Chapter 9. The peasantry

Lower even than the proletarians, non-guild craftsmen, and all who lived in their neighbourhoods, stood the **peasants**. The former lived in the towns and were not untouched by the general intellectual ferment of these localities. Their dwellings were tight, cramped, and close to the centres of power. Their intelligence, and the high population density, gave them a certain strength, and their proximity to the government allowed them to exert pressure on it directly. Whatever oppression these townsfolk suffered, it paled in comparison to the hardships to which the peasantry were daily subjected with impunity. Scattered, isolated, far from any intellectual stimulation, they were in no position to unite against their tormentors and make their grievances heard.

As the nobility, the clergy, the centralised urban bureaucracy, and most wealthy people were totally or partially exempt from direct state taxation, the bulk of this burden fell to the peasantry. It could happen that a peasant would lose 70% of his net income to taxes. The average was 50%.

It was by preference the peasant who was called into armed service in the militia, which took in 60,000 men a year. The nobility were exempt from such service. And yet they had the gall to claim that this exemption was justified by the blood tax which supposedly they alone sacrificed for the *patrie*. In fact, in so far as they fulfilled it at all, the blood tax had been transformed from the perilous and costly obligation that it once was into a privilege allowing them very lucratively to exploit this same *patrie*. To someone who saw injustice in the fact that only peasants were enlisted, a defender of this practice would retort that the lot of the soldier was so miserable that only a peasant could stand it.

The peasants were the only ones to be called up for the corvée to build the military roads: on them fell the burden of transport and billeting of the troops.

The number of burdens imposed upon the peasantry for the upkeep of the modern state grew and grew. At the same time, the ancient feudal burdens persisted: and they were not only burdens, but barriers that precluded any improvement to production, if indeed they did not bring about its complete deterioration.

The peasant did not have the right to grow whatever crop he pleased. The tithe depended on the old, well-known species, not on newly-introduced plants like potatoes or lucerne. The cultivation of such plants was often forbidden. This considerably set back the introduction of improved procedures, such as the transition from the three-field system to modern crop rotation (which did not require land to be left fallow). What remained of the regime of the rural community, and notably the servitudes relating to the rhythm of cultivation, was in truth a great hindrance to any attempt at agricultural progress.

At any time, even if he had urgent work to attend to in the field, the peasant could be called up for the corvée. Though by this time the feudal lord's corvées had mostly been converted into taxes levied in money, the roadwork and troop transport corvées had become an even heavier load to carry.

Once the crop was growing, it was almost impossible for a peasant to shelter it from the wild game, rabbits, and pigeons of their "gracious" masters. Hunting was the exclusive prerogative of the nobility. They also had the right to raise rabbits and to possess dovecotes, and they made good use of this privilege: it was not the noble, but the peasant who had to feed these animals, certainly unwillingly, by letting them feed on his fields. Sometimes, peasants were forced only to plant crops that were to the taste of wild game. Gamekeepers had the right to shoot down anyone accused of removing a rabbit or hare. Taine finds it odd that at the very moment when "social customs were softening" and when "the enlightenment was progressing," the barbarism of hunting was growing. But for the nobles, hunting was just as much a means of exploiting the peasants as it was a pleasure, and the more socially superfluous this class became, the more its thirst for pleasures and exploitation increased. The "softening of social customs" only concerned the

commerce between lords and their financiers. Wild game were left to multiply, even the most harmful ones: in the Clermontois, on the prince of Condé's land, **wolf cubs** were bred and raised with great care before being let loose in winter and hunted. It mattered little, to these noble lords skilful at devising delicate humanist ideals in their comfortable rooms, that the wolves would eat the sheep and even the children of the peasants.

The king was the largest landholder and also the preeminent hunter of France [12], thus one of the greatest devastators of the countryside. His hunting reserves notably widened in the region of Paris, and made it almost impossible to cultivate the soil. In the eleven hunting districts (*capitaineries*) that surrounded the capital, the wild game caused as much destruction as "the encampment of eleven enemy cavalry regiments" [13]. It is well known that Louis XVI, besides locksmithing, had only **one** passion: hunting. The 14th of July 1789, the day of the storming of the Bastille, was a date he only marked in his diary with the pained cry, "no hunting"!

A rule from 1762 forbade peasants living around royal hunting reserves from enclosing their fields and gardens to protect them from game. It was also illegal for anyone, even proprietors, to enter the fields between the 1st of May and the 24th of June. This was so as not to disrupt the nesting period of the partridge. If the fields get overtaken by weeds in this time, so be it!

And still: in 1789, with the revolt against the feudal system already in full swing, 108 protective thickets for hares and partridges were installed in a single canton in the royal reserve of Fontainebleau. No attention was paid to the protests of the peasants concerned.

And Louis XVI was, as it is claimed, a sovereign full of benevolence and kindness. Think, then, how it must have been with the heartless lords!

If, despite these obstacles, the peasant had a successful harvest, he was by no means permitted simply to walk off with it without further process. The crop, once reaped, was to be left in the field until the tax agents showed up and counted the sheaves in order to determine the sum of benefits in kind to be paid. If, in the meantime, the weather should turn wet, then the crop was lost.

Once the harvest was reaped, the peasant was not free to use it as he pleased. He had to press his grapes in the lord's winepress, grind his wheat in the lord's mill, bake his bread in the lord's oven. Circumvention of these rules was strictly forbidden. The peasant was not even allowed to own a hand-mill without a costly licence. The lord's winepresses, mills, and ovens were leased out, and, as one could imagine, they were in lamentable condition. They were slow and ineffective. "By law," the tenant was assured of his customers.

If, in spite of all the mechanisms designed not only to exploit him, but also to reduce to a minimum the product of his labour, a peasant somehow managed to produce a marketable surplus, he would still come up against barriers. He was not allowed to take his grapes to the market until four to six weeks after the harvest, during which time the lord had the sole right to their purchase. Moreover, the roads were in a deplorable state and tolls and market license fees were high. A peasant would have to be lucky merely to break even, paying for the transport costs with the sale of the surplus produce.

In any case, there was rarely a chance to speak of surplus! The abuses and "legal" maltreatments which we have indicated above are only a small sample of the complete list, which would be infinitely long (Wachsmuth, in his *History of France in the Age of the Revolution*, enumerates no fewer than 150 feudal rights which were abolished without compensation on the night of the 4th of August 1789). And on top of all of that, the peasant was defenceless against state and lordly representatives who simply took whatever they pleased, regardless of the law. The only thing that could protect them from pillage was the appearance of abject poverty. That is why their housing, livestock, tools, and fields were in such a pitiable state. If you

truly managed to keep something for yourself, it would take the form of a few good-quality silver coins which could easily be hidden from the suspicious eyes of the "servants of the law". Silver was used at most to buy a patch of land, not to improve working methods. Any growth in revenue was immediately followed by an increase in taxes.

But for the majority of peasants, the primitive character of the work, accomplished with the most rudimentary tools, was imposed by necessity. Only a small number ended up with any treasure to bury. The soil, never enriched with fertiliser, became visibly less and less fertile. Poor harvests succeeded each other with ever greater frequency. There were of course no grain reserves to draw from: a bad harvest inevitably brought the blackest misery. Many peasants could not continue in such conditions. They left: the countryside grew more deserted by the minute. Already by 1750, Quesnay showed that a quarter of the arable land was not cultivated. Immediately before the revolution, Artur Young claimed that a third of cultivable land had reverted to a wild state! According to the Agricultural Society of Rennes, two thirds of Brittany's land was fallow.

And while the number of peasants dwindled, the sum of their tax grew rapidly. More and more was being asked of fewer and fewer. It is no surprise, then, that in more than one agricultural community, the entire population threatened to flee. But where to? To emigrate to another country was practically impossible at the time, particularly for peasants. Instead they flocked to the cities, to work as day labourers: but here too they were faced with feudal barriers in the form of guild monopolies, which became even less tolerable as the proletarisation of the rural population progressed. They overpopulated the faubourgs of Paris that were free of the guild monopolies, and were the main contributors to the swelling crowds which would give rise to sans-culottism.

Others entered into the ranks of the army, but certainly not out of enthusiasm for the cause of the privileged that they would be called to defend — the cause of those who had led them to misery and blocked all exits. The smallest spark would be enough to ignite them in revolt against their tormentors.

The majority of the elements thus 'freed' sunk, however, into a rapidly growly Lumpenproletariat, in spite of the brutal sanctions brought to bear on beggars and vagabonds. Then as now, the ruling classes imagined that unemployment and destitution could be eradicated by punishing and abusing the unemployed and destitute. It was a crime simply not to have a job: both unemployment and beggary, following a decree from 1764, were punished with three years' galley labour. In 1777, 200,000 beggars were counted [14]. It is not known how this number was calculated. Though it may be a mere estimate, it at least gives a general idea of the level of destitution as it appeared to contemporary observers. [15]

However, daring, strong-fisted men despised the humiliation of beggary, which brought nothing but misery and kicks from passers-by. They formed armed gangs, and took what they needed by force. Brigandry became an ineradicable plague.

But in the peasants, too, whose property and feudal obligations still chained them to the land, there awoke a spirit of indignation and despair. The representatives of the state and the lords were constantly faced with violent resistance. Isolated and unconnected, these peasants' revolts were generally suppressed without any difficulty. But a single event in the capital, an event showing that the decisive battle had begun, would be enough for the long-suppressed anger to break out all at once in every village and town, and for the latent civil war to be brought into the open battlefield. This single event was the taking of the Bastille, which came after spirits had already been considerably heated by a combination of crop failure, a painfully harsh winter, and the elections to the Estates-General [16]. In one fell swoop, under the assault of the peasants, the whole edifice of feudalism collapsed. The castles of the nobility were reduced to cinders, and with them the social relations of feudal exploitation. When, on that famous night of the 4th August, the privileged classes of the

National Assembly gave up their privileges in the general enthusiasm, all they were doing was renouncing what they had already lost in order to save what could still be recovered.

There were, however, exceptions to this peasant explosion.

In our description of the nobility, we already noted that immediately before the revolution, there existed remote, backward regions where the feudal regime and its corresponding Catholic modes of thought were still rooted in the mode of production; districts where what elsewhere had become an intolerable burden still retained the appearance of a protective parapet. In these districts, every parish still lived and produced for itself in the old way. The peasant's loyalty ended at the horizon he could make out from the village clock: all that lay beyond was foreign land. He expected nothing from it, he wanted nothing to do with it; it only made itself felt by plundering his possessions and interrupting his work. To handle relations with these foreign lands, and to protect him from them, was the job of the priest and the lord. And now these strangers from hated Paris were taking it upon themselves to lay out laws, and to enforce them much more enthusiastically than the old monarchy ever did in these forgotten backwaters. Laws which went much more violently against their customs, their mode of production, than the laws and ordinances of the old monarchy; laws which outlawed everything that they respected and valued; laws which wanted nothing to do with the cooperative regime of property and its function within the family and the community which formed the base of their mode of production. And worse, this exterior world had the unthinkable pretention of tearing boys from their families and sending them to war [17]

Little effort was needed on the part of the aristocrats and clergy so in control of external matters to incite the peasants, notably in Calvados and the Vendée, into open revolt against the National Convention.

The mass of peasants, however, did not approve of these insurrections. They were solidly tied to the revolution. For them, the restoration of the old monarchy meant the restoration of the weight of the old feudal yoke, the old feudal misery. It possibly even meant the loss of their livelihoods. The National Assembly had declared church land national property, and confiscated the possessions left behind by émigrés. All of this was sold. And although this measure mostly served to enrich speculators, it offered peasants the chance to gain some land to add to their narrow parcels, and this process was facilitated as far as was possible. A part of the church land, and later also émigré land, was divided into plots, which were sold for insignificant advance payments with long deadlines. Before the revolution, many free tenants had held land hereditarily but still had to pay rent to the landlord. Now, the rents had disappeared, and many members of this class succeeded in becoming full landowners.

The little masters of the court nobility, to prove their chivalrous courage and fidelity to the King, had scampered off and left the King in the lurch as soon at the situation became dangerous for them. Some fled straight after the taking of the Bastille, chief among them the King's brother, the Comte d'Artois. These "stateless rodents" [18] plotted to come back to France under the protection of the Austrian and Prussian armies, with the intention to reconquer the country for themselves. Their victory would have meant the restoration of feudal exploitation, and the return of confiscated property to the church and the émigrés. Considering the burden under which the peasant groaned before the revolution, and the fanaticism with which he is bound to the land, it is obvious that under these circumstances, along with the revolutionary elements of the cities, the peasants, too, revolted massively and rushed to fill the ranks of the French armies at the borders to expel the invaders.

But they did not rise up out of enthusiasm for the legislature, the national convention, and the Parisian Jacobins who ran France in the first years of the revolutionary wars. The peasant had never been a lover of the representative system, which accorded him little influence, given his isolation and the underdevelopment of his intellectual capacities. Much less in the France of the revolution, which was barely waking up to

political life and whose population lacked any kind of political training. Peasants could not send members of their own class into representative assemblies: they sent lawyers, doctors, magistrates – i.e. predominantly urban elements. And these representatives sat in Paris under the influence of the “revolutionary mass” of this city. As soon as the interests of these people came into conflict with those of the peasants, the latter were obviously at a disadvantage when it came to legislation and administration. And conflicts there certainly were. To appease the starving masses of Parisian petty bourgeois and proletarians, the various legislative assemblies could only demand sacrifices from the bourgeoisie or peasantry. Of course, they chose the latter whenever possible. But a certain number of conflicts directly opposed the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry: the former wanted cheap bread, the latter wanted to profit as much as possible from the sale of these products. The crisis reached its peak when the Jacobins, after the fall of the Girondins, were the sole holders of power, and set a maximum price for staple foods, to put an end to the dreadful misery. They fulfilled this decree by requisitioning staple foods, not just for the army, but for all of Paris. These measures were directed primarily against the shopkeepers and speculators, but also affected the peasants. [19]

The revolutionary institution which incited the most enthusiasm among peasants was the new army, which was free of all the old class- and order-related barriers; the army in which “every soldier carries a marshal’s baton in his knapsack.” This army, composed primarily of the sons of peasants, opened up the possibility of a lustrous career. And even for those who stayed mere soldiers, the army was not only – which was the main thing – the most powerful weapon to defend their newly-won freedoms, the newly-won ground against feudalism, which was threatening to return with Europe’s help; it was also a means to **enrich oneself with the spoils of war.**

This is a factor which should not be underestimated. The revolutionary wars were of the greatest importance for the economic development of, in particular, England and France. They gave England the chance to seize, sometimes temporarily, sometimes definitively, colonies belonging not only to France but to the Netherlands too, which came into French possession in 1795, and also Spanish colonies, Spain having been forced in 1796 to settle a peace with the French. This, in addition, allowed England to pillage the fleets and coasts of these countries ceaselessly.

But France made up for it in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Egypt, Switzerland etc. Soldiers were not the only ones running around plundering these countries; what they did was nothing compared to the enormous sums that the generals and the commissioners extorted, partially for themselves, partially for public finances, which themselves were in turn pillaged by the greedy distributors and the “statesmen.” After the fall of the Jacobins, the war became “good business” for France: the very best that there was at the time. It was an all-powerful way for the riches accumulated by feudalism in the aforementioned countries, stagnating inert in churches, monasteries – princely treasures, like those of the old merchant republics of Holland, Venice, and Genoa – to be sent streaming into France in service of the capitalist mode of production. The French state, which moments before had been teetering at the edge of bankruptcy, suddenly became rich, and rich too became those whose position allowed them to plunder it. Great fortunes grew like mushrooms, seeking profitable investments. At the same time, each successive victory enlarged the market for French industrial output, and the new military methods were no less effective for that. Against the relatively small mercenary armies of the old monarchies, revolutionary France had mass drafting, and thus set industry the task of finding a way to rapidly clothe and arm these multitudes. It was a very effective way of transforming capitalist industry, which up to then had been mainly an industry for luxury products, into a modern industry of mass production.

The factor that set all this in motion, which liquidated the budget deficit and protected the peasant’s land, which enriched their sons and gave them a career, which brought financiers, merchants, and industrial firms enormous profits, which put an end to unemployment, was the army. One must keep in mind the importance that the army had for the economic development of France if one is to understand the importance which it

came to hold in the political sphere. The hypothesis according to which the military glory of the French suddenly went to their heads, that the little word "glory" made them all crazy, and that their politics and the Napoleon-cult proceeded from this, is, then, a little "idealist."

So, given the important role that the army played, any commander of a victorious war was destined to become a political player at the highest level. And the power that he had at his disposal could only but be immense once he succeeded in taking hold of the levers of state administration.

And it was not very difficult.

A large section of the bourgeoisie had fallen to parliamentary infighting in the course of the revolution, and longed for peace and quiet, the tranquillity of the bird of prey which wants to devour its prey in perfect leisure. From the beginning, many bourgeois circles had been cool and mistrustful towards the Revolution. The Terror cooled the enthusiasm for liberty even further. Many ideologues had become disillusioned and "reasonable," and had realised that the revolution did not mean the salvation of humanity, but the salvation of capital. They resigned themselves to see the parliamentary regime, whose freedom they had fought for, snatched away by a swordsman who, as compensation, opened the perspective of an entirely confiscated Europe, subservient and paying tribute to French capitalists.

Moreover, when France was beginning her cycle of triumphs across Europe, there was not one class which the bourgeoisie could rely upon. Never before, not even in the periods of the greatest revolutionary momentum, had they succeeded in holding on to dominance without an ally.

In France, the parliamentary regime had fallen through their hands because the privileged had revolted against the monarchy. They were no longer capable of defending it against the court and its allies in or outside of France without the active intervention of the peasants, petit-bourgeois and proletarians. However, the peasantry, as we have seen, only fought against **feudal** absolutism, not for the representative system. The new, mostly peasant, army, freed of the distinctions of estate, was the institution which attracted their enthusiasm. If a victorious general of humble origins should arrive at the head of these forces, throw parliamentary supremacy out the window, and assure his own absolute power – they would not rise up in revolt, they would stand and cheer him on: he, the peasant-emperor who took the place of the parliament of lawyers. As for those who had founded the republic and had victoriously defended it against the assault of feudal power – the sans-culottes – they were lying powerless on the ground. The military triumphs had exhausted their energies, and the bourgeoisie had crushed them: had been **obliged** to crush them, for their own class interests. But they had thus destroyed the only weapons which could have been used to oppose the new reign of sabre-politics.

And the old monarchy – it was gone, without any chance of coming back. The Empire was not a rebirth of feudal exploitation, it was, rather, like the Jacobin Terror, a tool of the Revolution. The Jacobins rescued the Revolution in France; Napoleon revolutionised Europe.

Notes

[12] His lands consisted of one million *arpents* [approx. 5100km^2] of hunting forests, excluding the forests used for salt evaporation ponds and other industrial purposes.

[13] Taine, *Les origines de la France contemporaine ; l'ancien régime*, p. 74.

[14] Louis Blanc, op.cit., I, p. 149

[15] Cf. ch. VIII p. 38. This is what Nikolai Kareev has to say about the Lumpenproletariat in pre-revolutionary France, in pages 211-214 of his work (cited above), "*The peasants and the peasant question in France in the last quarter of the 18th century*", and which we borrow from the translation of some passages which, as mentioned above, was communicated to us by F. Engels:

> "It is significant that the paupers were most numerous in the provinces which were considered the most fertile. The reason is that in these regions, there were very few peasants who owned their own land.
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> "But let us allow the figures speak for themselves: in Argentré (Brittany), of 2300 inhabitants who did not live off industry or commerce, more than half lived at a level of bare subsistence, and over 500 were forced into beggary. In Vainville (Artois), 60 families out of 130 were poor. Turning to Normandy: in Saint-Patrice, out of 1500 inhabitants, 400 lived on alms; in Saint-Laurent, it was three quarters of a population of 500 (Taine). The record books of the bailiwick of Douai show that, for example, in a village of 332 families, half lived on alms (parish of Bouvignies); in another, 65 out of 143 fell into poverty (parish of Aix); in a third, around 100 out of 413 were totally reduced to beggary (parish of Landus), etc. In the seneschalty of Puy-en-Velay, according to the records of the local clergy, out of a population of 120,000, 58,897 were unable to pay tax of any kind (*Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860, vol. V, p. 467*). In the villages of the Carhaix district, the situation was as follows: Frerogan: 10 well-off families, 10 poor, 10 destitute. Montred: 47 well-off families, 74 less well off, 64 families of paupers and day labourers. Paule: 200 households which for the most part one could call beggar's refuges (*Archives Nationales, vol. IV, p. 17*). The parish records of Marboeuf complain that in a population of 500, there are around 100 beggars (*Boirin Champeaux, Notice historique sur la Révolution dans le Département de l'Eure, 1872, p. 83*). The peasants of the village of Harville claimed that, due to a shortage of jobs, a good third of them lived in abject poverty (*Requête des habitants de la Commune d'Harville, Archives Nationales*).
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> "The situation in the towns was no better. In Lyon, 30,000 workers were reduced to beggary in 1787. In Paris, out of a population of 680,000, there were 118,784 paupers (Taine). At Rennes, a third of the population lived on alms, and another third were at permanent risk of falling to beggary (Du Chatelier, *L'agriculture en Bretagne, Paris 1863, p. 178*). The small Jurassic village of Lons-le-Saunier [transcription error? Kautsky wrote "Lourletaunier" – GB] was in such a state of poverty that when the Constituent Assembly introduced property qualifications for elections, only 728 people out of the 6,518 inhabitants could be counted as active citizens (Sommier, *Histoire de la révolution dans le Jura, Paris 1846, p. 33*). It is conceivable that at the time of the revolution, the population of people who lived on alms numbered in the millions. A clerical pamphlet of 1791 (*Avis aux pauvres sur la révolution présente et sur les biens du clergé, p. 15*) writes that there are six million poor people (*indigents*) in France, which seems somewhat exaggerated. But the figure of 1,200,000 beggars given for the year 1777 may not be an overstatement (Duval, *Cahiers de la Marche, Paris 1873, p. 116*)."

[16] Hail and drought damaged agricultural yields in 1788. At the end of December, 1788, the thermometers in Pairs read: 18.75 degrees Réamur [23.44 degrees Celsius]! In the faubourg of Saint-Antoine alone, there were 30,000 poor.

[17] In February 1793, the National Convention issued a law imposing compulsory military service on all unmarried Frenchmen between 18 and 40 years old – but one was permitted to send a surrogate instead.

[18] Ironic reference to the epithet hurled at the Social Democrats by German conservatives and nationalists at the time this brochure was originally published (1889). The anti-socialist laws stayed in effect until 1890. [GB]

[19] The crisis has its origin, essentially, in the exterior war, which not only absorbed a great quantity of food provisions for the upkeep of the army, but also hindered imports. The civil wars raging within the country at the same time brought about perhaps even deadlier consequences. And even the revolutionary peasants, who were no longer compelled by the greedy tax-farmers and officials to sell off a good chunk of their harvests at a low price, were inclined to keep their grain reserves to themselves: the small peasants because they scarcely produced enough to fulfil their own needs anyway; the larger peasants and sharecroppers, because it allowed them to increase prices, which rose hugely as a result of these factors.