

the interaction of social tensions, monarchical failures, and new ideas was explosive in France. It is the task of the next few pages to explain how this could be so.

## *Society and Social Tensions*

The best way to understand French society as a whole is to compare it with the societies of its nearest powerful neighbors, Great Britain and Prussia (a leading German state). On a scale ranging from most capitalist to most feudal, France ranked just about in the middle, with Great Britain on the capitalist end and Prussia on the feudal end. By 1789, Great Britain had long been free of the remnants of serfdom or feudalism. All land was freely owned and exchanged on the market, nobles enjoyed no meaningful legal privileges, and the middle classes were growing in numbers, wealth, and self-confidence. In contrast, France still lived with the vestiges of a feudal or seigneurial regime.<sup>1</sup> There were between 140,000 and 1,500,000 serfs, depending on how strictly serfdom is defined, and almost every peasant paid seigneurial dues to his noble landlord. Dues ranged from required labor on the lord's estate to fees for baking in his lord's oven or using his wine or olive press. (Document 1.3 includes several examples of seigneurial dues.) French nobles enjoyed various legal privileges, including exemptions from some forms of taxation. Yet the French middle classes, like their English counterparts, were growing in number (tripling in the eighteenth century), due to an explosive increase in overseas commerce and domestic manufacturing. French peasants owned about 50 percent of the land in the country. Prussia, on the other end of the scale, was much more caught up in the coils of feudalism or seigneurialism than France. Prussian nobles dominated their serfs on the land and occupied all the important positions in the army and the bureaucracy. Prussian nobles did not just enjoy legal privileges; they controlled both the army and the state administration. Few Prussian peasants owned the land they worked, and the middle classes were still small in number and relatively timid in political outlook. In other words, French society was a kind of hybrid, neither entirely free of the feudal past nor entirely caught up in it. As the quote from Abbé Emmanuel

It is not sufficient to show that privileged persons, far from being useful to the nation, cannot but enfeeble and injure it; it is necessary to prove further that the noble order does not enter at all into the social organization; that it may indeed be a burden upon the nation, but that it cannot of itself constitute a nation.

—Emmanuel Sieyès, *What Is the Third Estate?* (1789)  
(CD-ROM p. 41) 

1. *Feudal regime* and *feudalism* were terms used by the French revolutionaries to denounce those aspects of landholding that they considered backward. Historians now prefer the terms *seigneurial* and *seigneurialism*, labels derived from the French word *seigneur* for lord, because feudalism had virtually disappeared in France by the end of the sixteenth century. In the Middle Ages, lords of the manor exercised almost total control over the lives of their serfs. As serfdom disappeared in France, landowners who could claim titles as lords continued to insist on their rights to forced labor and payment of dues even from "free" peasants. These rights were considered feudal or seigneurial and denounced as such by the revolutionaries.

Sieyès demonstrates, many commoners deeply resented the privileges claimed by the nobles.

In 1789 France, excluding overseas colonies, had some 26,000,000 inhabitants. In theory, they were divided into three orders or estates: the clergy (the First Estate, those who prayed), the nobility (the Second Estate, those who fought), and the Third Estate (everyone else, those who worked). The First Estate included 130,000 Catholic priests, monks, and nuns, who ministered to a largely Catholic population. Yet at least 250,000 Calvinists lived in southern France, and 200,000 Lutherans resided in eastern France. Eastern France was home as well to 30,000 Jews, and smaller communities of Jews lived in various southwestern French cities and in Paris. The Catholic church owned about 10 percent of the land in the kingdom. The church paid no taxes, though it negotiated a voluntary payment to the government every five years in return for its monopoly of public worship, public charity, and education. It levied its own tax in the form of the tithe, or tenth tax, often collected in goods directly in the fields during the harvest. Ordinary people admired their parish priest, but they resented the taxes levied by the Catholic church, especially since one-quarter of church revenues ended up in the pockets of noble clergymen.

The Second Estate comprised some 300,000 nobles (just over one percent of the population). Nobles owned as much as 30 percent of the land, yet they were exempt from the major land tax known as the *taille*. Although they paid other kinds of taxes, nobles enjoyed not only seigneurial rights but also a variety of privileges, from the right to carry swords to the right to death by decapitation rather than hanging if they were convicted of a capital crime. Nobles held most of the high positions in the church, the judiciary, the army, and government administration. All the bishops of the Catholic church in 1789 were nobles. (Sieyès, author of the antinoble pamphlet quoted above, was a nonnoble clergyman.) The highest positions in the army officer corps were reserved to nobles who could prove that their families had been nobles for four generations.

The Third Estate, because it included everyone not in the First or Second Estates, consisted of a wide variety of people from different stations in life. The middle classes accounted for about 5 percent of the French population, and the lower classes in the cities and towns made up about 10 percent of the population. Peasants were the vast majority—80 percent—of the population. Less than half the French people could read and write; more men were literate than women, and more city dwellers were literate than peasants. Public affairs therefore usually had limited resonance; they attracted the attention of educated city folk who had access to newspapers, reading clubs, and other places where people might meet and learn about current events.

Historians have long debated the social origins of the French Revolution. Did hatred of the nobility fuel the Revolution? The quote from Abbé Sieyès seems to support the view that resentment of noble domination lay behind the revolutionary outbreak. According to Sieyès, nobles were parasites and should be excluded from the revolutionary nation. Evidence for hatred of the nobility is quite extensive. The playwright

**Fig. 1.1** The People Under the Old Regime

This image shows “the people” as a chained and blindfolded man being crushed under the weight of the clergy and nobility. Such a perspective on the period before 1789 purposely exaggerates social divisions and would have found few proponents before the Revolution, but the caricature does reveal the social clash felt so intensely by the revolutionaries.



Beaumarchais (Document 1.2) put strong words of denunciation into the mouth of his central character in *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784): “What have you [nobles] done to deserve so much? You went to the trouble of being born—nothing more!” It was not just fictional characters who expressed strong sentiments. When asked for their views in 1789, peasants railed against “the thousands of abuses” heaped on them by their noble landlords (Document 1.3).

After the Revolution began in 1789, some newspapers and pamphlets quickly took up the antinoble theme; they vehemently denounced the nobles as degenerate, corrupt, and ridden with venereal disease—a “rotten carcass” that threatened the health of the nation (see Fig. 1.1). The revolutionaries abolished the legal privileges of the nobles and all their titles and sent many nobles to the guillotine as enemies of the new nation. A few aristocrats fell victim to crowd violence, often being mutilated in the process. The most notorious incident, no doubt, was the murder of the Princess of Lamballe, a close friend of the queen, Marie-Antoinette. On 3 September 1792 an enraged mob dragged Lamballe out of an improvised courtroom and hacked her to death. Her head—and some said her genitals too—was paraded on a pike outside the

window of the queen's residence. "Aristocrat" became a common smear; for many it was synonymous with "conspirator" and "counterrevolutionary" and merited death.

Nobles inspired resentment and retaliation because they claimed that their political and social distinctions derived from their high birth; they insisted that their family lineages justified their legal status and privileges. In the eighteenth century, moreover, monarchy and nobility went hand in hand, as they had since the Middle Ages. The king ranked first among the nobles, and many believed that nobles constituted a separate "race" from the common people. Noble blood and birth supposedly made them natural leaders of a society based on deference to one's betters. Wealth often accompanied this elevated status. In some regions a few noble families owned as much as 50 percent of the land. The wealthiest nobles at court enjoyed fortunes worth 2 to 4 million livres a year, while ordinary workers earned a measly 300 livres. It is not surprising that critics of the regime seized upon the theme of inequality (Document 1.1).

Although it is true that the Revolution brought antinoble sentiments to the surface, such feelings had lain largely dormant for generations. Before 1789 no one imagined that noble titles and privileges would be abolished, just as no one dreamed that the king would be deposed and executed. Only a major upheaval could galvanize people to act upon their feelings of resentment. Scholars disagree about whether the nobility was rising or declining in wealth and influence in the eighteenth century. The evidence is inconclusive. Some nobles took up modern farming techniques and invested in overseas commerce in order to secure their wealth; others did not. Yet many people, like Sieyès, concluded that something had gone wrong in French society, and they pointed first and foremost to noble privileges as the cause. Nobles were not the only ones who enjoyed special privileges and exemptions, however. Privilege extended beyond the so-called "privileged orders" (the clergy and the nobility) down to the lowliest positions among the common people. Some regions paid much lower taxes than others did; in Brittany, for example, the rate of taxation was only one-fifth that of the Paris region. Regions, towns, artisanal guilds, and individual officeholders laid claim to or even bought exemptions from taxes.

In many ways, France was not one unified country, but rather a patchwork of special privileges. From the top to the bottom of the social hierarchy, individuals and groups tenaciously defended whatever privileges they managed to acquire. Conflicts over status and privilege even pitted nobles against one another. Great nobles derided the ambitions of those who had only recently acquired noble status. Rich men could buy noble status directly, or they could buy one of the 3,750 judicial and administrative offices that conferred nobility after a specified time in office. Between one-quarter and one-third of all noble families in 1789 had only become noble during the eighteenth century. Animosity between new and old noble families incited many of the political disputes of the eighteenth century.

Although nobles towered over the social hierarchy, every group sought to distinguish itself from those below it on the social ladder and tried to become more like



**Map 1** The Old Regime Provinces

The King of France ruled over a kind of federation of provinces. In the provinces surrounding Paris he exerted the most direct rule, but farther away, especially in the southern half of the country, provinces often had their own institutions, known as provincial estates, which controlled the levy of taxation, public works, and administration. The king had the final word everywhere, but he had to work through local officeholders and institutions. Languedoc and Brittany had the strongest provincial estates.

those on the rung above. Rich merchants and high-ranking royal officials emulated the habits of the nobility and dreamed of amassing enough wealth to move up the social scale. Such middle-class people considered the lower classes inferior because they worked with their hands; property owners, doctors, lawyers, government officials, and merchants prided themselves on using mental skills to make their living and considered tailors, butchers, and weavers—not to mention peasants—lower in status because they relied on manual labor in their work. Respectable artisans and shopkeepers kept their distance from their journeymen, apprentices, and servants; for them independence rather than manual labor was the key variable. Master artisans and shopkeepers depended only on themselves, whereas their journeymen, apprentices, and servants depended on them for room and board and wages. Lowest of all were the utterly dependent: the unemployed, the poor, and anyone who relied on charity. Official parades, the order of seating in the parish church, the number of bells rung at a funeral, the clothes one wore and especially the material they were made of, the size of one's house and its location—these were all markers of social distinction. Privilege and hierarchy shaped the whole society, not just its highest reaches. As Voltaire pronounced in his usual acerbic tones, "Equality is therefore both the most natural of things, as well as the most unreal" (Document 1.1).

Hierarchy may have been most pronounced among the peasantry. At the top were the big farmers, who owned some land of their own but mainly farmed large estates as tenants. A big farmer and his wife might have as many as fifty people working for them, and because of their relative wealth such farmers controlled the village council and decisions made in the parish. In French such men were known as "the cock of the village." More than half the peasants had no land of their own and either worked as agricultural laborers or farmed small plots as tenant farmers or sharecroppers. The wives of landless peasants and small farmers helped make ends meet by spinning cotton, silk, or wool at home. In the eighteenth century, this home industry expanded dramatically, employing hundreds of thousands of women as spinners. As the textile industry expanded, many rural families moved to the towns and cities, where the men worked as weavers and their wives and children assisted them. These new sources of work did not provide a living for everyone. At the bottom of rural society were hundreds of thousands of paupers and beggars forced to roam the roads in search of work or charity. The unexpected death of a father, a series of crop failures, or even a season of bad weather could ruin whole families.

The lower reaches of French society certainly lived in a state of nearly perpetual crisis, but French society as a whole seemed to be in a relatively buoyant state in the eighteenth century. Huge sums of money flowed back to France from the expanding trade in African slaves and the stunning growth of production of sugar, coffee, indigo, and cotton in the Caribbean colonies. At home, the textile industry expanded dramatically, prices for grain and other staples increased steadily, the population grew, and wages increased, though not always keeping up with prices. This general prosperity made the



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) 