

## Chapter five. The revolt of the privileged

The struggle between the *noblesse de robe*-defending Parlements on the one hand, and the rigorously centralised and despotic administration of the state on the other, sometimes reached the pitch of a general struggle of all the privileged against both this administration and the absolute monarchy: a struggle which did not stay within the limits of a court intrigue -- brutal, but invisible to the people outside -- but which rather called upon the entire non-courtesan class, and carried the multitude along with it.

The most significant movement of this kind was the Fronde, which we mentioned in the previous chapter. This took place in the first half of the seventeenth century, at a time when the nobility still had energy and self-confidence. An analogous movement was on the verge of breaking out in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The Fronde had culminated in a reinforcement of absolutism. The movement which started in 1787 would culminate in the victory of the Third Estate; it would be the prologue to the great Revolution.

We have already noted Louis XVI's hesitant attitude in the second chapter.

This was the most classic incarnation of the dual nature of the absolute monarchy of the eighteenth century. Under his reign, these two facets were typified by **Turgot** on one side and **Calonne** on the other. The first, a profound thinker as well as a strong personality, genuinely sought to put the state at the service of economic development, to free it from the obstacles that hindered it, and to put into practice the measures that the theoreticians had decided were necessary for maintaining the cohesion of the state and society. He refused to let the state administration be exploited in the interests of the court nobility. He abolished the *corvée*, internal customs barriers, and the guild system, and set industry free from the constraints of regulation. He wanted to put the nobility and the clergy at the same level as the Third Estate, and to put public expenditure in the control of an Assembly of Estates. These were unacceptable attacks upon "sacred rights." Led by the queen, the mass of exploiters revolted against the reformist minister, and Turgot succumbed to the assault in 1776.

After a whole series of experiments, of attempts to roast the sheep without it realising, the king called **Calonne** to the helm (1783). He was a man after the queen's own heart. A superficial charlatan, but crafty and shameless, his only method was to sacrifice to an increasingly insatiable court nobility not only the current, but also the future income of the state, and to plunder not only the existing finances, but also its credit. Borrowing proceeded borrowing. Over the three years that he governed, he borrowed 650 million livres (a precise breakdown can be found in Louis Blanc, I, 233), an enormous sum at the time. And almost all of this went into the pockets of the court, of the king and queen and their favourites. "When I saw that everyone was holding out their hands, I held out my hat, too," recalls a prince evoking the atmosphere of intoxication of the time. And indeed, the court was swimming with delights; not a voice was raised in warning of the fatal results of these delirious schemes. Louis XVI himself manifested the ravishment with which his finance minister filled him, who, significantly, upon his appointment, had his debts paid off by the king, which amounted to 230,000 livres. The whole court was ecstatic about the ease and speed with which the great man had succeeded in solving the social

question. [8]

The insane escapades of the court naturally had the result of bringing about the collapse of the entire system. Three years later, Calonne's wits were at an end. The annual deficit had now reached 140 million livres, and Calonne himself was forced to admit that no loan could save them from inevitable bankruptcy. They had to increase revenue and lower spending, which was only possible at the expense of the privileged. It was impossible to squeeze any more out of the people.

When Calonne announced this to the Assembly of Notables that he had convoked (February 1787), he was greeted with howls of anger from the privileged. An anger which was not directed at the scandalous policies of Calonne, but which instead was let loose at the idea of seeing them stopped for the simple reason that it was no longer possible to carry on with them. Calonne fell, but his successors were obliged to resume his policies of increasing the burden on the privileged, who ended up convincing themselves that the monarchy no longer had the means to continue to guarantee them the exploitation of the country in the same proportion as formerly. They thus revolted against the monarchy itself. Incredible, but true: the nobility, the clergy, the Parlements, the totality of the privileged, whose position was already undermined to the core and which only held steady at all thanks to the support of the royalty, united themselves into a coalition in order to saw off the branch that they were sitting on. Such is the degree to which a doomed class, which has lost all reason to exist, can be blind and driven by its own greed to do everything in order to bring about its own fall.

The privileged had not the slightest idea of the upheavals in the relations of forces within society; they believed that everything was as it had been in the past, at the time when they had defied the kings and the Third Estate: so much so that they vehemently protested the convocation of the Estates-General on the model of 1614. While they only stayed afloat thanks to the monarchy, they pretended now once more to preserve their privileges, their exploitation, by resorting to their own strength. At the very moment when, faced with a great menace, they should have held together, a mutiny exploded in their midst for the division of the loot!

Blinded by their wrath, the privileged entered into the revolutionary field. The Parlements were all suspended in May 1788; the clergy refused to contribute in any way to the state finances as long as the Estates-General were not convoked; the nobility rose up, armed, in the provinces, and Provence, the Dauphiné, Brittany, Flanders, and the Languedoc saw serious unrest.

More and more, the Third Estate took part in these movements and contributed to the chorus calling for the convocation of the Estates-General, but this did not anger the privileged: the monarchy had shown that it could no longer continue to be anything but the nerve centre of exploitation, and the monarchy had thus become the enemy, and the task of the privileged to shatter this absolute power. They hated the Third Estate too much to fear it. Who was going to tremble before a few rustics, shoemakers, tailors, and a handful of lawyers?

The absolute monarchy could not stand up in the face of a combined assault from all other orders. It was forced to consent to the convocation of the Estates-General, whose inaugural evening took place on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1789, a date now remembered as the beginning of the revolution. But it must be noted

that the upheaval against the absolute power of the King had already started by then; that it was the **privileged** who set the ball rolling and began the movement which would culminate in their own destruction; and that it was they who imposed the convocation of the assembly which was destined to seal their doom.

Of course the nobility and the royalty, those rivalrous siblings, soon reconciled their differences. Naturally the privileged united behind the King as soon as they realised how much the people and the deputies of the Third Estate hated them. But it was already too late.

#### Note

8. When the fallacious promises of Calonne led to an over-subscription of the first loan, an important figure exclaimed, "I knew that Calonne would rescue the state, but I would never had imagined that he would succeed so quickly"