economic downturn of 1786–89 seem all the more distressing. Ordinary people had come to expect constant improvement. In 1786 a free-trade treaty with Great Britain opened the floodgates to cheaper British textiles and revealed the dangers of overexpansion in the French industry; in some towns unemployment among weavers and spinners soared to 50 percent or more. In 1787 the silk harvest failed, and in 1788 a mammoth hailstorm cut a swath through the major grain-growing regions. By the spring of 1789 massive unemployment and rising grain prices threatened many with starvation. It was in this atmosphere that political events now unfolded.

The Monarchy and Its Critics

The kings of France ruled over a disparate collection of lands that except for the colonies were geographically contiguous but separated by language, custom, and history. People in the central heartland around Paris spoke French, but elsewhere people spoke Breton, Basque, German, or various local dialects. There was no one national law code; the southern half of the country relied on versions of Roman law, whereas the northern half used customary or common law, which varied from region to region. Royal officials governed most directly in provinces near Paris; farther away from the capital many regions enjoyed virtual autonomy, at least in questions of taxation. These regions were known collectively as "the country of estates," because they had their own "provincial estates" to represent their interests to the king. The king and his officials had to negotiate new taxes with the provincial estates. When the crown acquired colonies in North America and the Caribbean, and trading outposts in Africa and India, all of them months away by ship, the challenge of ruling from Paris only increased.

In theory, the king of France exercised "absolute" power—that is, no person or institution could block his initiatives. Unlike Great Britain, France did not have a functioning national parliament; the equivalent in France, the Estates General, had not met since 1614. In practice, however, the king depended on nobles, local elites, and royal officials to make his rule effective; he relied on them to carry out his will. The king's control over his own bureaucracy was limited by the fact that royal offices had been bought and sold as personal property since the late Middle Ages. The 50,000 royal officials who owned their offices paid a yearly tax to the crown in exchange

Liberty is without doubt the principle of all actions. It lies at the core of each Estate. . . . Sire, your subjects are divided into as many different bodies as there are Estates in the kingdom: the clergy, the nobility, the high courts and lower tribunals, the officers attached to these tribunals, the universities and academies, the banks and commercial companies. In every part of the state there are bodies that can be seen as links in a great chain, the first link of which is in the hands of Your Majesty as head and sovereign administrator of all that constitutes the body of the nation. The very idea of destroying this precious chain should be appalling.

—Argument of the Parlement of Paris against the Edict Suppressing the Guilds, presented to the King, 12 March 1776 (CD-ROM p. 26)

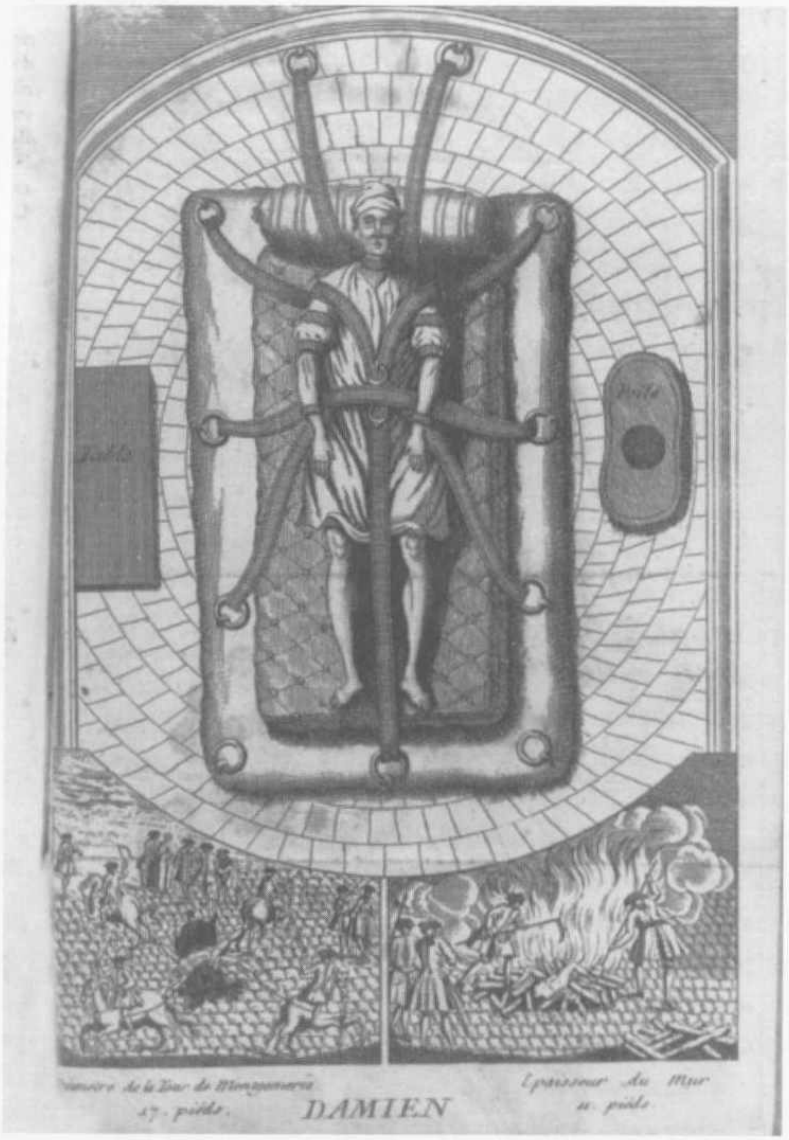

Fig. 1.2 Damiens Being Broken on the Wheel

These three depictions of Damiens narrate his fate. Placed on a flat bed, he had to submit to physical torture, including the shattering of his legs. Below left, one sees him drawn and quartered, though his limbs had to be hacked to assist the horses. Below right, the executioner burns the dismembered body.

for being able to pass on the offices as inheritable property. They consequently enjoyed a certain autonomy, though the king and his ministers could send officeholders into exile for refusing to cooperate, change their functions or the fee rates paid for official services, or suppress the offices altogether. The exercise of monarchical power therefore required a subtle balancing act between insistence on the king's right to rule unhindered by any interference, and compromise aimed at shoring up support from nobles, officeholders, and local elites.

From the middle of the eighteenth century onward, the French monarchy faced a succession of constitutional and fiscal crises. The threats could be very personal. In 1750, rumors circulated that King Louis XV (ruled 1715–74) suffered from leprosy and was kidnapping children off the streets of Paris in order to cure himself by

bathing in their blood. In 1757 Robert-François Damiens tried to assassinate Louis XV with a dagger. He narrowly missed killing the king, and he paid a horrible price for his effrontery: after breaking his limbs on the wheel, the executioner poured molten lead and boiling oil on them; horses then dismembered his body, and the parts were burned at the stake (Document 1.10; see Fig. 1.2).

The assassination and its aftermath revealed the political and religious fault lines in monarchical government. The assassination attempt came in the midst of a bitter campaign waged by the Parlement of Paris (high court) against clerical influence on the king. In 1750 the archbishop of Paris, with Louis XV's encouragement, had organized a new campaign against Catholics known as Jansenists. Jansenists supposedly followed the doctrines of the seventeenth-century Flemish theologian Cornelius Jansen, whose 1641 publication, *Augustinus,* had been condemned by the pope. Jansenists argued for reform of the Catholic church and for more ascetic and individual forms of worship. They insisted, for example, that parishioners take Communion only when they felt true contrition. Louis XIV had tried to suppress the Jansenists in the seventeenth century, but they had won many followers among lawyers, judges, and even bishops. After 1750 the archbishop of Paris encouraged parish priests to refuse the last sacraments (last rites) to anyone who refused to sign a written statement of support for the church's official position against Jansenism. The Parlement of Paris roundly condemned this denial of the sacraments and denounced "the power of the clerics." They urged the king "to stop ceding your authority to the clerics who abuse and compromise it." (CD-ROM p. 24) Because the parlement had taken such a vociferous position, some concluded that it directly inspired the action Damiens took. Supporters of the parlement insisted that the Catholic clergy were behind the plot (Document 1.7). During his interrogation Damiens seemed to take the side of the parlement, insisting that he acted because of the archbishop's refusal of sacraments (Document 1.8).

The Damiens Affair showed that the parlement had become more aggressive in the assertion of its constitutional powers; though the judges insisted on their "poignant love for Your Majesty's sacred person," they also claimed now to speak for "the people" and their "liberty," challenging the king's exclusive hold on power (Document 1.6). The Parlement of Paris and its counterparts in the provinces aimed to take the place of the defunct Estates General and represent the people's interests to the king. The conflict also opened the way to the expression of unpredictable popular resentments. During the Damiens Affair posters pasted on the walls of Paris sometimes violently criticized the king himself.

The parlementary magistrates did not want to be revolutionaries. As the argument quoted at the beginning of this section demonstrates, they claimed to be preserving the fundamental nature of the monarchy. They resisted any effort, whether by the clergy or by the monarchy itself, to break the great chain linking the king down through his officials to the lowliest subjects in the land. What this really meant, how-

ever, was that any attempt at reform inevitably failed. Again and again between the 1760s and the 1780s, the king and his ministers tried to standardize taxation, eliminate abuses, and modernize the French government. But the parlements denounced all such measures as examples of ministerial despotism and tyranny. These conflicts gave them the chance to enhance their reputation as guardians of the fundamental constitution of the kingdom. The parlements countenanced change only when they authored it themselves, and their proposals always reinforced local autonomy rather than fostering national reform.

When the Seven Years' War ended in 1763, the French monarchy faced enormous deficits as well as a disastrous loss of face. The French armies fought to a stalemate against the Prussians on the continent but lost decisively to Great Britain overseas. By the terms of the peace, France ceded Canada to Great Britain and withdrew from India. From this moment forward, the French crown would ceaselessly seek new sources of revenue. When King Louis XV doubled and even tripled some forms of taxation during the war, the parlements objected. Although they could not prevent the new levies, they continued to protest through the 1760s. In 1771 the king's reform-minded chief minister abolished the troublesome parlements. At first the new courts that replaced them functioned well and the bold stroke seemed to have succeeded. But when Louis XV died in 1774, his successor Louis XVI (ruled 1774–92) restored the parlements to curry favor with public opinion.

Other efforts at reform from above also failed. Louis XVI tried to implement his own ambitious program of reform in 1774. It aimed at modernizing the economy, which not coincidentally would enhance tax collection. The king ordered the establishment of free trade in grain, the suppression of guilds that controlled access to manual trades (the subject of the protest excerpted above), and the conversion of forced labor by peasants into a money tax payable by all landowners. He also planned to introduce elected local assemblies to make government more representative. Riots against rising grain prices, and widespread resistance led by the parlements, convinced Louis to dismiss the minister in charge and withdraw the measures in 1776. The crown's efforts at reform succeeded only in fostering the expression of new forms of dissent. As one court argued in 1775 in opposing the reforms, "Why can Your Majesty not abandon today those fatal maxims of government, or just that policy introduced a century ago by jealous ministers, which has reduced all the Orders [Estates] of the State to silence with the sole exception of the Magistracy? Why is it not possible for the nation to speak for itself about its most cherished interests?" (CD-ROM p. 27)

In 1778 France took the side of the British North American colonists in their war for independence from Great Britain. The French government supported the Americans in order to exact revenge against the British for its defeats in the Seven Years' War twenty years earlier, but though the Americans gained their independence, the French crown succeeded mostly in adding to its fiscal woes. During the years of

its participation in the war (1778–83), the French spent as much as five times their usual navy budget. In the early 1780s, as a result, taxes had to be increased dramatically once again. To inflict a blow against its enemy Great Britain, France found itself supporting a revolution dedicated to defending liberty and rights. Scores of young French aristocrats reported back home about the new republican hero, George Washington, and in Paris Benjamin Franklin electrified gatherings when he appeared dressed as a rustic American wearing a beaver cap. Mobbed whenever he left his house (Franklin lived in Paris between 1776 and 1785), Franklin soon found his likeness on every conceivable consumer item from snuffboxes to popular prints. This mania for things American allowed returning aristocratic officers and their ordinary soldiers to talk in new heartfelt ways about freedom in action.

In the 1780s, government deficits became the subject of public discussion. As one minister gave way to another in the frantic search for new sources of revenue and short-term loans, each one published his own competing version of the national budget. This, in itself, marked a major change in the monarchical regime: the crown and its officials now had to respond to public opinion. Public opinion had become increasingly important in the aftermath of the Damiens Affair. In the 1760s and 1770s, as the parlements portrayed themselves as defenders of the country's fundamental constitution (there was no written constitution as such, just a combination of legal tradition, judicial precedent, and custom), the crown had been forced to develop its own counterargument. In 1773, for example, a spokesman for the crown published a book on the "lessons of morality, politics and law" for the instruction of the crown prince. In it he argued, "After examining the nature of the Government throughout our history, you will then look for the one that should always exist so that Kings are powerful and Peoples free and happy." By entering into debate with the parlements in this fashion and speaking the same language of liberty, the crown had implicitly altered the monarchical style of rule; while still insisting that he ruled by divine right as the lieutenant of God himself, the king now simultaneously argued that he protected the interests of the people and responded to the requirements of public opinion. All sides now invoked the public, a new factor in French politics. As the recently fired finance minister Jacques Necker argued in 1781 when he published his account of the budget, "This report would also allow each of the people—who are part of YOUR MAJESTY's Councils—to study and follow the situation of the Finances. . . . Such an institution could have the greatest influence on public confidence." Lawyers now published their briefs defending their clients and appealed directly to public opinion in part to stake out their own independence. The growing importance on all sides of public opinion meant that before 1789 the constitution of the kingdom was already in transition.

Behind the scenes of this subtle transformation in national politics lay a hidden world of underground publishing that devoted much of its attention to increasingly scurrilous attacks on the monarchy. Both Louis XV and Louis XVI devoted great

effort and money to ferreting out the writers and publishers of this scandal literature, which began to appear in the 1770s and reached tens of thousands of readers in the 1780s. The juiciest target of attack was Louis XV, notorious for his string of mistresses and insatiable sexual appetites. One such publication of 1775, *Anecdotes on the Countess du Barry,* laid out what were soon to be the usual charges against the lascivious king, recently deceased. He had kept a veritable harem of young virgins, and married them off to his officials when he tired of their attentions. Most notorious of all was the so-called Countess du Barry, a low-born courtesan who had "what it takes to revive even the most worn-out partner," even "a jaded lover such as the aged King." (CD-ROM p. 28) After the accession of Louis XVI, the scandal sheets linked the new king's Austrian wife, Marie-Antoinette, to du Barry: "The same debauchery and agitation of passions were observed in Marie-Antoinette's life. Men, women, everything was as she liked." (CD-ROM p. 28) Various courtiers, from Louis XVI's brother to the Princess of Lamballe, were linked erotically with the queen in these publications. The scandal sheets got added spice from the well-known fact that Louis XVI had at first been unable to consummate his marriage. It was easy to imagine that a king whose only passions were hunting and lock-making might inspire little feeling in his wife. This underground literature, which proliferated despite police surveillance, may well have tainted the reputation of the monarchy and contributed to its eventual downfall.

New Ideas

The time has come when it is no longer acceptable for a law to overtly overrule the rights of humanity that are very well known all over the world.

—Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne, a Protestant pastor, commenting on the Edict of Toleration for Protestants, 1787

Nobles might have maintained their dominance of society, and the crown might have weathered the storm of criticism of its policies, if new ideas associated with the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment had not profoundly influenced the expectations of most educated people in France. The writers of the Enlightenment wanted to apply reason and science to improve society. They aimed, in the words of the editors of *The Encyclopedia* (published 1751–72), the manifesto of the movement, to "overturn the barriers that reason never erected" and "give back to the arts and sciences the liberty that is so precious to them." Contrary to the impression given by its name, *The Encyclopedia* provided not only a compendium of knowledge but also the principles for attacking despotism, superstition, and intolerance, the major targets of the Enlightenment. Freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the freedom to pursue knowledge unfettered by government restriction—these were the leading goals of the Enlightenment. The pursuit of such freedoms inevitably brought Enlightenment writers into conflict with both church and state, yet by 1787, as the quote opening