

Chapter 2

The Absolute Monarchy

Before examining the class antagonisms of the era of the great revolution, it will be useful to take a look at the political development within which they unfolded. The form that the state takes determines the way in which the different classes compete for the prevalence of their interests; it determines the configuration of the class struggle.

The form that the French state took from 1614 to 1789 was that of absolute monarchy, a kind of state which, under normal conditions, excludes any intensive struggle between classes, since it forbids its subjects from engaging in any political activity. It is, consequently, incompatible with the society of today. All class struggle inevitably culminates in political struggle. Any ascendant class is thus obliged, if it has no political rights, to fight in order to obtain them. But political struggles do not stop as soon as these rights are obtained; on the contrary, it is only from that point on that the struggle really begins, a phenomenon which surprised and horrified as many ideologues in 1789 as it did later in 1848.

Absolutism, that is to say, political power's independence from the dominant classes, the form of state power in which the state is not a direct instrument of class domination, but has, at least superficially, an independent existence outside of classes and parties, can only be established under conditions where the classes which play a decisive role in the life of the society form an equilibrium with each other, such that no one class is powerful enough to seize political power for itself. The political power is thus able to hold each of the existing classes at bay by playing one class against another, to impose upon all of them an armistice —a truce of political struggle—and to subject all of them to its own will.

Such was the situation in France in the seventeenth century. The feudal way of production was decaying, and the landed nobility had, like the Church, lost its capacity for autonomous political existence when faced with the new organs of state control backed up by the burgeoning power of money. They instead became the footmen of royalty, supports holding up absolutism. An ever-growing number of nobles joined the court: there they became something like high-end lackeys to the king, who in turn took it to himself to ensure their material prosperity. No longer obstacles to absolutism, the high nobility and clergy increasingly came to be supports of it.

The power of the royalty grew ever greater as the new mode of production put at its disposal greater and greater means of exercising power. In the feudal age, the various communities which comprised the state had been, economically speaking, almost entirely autonomous: they produced for themselves more or less everything they needed. Whence their political autonomy. However, merchant production and commerce rendered the various communities of the country dependent on a small number of economic centres, and this economical centralisation was followed by political centralisation.

The organs of local and regional self-administration were replaced by centralised administration, a bureaucracy which every day grew in size, strictness and dependence upon the centralised authority.

Alongside the bureaucracy, for various reasons also tied to the growth of merchant production, which

cannot be detailed here, there was established a permanent army completely dependent on the central power, originally intended to ensure the defence of the country against foreign enemies, but also useful for repressing by force any armed resistance to the government that should appear inside the country.

The upkeep of these new expedients of course required money, lots of money. Thus, the state power depended, in the last analysis, upon the contributions of monied or money-earning citizens. If they refused to contribute, or made their contributions conditional (and succeeded in imposing these conditions), then that was it for absolutism, for the total independence of state power. However, as long as the classes concerned did not have the means to resist, or had no pressing need to resist, the holders of state power had every right to imagine that the state was only there to serve their personal interests.

The state became the mere domain of the reigning prince, the interests of the monarch indistinguishable from the interests of the state. The richer, the more powerful the state, the richer and more powerful its sovereign. His task essentially consisted of taking care of the material well-being of his subjects in the same way that a shepherd cares for the sheep that he intends to shear. The more the bureaucracy took over from the past frameworks of state control, extending into new domains and increasing in importance, so with more zeal did the state put itself to developing commerce, industry and agriculture; to putting through administrative and other reforms to eliminate what hindrances remained; to protecting the wealth-producing classes from the excessive pressure and exploitation with which the privileged hurt and weakened them. In short, as the monarchy became more and more absolute, its tendency to be "enlightened" also grew.

It is with this facet of the monarchy of the eighteenth century in mind that those who want to prove from history that "social royalty" -- the protection of the weak from the strong, the concern for the material prosperity of the people-- is the "natural vocation" of the monarchy. A vocation that would be (they say) regrettably thwarted by parliamentarism, which replaces the power of the prince, aloof from party politics, with the power of the parties themselves, and their particular interests.

This argument ignores two things. First, that the aim of the economic interventionism of the eighteenth-century absolute monarchs was not to protect the weak, but to increase "national wealth", which is to say merchant production.

However, this essentially just involved supporting the capitalists, often directly, by establishing protectionist customs rights, instituting monopolies, and subsidizing their enterprises. Other measures, although not directly concerning them, benefitted them too, such as the improvements to the school system, the abolition of serfdom, etc. An absolute monarch would never have thought of protecting and helping the weak in society if this had not also served to increase "national wealth", and with it the income of the state. The rulers of the eighteenth century did not concern themselves with the proletariat, working or beggarly [lumpenproletariat], except to the extent that they made sure the police kept them in check. As for the peasants and artisans, they did not benefit from royal protection either, except when that their ability to pay taxes was at stake.

"Protecting the weak" thus basically amounted to supporting that social class upon which power was already largely economically, but not yet politically, dependent -- the bourgeoisie.

But the monarchs of the eighteenth century drew considerable income not only from taxes paid in cash, but also from landed property, which is not surprising considering the feudal origin of the monarchy. As a general rule, the king was, other than the church, the largest landholder in a country: in France he was by a long margin.

“We do not know exactly how land ownership was distributed in 1789,” says Léonce de Lavergne. “The only certainty, which everybody agrees on, is that the royal domains, along with the properties of the town municipalities [*communes*], covered a fifth of the country’s surface.” [2] One may get an idea of the scale of this when one learns that the royal hunting forests alone covered one million acres, an area approximately equivalent to that of the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg.

Added to that were the properties of the royal princes, occupying one-seventh of the country’s territory.

As a feudal lord, the reigning prince had other interests than just as the owner of the great domain of the state. He, whose cousins and “good friends” were all feudal lords too, had the best reasons in the world never to let go of feudal exploitation and privilege, and to oppose all reforms likely to threaten them. For him, the chief of feudalism, the task of the state was not to provide the best possible material prosperity to his subjects, but, on the contrary, to extort from them as much as possible in order to use the product in his own interest, in the interest of his court, to the benefit of the now court-centred nobility. He, supreme chief of the privileged, did not seek to set the power of the state in the service of the “weak” – the non-privileged – to protect them from the powerful and privileged: he used it rather to suffocate the least attempt of the weak to defend themselves from the abuses of the powerful.

Like Faust, therefore, the monarchy of the eighteenth century had two souls inhabiting its breast: one was “enlightened”, the other was under the control of “tenebrous medieval prejudices.” Brought to absolute power by the fact that the ruling classes of the decaying feudal mode of production, i.e. the nobility, on the one hand, and those of the burgeoning capitalist mode of production, i.e. the bourgeoisie, on the other, had reached an equilibrium with each other, the monarchy itself formally reigned over both in equal measure, placing itself above and outside of both while also effectively being forced to defend the interests of both at the same time. In reality, absolutism, “the protector of the weak against the powerful”, insofar as it was capable of influencing economic relationships, submitted the popular classes not only to feudal exploitation, but also to capitalist exploitation and the misery that comes with it. It thus came to be seen by these classes simply as *the* incarnation of exploitation.

But the interests of the nobility and the bourgeoisie were too contradictory for absolute monarchy to be able to satisfy them fully. The nobility could not be contented without harm being done to the bourgeoisie, and vice versa.

Under the absolutist regime, the struggle between these two classes never fully ceased. But as long as the equilibrium between them was maintained, as long as the bourgeoisie could not think of placing the state power— the monarchy— at its own service, this struggle among the upper strata of society essentially took the form of rivalries between factions and cliques to obtain favours from the king, a struggle in which of course only the elites of society took part: the court nobility, the high dignitaries of the church, big finance, the high representatives of the bureaucracy and the “intelligentsia”, etc. The

reigning prince was no more aloof from these parties than is the case in a parliamentary system. The only difference is that in the absolutist state, the interests for which the monarch served as an instrument were far pettier, and the machinations and intrigues used to sway him far more deplorable.

Faced with these battles between cliques around the person of the king, which endeavoured to bring him now to one side, now to the other, like the Achaeans and the Trojans with the corpse of Patroclus; and in view of the conflict that was inherent in eighteenth century monarchy — the monarch being simultaneously head of the modern state apparatus and head of the feudal nobility—it was essential for a king to have a great capacity for intelligence and character in order, at the very least, to preserve a unity in the way of leading the affairs of the government. As soon as it was a weak character who was put in charge, confusion could only make way for catastrophe. Louis XVI was a weak character. And if his wife Marie-Antoinette, at the opposite extreme, was gifted with an obstinacy that her arrogance only made more pernicious, that did not put him in any better position. She never suspected that there could be other necessities and other needs than those of the court. For her, the job of the monarchy was simple: to entertain the court and provide it with money.

We shall see what that meant.

Note

2. L. de Lavergne : *Économie rurale de la France depuis 1789*. Paris 1866, p. 49