallowed an absurd proportion of the taxes. The salt tax, for example, brought in 60 million livres but cost 20 million to collect, and about 50,000 troops and agents had to be used to suppress smuggling. Above all, the constant wars for over a century and the ruinous loss of most of the French Empire in the Seven Years War had made continuous borrowing necessary, and had piled up an enormous amount of debt. Each year about one half of the royal income had to be set aside to pay interest on debts – and even then the monarchy had already defaulted five times in the eighteenth century by reducing interest or repudiating debt. When on top of this chaotic and dangerous situation the government of Louis XVI joined in the War of American Independence and spent 2,000 million livres on helping to bring about the defeat of Britain, it also brought about its own bankruptcy.

The financial situation was now desperate. Already two Controllers-General with reforming ideas, first the great Intendant and economist Turgot, then the German financier Jacques Necker, had attempted remedies which might have staved off disaster, only to come up against the rock-like obstacle of old-established privileges. Now a new Controller-General, the former Intendant Calonne, came to the same conclusion as Turgot and Necker – that nothing could be done to restore the national finances while the nobles and clergy remained exempt from the bulk of taxation. To help break down this corruption, in particular by a new land tax falling on all landowners, Calonne advised the King to call an Assembly of Notables – nobles, clergy, officials and others – to be selected by the Crown.

The Notables met in 1787, but, not surprisingly, failed to approve all Calonne's desired reforms. Equal failure then followed the efforts of Calonne's successor, Archbishop Brienne, both to have his own proposed measures registered by the Paris parlement and then to suspend the parlements altogether. At least, however, the cry of reform was in the air and in both the Notables and the Paris parlement issues were raised to demand that, if great changes were contemplated, the proper body to advise them was the long defunct States-General. In desperation, Brienne clutched at the straw. Hoping to destroy by this means the most flagrant exemptions of the privileged classes, he advised the king to call the States-General. He had armed such opposition that the king could no longer return him; but his successor, the recalled Necker, confirmed Brienne's advice, and suggested an earlier date for the meeting. So it was decided that the States-General should meet again in May 1789, after a lapse of 175 years. Minister and Monarch little thought that their device for ending bankruptcy would begin a revolution.

It was natural, of course, though it surprised the government, that the calling of the States-General, and the official request for lists (cahiers) of grievances which preceded it should open the floodgates of criticism. But the outcome depended on how the demands of the Third Estate were to be handled by the king; and unfortunately for France, Louis XVI was a king in name and in power, but not in character. Full of the best intentions – he had rapidly appointed as Controller-General first one outstanding reformer, Turgot, then another, Necker – he could never be relied on to carry out those intentions consistently: he had dismissed Turgot and Necker with equal promptitude. At every

stage in the revolution he was to encourage reform and then to draw back. Such inconsistency was to bring its almost inevitable reward: it is not usually the strong, brutal rulers of this earth who lose their thrones but the inconsistent, well-intentioned ones. ‘When you keep together a number of oiled ivory balls’, one of his relatives said of Louis, ‘you may do something with the king.’ Mildly interested in reform, more interested in his kingship, but most interested in hunting. Louis XVI was to hesitate, to play for time, to yield and to deny, till the forms which he had released caught him up in their torrential current and swept him and the monarchy to destruction.

Louis was also unfortunate in his advisers. Necker lacked firmness, and the one great man who was later to try to save the king, Mirabeau, died at a crucial moment. For the most part, in fact, Louis was under the fatal influence of his wife, Marie Antoinette. Extremely unpopular among the French as the representative of the hated Austrian alliance which led to the disastrous Seven Years War and the loss of colonies, she was nicknamed with contempt - ‘l’Autrichienne – the Austrian woman. Ignorant of the need for reform, unsympathetic to the people’s needs and incapable of grasping the political situation, she poisoned Louis’ mind first against Turgot and then against Necker, and everywhere advised a fatal firmness atg precisely the wrong moments. ‘The king’, said Mirabeau, ‘has only one man about him, his wife.’ France’s destiny rested with a king who was too weak minded to be stable and a Queen who was too strong-minded to be sensible.

Finally, among the many factors leading to the Revolution must be mentioned the rise in prices which had taken place during the eighteenth century, and which had not been accompanied by any corresponding increases in wages. All over Europe, thanks largely to improved medical knowledge, the population was increasing, even if most of it lived in wretched conditions; and this increase, coming at a time when there was little mass manufacture or scientific agriculture, brought a keen demand for scarce goods and food and so helped to cause higher prices. It has been calculated that between 1730 and 1789 grain prices in France rose by about sixty per cent, where wages rose only by only twenty-two per cent. The result was widespread poverty at the lower end of society, sharpened in the countryside by the fact that landlords, to counteract the declining value of some of their fixed dues, began to exploit their privileges more vigorously than ever.

To complete the deteriorating situation the weather of 1788 was disastrous. It ruined the harvest, raised corn to a famine price, and caused widespread starvation. This calamity was to be followed by the desperately severe winter of early 1789, when all the great rivers of France were frozen and even the port of Marseille in the extreme south was blocked with ice. The result was an even greater distress than usual. A commercial treaty with Britain in 1786, admitting British manufactured goods at cheap rates in return for corresponding concessions on French wine, had already caused much industrial suffering. In some towns as many as half the workmen were unemployed. It had long been the custom, in certain parts of France, for the rural poor to seek work in towns during the winter. Now hordes of people gathered in Paris and the other great towns from the surrounding countryside, hoping to find food and shelter in urban conditions. So came into being the characteristic Paris mob of the Revolution – idle, desperate, ready to cheer on the most extreme measures, and destined to sway the fortunes of events on more than one vital occasion.

All the material for a great combustion was now present. An outworn, inefficient, unfair, and bankrupt system of government; a strong body of reforming opinion created by the philosophers; the successful example of the Americans; a weak king and an unpopular queen; widespread

economic distress; and a desperate mob of exceptional size in Paris. It needed only a spark to set it all alight, to turn the smoulderings of 1787-89 into a fire. On 5th May 1789, the States-General met.