

Chapter five. The revolt of the privileged

The struggle between the Parlements, advocates of the Nobles of the Robe, 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 bounds of a court intrigue —brutal, but invisible to the people outside —but which rather called upon all the classes outside the court, and carried the masses along with it.

The most significant upheaval 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 vitality and self-confidence. An analogous upheaval was on the verge of breaking out in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The upheaval of 1648 in the Fronde had culminated in a reinforcement of absolutism. The upheaval which began in 1787 would culminate in the victory of the Third Estate; it would be the prelude to the Great Revolution.

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

His tenure represents the most classic incarnation of the dual nature of the absolute monarchy of the eighteenth century, and under his reign, the most classic representatives of these two tendencies were 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 theorists had determined were needed to maintain the cohesion of the state and society. He refused to allow the state administration to 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 on the same level as the Third Estate, and to subject public expenditure to 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 realizing, 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 sole 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. One loan after another was taken out; 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 of their favourites. "When I saw that everyone was holding out their hands, I held out my hat, too," recalls a prince evoking the debauchery of the time. And indeed, the court was swimming in delights; not a voice was raised to warn of the fatal results of these delirious schemes. Louis XVI was elated with his new finance minister, who, significantly, upon his appointment, had his debts paid off by the king, amounting 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 aimed at the scandalous policies of Calonne, but rather let loose at the very idea of seeing them stopped for the simple reason that it was no longer possible to continue them. Calonne fell, but his successors were obliged to resume his policies of increasing the burden on the privileged, who became convinced that the monarchy no longer had the means to continue to guarantee them the exploitation of the country to the same extent as before. They thus revolted against the monarchy itself. Incredible, but true: the nobility, the clergy, the Parlements, the whole privileged stratum, 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 blinded and driven by its own greed to do everything to bring about its own fall.

The privileged had not the slightest idea of the changes in the balance of power 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 agitated for 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 fast, a mutiny broke out 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 in the face of a combined assault from all the orders. It was forced to consent to the convocation of the Estates-General, whose inaugural evening took place on the 5th 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 by then had already begun; that it was the privileged who set in motion the movement which would culminate in their own downfall; and that it was they who demanded 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, and the privileged coalesced again behind the King once 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 overdraft on the first loan, an important figure exclaimed, "I knew that Calonne would rescue the state, but I would never have imagined that he would succeed so quickly"