

The French Revolution: an Introduction

While the American Revolution remained a remote affair in the lives of most Europeans, the French Revolution of 1789 exercised a profound influence on the society and politics of the following centuries. It gave rise to modern conceptions of nationhood and citizenship; equally important, it served as the model and archetype for a revolutionary tradition that has marked Europe to the present day.

To grasp the nature of the Revolution, it is necessary to know something about the basic social structure of pre-Revolutionary France. The French *ancien régime* was formally divided into three legal orders or "estates." The clergy and the nobility comprised the First and Second Estates, while the Third Estate served as a broad category encompassing much of the rest of the population. Members of the first two estates enjoyed numerous privileges, such as immunity from taxation, monopoly of certain offices, and entitlement to various pensions. Since their traditional roles were ecclesiastical and military, they were legally discouraged from joining the liberal and commercial professions. For these reasons, the productive and fiscal burdens of the absolutist regime fell heavily on the Third Estate, principally on the peasantry which made up roughly 80% of the population.

The immediate occasion for the revolution lay in the financial crisis of the monarchy, owing in large part to the vast sums it spent on military undertakings, including France's support for the American Revolution. By 1788, a reluctant Louis XVI was compelled to summon a representative body, known as the Estates General, in order to levy emergency funds. This meeting of the Estates General was to be the first of its kind since 1614. In the months leading up to it, a great many political pamphlets articulated the resentment felt by many members of the Third Estate against the antiquated system of privileges that protected the "sloth" of the nobility and blocked the ascendancy of the most productive elements in French society. In their view, France should be reformed into a constitutional monarchy, with rewards based on individual merit rather than on inherited privileges.

Probably the most important of these pamphlets is Joseph Emmanuel Sieyès' "What is the Third Estate?" The **Abbé Sieyès** (1749-1836) was a powerful figure during the years from 1789 to 1799, largely as a result of this pamphlet: through identifying the unprivileged Third Estate with the nation, it fused the diverse discontents of revolutionary France into what seemed to be a systematically developed program for righting existing wrongs. One report is that the pamphlet sold 30,000 copies in the three weeks following its publication in January, 1789.

"What is the Third Estate?" gives forceful evidence of the intellectual influence on the Revolution exerted by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. In a simple and lucid fashion Sieyès puts to political use the Physiocrat emphasis on laissez-faire economics and the fundamental value of land; he uses, and mixes, the philosophies of natural rights and utilitarianism; and although he denied Rousseau any part in establishing the

"principles of the social art," he agreed with Rousseau's account of the foundation of society. The central part of his political philosophy rests on the notion of the general will. Sieyès' chief addition to the theory of government in *The Social Contract* is a greater emphasis on representative government.

Events in the spring and summer of 1789 seemed to reinforce the arguments advanced by Sieyès and others: the upper orders refused to reform the voting structure of the Estates General in order to give the Third Estate a voice corresponding to its numbers and financial importance. On 17 June 1789, disgruntled representatives of the Third Estate took matters into their own hands, reconstituting the Estates General as a sovereign National Assembly, thereby making manifest the principle that the Third Estate constituted the nation as a whole.

At the same time, uprisings of the peasantry and the urban classes pushed the National Assembly into abolishing many of the most burdensome aspects of the old order. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, promulgated on 26 August 1789, legally enshrined the principles of popular sovereignty and equality under law. It also insisted that civil distinctions could be legitimately founded "only on the basis of public utility," a further indication of the meritocratic aims of the revolution in its early phase.

In subsequent years, the revolution passed through numerous stages as different social and political elements struggled for control. The "Constitution of 1791" highlights the liberal period of the revolution, with its emphasis on individual rights, private property, representative government, constitutional monarchy, and a restrictive franchise. A more radical "Jacobin" phase began in 1792, primarily as the result of continued peasant and urban unrest, growing internal opposition, military threats from abroad, the recalcitrance of Louis XVI, and the ideological "logic" of the revolution itself. Louis was deposed in August of that year and a republic declared in September. The Constitution of 1793 reflects the more radical character of this period in its proclamation of universal male suffrage and in its provisions for broad public education and social welfare. However, the mounting conditions of war, inflation, and political unrest led the revolutionary government to suspend this Constitution until peace could be established, and in fact it was never put into effect.

By the late summer of 1793, the many threats to the survival of the revolution served to legitimate a reign of terror by a governmental committee (the second Committee of Public Safety) dominated by **Maximilien Robespierre** (1758-1794). A lawyer from the provincial city of Arras who had been elected deputy to the Estates General in 1789 and a great advocate of democratic egalitarianism in his capacity as leader of the Paris Jacobin Club, Robespierre was elected to the National Convention after the fall of the monarchy and soon emerged as the leader in the revolutionary government. He was also the most powerful and controversial figure during the Terror, which lasted from 1 June 1793 to 27 July 1794 and which constituted the most violent phase of the Revolution; approximately 40,000 people were killed.

An admirer of Rousseau's political thought, Robespierre developed several fundamental

ideas, above all the linkage between virtue and terror. He elaborated a theory of collective, civilian, revolutionary dictatorship. Viewing a unified general will as essential and moral virtue as synonymous with revolution, Robespierre tried to "force men to be free," and to convert or eliminate the "enemies of the people." He not only championed "virtue and terror" as principles of revolutionary government, but also argued, contrary to Rousseau, for a representative rather than a direct democracy.

Written in 1790, well before the Terror, **Edmund Burke's** *Reflections on the Revolution in France* has endured as one of the most important criticisms of the Revolution. An Irish Protestant, Burke (1729-97) became secretary in 1765 to the Marquis of Rockingham, the leader of the Whig party, and entered Parliament in the same year. For a generation, he was the most eloquent Whig spokesman. Although he defended the right of the American colonies to revolt against Britain (he was also the agent of the Province of New-York), and devoted years of effort to trying to improving conditions for Britain's subjects in Ireland and India, Burke denounced the revolution in France, even during its early, moderate phase; in this, he broke with the Whigs and his close friend Charles James Fox, then their leader. Burke's anti-revolutionary stance rested upon his conviction that society was too massively complex an organism to be subjected to merely rational control. His work became a foundational text of the conservative tradition; but his conservatism in *Reflections* is based less on political conservatism than on his understanding of the emotional power of tradition and his recognition of the irrational elements in human character.

Burke's were not the only philosophical objections to the Revolution. The Revolution in general, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the various Constitutions in particular, prompted instant and vigorous debate among political philosophers at home and abroad. Of particular concern were the so-called "natural rights of man," the claim that government has its basis in contract, and the origins and meaning of freedom. Between 1791 and 1795, **Jeremy Bentham** (b. 1748), one of the founders of Utilitarianism and a leading advocate of legal reform in England, wrote a stinging polemic against the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in which he warned that the language of abstract natural rights was nothing but "nonsense upon stilts" that would ultimately lead France into anarchy. Arguing that the contractual basis of government and Enlightenment concepts of the state of nature and man's natural freedom were nothing more than delusory fictions, he asserted that man had no rights other than those endowed by man-made law. In this vein, Bentham foreshadowed and initiated a debate about rights and revolutions that would occupy philosophers for many decades to come.

What Is the Third Estate?

Joseph Emmanuel Sieyès

The plan of this work is quite simple. We have three questions to consider:

(1) What is the third estate? Everything.

(2) What has it been in the political order up to the present? Nothing.

(3) What does it demand? To become something....

The Third Estate is a Complete Nation

- 10 What is necessary for the subsistence and prosperity of a nation? Particular labors and public functions.

Particular labors can be divided into four classes: 1) The soil and water furnish the primary materials for the satisfaction of human needs, and the first class in this order will be that of all the families attached to the work of the field. 2) From the first sale of materials until their consumption, or use, a new handiwork, more or less multifarious, adds to these materials a secondary value more or less compound. Human industry succeeds in perfecting the goods of nature and multiplies their value as raw materials twofold, tenfold, a hundredfold. Such are the works of the second class. 3) Between production and consumption, and also between the various stages of production there is a multitude of intermediary agents, useful as much to the producers as to the consumers: these are the merchants.... This useful group makes up the third class. 4) In addition to these three classes of productive citizens who are busy with the *objects* of consumption and use, society requires a group of special works and services *directly* useful or pleasing to the *person*. This fourth class embraces everything from the most liberal and distinguished scientific professions to the least esteemed domestic services. Such are the works which maintain society. Who supports them? The third estate.

20

Public functions may similarly, in the existing state, be arranged under the four recognized denominations, the Sword, the Robe, the Church and the Administration. It would be superfluous to run through them in detail, in order to show how the third estate is nineteen-twentieths of these, with this difference, that it is responsible for all that is truly laborious, all the services that the privileged order refuses to perform. The lucrative and titulary positions are occupied by members of the privileged order. Should we give them credit for that? It would be justifiable if the third estate either refused to fill these positions or if it were not so capable of performing their functions. The truth of the matter is known; yet they have dared to place the third estate under interdiction. They have said to it: "Whatever your services, whatever your talents, you shall go just so far; you shall not pass beyond. It is not a good thing for you to be honored." If this exclusion is a social crime against the third estate, might one at least be able to say that it serves the public

30

40 interest? Well, are not the effects of monopoly known? If it discourages those whom it excludes, does it not also render unskilled those whom it favors? Isn't it known that every work removed from free competition will be at once more expensive and less well done?

What Has the Third Estate Been Up to the Present? Nothing

50 We shall not examine the state of servitude in which the people has groaned for so long, no more than the state of constraint and humiliation in which it is still held. Its civil condition has changed; it ought to change more: it is quite impossible that the body of the nation or even that any particular order should become free if the third estate is not free. Privileges do not make one free, but rather the rights that belong to everyone. If the aristocrats should attempt, even at the cost of this liberty of which they have shown themselves unworthy, to keep the people oppressed, it is fair to ask by what right. If the answer is by the right of conquest, then, it must be agreed, the matter must be pushed a bit farther. The third estate need not fear going back to the past in this way. For it will go back to the year preceding the conquest; and since it is today strong enough not to allow itself to be conquered, its opposition will be more effective. Why should not all these families that maintain the foolish pretention that they are descended from the conquerors and are the inheritors of their rights return to the forests of Franconie?

60 The nation, thus purged, will be able to console itself, I think, with being reduced to regard itself as made up of only the descendants of the Gauls and the Romans. In truth, if one insists upon making distinctions based on birth, might it not be revealed to our poor compatriots that those that are descended from the Gauls and the Romans are at least worthy as those that come from the Sicambres, the Welches and other savages come out of the woods and swamps of ancient Germany? Yes, it will be said; but the conquest has upset all relationships, and nobility of birth has passed to the side of the conquerors. Well! then it must change sides again, and the third estate will get back its nobility by becoming the conqueror in its turn....

70 Let us continue. By the third estate must be understood the mass of citizens who belong to the common order. Everyone who is privileged by law, in whatever manner, departs from the common order, is an exception to the common law, and, consequently, does not belong to the third estate. We have said that a common law and a common representation are what make one nation. It is only too true that one is *nothing* in France, when one is only under the protection of the common law; if one does not hold some privilege he must make up his mind to endure scorn, insult and vexations of all kinds. In order to prevent his being completely crushed the only resource of the unfortunate unprivileged person is to attach himself by all sorts of sordid tricks to some dignitary, only at this price does he buy the power, on occasions, to call himself *somebody*.

But it is less in its civil estate than in its relations to the constitution that we have to consider the third estate here. Let us study it with respect to the Estates General.

Who have been its pretended representatives? Either the newly ennobled or the temporarily privileged. These false deputies have not even always been freely chosen in a popular election. Sometimes in the Estates General, and almost always in the provincial estates, the representation of the people is looked upon as the peculiar right of certain positions or offices.

The old nobility cannot stand the new nobles; it only permits them to sit with it when they can claim, as is said, four generations and a hundred years. So it thrusts them back into the third estate to which they obviously no longer belong. However, in the eyes of the law all nobles are equal, those of yesterday and those who succeed greatly or very little in hiding their origin or their usurpation. All have the same privileges. Only opinion distinguishes between them. But if the third estate is compelled to support a prejudice sanctioned by the law there is hardly any reason for its submitting to a prejudice which is against the text of the law.

No matter who is made a noble it is certain that from the moment that a citizen acquires privileges contrary to the common right he is no longer a member of the common order. His new interest is opposed to the general interest; he is incapacitated from voting for the people....

Is separating from the third estate not only the hereditarily privileged, but also those who are enjoying privileges only temporarily, . . . is this an attempt to weaken this order by depriving it of its most enlightened, most courageous and most respected members?

. . . The third estate is always identified in my mind with the idea of a nation. Whatever our motive may be, can we make the truth not the truth? Because an army has had the misfortune of seeing its best troops desert it, does it follow that it must depend upon them to defend it? All privilege, it cannot be repeated too much, is opposed to the common right; therefore all the privileged, without distinction, form a class that is different from and opposed to the third estate. At the same time, this truth ought to contain nothing that will alarm the friends of the people. On the contrary, it serves the national interest, by making forcefully apparent the necessity of immediately suppressing all temporary privileges, which divide the third estate and would appear to condemn this order to placing its destinies in the hands of its enemies. Besides, this observation must not be separated from the one that follows: the abolition of privileges in the third estate is not the loss of exemptions which a few of its members enjoy. These exemptions are nothing but the common right. It has been supremely unjust to deprive the generality of people of them. So I demand not the loss of a right but its restitution; and if it is objected that by making some of these privileges common, like, that of not being drafted for the militia, the means of filling a social need is prevented, I answer that every public need ought to be the responsibility of everybody, and not of a particular class of citizens, and that one must be as much a stranger to all reflection as to all justice not to find a more national means of completing and maintaining such military establishment as one wishes to have....

Let one read history with the intention of examining whether the facts are in conformity with or contrary to this assertion, and he will be assured, I have had the experience, that it is a great error to believe that France is subject to a monarchical regime.

It is enough at this point to have made it apparent that the pretended utility of a privileged order for the public service is only a chimera; that without it, everything that is laborious in this service is discharged by the third estate; that without it the superior places would be infinitely better filled; that they ought to be the natural portion and reward of recognized talents and services; and that if the privileged have succeeded in usurping every lucrative and titulary post, it is at once an odious crime against the generality of citizens and a betrayal of the public interest.

Who would dare to say, therefore, that the third estate does not contain in itself all that is necessary to constitute a complete nation? It is like a strong and robust man whose arms are still in chains. If the privileged order were removed the nation would not be something less but something more. So, what is the third estate? Everything, but an "everything" shackled and oppressed. What would it be without the privileged order? Everything, but an "everything" free and flourishing. Nothing can get along without it, everything will get along infinitely better without the others. Nor is the whole case stated when it is shown that the privileged, far from being useful to the nation, can only weaken it and harm it; further, it must be proved that the nobility does not enter into the social order; that it can well be a *burden* on the nation, but that it is not capable of being a part of it.

First, it is impossible to know where to place the nobles among the various elements in the nation. I know that there are many individuals, indeed too many, in whom infirmity, incompetence, incurable laziness, or the force of bad habits operate to make them strangers to the work of society. Everywhere the exception and the abuse is side by side with the rule, especially in a vast empire. But at least it will be agreed that the fewer these abuses the better the State is regulated. The worst regulated of all will be that State in which not only are there particular persons isolated, but an entire class of citizens finds its glory in remaining inactive in the midst of general activity and is able to consume the best part of the produce without having helped in any way to bring it into existence. Such a class is surely foreign to the nation in its *sloth*.

The noble order is foreign among us not less because of its civil and public prerogatives.

What is a nation? A body of associates living under a *common* law and represented by the same *legislature*.

Is it not all too certain that the noble order has privileges, exemptions, and even rights separated from the rights of the great body of citizens? It departs in this respect from the common order, from the common law. Its civil rights make it already a people apart in the nation at large. It is truly *imperium in imperio*.¹

With regard to its *political* rights, it also exists apart. It has representatives of its own, who are not responsible in any way for acting on behalf of the people. The body of its deputies sits apart; and when it assembles in the same room with the deputies of simple citizens it is no less true that its representation is essentially distinct and separate: it is
 160 foreign to the nation in its principle, since its commission does not come from the people, and in its object, since it consists in defending not the general interest, but a particular one.

The third estate therefore includes everything that belongs to the nation; and everything that is not the third estate cannot be regarded as being of the nation. What is the third estate? Everything.

Remove from our annals a few years of Louis XI, of Richelieu, and a few moments of Louis XIV, where one sees only pure despotism, and you would believe that you were reading the history of an *aulic*² aristocracy. It is the court which has reigned and not the monarch. It is the court which makes and unmakes, which calls and recalls the ministers,
 170 which creates and distributes positions, etc. And what is the court, if not the head of that immense aristocracy which covers every part of France, which, through its members, attains to everything and exercises everywhere what is essential to every part of the public interest? Thus the people has accustomed itself to separate in its grumblings the monarch from the powers behind the throne. It has always regarded the king as a man so surely deceived and so without protection in the middle of an active and all-powerful court, that it has never thought to blame him for all the evil that is done in his name.

To sum up: the third estate has not had up to the present true representatives in the Estates General. Therefore its political rights are nought.

180 **What Does the Third Estate Demand? To Become Something.**

It is not necessary to judge its demands on the basis of the isolated observations of a few authors more or less informed about the rights of man. The third estate is still very backward in this respect, not only with regard to the insights of those who have studied the social order, but also with regard to that mass of common ideas which constitutes public opinion. The true petitions of this estate cannot be appreciated except in terms of the authentic protests which the great municipalities of the kingdom have addressed to the government. What do these show? That the people want to be *something*, and in truth the least possible. It wants to have genuine representatives in the Estates General, that is to say, deputies *drawn from its own ranks*, who are capable of being the interpreters of its
 190 desire and the protectors of its interests. But of what use is it to this estate to be present in the Estates General if the interest contrary to its own predominates there! It would only serve to give sanction by its presence to the oppression of which it is the eternal victim. Therefore it is quite certain that it cannot come to vote at the Estates General if it ought not to have there *an influence which is at least equal to that of the privileged classes*, and it demands a number of representatives equal to the number of the two other orders together. Finally, this equality of representation would become completely illusory if

200

every chamber had its separate voice. The third estate demands therefore that the votes be taken *by heads and not by order*. These protests which have created such alarm in the circles of the privileged amount to this, because it is only from this that the reform of abuses would follow. The true intention of the third estate is to have in the Estates General an influence equal to that of the privileged. I repeat, can it ask less? And is it not clear that if its influence there is not equal, one cannot hope that it will leave its state of political nullity and become *something*?

Notes

1. A sovereignty within a sovereignty.
2. Court