The vast increase in factual knowledge about the physical universe gave men a tremendous sense of power, a feeling that with this newly acquired knowledge they could dominate nature. This new consciousness of power justified abandonment of the vain search for first principles and primary causes. If man could manipulate matter and conform it to his will, what difference did it make what matter was? The mediaeval conception of human impotence gave way to a marvelous surge of self-confidence, a buoyancy, an optimism which, though at times it was diluted by grave misgivings and doubts, remained overwhelmingly the spirit of the age.

While the mediaeval philosophers had been absorbed with beatitude, and Protestantism had brought turmoil into the breasts of true believers over whether or not they had grace and would be saved, the eighteenth-century man of letters set the problem of terrestrial happiness at the dead center of morals. The primary question was whether man could be happy on earth. Christian moralists had taught that man was born to toil, to suffer, and to lament, for he carried the weight of the Biblical curse and of Adam's original sin. As a response to the same problem, dominant eighteenth-century
opinion was convinced that man was capable of great happiness now and in this world, irrespective of any future drama which might be enacted in heaven or hell. Concentration upon the "pursuit of happiness" in this world is magnificently expressed in the language of the American Declaration of Independence, composed by revolutionaries who had been profoundly influenced by the *philosophes*.

Most thinkers inclined to the idea that man was born with a capacity for happiness: witness the idealization in the travel literature of the age of the life of primitive savages in a state of nature, especially the fortunate inhabitants of recently discovered Tahiti. To rebut those who believed in the Christian doctrine of the essential sinfulness of man, the travel-book writers—those who had ventured to the new worlds as well as those who had written about the blessed isles in their Paris garrets—depicted the simplicity, beauty, and happiness of primitive man. What need had he of the terrible Christian epic of the fall and man's sin and redemption? The noble savage seemed to hail from another planet untouched by sermons depicting the tortures of hell and the sufferings of a Man-God, and he was happier and more virtuous for his ignorance. In the exotic literature there was thus gathered a profusion of "scientific evidence"—as the intellectuals understood it—on one of the overriding problems of man, his capacity for contentment on earth.

When thinkers of the day asked themselves how natural man had lost his original state of happiness, their anticlericalism guided them to an easy answer: they pointed an accusing finger at the priests of all nations. Revealed religions had taught that the human body and its enjoyment were evil, had imposed upon man laws of moral conduct which were directly contrary to his nature, and thus had brought
him endless grief. Christianity was the target for the most vitriolic attacks because of its denial of the pleasures of the flesh; by contrast, Mohammedanism, which had been more tolerant of man’s natural desires, usually fared better in the imaginative writings of the intellectuals.

Liberation of the Passions

Absorption in terrestrial happiness had as a concomitant a general emancipation of the emotions and the passions, which no longer had to be held forever in check as the real sources of wrongdoing. Passions were the very savor of life, which would be rendered insipid without them. They were the winds which set the sails in motion, and though on occasion they might drive the boat on the rocks, they were essential parts of the natural order. This eulogy of the free expression of emotion led to an idealization of sexual love in a form which later came to be known as romanticism. The attainment of romantic love replaced the attainment of heavenly bliss, and depiction of the sufferings and trials of the hero and the heroine in the working out of their affairs replaced the drama of Christ as the story of mankind. Eighteenth-century novels and tales usually ended with fulfillment, a long series of reaffirmations that man could achieve happiness on earth.

The tear ducts of mankind were opened and men were allowed to give vent to their sensibility in a lachrymose manner without suffering the accusation that they were effeminate. Great men became proud rather than ashamed of their emotions and one of the most extravagant and influential figures of the modern world, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wrote a voluminous book of Confessions which is the history of his feelings and sentiments, each one of which he relished
again in the retelling. The book invites contrast with the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, for whom life's struggle was a search for God. In this age of sensibility all emotions were good and a virtuous man unloosed them freely. Tears of joy and tears of grief were intermingled. Readers wept profusely with Rousseau's *Julie* and shared with Goethe *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

Pleasure was recognized by the *philosophes* to be a legitimate good and was freed from the mediaeval Christian and Calvinist anathemas. Pleasure was conceived as a spontaneous human response to good and evil. Since in its sexual form it was associated with the reproduction of the species, what better proof that pleasure was necessary and useful and not a manifestation of man's lower nature as most Christian doctrines had held? In the past, the life of reason, the way of the philosopher, Greek, Hebrew, or Christian, had generally required emancipation from the desires of the flesh. The eighteenth century saw no incompatibility between the philosopher's world and sensual pleasure. "I am a very voluptuous philosopher," said Voltaire.

*Moral Philosophy: The Laws of Nature*

Idealization of the state of nature took on characteristics of a cult, retaining the angels and devils of Christianity in a different guise. Before man was misled from the path of nature, he had absolute liberty and life was blissful. But alas! humanity had been perverted by the impositions of despots and priests, who were the Lucifer and cohorts of the natural order. These wicked ones introduced strange objects and manners into nature which warped its perfection. Whenever man falls or is pushed from nature, whenever he violates the true laws of universal conduct by following petty
conventionalities, he suffers the worldly punishment of the new deity—he is unhappy. Thus all the ills of existing society and the wretchedness of man are to be understood as the inevitable result of deviation from the prescribed laws of man's instinctive being. The eighteenth-century philosophe entreated man to forsake his artificial ways, to live according to the laws of the Système de la nature, and thus to recapture the happiness from which Christian civilization had long barred him.

For the intellectuals were firmly convinced that there were laws governing man's actions in society—laws which could be discovered in precisely the same manner that natural scientists had reached their conclusions. These rules of conduct which embodied the laws of society were generally defined as morals or moral philosophy. "I believed," wrote the French philosopher Claude Helvétius (1715-1771), "that morals should be treated like all other sciences, and that one should arrive at a moral principle as one proceeds with an experiment in physics." ¹ The moral laws thus scientifically derived would be useful to society. Just as physical laws of science had led to technological inventions and progress in mechanical arts, so the formulation of moral laws would result in greater social progress for humanity. Once the immutable laws of society were made known men would inevitably follow them, human institutions would be molded in accordance with their dictates, and greater happiness for all mankind would ensue.

The method of arriving at laws of social or moral science having been declared identical with that of physical science, the intellectuals proceeded to their laboratories. Most of them were so impressed by the great conquests of the

¹ Claude Helvétius, De l'esprit, in Œuvres (London, 1776), I, ii.
physicists, who with a few crucial experiments had revolutionized the whole view of the universe, that they entertained similar expectations for the science of man and society. History and contemporary travel literature were the only laboratories of experience in morals open to the intellectuals. They were reluctant to examine objectively the European man of their own times with whom they were most familiar; since he appeared to them caked over with a crust of false conventions, they deduced that little could be learned about true moral man from observing him.

Unfortunately, the men of letters who manipulated historical examples as scientific proof positive of their theories of society were absurdly superficial and casual in assembling their data. They contented themselves with a few illustrations pulled at random from classical literature or from authors who had compiled books about the customs of the Chinese or the Indians. Thus in their voluminous writings on man in society philosophers of every tendency came to use historical data in much the same manner that a preacher quotes a text from Scripture before he proceeds with his sermon. The eighteenth-century theorists have left us great insights on the nature of social relations, but these were really intuitions, not propositions derived in accordance with the scientific method to which they gave lip service.

As defined by the intellectuals, the moral laws were universal and changeless. They were simple and easy of comprehension, not hieratic, not the secret of priests and learned doctors. They were commonly perceived, not dependent upon sudden illumination or grace. The Declaration of Independence held certain truths to be self-evident, immediately knowable, without the necessity of elucidation by schoolmen. The ready communicability of the moral laws
was an attribute especially convenient to the intellectual reformers, who with high purpose undertook to make them known to great numbers of people. In a word, they became popular propagandists for the truths of moral philosophy. The British essayist Joseph Addison (1672–1719) wrote in an early number of his periodical The Spectator: “It was said of Socrates, that he brought philosophy down from heaven, to inhabit among men: and I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses.” The moral laws would be pabulum for the men in the street—and for the ladies too. Everybody could become a philosopher by learning the moral laws.

Self-Love and Benevolence

The doctrine of self-love, an axiom in their whole science of society, raised a primary ethical problem for the moral philosophers. Since they believed that man was born good and was also born with self-love, they had to find this passion a source of ultimate good rather than evil. But how conciliate the separate self-loves of individuals in a social state? On this point the French intellectuals differed from some of their British counterparts. The French tried to prove that if all men acted in accordance with their self-love a harmony of these self-loves would somehow prevail in the order of society and men would be happy. They pointed to society’s existing confusion and dogmatically affirmed that it had been created by the artificial barriers set up by states and religions to the free expression of this self-love. Inflexibly ra-

tionalist, the French would recognize no other drive for action except self-love. Voltaire, as always, gave it the classic epigrammatic definition:

Those who have said that love of ourselves is the basis of all our opinions and all our actions, have therefore been quite right in India, Spain, and all the habitable world: and as one does not write to prove to men that they have faces, it is not necessary to prove to them that they have self-love. Self-love is our instrument of preservation; it resembles the instrument which perpetuates the species. It is necessary, it is dear to us, it gives us pleasure, and it has to be hidden.\(^3\)

The British school of moralists avoided the rather mechanical view of the Frenchmen by positing the existence of certain natural moral sentiments of sympathy which served to bind individual men together. Benevolence, a feeling of sympathy toward one’s fellow man, was a passion as strong as self-love and in an ideal state of society would serve to regulate the social harmony. To the British thinkers humanitarian sympathy was a cohesive element in society; in the next century it came to be the basis of utilitarianism. As against the wolvine bestiality of man depicted by Thomas Hobbes in the previous age, the eighteenth-century sentimentalist, without doing violence to his trust in reason, believed that pity, compassion, fellow feeling—in short, benevolence—were woven into the very constitution of man. Man was a social creature who naturally loved the fellow of his species, was moved by the suffering or happiness of others, and had a tendency to do good to his neighbors. The British clergyman and novelist Laurence Sterne (1713–1768) wrote an impassioned hymn to man’s

\(^3\) Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary*, p. 272.
natural sensibility and benevolence. "I feel some joys and
generous cares beyond myself—all comes from thee, great
—great Sensorium of the world! which vibrates, if a hair
of our heads but falls upon the ground, in the remotest
desert of thy creation." 4

The Science of Economics

A doctrine of enlightened self-interest or self-love served
as the basic preconception of the new science of economics,
which was really born in this age. From the beginning, two
trends of thought emerged: the theories of the French
physiocrats, who tended to emphasize the importance of
land in the nation’s economy, and the principles of Adam
Smith (1723–1790), who revealed the wealth which lay in a
nation’s industrial and commercial enterprise. Whatever the
technical differences in their points of view, however, they
stood together in denouncing the regulatory system of
economy which had survived from the Middle Ages in a
wilderness of local prohibitions against free enterprise—the
natural expression of self-interest—and in attacking the re-
strictive state decrees which had been set up by seventeenth-
century bullionists and mercantilists. If individual economic
man were only allowed free play in society, the competing
individual interests, without state intervention, would form
a pattern which would produce the most real wealth and
hence happiness among the nations of the world. The
treatise by Adam Smith is not designed to show one state
how to beat the other in a struggle for commercial su-
premacy. It is called Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of
the Wealth of Nations (1776), with emphasis on the plural,

4 Lawrence Sterne, A Sentimental Journey through France and
and is a book of economic laws to be followed by all men. In a world where whole new continents invited exploitation, there was enough for everybody.

_The Politics of the Philosophes_

On the whole the _philosophes_ were concerned with the basic moral preconceptions and attributes of their society, and not with the precise form of its political institutions. They wanted to emancipate society from what they considered the superstitions and restraints of the past, and to provide it with a rational machinery. But once society was free and governed in accordance with the laws of reason, the philosophers rested on the comfortable assumption that progress, justice, and the good life were assured. Monarchy, aristocracy, or republic—the question did not appear to be of paramount importance. The principles of reason could be clothed in any vestments. There was perhaps a tendency to prefer monarchical stability in a regime with liberal guarantees above other traditional government forms described by the political theorists, but in general the issue had no burning partisans.

For forms of government let fools contest;  
Whate’er is best administer’d is best.

rhymed Alexander Pope (1688–1744) in his _Essay on Man._

The _philosophes_ were gradualists. In their scheme of things, the emancipation of society was to take place without the abruptness and blind brutal force of revolution. In the past, change had been cataclysmic because mankind

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moved in ignorance of the law of its own development. Fury and violence were the consequence of failure to perceive that gradual progress was inevitable. Now that men knew the law of human crises, the same progress which once engendered disorder could be achieved by a slow and peaceful transformation. This emphatic disavowal of revolutionary action was no mere subterfuge to avoid the prosecutions of the state. It was a cardinal principle entirely congruent with their universal philosophy. Even those who foretold the boldest of social innovations, such as basic alterations in the nature of property, posited only smooth transitions.

The intellectuals wanted to perfect, not to uproot and overturn the society in which they lived. They conjured up visions of the perfect state, but they felt no obligation to prescribe a course of political action for achieving it, save by following the laws of nature and reason. They attacked the philosophic foundations of their society, but they rarely sought to undermine its specific institutions. Hence the half-tolerant attitude of kings toward the intellectual enfants terribles. The autocrats who invited them to their palaces were not perturbed by the shining utopias of the philosophes and even found them amusing. While they would have prosecuted as dangerous to the state any pointed attack on the farming of the salt tax, they could with great show of largesse permit their philosophical coteries to flaunt doctrines about natural rights, atheism, democracy, and even communism.

But men are often unaware of the consequences of their own ideas. Though the intellectuals as a group were opposed to the overthrow of state power by physical violence, they had a tremendous effect in preparing the climate of opin-
ion for the Revolution of 1789. The *philosophes* had so assiduously undermined the spiritual props of the *ancien régime* that the very rulers of society ceased to hold fast to the religion and the system of ideas which had sustained them. Men have judged the *philosophes* more or less sympathetically depending upon whether the ideals of society which they helped to demolish have been esteemed or despised.

*Common Ground of the Intellectuals*

Despite their sharp cleavages and varying interests, there was a common ground on which all the intellectuals could stand, and from their inconsistent and even incompatible tendencies there emerged a moral outlook distinct from that of the previous age. The eighteenth-century philosophers popularized general precepts of conduct which in time were widely accepted in most civilized societies. They made aggressive war look odious and mocked the ideal of military glory. They preached religious toleration, free speech, a free press. They were in favor of the sanctions of law to protect individual liberties and they were against tyranny which governed by caprice. They wanted equality of all citizens before the law and they were opposed to any recognition of social distinctions when men were brought to justice. They abhorred torture and other barbaric punishments and pleaded for their abolition; they believed that punishment should fit the crime and should be imposed only to restrain potential malefactors. They wanted freedom of movement across state boundaries both for individuals and articles of commerce. Most of them believed that it did not require the threat of eternal torment in hell to make moral ideas generally accepted among mankind. They were convinced that
the overwhelming number of men, if their natural goodness were not perverted in childhood, would act in harmony with simple rules and the dictates of rational principles without the necessity for severe restraints and awful punishments.

In summary, though the *philosophes* did not solve the problem of the existence of evil and suffering in the world, they did manage to establish in European society a general consensus about conduct which is evil, a moral attitude which still sustains us. Despite their subservient behavior toward some of the European despots and the social anarchy ultimately inherent in their doctrines of absolute self-interest, the eighteenth-century men of letters did formulate a set of moral principles which to this day remain basic to any discussion of human rights. The deficiencies of their optimistic moral and political outlook are by now visible, but they did venture the first bold examination of reality since the Greeks and they dared to set forth brand-new abstractions about man and the universe. They taught their contemporaries to view the institutions of church and state in the light of reason and to judge them by the simple criterion of human happiness.

*The “Minuet” of Philosophes and Enlightened Despots*

There is, of course, a ridiculous aspect to the “minuet” of the philosophers and the enlightened despots. The absolute monarchs in fact did not create the liberal state of the philosophers. At best they introduced the regulated state, at worst the regimented state. The *philosophes* rationalized the power drives of the enlightened despots with the bland assurance that “to be very good you had to be very strong.”
There were nevertheless significant points of valid contact between the philosophers and the despots. The monarchs sensed that the philosophers' praise of the Newtonian order of nature and the rationalist spirit was not alien to the basic centralizing policies of their governments. In turn, when they established uniform administrative procedures, they were at least approaching the *philosophes*' ideal of equality before the law. The government of law in accordance with reason and the natural order tended to abolish odious distinctions among men, especially those which annoyed the intellectuals most, the differences between noble and nonnoble. By the eve of the French Revolution, royal power had so effectively curtailed ecclesiastical influence that in reality all the churches of Europe had been transformed into state institutions. Religious toleration in large measure had been granted. The enlightened despots at least in part repaid the *philosophes* for their ideological support.

The six chapters which follow are limited for the most part to the internal political and social conflicts and the international relations of the five major European powers. This does not mean that developments in Scandinavia, the Iberian Peninsula, the Italian and German principalities, and the Balkans lack intrinsic interest. But it is felt that the motive forces at play in the Age of Reason can be illustrated sufficiently well for a book of this compass by drawing upon events in France, Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia.
CHAPTER IV

The Realm of France

LOUIS XIV's death in 1715 was hailed by the people of Paris and the courtiers of Versailles with ferocious joy and wild drunkenness. The King's last testament was irreverently broken. Men of high and low degree insulted the cadaver of the Sun King, symbolically foretelling the destruction of the absolute Catholic monarchy of France. For the parsimony and piety imposed on the court in Louis XIV's old age, the Regent and the two Louis's who succeeded him substituted luxurious expenditure and license. In place of an orderly, centralized, and systematic monarchy operated by technicians, many of whom were commoners, the successors of Louis XIV permitted the restoration of real power to the ancient nobility who had been corralled into the palace of Versailles and threw the doors wide open to government by petty intrigue. Advancement, no longer open to talent, was often dictated by what French euphemism calls "gallantry." It has been said that women set the tone of monarchical government in eighteenth-century France. The forty-nine-year reign of the debauched and bored Louis XV is the central fact of political life during this period. The simplicity of his well-meaning and pathetic successor could not affect the character or alter
the trend of the regime. In his tragic death on the scaffold in 1793, Louis XVI expiated the sins of the fathers.

The French monarch continued to proclaim himself a king by divine right and an absolute sovereign who was sole fountainhead of law. In a famous speech of 1766 Louis XV declared that he held his power from God and that authority was vested in himself alone, "without sharing or dependence." Viewed historically, these pretensions were by this time absurd: the monarchy was already being tossed about by the currents of opposing classes, and the king's claim to rule by divine right was so irrelevant as to be fatuous. The royal will was no longer transmitted swiftly and efficiently to local officials. The animating force in the state was lacking, since the French king had no initiative or interest in governance.

Ministers, Intendants, and Parlements

Too indifferent and dissolute to rule himself, Louis XV nevertheless refused to allow his ministers to rule for him. He mistrusted his chief advisers, and after Cardinal Fleury's death in 1743 he appointed no other prime minister. The King felt hemmed in by the elaborate bureaucratic mechanism inherited from his predecessor, and seriously impaired its effectiveness through a bewildering turnover of key officials: eighteen foreign secretaries and fourteen controllers-general followed one another in rapid succession. Partly for amusement, partly to circumvent his ministers, the King despatched special agents and emissaries throughout Europe to work behind their backs and report directly to him. Since there was no prime minister, each major department of state virtually led a life of its own; the controller-general, who was the treasurer, could not co-ordinate or dominate them.
even though he approached closest to the chief role. This lack of an effective executive either in king or cabinet resulted in a changeling policy dependent upon chance, as the monarchy was buffeted by turbulent economic and social forces in the realm.

The provinces were administered by a group of noble officials known as Intendants of Justice, Police, and Finances. In name they were the subordinate representatives of the controller-general, endowed with broad powers of taxation, general administration, and justice, and many subsidiary functions relative to the policing of commerce and industry. But these men were proud officials of independent means, not obsequious civil servants in any modern sense of the term. The Intendants conceived of themselves as protectors of the local interests in their provinces and often in practice they mitigated the severity of laws emanating from Paris. It is significant of the new administrative relationships under the French monarchy of the eighteenth century that the Intendants were no longer the battering rams of a royal absolutism as they had been under Richelieu and Louis XIV.

The greatest counterpoise to the monarchy were the provincial judicial bodies, the parlements—foremost in prestige among them the Parlement of Paris—whose duty it was to adjudicate disputes at law and to register royal decrees. By refusing to act on such decrees, the parlements could often force upon the king amendments and modifications which they favored. The line of demarcation between the administrative functions of public law and the judicial functions of private law was shadowy. The king's ministers flagrantly interfered in what were clearly issues of private suits and the parlements sought to influence the public administration of the kingdom. The Parlement of Paris, above
all others, tried to assume powers similar to those of the contemporary English Parliament, or to usurp prerogatives of the old French Estates-General which had not met since 1614.

There was a bitter struggle between the monarchy and the *parlements* throughout the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI. *Parlements* tore down posted royal orders on the pretext that they had not been properly registered, and the kings of France "exiled" refractory *parlements*. This conflict at no time had the character of a war between defenders of democratic liberty and upholders of royal absolutism. On the contrary, the *parlement* was always the juridical voice of the aristocracy. A well-organized offensive was spearheaded by the nobility of the robe, who controlled the *parlements* and aimed to revive traditional aristocratic powers long suppressed by the kings of France. As the guardian of special privilege embodied in custom, the *parlement* set itself in stubborn opposition to the royal administrators who were laboring to establish laws and practices applicable to all subjects of the monarch irrespective of their social status. Despite the King's unconcern, his administrators in the very performance of their office tended to rationalize the government of France, to eliminate the confusing residues of the feudal system, the restrictions on free commerce within the realm, the multifarious taxing systems which weighed unequally on different classes and areas, and the wholesale exemption of persons and estates from bearing a just share in the burdens of government. In *parlement* the feudal spirit, fortified with legal precedents, lived on into the eighteenth century.

The King could issue *lettres de cachet*, sealed orders which
sent men to the Bastille without recourse to any French equivalent of habeas corpus or the English trial by jury. At the behest of a mistress he might irresponsibly dismiss one of his chief ministers. Since Louis XV governed by caprice when he governed at all, he had neither the will nor the power to impose a royal absolutism on France, and in the day-to-day conduct of affairs he was not the generator of energy for the organization of the state. Administrative offices and army ranks were bought and sold. Posts were acquired by inheritance. There was an army of bureaucrats who could not be dispossessed without upsetting the whole governmental system, since men who held office had a proprietary right which was protected by law. Far from carrying through administrative reorganizations as other continental monarchs were doing, Louis XV relaxed the decrees put into effect by his great-grandfather and made substantial concessions to local privilege. In some respects his reign signalized a retrogression to the diversity and confusion of earlier centuries, leaving France an administrative patchwork unequal to the economic and military problems which confronted this, the greatest state in Europe.

At the close of the Seven Years' War in 1763 the national debt had mounted to over 1,700,000,000 livres (the livre was the basic monetary unit before the introduction of the franc in 1795); it was further augmented by the costs of participation in the War for American Independence. Interest alone on the national debt jumped from 18,000,000 livres in the middle of the century to 106,000,000 by 1776. The actual debt was not staggering, except in terms of the anomalies of the French political system. The state was whirling in a vicious fiscal circle: no further loans could be
secured unless the King levied extraordinary taxes as a guarantee that money would be available to repay the creditors. But the tax burden could not be spread without attacking the exemptions of the clergy and the nobility. The idea of state bankruptcy, though suggested, was an abhorrent breach of faith which Louis XVI could not entertain. To end the impasse an Estates-General was called and a chain reaction of revolutionary events was set in motion which destroyed the monarchy—and along with it the nobility and the clergy.

The Nobles

Although in theory the unwritten ancient constitution of the kingdom divided the subjects of the French king into three estates—the clergy, the nobility, and a catch-all known as the third estate—in practice there was only one underlying criterion of differentiation, the distinction between a man who was noble and a man who was not. The same division existed among the clergy as among the laity, for great ecclesiastical offices were sinecures restricted to aristocratic families, and the humble parish priest was always a commoner.

There were various gradations of dignity among the nobles themselves. Enjoying the highest social status were those families who held titles by “race,” by inheritance, and who were therefore considered truly noble; of these many had offices or sinecures in the army. Traditionally, such a hereditary noble was one who could trace his aristocratic progenitors back to “time immemorial,” but by the end of the seventeenth century, four generations was usually considered ample fulfillment of the requirement. The nobles of race and the nobles of the sword looked with disdain upon all other nobles—those whose title had been secured by royal
letter, whose escutcheon merely came along with the pur-
chase of an honorific office or a great fief, or who had been
rewarded for municipal service or a substantial loan to the
royal treasury. It was Louis XIV who had broken the power
of the old nobility by frequent recourse to the act of selling
ennoblement by letter patent. In order to get more money
into the royal treasury, such noble titles from time to time
were revoked and renewed, a practice which did not add
to the prestige of the estate.

Contemporary estimates of the total number of persons
who held authentic titles of nobility of any sort diverged
widely, from 80,000 to five times that figure. By the end of
the century, the crucial mark of distinction among the horde
of ancient and upstart nobles was the test of presentability
at court. In 1789 there were about 20,000 whom it was
proper to receive at Versailles, supposedly in conformity
with a decree which limited the privilege to hereditary no-
bles who could trace their ancestry back to the year 1400.
If the edict had ever been enforced literally, the palace
would have been desolate.

By the eighteenth century certain administrative and ju-
dicial offices were restricted to men bearing noble titles:
the intendancies, the magistracies in the Parlement of Paris,
the secretariats in the Chamber of Accounts; also the
higher ecclesiastical posts of archbishop and of abbot, and
the chief military ranks. As titles of nobility grew common,
there was a tendency for members of the great official bod-
ies, in defense of their prestige, to impose ever more stringent
entrance requirements of nobility upon prospective incum-
bents. In general, nobles of the sword controlled the army
and nobles of the robe conducted the administration of the
kingdom. Of this latter group a few families had secured
by tradition a virtual monopoly of the great intendancies
and of the presidencies of the parlements.

The nobles were divided among themselves not only in
terms of symbols of dignity and office, but in economic
power. The nobility of the sword, which was bedizened
with the grandest titles, was often the poorer element, de-
pendent almost exclusively on royal bounty. Among the no-
bility of the robe, the judicial and administrative officers who
had the more recent titles, there were men of wealth who
retained relationships with the great bourgeois and were
sometimes not to be distinguished from them. The way of
life of the country nobility, at the bottom of the scale of
aristocracy, was not wholly unlike that of the more pros-
perous peasants.

Apart from their monopoly of various offices, nobles en-
joyed a host of special privileges which made the title sought
after for more than the honor it conferred. They were free
from many taxes normally levied on commoners; they had
the right to be tried in a court of their peers; they were ex-
empt from humiliating punishments. In law these privileges
could be abrogated if a noble demeaned himself with de-
grading occupations such as trade and manufacture, or if
he committed vile deeds, but the procedure was not resorted
to frequently.

A noble could fight, judge, or rule; it was a “disparage-
ment” if he participated directly in increasing the wealth of
France. Since the administration was not expanding, and
the army could not absorb an ever-increasing number of of-
ficers, toward the end of the old regime there were not
nearly enough functions appropriate to noble status to go
round. Prevented by the mores of their caste from engaging
in commerce or industry, and often trained for nothing but elegant display, large numbers of aristocrats were condemned to parasitic idleness.

There was nothing hidden or startling about the decomposition of France's court nobility in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. The symptoms of its decay had long been written on its face. The nobles of France gained for themselves the invidious hatred of their nearest rivals by snubbing commoners who were rich and talented. The aristocrats suffered general public contempt because of their scandalous lives and the corruption of their morals in defiance of all precepts of the Catholic religion. During a trial before the Parlement of Paris (the famous case of the diamond necklace), a cardinal of the church, a Rohan, scion of the ancient hereditary nobility of France, stood accused in general opinion of attempting adultery upon the person of the Queen herself.

Eighteenth-century France had become a strange, chaotic combination, hardly an amalgam, of the strong centralizing monarchical absolutism created by Louis XIV and the spirit of noble independence resurgent after his death. The memory of the Fronde was not dead in France, and there were repeated attempts on the part of the nobility to recoup powers of which they had been divested in the previous century. Paradoxical as it may now seem, the first call for the Estates-General in 1787 setting the stage for the Revolution was a consequence of aristocratic pressure on the weakened bankrupt monarchy. The nobility dreamed of an aristocratic reaction, a reversion to a mediaeval constitutional ideal in which their role was predominant in council. Instead they unleashed the new social and economic classes of the third estate.
The Peasants

There were more than 20,000,000 peasants in France who, though still subject to a host of manorial dues—payments in money, labor, or kind which they owed their lords—in the overwhelming majority were free men who tilled their own lands. The French peasant was by no means among the most wretched in Europe, since he was emancipated from most of the disabilities of serfdom. He was not bound to the soil he worked, and he could raise his children in such occupations as he liked; moreover, he was frequently protected by law and custom from arbitrary dispossess of his farm by the local lord. He was probably more prosperous than the peasants of other lands on the continent, and he certainly enjoyed a greater measure of freedom. But travelers compared him with the English farmer, and were struck by the contrast in vitality and well-being. One contemporary observer wrote:

The portion of the taxes which he pays according to his rate of industry, is either so unjustly estimated, so exorbitant, or levied in so discouraging a manner, that a farmer is afraid of clearing a new field, of augmenting the number of his cattle, or in short of displaying fresh industry, sure as he is to see himself loaded with a new arbitrary tax, though he has not sufficient to pay the old one. . . . It is a maxim received in France, that the Peasantry must be kept low, and not suffered to be at ease. But supposing this maxim to be as true as it is destitute of humanity, at least, nothing is more certain than that it has been abused. So far from being at their ease, the peasants in France have not even a necessary subsistence. They are a species of men, which begins to decline and wear out at the age of forty, for want of a reparation . . . proportioned to its fatigues. Humanity is hurt by the comparison of them with other men, and above all with the
English peasants. Observe but the French labourers, and their exterior alone points out the impairs of their bodies, and the destruction of the faculties of their minds.¹

In a country overwhelmingly agricultural, the unwholesomeness of economic policies which discouraged production and depressed the peasantry was obvious.

During the century there were fifteen or twenty crop failures and the small peasants were threatened by periodic famine. Their discontent reached a climax during the general economic crisis which swept France during the last three years of the ancient regime. The peasants, always hungry for more land, saw with resentment vast uncultivated areas belonging to a local lord or to a religious establishment. Many nobles had ceased to perform any useful functions on their estates; they were absentee owners who spent most of the year in town, delegating authority to a steward whose person and power were not sanctified by tradition. Since the nobility no longer rendered any services, they were finally forfeiting the respect considered due to righteous lords. In 1789 the peasants of France were not in the vanguard of the revolution against the state, but once the bars of authority were let down they were quick to sack the châteaux which housed the records of their manorial dues and to seize whatever land they could.

The Industrial Workers

The only substantial large-scale manufacturing was concentrated in the cloth centers of the northern and the south-

ern provinces. While mediaeval guild regulations prohibiting the free movement of artisans from place to place and the free hiring of workers for manufactures nominally remained in force, the code was often violated without the imposition of legal sanctions. At times, whole manufacturing areas and specific new industries were granted a blanket exemption from guild restrictions by royal decree.

Most workers were not exclusively engaged in industry but alternated factory work with agriculture, even where the putting-out system had been abandoned for a central factory in a town. Therefore numerical estimates of the number of industrial workers in France in the last century of the old regime have a wide spread. Inspector of Manufactures Roland wrote in his article in Diderot’s Encyclopédie that a figure of 150,000 would cover men, women, and children in industry, but other contemporary figures are far higher. In any case, the total could hardly have exceeded 1 or 2 per cent of the population. The bulk of ordinary manufacturing was still conducted in tiny units of masters, journeymen, and apprentices under the old guild system.

During the reign of Louis XIV, Colbert had sent spies abroad to bring back new industrial techniques, had sponsored the experiments of inventors in special laboratories, had enticed foreign entrepreneurs with concessions, and had attracted skilled workers with special privileges. In the eighteenth century, although the government manifested much less enthusiasm in pursuit of this policy, it was not completely abandoned. As England was undergoing its industrial revolution, a few models of the new water- or steam-driven textile machines, particularly those used in spinning, were smuggled out of the country in spite of prohibitions
and embargoes. And in the last years of the old regime an ambitious group of manufacturers in Rouen, the Abbé Baudouin's Free Society for the Encouragement of Inventions Which Tend to Perfect Arts and Trades, in Imitation of the London Society (1776), and government agencies working under the minister Calonne made a concerted effort to further the introduction of machines and new industrial processes in mining and manufacturing. The workers received the machines with complaints that they deprived them of jobs, disrupted the organization of the existing industrial system, and caused a marked deterioration in the quality of the finished product. But since the use of the new mechanical devices was limited, and power for the most part was still manually supplied, machine-breaking by enraged artisans was not a serious problem. Except for chance outbreaks which were easily silenced, there was no co-ordinated movement of violence against the introduction of machinery.

In the course of the century the price of bread—and this single item of consumption normally absorbed well over 50 per cent of the average laborer's total expenditures—remained fairly stable, possibly showing a slight increase. Wages rose somewhat, though in most occupations they were fixed at traditional levels. When they moved upward rather spottily in the last decades before the Revolution they still usually lagged behind prices. Strikes for higher wages were rather more disciplined than the outbursts of workers in the preceding age, and journeymen in a number of skilled trades, who formed secret organizations, on occasion wielded the strike weapon with remarkable success. At other times the royal police intervened and, as in previous centuries, unceremoniously hanged the strike leaders in the public square.
The factory workers, hard hit by the depression of 1787, joined in the Revolution of 1789. On the Great Days when peasants sacked châteaux they wrecked new machinery, but as a class the small industrial proletariat were no more important protagonists of the Revolution than the peasants.

The Bourgeois

In provincial cities which were trading centers, the great bourgeois were hardly differentiated in their manner of living from the nobility. The division of the city of Rennes into three residential areas about the middle of the century is more typical of the realities of class stratification than nominal distinctions by estate: there was an area of grand houses for nobles and rich bourgeois; a section in the old city inhabited by artisans and shopkeepers; and a suburban area where common laborers lived. In provincial capitals such as Dijon, about a third of the inhabitants belonged to the families of functionaries who, whether or not they had a noble title of recent origin, tended to be bourgeois in spirit. The top financiers and tax farmers who were creditors of the state and of many of the hereditary noble families aped the grandeur of princes of the blood and were not noted for the practice of those virtues of sobriety and parsimony traditionally associated with the French bourgeois. Standing nearest to the great nobility, the rich bourgeois imitated their ostentation and extravagance. Unable to achieve equality in status with the hereditary nobility, the financiers tried to approach them through equality in vice; this was the censorious historical judgment of the nineteenth-century French moralist, Alexis de Tocqueville.

But if there was a superficial measure of similarity in
The Realm of France

manner, the difference in the changing economic position of the two classes was real and in the end decisive. The eighteenth century saw the burgeoning of a prosperous merchant class in France, while the ancient nobility, unlike its English counterpart across the Channel, refused to join in the direction of profitable enterprise, considering it a degradation. The foreign commerce of France quintupled between 1716 and 1789, and as the commercial profits accumulated from the sale of wine, brandy, West Indian sugar, textiles, and luxury goods, they were invested in new industrial projects—coal and iron mines, glass works, metal plants and textile factories—which brought increasing wealth to the bourgeoisie entrepreneurs. The enrichment of the merchant and manufacturer is not paralleled by any equivalent rise in the prosperity of other classes in the realm. Some nobles invested in commerce and industry and reaped their share of the profits even when they did not actually manage the ventures, but they were clearly the exception. Most successful were the merchants of port cities such as Marseilles, Bordeaux, Nantes, Rouen, who traded with the American colonies, the Orient, and other parts of Europe, processing and exchanging the products of all of them, as well as exporting native French goods. Their vast new wealth was soon reflected in the good fortune of the professional men who served them and lived in their company—the doctors, the lawyers, and the intellectuals. Ownership of land remained the mark of gentility, and to acquire it the great bourgeoisie bought up country seats from impoverished nobles, but commerce and industry continued to be their main sources of income and ultimately of power. The bourgeoisie of France had been investing in land since the
sixteenth century, and in the eighteenth a technological revolu-
tion in agriculture which increased annual yields made
financial returns greater than ever before and attracted sub-
stantial amounts of new capital. The speculative enterprise
of the bourgeois was thus not limited to trade and industry;
they had begun to take possession of the noble’s traditional
inheritance, his estates.

As long as the authority of the aristocracy had been
clothed in a religious mantle and the dignity of custom, the
bourgeois could be kept in their place. But the eighteenth-
century nobility, whose personal conduct set the irreligious
tone of the age, had divested themselves of their most sacred
armor. The noble privileges which persisted in law no longer
had any rational or moral justification for the politically
conscious among the bourgeois. Many had read the con-
temporary philosophers and knew that an idle class, ful-
ing no function in society, was contrary to the natural
order. Hence they were no longer content to endure dis-
paragement, to be looked down upon by men whose elevated
status they did not respect, especially since many nobles
themselves no longer believed in their own right to homage.
Young noble blood had joined the American Revolution to
fight for liberty and equality, and irreligious Masonic so-
cieties were crowded with princes.

Titles, superannuated parchments kept in gothic châteaux, do
they bestow upon those who have inherited them the right to as-
pire to the most distinguished offices in the Church, in the court,
in the judiciary or in the army, without their having any of the
talents necessary to fulfill them worthily? Because noble war-
rriors once contributed, at the risk of their lives, to the conquest
of a kingdom or to the pillage of provinces should their de-
scendants believe that, after so many centuries, they still are entitled to maltreat their vassals?  

Thus reasoned the philosopher Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789), mouthpiece of the upper bourgeois: nor did any contemporary offer to rebut the argument.

Memoirs and autobiographies of bourgeois lawyers who were later among the great tribunes of the French Revolution reveal that they never forgave the slights from nobles which they had suffered in their youth. Chateaubriand (1768–1848) wrote:

This resentment of the bourgeoisie against the nobility, which burst forth with such great violence at the moment of the revolution, did not derive from inequality in office; it derived from inequality in esteem. There was no baronet so petty that he did not have the privilege of insulting and disdaining the bourgeois to the point of refusing to cross swords with him; the name noble gentleman dominated everything.  

The bourgeois and their lawyers were the protagonists of the Great Revolution, not because of their suffering at the hands of the state, but because they had grown rich and self-confident and were becoming impatient with the existing regime. The state, which had spent itself in a long series of wars and in the distribution of millions in noble sinecures, was bankrupt and had to rely upon them to raise loans. In the reorganization which was patently inevitable in the last decades of the century, the great bourgeois saw the opportunity to achieve political power and prestige commensurate

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2 Baron Paul d'Holbach, *Ethocratie ou le Gouvernement fondé sur la morale* (Amsterdam, 1776), pp. 43–44.

with their economic status in the realm. And it was the middle-class lawyers who did the talking during the Revolution as the men of letters in the mid-eighteenth century had done the thinking for the *bourgeois*. The bankers and entrepreneurs themselves could not foretell the direction of the Revolution, and it held many fatal surprises in store for them. Nevertheless the French Revolution can truly be called *bourgeois*, less because it was a plot of the third estate to seize the government than because, after the guillotined heads were buried and the rubble swept away, the *bourgeois* emerged with their rights validated in law, elevated in public consideration, and strengthened in power—goals for which they had been striving for a century.

*Last Attempts at Governmental Reform*

In the last decades of the old regime there were two major attempts to reform and to reorganize the administration of the French kingdom, the first by a native French administrator, economist, and philosopher, Turgot (1727–1781), the second by a Swiss banker, Necker (1732–1804). Turgot wanted to rationalize the whole administrative system; to abolish sinecures and lavish allowances for the nobility; to economize; to keep within the budget; to abolish provincial restrictions and permit the free movement of grain throughout the length and breadth of the land in order to aly the pangs of hunger during local crop failures; to put an end to forced labor by the peasants on public works; to destroy the monopoly of the guilds which stifled large-scale manufacturing. But the nobles militantly resisted the innovations and Turgot was dismissed.

At first Necker tried to be more persuasive and diplomatic where Turgot had been blunt in proposing his revolu-
tionary changes. In January 1781, however, he embarked upon a novel administrative procedure which shook the pillars of the kingdom far more violently than had any of Turgot's schemes. In imitation of the annual account presented to the English Parliament, he published 100,000 copies of the French national budget, which he called a Compte Rendu. For the first time the mystery of the monarchy's finances was revealed to anyone who could read. Though workers and peasants would not buy or read it, the bourgeois did. Necker's comments on money grants, pensions, and annual bounties to nobles were hardly circumspect: "Even Your Majesty was amazed to find that on this account your finances were annually charged with near 28,000,000 of livres. I much question whether all the Sovereigns in Europe put together lay out in pensions more than one half of the above sum." 4 When describing the countless impediments to free commerce raised by local tolls and prohibitions and the uneven burdens of taxation carried by the various estates, he concluded: "It must be allowed that all this part of our constitution is barbarous." His remedy was in part the same as Turgot's: "It would be a plan as simple as it is grand to render the interior circulation of commerce absolutely free. . . ." 5 But the Minister who had dared to affront the nobility had to go the way of his reforming predecessor.

The French nobility of the eighteenth century is an archetype of a ruling class debilitated by its own uselessness. The men of the court showed themselves weaklings in battle and were distinguished only for their spectacular games at Ver-

5 Ibid., p. 92.
sailles. The country nobles who remained smugly on their estates were generally despised. The nobility was incapable of political action beyond backstairs resistance to the efforts of rationalist ministers of state such as Turgot or Necker and hamstringing royal intendants in the provinces. The reforming ministers might have rendered the extinction of the French nobility less precipitate, less bloody. Doomed it had been since the late Middle Ages by the growth of a capitalist system of enterprise which became a great source of wealth and power in the state and had little use for those military attributes cherished by the nobles in the centuries of fighting that had created France. Since capitalism was expanding without significant participation by the nobles, they came to be regarded by the more active elements in the nation as purely decorative, a senseless encumbrance to the economic and political development of France. Nevertheless, a crisis in the French government might have been avoided by reform in the organization of taxation and expenditures, and the transition to bourgeois monarchy or to a republic might have been more gradual, smooth, and peaceful if the nobility had been able to merge with the rival groups thirsting for power in the state—the lawyers, the manufacturers, the merchants, and the financiers. But such an amalgamation, partially effected in England, did not take place in France.