

### 3. Nobility and Clergy

While the nobility and clergy were small in numbers<sup>3</sup>, only part of them, a minority, enjoyed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century a life of luxury and opulence, exhibited pomp and took part in the spending frenzy which we now view as characteristic of the privileged before the Revolution. Only the highest members of the nobility and clergy, landowners of immense domains, could afford the luxury and extravagant expenses by which they competed against one another through the splendour of their salons, the glory of their gatherings, the magnificence of their palace – the only stimulant that could still excite the nobility. They had long become too languid and too feeble to take part in jousts, in which only talent and personal abilities matter. Rivalling against one another to see who could spend the greatest sums of money and therefore following from that, who had the highest income, was well aligned with the nature of commodity production which had subsumed the major part of the nobility. Yet, the nobility still wasn't moulded by the new mode of production to the extent, for example, today's nobility is. It did not take the nobles long to learn how to spend, they would however not engage as fully as their current counterparts in growing their incomes by trading wool, grains, spirits, etc. Having for sole income feudal revenues, the nobility was accumulating debt at breakneck speed. Moreover, while this was already the lot of the high nobility, it was all the more severe for the middle and small nobility! Indeed, numerous families would only derive from their real estate no more than 50 *livres*, 25 *livres* even [~520 to 260 euros], of yearly income. The poorer they were, the more demanding and ruthless they were with their peasants. Yet the results were meagre. Loans were only a temporary solution that would, eventually, only further increase their misery. Only the State could permanently relieve them from their despair : looting the State had increasingly become the main activity of the nobles. They eagerly took every profitable office that the King could distribute. Furthermore, due to the ever increasing number, year after year, of ruined or nearly bankrupt nobles, those offices had to be constantly multiplied. The most frivolous of pretexts ended up being invented to grant destitute nobles a title to exploit the State. It goes without saying that beside those nobles in need, the high nobility, no less in debt nor greedy, was not forsaken.

The most wanted sinecures were court offices. They were the best paid, they required the least amount of knowledge and work to be fulfilled and they directly led to the source of all favours and pleasures. About 15 000 individuals were admitted to the court, the overwhelming majority of which was simply present to collect an income tied to a title. In order to sustain this useless mob, a tenth of the State revenue was needed, that is more than 40 millions of *livres* [~415 millions euros](this would correspond to 100 millions of today's francs).

Yet this was not enough for the nobility. Civil servants positions, which composed the State apparatus, were of wide variety. Some required prior education and a great deal of work. These were the ones that made the State function properly, their pay was meagre and they were occupied by bourgeois. Along those were the ones that only existed for « show », their occupants merely having the heavy burden of entertaining themselves and their peers. These well paid vacancies were exclusively restricted to the nobility<sup>4</sup>.

In the army, merit had been once the criteria used to appoint officers. Under Louis XIV, officers could equally be bourgeois or nobles. The latter were only favoured in peace time.

Yet, the greater the nobles' greed increased, the more they aspired to keep for themselves the high-ranking officer positions. The non-commissioned officer positions – upon which fell the most tedious aspects of the service – were left to the « canaille », however the well paid officer positions, which didn't require much work – especially in peace time – nor expertise, were becoming the privilege of the nobility. Officers cost 46 millions *livres* per year, the troops as a whole had to settle for 44 millions. The more the nobility's debt increased, the more it kept a jealous watch on its privileges. A few years before the Revolution broke out (1781), a royal edict was decreed which reserved the officer positions to the old nobility. The aspirants had to

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<sup>3</sup> Taine assessed that the nobility and clergy combined amounted to 270 000 individuals. He estimated that the nobility was composed of 25 000 to 30 000 families totalling 140 000 members and for the clergy 130 000 individuals, including approximately 60 000 priests and vicars, 23 000 monks and 37 000 nuns. (Taine, *Les origines de la France contemporaine*, I, 17, 527)

<sup>4</sup> These types of position were, according to a 1776 decree : 18 *gouvernements généraux de province* with a 60 000 *livres* salary and 21 at 30 000 *livres*; 114 *gouvernements* paid 8000 to 12 000 *livres*; 176 *lieutenants de villes* : 2 000 to 16 000 *livres*. In 1788 were created, among others, 17 posts of *commandants de ville* with a fixed income of 20 000 to 30 000 *livres* and an housing allowance of 4 000 to 6 000 *livres* per month; and vacancies of *sous-commandants* too.

prove noble birth for four generations in patrilineage. Thus were excluded from the grade of officer not only the bourgeoisie, but altogether the entirety of the newly ennobled nobility during the prior century.

In the Church, higher and better paid positions were, in part, specifically or de facto, reserved to the nobility as the king possessed the nominating power and appointed no one but nobles at these posts. Once again, the nobility exclusive access to those lavishly endowed offices was officially confirmed shortly before the Revolution, even though this provision was never made public. The 1500 opulent prebendaries at the disposal of the king were allotted exclusively to the nobility just as the episcopal and archiepiscopal sees. The 131 bishops and archbishops derived in total from their offices more than 14 millions *livres* of income, that is more than 100 000 *livres* per head. The Rohan cardinal, archbishop of Strasbourg, earned, as Prince of the Church, more than one million *livres* per year! This holy shepherd of worth could afford the luxury to buy for about 1 400 000 *livres* a diamond collar in hopes of gaining the favours of Queen Marie Antoinette.

However, all these lavishly compensated offices, whether they be ecclesiastical, military or administrative, could not satisfy a nobility both in debt and cupid. The king was continuously overwhelmed with requests to draw from the treasury and allocate special subsidies, for example to help a noble in financial distress or to indulge the whims of a dignitary or great lady.

As a result, between 1774 and 1789 only, 228 millions *livres* were spend by the treasury in pensions, gifts and other presents, including 80 millions *livres* for the royal family itself. This is how the two brothers of the king were each bestowed 14 millions *livres*. A couple of years before the Revolution, even though the budget deficit was already enormous, *Calonne*, the minister of finance, bought for the queen for 15 millions *livres*, the Castle of Saint-Cloud and for the king Rambouillet's Castle for 14 millions. Since the king not only viewed himself as the head of State but also as the head of landowners, he did not have any remorse profiteering, as such, from the plundering of the State.

The Polignac family, favoured by Marie Antoinette, received, alone, 700 000 *livres* in pensions. The duke of Polignac secured, among other things, a personal income of 120 000 *livres* and was gifted 1 200 000 *livres* for purchasing a domain<sup>5</sup>.

Hitherto, we have only focused on the nobility in general, as a group engaged in the systematic plunder of the State and the people.

However, this is not entirely correct. A significant part of the nobility, while a minority, not only did not partake in such schemes but on the contrary took great offence at these. It was the small and middle nobility of the economically retarded provinces, where feudal economy still persisted with vigour, mostly in Brittany and Vendée. Those lords would not migrate to Paris nor Versailles, preferring the traditional way of life in their castle, among their peasants, themselves merely being peasants of a higher kind. They were rough and uncultured but also vigorous and self-assured, their needs consisted for the most part in eating and drinking quality products in large quantities, which were easily satisfied by the payments in kind from the peasants upon whom they ruled. Moreover, their lack of debts and their simpler lifestyle meant they had no incentive to multiply taxes they could collect nor resorting to brutal methods to raise them. Thus they were far from being in bad terms with their peasants and their similar living conditions had created a certain kind of shared sympathy. Lords of those backwards regions had yet to share the traits of the useless exploiters and parasites that were those from the more developed ones. In those, the royal bureaucracy had progressively absorbed the main administrative, judiciary and police functions that a feudal lord would have once occupied. The only duties they still had were of little impact on the security and order of their territory and while they may have been, yesteryear, a way to secure its prosperity, they are now merely an instrument of its exploitation. The domainial officers of justice and police did not receive any stipends, on the contrary, they had to pay for these offices. This meant that they bought the ability to rip their lord's subjects off.

Things were rather different in the lands of the old fashioned feudality. There, the lord himself administered his domain, took care of roads and transport security, mediated conflicts between his subjects and punished crimes and offences. The lord would even sometimes continue to fulfil the ancient duty of protection of his people against foreign enemies –

<sup>5</sup> You can find detailed information on those pensions, among other things, in the book by Louis Blanc: *Histoire de la Révolution française*, book 5, chapter 3: *Le livre rouge*.

except, to tell the truth, against hostile armies. The most common enemies who came from time to time in these regions to plunder them were the royal officers of the fiscal administration. We have historical records showing how the lords would expel them when one would try his luck in their kingdoms.

Those nobles were unwilling to fully submit themselves to the royal authority. The court nobility, along with its acolytes within the army, the Church and the high bureaucracy, had interest in calling for the strengthening of the absolute power of the king. That which the feudal lords didn't manage to extract from the peasants in the name of the noble titles they held, the Farmers General and the royal officials themselves could reap and so much the better if their authority was expanded and the royal power without any limits. As the monarchy became absolute, the brutality and unfairness of its fiscal pressure intensified along its ability to dig into its treasury to divert vast sums for the benefice of its creatures but at the expense of the needs of the State.

The "countryside squires" were not too keen on this state of affairs as they would never be the recipients of any of those court favours nor, in fact, would they even need them. However, the fiscal pressure, as it grew stronger, impoverished their subjects. Moreover, the more the royal bureaucracy absorbed missions in the realm of justice, administration and police, the more power and prestige were lost by these feudal lords in their own lands.

Contrary to courtiers, the feudal lords did not see themselves as mere lackeys of the king. Moved by an authentic feudal spirit, they placed themselves on the same footing as the king. In their minds, just like in feudal times, the king was merely the most important landowner, a *primus inter pares*, who did not have any prerogative to modify in any way the organisation of the State without their consent and against whom they firmly asserted their freedom and hereditary rights, without much success nonetheless. They were all the more inclined to this that, as the needs of the royal treasury grew, new fees were put in place that would also concern the nobility, even though up until that point it had been exempt from any tax. This had the consequence of making the "countryside squires" contribute to the State's expenses for no personal benefit. This is why they demanded, with increasing vigour, saving measures regarding the budget, reforms of the financial system and its control by an assembly of Estates.

The nobility was split in two hostile factions: on one hand, the court nobility and its acolytes, e.g. the high aristocracy as a whole and the majority of small and middle aristocrats, all resolute advocates of absolutism, and on the other hand, the rural nobility, encompassing the small and middle nobility of the economically undeveloped regions, who demanded the convocation of the Estates General to rein in the public administration.

For whom who judges factions of the past, not upon the class interests they represent, but from the apparent concordance of their tendencies with modern slogans, the most reactionary elements of France at that time might appear unmistakably "progressive" or "liberal", as their goals were, just as those of the Third Estate, to replace the absolute monarchy with a supervised monarchy.

In truth, however, none were more opposed to new ideas and to the rising classes than them.

The "backwoods squire" hated the bourgeois just like a peasant hates an urbanite, a man of the natural economy hates a representative of the monetary economy, a yokel hates a cultured man, an hereditary landowner from a vast lineage hates a ruthless parvenu. He treated the bourgeois with obvious contempt when they interacted, which quite honestly was a rare occurrence.

On the opposite side, the urban nobility and part of the bourgeoisie were quickly drawing closer. Granted, the aristocrat's arrogance, when interacting with a tailor or a cobbler, was even greater, if possible, than the one exhibited by his colleagues from the countryside. A craftsman was expected to feel especially honoured to be able to work for a person of high standing, thus it was seen as a great offence to even demand any payment. The attitudes were quite different towards the good sirs of the high finance. For they possessed in abundance that which the nobility needed the most, money. The nobility had grown dependant on them, they could on a whim bankrupt it or allow the prolongation of its existence. Except for a very few families, the court aristocrats, from the king to lowest pageboy, were indebted to the high finance. It was, therefore, not appropriate to display too much arrogance towards those good sirs. One day, Louis XIV, the "Sun King", welcomed in front of the whole court the Jew

Samuel Bernard with the same regard as a reigning prince : admittedly this man was sixty times millionaire. Why would the king's servants exhibit more pride than their master himself? The high finance was resembling more and more the nobility as it purchased titles and noble properties. Many a nobleman in need would even try to restore his lineage reputation by marrying a rich heiress of a more recent nobility. They would tell themselves that even the best farmlands needed from time to time to be fertilised with manure. From there onward, the nobility had fallen rather deep into the manure. The parlours of the high finance looked more and more like those of the nobility and, which may have favoured the convergence of the two classes, they met up in the same filth. Prostitutes sold themselves as easily to the hedonists from the Third Estate as to the earls, dukes and bishops. The brothel erased any distinctions between orders, and the French court was not far from becoming worryingly similar to one. We have seen earlier how an archbishop tried to buy a queen with diamonds.

Several writers (Buckle comes to mind) have seen in this increasing intermingling between nobles and Parisians bankers the effect of "the democratic spirit" which, before the Revolution, would have haunted everybody's mind, regardless of class. Unfortunately for them, at the same moment, impelled by those "democratic" noblemen, the review of the lineage was made stricter to access the rank of officer, the Church's goods were declared the exclusive prerogative of the nobility and new sinecures in the bureaucracy were created just for the nobility. It was not the democratic ideas but material interests which, as they strengthened the exclusive access of the aristocracy to State offices, lowered in an increasingly apparent way the visible threshold between the old landowning nobility and the new financial one.

This "lack of prejudice" of the Parisian nobility, sociability wise, provoked the ire of the "countryside squires", especially regarding religious and moral matters. The noble countryman, still living in the feudal sphere of old, was imbued with the respective ancient mental structures of his forefathers' religion. For the Parisian nobleman, however, the last remnants of feudality were merely tools for the exploitation and control of the masses, its functions, of which only subsisted the titles and their corresponding revenues, were for him devoid of any other meaning. This is how he regarded religion itself. For him, who lived in the city and far from the feudal ruins, it had lost its significance and as with the other relics of the feudal age, it was only good to subdue and exploit the masses. Still, in his mind, religion was absolutely necessary for the "ignorant" population, who could not do without it<sup>6</sup>. As opposed to the "enlightened" nobles that could, of course, ridicule it as they pleased.

The development of libertinage in the nobility's parlours was followed by the decadence of ancient customs which had in the same way lost their material basis. The lord of the old fashioned feudality placed the utmost importance on the upkeep of his household and on the virtue of his housewife. Without a thorough and continuous management, the entire mechanism of reproduction would come to a halt. A solid couple and a firm household discipline were a requirement. Yet, for a courtier whose only pastime is to have fun and spend his money, marriage and family were entirely superfluous. They were but hindering formalities to which one had to comply for appearance's sake as having legitimate heirs was after all a requirement, but with which one could easily take some liberties. It is common knowledge how the kings led the nobility by example on the matter of "free love", thus we need not to get into the details here.

The countryside nobility, understandably, expressed as much outrage against this "lack of prejudice" from the urban nobility as against its looting of the State's treasury, while latter blamed the former for its crudeness and ignorance as well as its disobedience. An outright hostility pitted them against one another.

Beside those two sides of the nobility, there were also nobles who defected to the enemy and fought the feudal system to its very core. Among the ranks of the bankrupted small nobility, in particular, could be found many of such cases who did not have any fondness for the ecclesiastic State nor any penchant for a military career, who did not make any progress inside the court or would even fall from grace and lastly those who were as much disgusted by the corruption of the court nobility as by the stupidity and vulgarity of the "countryside squires" and who saw that the collapse of the existing system was unavoidable while at the

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<sup>6</sup> « *Regarding the people, it will always be foolish and uncultured [...]. They are but cattle in need of a yoke, a goad and some hay.* » Voltaire, Letter to Mr. Tabareau » (Ferney, February 3rd 1769), in *Œuvres de Voltaire*, Voltaire, éd. Delagrave, 1885, t. 69, p. 428

same time strongly sympathising with the masses living in squalor. They sided with the Third Estate and joined its intellectuals, writers, pamphleteers and journalists, all of those who gained moral authority along the Third Estate rise in prominence. Thus, those among the aristocrats who were the most intelligent, dynamic, brazen or strongest in character, took the side of the Third Estate. At first, only individual defections occurred, however when the triumph of the Third Estate became apparent, they rushed up in droves, thereby greatly weakening their class in the very moment it needed to muster all of its strength in order to, at the very least, delay its annihilation.

Moreover, at the same time, the two pillars upon which the Ancien Régime most firmly stood, the clergy and the army, began to falter.

The higher ranks of those two institutions, like we already said, were reserved to the nobility. The Third Estate provided non-commissioned officers and priests, both of whom charged, in their respective fields, of the same task, that is converting their subordinates into mindless cogs who would obey, without any objections, every orders from above. Yet, the very people who had the task to tame and to manage them in order to serve the ruling class, were also part of the oppressed.

The Church was immensely rich. It owned a fifth of the lands, the most fertile and best cultivated fifth, which value surpassed, proportionally, all of the others. The value of all the Church's possessions was around four millions *livres*<sup>7</sup>. The tithe alone yielded the clergy 123 millions per year. Of those enormous revenues, income from movable assets of the various religious corporations excluded, the lion's share went to the high dignitaries and to the monasteries<sup>8</sup>, the priests themselves lived in abject misery, in squalid hovels, and oftentimes would even face starvation. Yet, those very same priests had to bear all the Church's duties that it still retained. Nothing would come to remind them that they pertained to a privileged order. Attached to the Third Estate by their familial bonds, without having any hope of ever escaping poverty, overworked, living among the wretched, they were asked to instil those poor people with an absolute obedience towards the lazy parasites that only repaid them with contempt, to be the enablers of exploitation of the people from which everything had already been taken, and to help to pressure their brothers and fathers for the sake of an arrogant and lecherous elite that, without any regard, threw away into their whores' underskirts the fruits of the labour of thousands of people.

Devoid of any gratification and prospect, how much longer could the non-commissioned officers let themselves be bullied by the neophytes and dandies of the aristocracy who did not understand a thing about service nor even cared about it, while all the most important and demanding tasks increasingly fell upon them?

The more the arrogance and cupidity of the nobles increased, the more the aristocrats kept for themselves the best positions in the army and the Church, and the more they would push the non-commissioned officers and the lowly priests into the arms of the Third Estate. The powers that be, of course, did not perceive any sign of this development: the blind subjugation imposed upon their subordinates in the army and the Church hid it all too well. The awakening was all the ruder when, at a critical juncture where they needed their ancillary troops the most, those same subordinates turned against them.

In the Estates General of 1789, the critical question was at first to determine whether to grant one vote per delegate or per order. The third Estate demanded to vote per delegate, the number of their delegates being double of the other two orders. The nobility however believed it would be able to dominate the Estates General with the help of the clergy if they voted per order.

During this struggle, the clergy had let the nobility down. Within their delegates, there were 48 archbishops and bishops, 35 abbots and deans but also 208 lowly priests. Those mostly sided with the Third Estate and thus helped the victory of the vote per delegate.

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<sup>7</sup> In 1971, the deputy Amelot estimated the value of all the Church's possessions, already sold or to be sold, to 3700 millions, forested lands excluded.

<sup>8</sup> The 399 Prémontrés monks evaluated their annual income at more than 1 million. The Bénédictins of Cluny, consisting of 288 monks, earned annually 1,800,000 *livres*, those of Saint-Maur, 1672 in total, even earned a net income of 8 millions, excluding what the abbots and priors earned annually which was a similar amount.



They thought the army would erase the nobility's defeat. The court took in Versailles and Paris wide-ranging military measures that prefigured a coup d'État. They hoped that once Paris was crushed, they would see the end of the National Assembly that replaced the Estates General. The uprising was easily provoked by Necker's firing (July 12th), who was a popular minister. However, it did not go their way. The Gardes Françaises took the side of the people, other regiments refused to make use of their weapons and officers were forced to withdraw them to avoid further defections. Yet, this move did not appease the people, who wanted to hedge against future power grabs. They took up arms July 13<sup>th</sup>, and when, July 14<sup>th</sup>, the news of the Bastille's canons being directed at the faubourg Saint-Antoine spread, while at the same time new troops arrived from Saint-Denis, the Parisian people and the Gardes Françaises, united, took over the infamous citadel. The defections of the lowly priests and the Gardes Françaises are two key moments of the French Revolution.

Thus we can see that the whole reactionary body, that is, the nobility, the clergy and the army, was divided and split at the start of the Revolution. Some part of it was hesitant, another one openly allied to the enemy, another ultra-reactionary, but opposed to the absolute monarchy, vigorously demanding fiscal reforms, a further one, "enlightened", but deeply implicated in the abuses of dominant system which had become for them a vital necessity, so much that any fiscal reform would be the death of them. Among the privileged, there was a part unwilling to let go of its privileges, audacious and vigorous yet ignorant, uncouth and unable to manage the matters of State ; the other one was more educated, cognisant of the needs of a functioning State, yet cowardly and languid. One part was weak and apprehensive, prone to concessions and the other part was arrogant and brutal. All of these factions tenaciously fought one another, the ones accusing the others of being responsible of the current situation in which everyone was stuck. And lastly the court, agitated by all these influences, tossed around from one to another, would spark outrage one day by its violent fits and the following day inspire contempt for its cowardice : This is the picture of the ruling classes in the early days of the Revolution.