France on the Eve of 1789: A Society in Crisis?

There is besides something special in this malady of the French Revolution that I feel without being able to describe it well or to analyze its causes. It is a \textit{virus} of a new and unknown kind. There were violent revolutions in the world, but the immoderate, violent, radical, desperate, audacious, almost mad, and nonetheless powerful and effective character of these revolutionaries is without precedent, it seems to me, in the great social agitations of past centuries. From whence came this new race? What produced it? What made it so effective? What is perpetuating it?

—Alexis de Tocqueville (1858)

(CD-ROM p. 167)
The French Revolution transformed French society and politics and threatened the entire established order of Europe. French revolutionaries granted equal rights to religious minorities, suppressed serfdom and the remaining feudal obligations, abolished the nobility, reorganized the Catholic church, installed a republican form of government, executed the king, and started a war that would eventually engulf much of Europe, the Caribbean, and the Near East. They also executed 40,000 supposed counterrevolutionaries and arrested 300,000 suspects for political crimes. Some 250,000 people died in civil wars fought within France; many hundreds of thousands died in the wars with foreign powers. By the end of 1799 France had tried four different constitutions at home and imposed new constitutions on conquered territories in the Netherlands, Italy, and Switzerland. The French aimed to revolutionize all of Europe; as might be expected, the European monarchs did everything they could to hold back this seemingly irresistible tide.

After the decade of revolutionary upheaval, 1789–99, came fifteen years of rule by Napoleon Bonaparte, a minor Corsican nobleman who rose to become emperor of the French nation. Between 1799 and 1815, Napoleon recast France in a more authoritarian mold and at the same time continued to impose revolutionary reforms on the rest of Europe. By 1810 Napoleon controlled most of Europe west of Vienna, but his invasion of Russia in 1812 spelled the beginning of his decline. Though he won most of the battles, he lost his army to the cold and to the rigors of withdrawal. In 1814 his own government deposed him, and after a brief attempt to regain his position the united European allies defeated him definitively at Waterloo in 1815. The victors sent Napoleon into permanent exile, where he died in 1821. The rulers of Europe finally breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Twenty-five years of constant turmoil and upheaval seem to require equally dramatic origins. As the French aristocrat and social commentator Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the letter excerpted above, “the immoderate, violent, radical, desperate, audacious, almost mad, and nonetheless powerful and effective character of these revolutionaries is without precedent.” Tocqueville devoted many years of his life to assessing the causes of the French Revolution, and yet even he confessed that he never entirely penetrated its secrets. How could the most populous country in western Europe, one with a history of centuries of monarchical rule, become the home of modern revolution? Did revolution arise out of particularly oppressive social conditions? Was French society in crisis on the eve of 1789? Or was the Revolution an accident of history? Tocqueville was only one of many who have argued about the same questions since 1789.

The origins of the French Revolution can be divided into three major categories: society, monarchy, and new ideas. French society did not experience more tensions and conflicts than other European societies. The French monarchy did not oppress its subjects more than the other European rulers did. And the ideas of the movement known as the Enlightenment affected other countries and not just France. Nevertheless,
the interaction of social tensions, monarchical failures, and new ideas was explosive in France. It is the task of the next few pages to explain how this could be so.

**Society and Social Tensions**

The best way to understand French society as a whole is to compare it with the societies of its nearest powerful neighbors, Great Britain and Prussia (a leading German state). On a scale ranging from most capitalist to most feudal, France ranked just about in the middle, with Great Britain on the capitalist end and Prussia on the feudal end. By 1789, Great Britain had long been free of the remnants of serfdom or feudalism. All land was freely owned and exchanged on the market, nobles enjoyed no meaningful legal privileges, and the middle classes were growing in numbers, wealth, and self-confidence. In contrast, France still lived with the vestiges of a feudal or seigneurial regime. There were between 140,000 and 1,500,000 serfs, depending on how strictly serfdom is defined, and almost every peasant paid seigneurial dues to his noble landlord. Dues ranged from required labor on the lord’s estate to fees for baking in his lord’s oven or using his wine or olive press. (Document 1.3 includes several examples of seigneurial dues.) French nobles enjoyed various legal privileges, including exemptions from some forms of taxation. Yet the French middle classes, like their English counterparts, were growing in number (tripling in the eighteenth century), due to an explosive increase in overseas commerce and domestic manufacturing. French peasants owned about 50 percent of the land in the country. Prussia, on the other end of the scale, was much more caught up in the coils of feudalism or seigneurialism than France. Prussian nobles dominated their serfs on the land and occupied all the important positions in the army and the bureaucracy. Prussian nobles did not just enjoy legal privileges; they controlled both the army and the state administration. Few Prussian peasants owned the land they worked, and the middle classes were still small in number and relatively timid in political outlook. In other words, French society was a kind of hybrid, neither entirely free of the feudal past nor entirely caught up in it. As the quote from Abbé Emmanuel

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1. *Feudal regime and feudalism* were terms used by the French revolutionaries to denounce those aspects of landholding that they considered backward. Historians now prefer the terms *seigneurial* and *seigneurialism*, labels derived from the French word *seigneur* for lord, because feudalism had virtually disappeared in France by the end of the sixteenth century. In the Middle Ages, lords of the manor exercised almost total control over the lives of their serfs. As serfdom disappeared in France, landowners who could claim titles as lords continued to insist on their rights to forced labor and payment of dues even from "free" peasants. These rights were considered feudal or seigneurial and denounced as such by the revolutionaries.
Sieyès demonstrates, many commoners deeply resented the privileges claimed by the nobles.

In 1789 France, excluding overseas colonies, had some 26,000,000 inhabitants. In theory, they were divided into three orders or estates: the clergy (the First Estate, those who prayed), the nobility (the Second Estate, those who fought), and the Third Estate (everyone else, those who worked). The First Estate included 130,000 Catholic priests, monks, and nuns, who ministered to a largely Catholic population. Yet at least 250,000 Calvinists lived in southern France, and 200,000 Lutherans resided in eastern France. Eastern France was home as well to 30,000 Jews, and smaller communities of Jews lived in various southwestern French cities and in Paris. The Catholic church owned about 10 percent of the land in the kingdom. The church paid no taxes, though it negotiated a voluntary payment to the government every five years in return for its monopoly of public worship, public charity, and education. It levied its own tax in the form of the tithe, or tenth tax, often collected in goods directly in the fields during the harvest. Ordinary people admired their parish priest, but they resented the taxes levied by the Catholic church, especially since one-quarter of church revenues ended up in the pockets of noble clergymen.

The Second Estate comprised some 300,000 nobles (just over one percent of the population). Nobles owned as much as 30 percent of the land, yet they were exempt from the major land tax known as the taille. Although they paid other kinds of taxes, nobles enjoyed not only seigneurial rights but also a variety of privileges, from the right to carry swords to the right to death by decapitation rather than hanging if they were convicted of a capital crime. Nobles held most of the high positions in the church, the judiciary, the army, and government administration. All the bishops of the Catholic church in 1789 were nobles. (Sieyès, author of the antinoble pamphlet quoted above, was a nonnoble clergyman.) The highest positions in the army officer corps were reserved to nobles who could prove that their families had been nobles for four generations.

The Third Estate, because it included everyone not in the First or Second Estates, consisted of a wide variety of people from different stations in life. The middle classes accounted for about 5 percent of the French population, and the lower classes in the cities and towns made up about 10 percent of the population. Peasants were the vast majority—80 percent—of the population. Less than half the French people could read and write; more men were literate than women, and more city dwellers were literate than peasants. Public affairs therefore usually had limited resonance; they attracted the attention of educated city folk who had access to newspapers, reading clubs, and other places where people might meet and learn about current events.

Historians have long debated the social origins of the French Revolution. Did hatred of the nobility fuel the Revolution? The quote from Abbé Sieyès seems to support the view that resentment of noble domination lay behind the revolutionary outbreak. According to Sieyès, nobles were parasites and should be excluded from the revolutionary nation. Evidence for hatred of the nobility is quite extensive. The playwright
Beaumarchais (Document 1.2) put strong words of denunciation into the mouth of his central character in *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784): "What have you [nobles] done to deserve so much? You went to the trouble of being born—nothing more!" It was not just fictional characters who expressed strong sentiments. When asked for their views in 1789, peasants railed against "the thousands of abuses" heaped on them by their noble landlords (Document 1.3).

After the Revolution began in 1789, some newspapers and pamphlets quickly took up the antinoble theme; they vehemently denounced the nobles as degenerate, corrupt, and ridden with venereal disease—a "rotten carcass" that threatened the health of the nation (see Fig. 1.1). The revolutionaries abolished the legal privileges of the nobles and all their titles and sent many nobles to the guillotine as enemies of the new nation. A few aristocrats fell victim to crowd violence, often being mutilated in the process. The most notorious incident, no doubt, was the murder of the Princess of Lamballe, a close friend of the queen, Marie-Antoinette. On 3 September 1792 an enraged mob dragged Lamballe out of an improvised courtroom and hacked her to death. Her head—and some said her genitals too—was paraded on a pike outside the
window of the queen's residence. "Aristocrat" became a common smear; for many it was synonymous with "conspirator" and "counterrevolutionary" and merited death.

Nobles inspired resentment and retaliation because they claimed that their political and social distinctions derived from their high birth; they insisted that their family lineages justified their legal status and privileges. In the eighteenth century, moreover, monarchy and nobility went hand in hand, as they had since the Middle Ages. The king ranked first among the nobles, and many believed that nobles constituted a separate "race" from the common people. Noble blood and birth supposedly made them natural leaders of a society based on deference to one's betters. Wealth often accompanied this elevated status. In some regions a few noble families owned as much as 50 percent of the land. The wealthiest nobles at court enjoyed fortunes worth 2 to 4 million livres a year, while ordinary workers earned a measly 300 livres. It is not surprising that critics of the regime seized upon the theme of inequality (Document 1.1).

Although it is true that the Revolution brought antinoble sentiments to the surface, such feelings had lain largely dormant for generations. Before 1789 no one imagined that noble titles and privileges would be abolished, just as no one dreamed that the king would be deposed and executed. Only a major upheaval could galvanize people to act upon their feelings of resentment. Scholars disagree about whether the nobility was rising or declining in wealth and influence in the eighteenth century: The evidence is inconclusive. Some nobles took up modern farming techniques and invested in overseas commerce in order to secure their wealth; others did not. Yet many people, like Sieyès, concluded that something had gone wrong in French society, and they pointed first and foremost to noble privileges as the cause. Nobles were not the only ones who enjoyed special privileges and exemptions, however. Privilege extended beyond the so-called "privileged orders" (the clergy and the nobility) down to the lowliest positions among the common people. Some regions paid much lower taxes than others did; in Brittany, for example, the rate of taxation was only one-fifth that of the Paris region. Regions, towns, artisanal guilds, and individual officeholders laid claim to or even bought exemptions from taxes.

In many ways, France was not one unified country, but rather a patchwork of special privileges. From the top to the bottom of the social hierarchy, individuals and groups tenaciously defended whatever privileges they managed to acquire. Conflicts over status and privilege even pitted nobles against one another. Great nobles derided the ambitions of those who had only recently acquired noble status. Rich men could buy noble status directly, or they could buy one of the 3,750 judicial and administrative offices that conferred nobility after a specified time in office. Between one-quarter and one-third of all noble families in 1789 had only become noble during the eighteenth century. Animosity between new and old noble families incited many of the political disputes of the eighteenth century.

Although nobles towered over the social hierarchy, every group sought to distinguish itself from those below it on the social ladder and tried to become more like
The King of France ruled over a kind of federation of provinces. In the provinces surrounding Paris he exerted the most direct rule, but farther away, especially in the southern half of the country, provinces often had their own institutions, known as provincial estates, which controlled the levy of taxation, public works, and administration. The king had the final word everywhere, but he had to work through local officeholders and institutions. Languedoc and Brittany had the strongest provincial estates.
those on the rung above. Rich merchants and high-ranking royal officials emulated the habits of the nobility and dreamed of amassing enough wealth to move up the social scale. Such middle-class people considered the lower classes inferior because they worked with their hands; property owners, doctors, lawyers, government officials, and merchants prided themselves on using mental skills to make their living and considered tailors, butchers, and weavers—not to mention peasants—lower in status because they relied on manual labor in their work. Respectable artisans and shopkeepers kept their distance from their journeymen, apprentices, and servants; for them independence rather than manual labor was the key variable. Master artisans and shopkeepers depended only on themselves, whereas their journeymen, apprentices, and servants depended on them for room and board and wages. Lowest of all were the utterly dependent: the unemployed, the poor, and anyone who relied on charity. Official parades, the order of seating in the parish church, the number of bells rung at a funeral, the clothes one wore and especially the material they were made of, the size of one’s house and its location—these were all markers of social distinction. Privilege and hierarchy shaped the whole society, not just its highest reaches. As Voltaire pronounced in his usual acerbic tones, “Equality is therefore both the most natural of things, as well as the most unreal” (Document 1.1).

Hierarchy may have been most pronounced among the peasantry. At the top were the big farmers, who owned some land of their own but mainly farmed large estates as tenants. A big farmer and his wife might have as many as fifty people working for them, and because of their relative wealth such farmers controlled the village council and decisions made in the parish. In French such men were known as “the cock of the village.” More than half the peasants had no land of their own and either worked as agricultural laborers or farmed small plots as tenant farmers or sharecroppers. The wives of landless peasants and small farmers helped make ends meet by spinning cotton, silk, or wool at home. In the eighteenth century, this home industry expanded dramatically, employing hundreds of thousands of women as spinners. As the textile industry expanded, many rural families moved to the towns and cities, where the men worked as weavers and their wives and children assisted them. These new sources of work did not provide a living for everyone. At the bottom of rural society were hundreds of thousands of paupers and beggars forced to roam the roads in search of work or charity. The unexpected death of a father, a series of crop failures, or even a season of bad weather could ruin whole families.

The lower reaches of French society certainly lived in a state of nearly perpetual crisis, but French society as a whole seemed to be in a relatively buoyant state in the eighteenth century. Huge sums of money flowed back to France from the expanding trade in African slaves and the stunning growth of production of sugar, coffee, indigo, and cotton in the Caribbean colonies. At home, the textile industry expanded dramatically, prices for grain and other staples increased steadily, the population grew, and wages increased, though not always keeping up with prices. This general prosperity made the
economic downturn of 1786–89 seem all the more distressing. Ordinary people had come to expect constant improvement. In 1786 a free-trade treaty with Great Britain opened the floodgates to cheaper British textiles and revealed the dangers of overexpansion in the French industry; in some towns unemployment among weavers and spinners soared to 50 percent or more. In 1787 the silk harvest failed, and in 1788 a mammoth hailstorm cut a swath through the major grain-growing regions. By the spring of 1789 massive unemployment and rising grain prices threatened many with starvation. It was in this atmosphere that political events now unfolded.

**The Monarchy and Its Critics**

The kings of France ruled over a disparate collection of lands that except for the colonies were geographically contiguous but separated by language, custom, and history. People in the central heartland around Paris spoke French, but elsewhere people spoke Breton, Basque, German, or various local dialects. There was no one national law code; the southern half of the country relied on versions of Roman law, whereas the northern half used customary or common law, which varied from region to region. Royal officials governed most directly in provinces near Paris; farther away from the capital many regions enjoyed virtual autonomy, at least in questions of taxation. These regions were known collectively as "the country of estates," because they had their own "provincial estates" to represent their interests to the king. The king and his officials had to negotiate new taxes with the provincial estates. When the crown acquired colonies in North America and the Caribbean, and trading outposts in Africa and India, all of them months away by ship, the challenge of ruling from Paris only increased.

In theory, the king of France exercised "absolute" power—that is, no person or institution could block his initiatives. Unlike Great Britain, France did not have a functioning national parliament; the equivalent in France, the Estates General, had not met since 1614. In practice, however, the king depended on nobles, local elites, and royal officials to make his rule effective; he relied on them to carry out his will. The king's control over his own bureaucracy was limited by the fact that royal offices had been bought and sold as personal property since the late Middle Ages. The 50,000 royal officials who owned their offices paid a yearly tax to the crown in exchange for the right to serve. Liberty is without doubt the principle of all actions. It lies at the core of each Estate... Sire, your subjects are divided into as many different bodies as there are Estates in the kingdom: the clergy, the nobility, the high courts and lower tribunals, the officers attached to these tribunals, the universities and academies, the banks and commercial companies. In every part of the state there are bodies that can be seen as links in a great chain, the first link of which is in the hands of Your Majesty as head and sovereign administrator of all that constitutes the body of the nation. The very idea of destroying this precious chain should be appalling.

—Argument of the Parlement of Paris against the Edict Suppressing the Guilds, presented to the King, 12 March 1776

(CD-ROM p. 26)
for being able to pass on the offices as inheritable property. They consequently enjoyed a certain autonomy, though the king and his ministers could send officeholders into exile for refusing to cooperate, change their functions or the fee rates paid for official services, or suppress the offices altogether. The exercise of monarchical power therefore required a subtle balancing act between insistence on the king’s right to rule unhindered by any interference, and compromise aimed at shoring up support from nobles, officeholders, and local elites.

From the middle of the eighteenth century onward, the French monarchy faced a succession of constitutional and fiscal crises. The threats could be very personal. In 1750, rumors circulated that King Louis XV (ruled 1715–74) suffered from leprosy and was kidnapping children off the streets of Paris in order to cure himself by
bathing in their blood. In 1757 Robert-François Damiens tried to assassinate Louis XV with a dagger. He narrowly missed killing the king, and he paid a horrible price for his effrontery: after breaking his limbs on the wheel, the executioner poured molten lead and boiling oil on them; horses then dismembered his body, and the parts were burned at the stake (Document 1.10; see Fig. 1.2).

The assassination and its aftermath revealed the political and religious fault lines in monarchical government. The assassination attempt came in the midst of a bitter campaign waged by the Parlement of Paris (high court) against clerical influence on the king. In 1750 the archbishop of Paris, with Louis XV's encouragement, had organized a new campaign against Catholics known as Jansenists. Jansenists supposedly followed the doctrines of the seventeenth-century Flemish theologian Cornelius Jansen, whose 1641 publication, *Augustinus*, had been condemned by the pope. Jansenists argued for reform of the Catholic church and for more ascetic and individual forms of worship. They insisted, for example, that parishioners take Communion only when they felt true contrition. Louis XIV had tried to suppress the Jansenists in the seventeenth century, but they had won many followers among lawyers, judges, and even bishops. After 1750 the archbishop of Paris encouraged parish priests to refuse the last sacraments (last rites) to anyone who refused to sign a written statement of support for the church's official position against Jansenism. The Parlement of Paris roundly condemned this denial of the sacraments and denounced "the power of the clerics." They urged the king "to stop ceding your authority to the clerics who abuse and compromise it." (CD-ROM p. 24) Because the parlement had taken such a vociferous position, some concluded that it directly inspired the action Damiens took. Supporters of the parlement insisted that the Catholic clergy were behind the plot (Document 1.7). During his interrogation Damiens seemed to take the side of the parlement, insisting that he acted because of the archbishop's refusal of sacraments (Document 1.8).

The Damiens Affair showed that the parlement had become more aggressive in the assertion of its constitutional powers; though the judges insisted on their "poignant love for Your Majesty's sacred person," they also claimed now to speak for "the people" and their "liberty," challenging the king's exclusive hold on power (Document 1.6). The Parlement of Paris and its counterparts in the provinces aimed to take the place of the defunct Estates General and represent the people's interests to the king. The conflict also opened the way to the expression of unpredictable popular resentments. During the Damiens Affair posters pasted on the walls of Paris sometimes violently criticized the king himself.

The parlementary magistrates did not want to be revolutionaries. As the argument quoted at the beginning of this section demonstrates, they claimed to be preserving the fundamental nature of the monarchy. They resisted any effort, whether by the clergy or by the monarchy itself, to break the great chain linking the king down through his officials to the lowliest subjects in the land. What this really meant, how-
ever, was that any attempt at reform inevitably failed. Again and again between the 1760s and the 1780s, the king and his ministers tried to standardize taxation, eliminate abuses, and modernize the French government. But the parlements denounced all such measures as examples of ministerial despotism and tyranny. These conflicts gave them the chance to enhance their reputation as guardians of the fundamental constitution of the kingdom. The parlements countenanced change only when they authored it themselves, and their proposals always reinforced local autonomy rather than fostering national reform.

When the Seven Years’ War ended in 1763, the French monarchy faced enormous deficits as well as a disastrous loss of face. The French armies fought to a stalemate against the Prussians on the continent but lost decisively to Great Britain overseas. By the terms of the peace, France ceded Canada to Great Britain and withdrew from India. From this moment forward, the French crown would ceaselessly seek new sources of revenue. When King Louis XV doubled and even tripled some forms of taxation during the war, the parlements objected. Although they could not prevent the new levies, they continued to protest through the 1760s. In 1771 the king’s reform-minded chief minister abolished the troublesome parlements. At first the new courts that replaced them functioned well and the bold stroke seemed to have succeeded. But when Louis XV died in 1774, his successor Louis XVI (ruled 1774–92) restored the parlements to curry favor with public opinion.

Other efforts at reform from above also failed. Louis XVI tried to implement his own ambitious program of reform in 1774. It aimed at modernizing the economy, which not coincidentally would enhance tax collection. The king ordered the establishment of free trade in grain, the suppression of guilds that controlled access to manual trades (the subject of the protest excerpted above), and the conversion of forced labor by peasants into a money tax payable by all landowners. He also planned to introduce elected local assemblies to make government more representative. Riots against rising grain prices, and widespread resistance led by the parlements, convinced Louis to dismiss the minister in charge and withdraw the measures in 1776. The crown’s efforts at reform succeeded only in fostering the expression of new forms of dissent. As one court argued in 1775 in opposing the reforms, “Why can Your Majesty not abandon today those fatal maxims of government, or just that policy introduced a century ago by jealous ministers, which has reduced all the Orders [Estates] of the State to silence with the sole exception of the Magistracy? Why is it not possible for the nation to speak for itself about its most cherished interests?”

In 1778 France took the side of the British North American colonists in their war for independence from Great Britain. The French government supported the Americans in order to exact revenge against the British for its defeats in the Seven Years’ War twenty years earlier, but though the Americans gained their independence, the French crown succeeded mostly in adding to its fiscal woes. During the years of
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In the early 1780s, as a result, taxes had to be increased dramatically once again. To inflict a blow against its enemy Great Britain, France found itself supporting a revolution dedicated to defending liberty and rights. Scores of young French aristocrats reported back home about the new republican hero, George Washington, and in Paris Benjamin Franklin electrified gatherings when he appeared dressed as a rustic American wearing a beaver cap. Mobbed whenever he left his house (Franklin lived in Paris between 1776 and 1785), Franklin soon found his likeness on every conceivable consumer item from snuffboxes to popular prints. This mania for things American allowed returning aristocratic officers and their ordinary soldiers to talk in new heartfelt ways about freedom in action.

In the 1780s, government deficits became the subject of public discussion. As one minister gave way to another in the frantic search for new sources of revenue and short-term loans, each one published his own competing version of the national budget. This, in itself, marked a major change in the monarchical regime: the crown and its officials now had to respond to public opinion. Public opinion had become increasingly important in the aftermath of the Damiens Affair. In the 1760s and 1770s, as the parlements portrayed themselves as defenders of the country's fundamental constitution (there was no written constitution as such, just a combination of legal tradition, judicial precedent, and custom), the crown had been forced to develop its own counterargument. In 1773, for example, a spokesman for the crown published a book on the "lessons of morality, politics and law" for the instruction of the crown prince. In it he argued, "After examining the nature of the Government throughout our history, you will then look for the one that should always exist so that Kings are powerful and Peoples free and happy." By entering into debate with the parlements in this fashion and speaking the same language of liberty, the crown had implicitly altered the monarchical style of rule; while still insisting that he ruled by divine right as the lieutenant of God himself, the king now simultaneously argued that he protected the interests of the people and responded to the requirements of public opinion. All sides now invoked the public, a new factor in French politics. As the recently fired finance minister Jacques Necker argued in 1781 when he published his account of the budget, "This report would also allow each of the people—who are part of YOUR MAJESTY's Councils—to study and follow the situation of the Finances. . . . Such an institution could have the greatest influence on public confidence." Lawyers now published their briefs defending their clients and appealed directly to public opinion in part to stake out their own independence. The growing importance on all sides of public opinion meant that before 1789 the constitution of the kingdom was already in transition.

Behind the scenes of this subtle transformation in national politics lay a hidden world of underground publishing that devoted much of its attention to increasingly scurrilous attacks on the monarchy. Both Louis XV and Louis XVI devoted great
Nobles might have maintained their dominance of society, and the crown might have weathered the storm of criticism of its policies, if new ideas associated with the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment had not profoundly influenced the expectations of most educated people in France. The writers of the Enlightenment wanted to apply reason and science to improve society. They aimed, in the words of the editors of *The Encyclopedia* (published 1751–72), the manifesto of the movement, to “overturn the barriers that reason never erected” and “give back to the arts and sciences the liberty that is so precious to them.” Contrary to the impression given by its name, *The Encyclopedia* provided not only a compendium of knowledge but also the principles for attacking despotism, superstition, and intolerance, the major targets of the Enlightenment. Freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the freedom to pursue knowledge unfettered by government restriction—these were the leading goals of the Enlightenment. The pursuit of such freedoms inevitably brought Enlightenment writers into conflict with both church and state, yet by 1787, as the quote opening

*New Ideas*

The time has come when it is no longer acceptable for a law to overtly overrule the rights of humanity that are very well known all over the world.

—Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne, a Protestant pastor, commenting on the Edict of Toleration for Protestants, 1787
this section illustrates, talk of "the rights of humanity" had become widespread in France.

The Enlightenment did not immediately precede the French Revolution. It began as a low rumble in 1685 when France's King Louis XIV revoked the rights of French Protestants, forcing hundreds of thousands of them into exile in the Dutch Republic, Great Britain, and Prussia. In exile the French Protestants began to publish works that were much more critical of the French monarchy than anything allowed past the French censors. At the same time, new breakthroughs in science by Isaac Newton gave scientific method—and reason in general—an enormous boost in prestige. In the 1720s and 1730s a few hardy souls began to write critical works from within France itself. Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron of Montesquieu, published his Persian Letters in 1721. Although himself a judge in a provincial parlement, Montesquieu used his fictional correspondence between two Persians to satirize French politics at the end of the reign of Louis XIV (d. 1715). In 1733 Voltaire (the pen name for François-Marie Arouet) published his Letters Concerning the English Nation. He praised the work of Newton and compared French laws and customs with those in Great Britain, always to the disadvantage of the French, especially in questions of religion. The British Bill of Rights of 1689 (Document 1.11) had guaranteed freedom of speech and granted freedom of religion to all the Protestant sects. Voltaire wanted the same for France (he neglected to mention that Catholics had no rights in Great Britain), and he ridiculed those who opposed him as ignorant fanatics. Montesquieu published his book anonymously, and Voltaire published his first in English, but the books nonetheless made their authors celebrities in France.

By the 1750s the Enlightenment had moved into high gear as leading writers, called philosophes (French for "philosophers"), explicitly challenged the intellectual authority of the French Catholic church and the French state and gained an international audience for their efforts. The French government arrested, exiled, or even imprisoned the writers and banned their books, but they were welcomed by intellectuals across Europe, feted by neighboring monarchs, and read by an eager French public willing to buy its books from clandestine sources. In the 1760s the Enlightenment reached its high point when Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau published their most influential works. The French government and the Catholic church still tried to ban their publications, but the public appetite overcame all forms of censorship and surveillance. By the 1770s even the king's ministers had become devotees of the movement. Clergy from both the Jansenist and anti-Jansenist camps had been influenced by Enlightenment ideas. The Enlightenment had triumphed over its adversaries. Voltaire and Rousseau died in 1778, but by the 1780s all sides to political dispute in France spoke the language of the Enlightenment. Hardly any of the original band of Enlightenment writers remained to greet the revolution that has often been attributed to their influence, and none of them ever explicitly supported the notion of revolutionary change. As Denis Diderot, one of the editors of the Encyclopedia, said, "We
will speak against senseless laws until they are reformed; and, while we wait, we will abide by them."

If the Enlightenment did not immediately lead to revolution, in what sense did it prepare the way? And if the Enlightenment was not exclusively French, then why did only France have a revolution? These two questions have sparked passionate debate ever since 1789, for as soon as the French Revolution erupted, conservative critics claimed to see in it the nefarious influence of the Enlightenment philosophers. These critics often tied the impact of the Enlightenment to the secret designs of two other groups in prerevolutionary France: the Protestants and the freemasons. Masonic lodges had spread from Great Britain across Europe during the eighteenth century. Based on secret rituals of the masons' guilds ("freemasons" were those who had passed through their apprenticeship), the Masonic lodges offered conviviality, philanthropy, and a kind of constitutional discussion. All brothers in the lodge were supposedly equal, and lodges wrote their own constitutions and elected their officers. In the conspiratorial view of some critics, freemasons wanted to install an anti-Christian regime, Protestants wanted revenge against Catholics, and the Enlightenment philosophers helped them accomplish their goals by denigrating the Catholic church and destabilizing the French monarchy. Scholars have long since debunked any notion of a plot behind the French Revolution, but they still want to track down the influences that made it possible. Both the Enlightenment and the freemasons usually figure in some way in their accounts.

Enlightenment writers opened a breach in the authority of church and state by persistently questioning official policies. They insisted that reason must be the final judge in all matters, not custom, history, tradition, or Scripture. They wanted to apply a scientific and critical approach to all the problems of society from religious persecution to poverty. They did not limit themselves to works about social problems, however. Voltaire, for example, wrote poetry, plays, a "philosophical" dictionary, and a satirical novel. Rousseau, a Genevan Protestant who lived most of his life in France, wrote a treatise on education, a constitution for Poland, an analysis of the effects of the theater on public morals, a best-selling novel, an opera, and a notorious autobiography, as well as assorted political writings.

These writers did not just vehemently criticize religious intolerance or the lack of freedom of the press; they also offered new ideals for society and government. If reason were applied to the question of the legitimacy of government, Rousseau argued (Document 1.12), people would have to recognize that "the source of right" could only be found in a "social contract" joining all the citizens, not in divine right, historical tradition, or biblical precedent. Although his account might seem too abstract to be threatening, at the time (1762) both the French and the Genevan governments outlawed the book. Rousseau insisted that "there is in the State no fundamental law which cannot be revoked" by the citizens; in effect, he was saying that nothing about the French monarchy was immune to change. Moreover, his very abstraction of argument
seemed to undermine the monarchy; he talked only of the “body politic” and the “sovereign,” implying that people might choose to express their social contract in a form other than monarchy. Rousseau’s formulation of the social contract left open the question of the concrete form of government. This made his work attractive to the revolutionaries, but it also left an ambiguous legacy. Rousseau maintained that “the general will is always right and always tends to the public advantage.” His argument opened the way for supporters of extreme revolutionary measures to declare that the government had the right to enforce the general will, even against dissidents.

Rousseau never advocated revolution, but his notion of the social contract had revolutionary implications. In his view, all (adult male) citizens possessed the same rights; there seemed to be no room for the nobility in this vision of the just society. The citizens guaranteed their rights by entering into a social contract; each gave up their individual rights in order to enjoy rights guaranteed by law to everyone. Government therefore gained its legitimacy from protecting rights that applied equally to every citizen. In other words, Rousseau appeared to be arguing for democracy: each man had the same say in determining the social contract. It is not surprising, therefore, that Rousseau displaced all the other Enlightenment figures as the Revolution proceeded. The more radical the Revolution, the more the revolutionaries relied on Rousseau as their guide. As might be expected, then, many opponents of the Revolution blamed the violence and terror on Rousseau.

The Enlightenment might have remained in the realm of ideas if it had not been able to reshape public opinion. More books were published in the eighteenth century than ever before, and more people could read; although illiteracy only dropped from 71 percent in 1700 to 63 percent in 1790, most people could read and write in Paris and other big cities. Even an ordinary Parisian glassworker might be familiar with the ideas—or at least the reputation—of Rousseau. But book reading alone does not explain the influence of the Enlightenment, which depended in large part on new social institutions. Cafés, newspapers, provincial academies, literary societies, and masonic lodges all grew in number toward the end of the eighteenth century. By 1789 Paris alone had about 100 Masonic lodges, which drew men from the upper aristocracy, the military, the parlements, commerce, and even the manual trades. Many freemasons became politically active during the Revolution, but they took no one side during the upheaval. Masons could be radicals, conservatives, or moderates.

The growth of new social institutions gave backbone to the “public” and provided a secular forum for the development of “public opinion.” Ordinary people had always gathered in their churches and in church-sponsored organizations, and conflicts over Jansenism had initiated many into political discussion. Now the public had more options, new places to congregate and inevitably to discuss the affairs of the day. In addition to meeting in coffeehouses, lodges, and academies, the public attended the newly established annual art exhibitions in Paris. By 1787, some 10 percent of the Parisian public visited the art exhibitions. Art and theater criticism, newspapers, and
such forbidden books as those of Voltaire and Rousseau, or the gutter publications that attacked the court, all helped shape public opinion, which was then reinforced by the social interactions fostered in the new institutions. Enlightenment *philosophes* sometimes joined Masonic lodges (Voltaire became a mason at the end of his life) and certainly frequented cafés, but they also met in private circles called “salons,” where under the patronage of leading women of high society they would read their manuscripts and discuss ideas. The salons (French for living room) of Paris drew an international crowd of intellectuals from England, Scotland, Italy, and the German states. They gave such men as Voltaire and Rousseau a launching pad for their attempts to sway public opinion, and they provided women with a way to participate in the Enlightenment. Women also set up Masonic lodges of their own.

Although Voltaire and Rousseau had to flee France more than once to escape prosecution for their books (Voltaire established his permanent residence one mile from the Swiss border), government censorship proved incapable of holding back the floodgates of criticism. Printers in Switzerland and the Dutch Republic were able to make fortunes publishing books banned in France. They smuggled them into France by every means imaginable and often sold them under the counters of the most respectable bookstores. Faced with this losing battle, the French government began to loosen its grip on publishing in the 1760s. As the monarchical government sought ways of modernizing the country’s economy through reforms of taxation, freeing-up markets, and lessening burdens on peasants, government officials began to move closer to the positions enunciated by Enlightenment writers.

Conflict between Enlightenment figures and state authorities consequently began to abate in the 1770s. When Voltaire died in 1778 he was celebrated as a national hero. The reform plans of Anne-Robert Turgot, Louis XVI’s chief minister from 1774 to 1776, show the impact of Enlightenment thinking on the highest reaches of the French bureaucracy (Document 1.13). A career official, Turgot had secretly contributed to the *Encyclopedia*, frequented the Paris salons, and corresponded with Voltaire. Turgot rejected the old practice of citing precedent, which he called the “example of what our ancestors did in times of ignorance and barbarism.” Like a good Enlightenment *philosophe*, he advocated relying on “the rights and interests of men.” The Enlightenment had succeeded in putting “natural” or “human” rights on the agenda. By the 1770s most writers, even those supportive of the government, agreed that rights were, as Turgot claimed, “based upon the principles of justice that each of us bears in our heart.” Statesmen and Enlightenment reformers did not always agree on just what those rights were or how they would best be guaranteed, but rights had become part of public discourse, and they could be defended in ways that privilege could not.

The American War of Independence gave a big boost to the notion of natural or human rights in France. Many French followed events in the colonies with avid interest because they believed that the Americans were putting Enlightenment ideas into practice in an almost pure form. French translations of the Declaration of
Independence and various declarations of rights drafted by the new states appeared almost immediately in French-language newspapers, many of them published outside France's borders but distributed within France. In addition, translated collections of the state constitutions and bills of rights were published in the late 1770s and throughout the 1780s. One of the most influential of these documents was George Mason's Declaration of Rights for the state of Virginia, drafted in 1776 (Document 1.14). Mason's opening statement, "That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights" seemed to put Rousseau's social contract into constitutional form. This Declaration later served as a model for those drafting a French Declaration of Rights in July and August 1789 (Document 1.16). The influence of these American documents was enhanced by the correspondence and visits among leading figures on both sides of the Atlantic. Thomas Jefferson's presence in Paris in 1789 made the American influence palpable.

The spread of the language of rights produced concrete reforms by the end of the 1780s. In 1787, the crown granted French Calvinists freedom of religion for the first time since 1685; Calvinists still had no political rights. The Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of the city of Metz in eastern France held an essay contest in 1787 and 1788 on the status of the Jews in France (Document 1.15), and in 1788 the monarchy set up a royal commission to consider the question of Jewish rights. Writings against the slave trade and slavery in the colonies began to increase after 1780, and a group of Enlightenment-inspired Frenchmen set up an abolitionist society in 1788 in Paris. The Society of the Friends of Blacks, as the founders called it, regularly corresponded with abolitionist groups in Great Britain (see Fig. 1.3).
The French were not the only Europeans interested in things American or in natural rights. German, Swedish, Italian, Polish, and English commentators all seized upon American developments to forward their own arguments about "the rights of man." For example, one German wrote in 1777 that American victory in the War of Independence would give "greater scope to the Enlightenment, new keenness to the thinking of peoples and new life to the spirit of liberty." As those words suggest, the Enlightenment echoed not only in France but also in many other places in Europe. The rights of religious minorities, the abolition of slavery, reform of harsh forms of corporal punishment, debates about the use of torture in the legal process, and efforts to alleviate the burdens on peasants occupied statesmen and reformers almost everywhere in western and central Europe.

Given this widespread interest in rights and in the American example, why did revolution occur only in France? Once again, the answer seems to lie in France's intermediate position. Still lacking many of the freedoms (of the press, of religion, and of an elected national parliament) already achieved in Great Britain, the French monarchy nonetheless eventually allowed the dissemination of critical literature and did not prevent the development of new social institutions that helped spread Enlightenment values. In short, the French government was oppressive enough to warrant widespread criticism and not oppressive enough to eliminate its critics.

Although the combination of social tensions, failure of political reform, and increasing influence of Enlightenment ideas goes a long way toward explaining why France was susceptible to revolution, it does not account for the specific timing of its outbreak. Harvest failures, such as the one in 1788–89, occurred periodically under the monarchy without threatening its existence. In fact, Louis XVI's popularity had soared when French forces helped decisively defeat the British at Yorktown in 1781. Yet almost immediately thereafter, French foreign policy faced a series of setbacks. First, the British sank the French fleet in the West Indies. By 1783 the independent United States and Great Britain had patched up their quarrel, leaving France with huge deficits and little else to show for its role in aiding the colonists. In 1787 France stood by while Prussian forces invaded the Dutch Republic to suppress "patriots" there who tried to set up a republic on the American model. The once enthusiastic public mood turned sour.

An escalating series of constitutional crises brought all these tensions to the boiling point. To stave off bankruptcy, Louis XVI first called an Assembly of Notables and then asked the Parlement of Paris for help. Both refused, ultimately forcing the king to convene the Estates General, which had not met since 1614. The Estates General consisted of deputies from the three Estates or Orders. In 1614 each estate had voted as an estate, allowing the deputies of the clergy or the nobility to veto any proposal for reform that might come from the Third Estate. Under pressure, Louis XVI agreed to double the number of deputies from the Third Estate, making them equal in number to the other two combined. But he left it to the Estates General to decide whether the estates would
vote separately (as estates) or by individual head. Voting by order (one vote for each estate) would guarantee the traditional powers of the clergy and the nobility; voting by head would make the Third Estate dominant. Abbé Sieyès wrote his pamphlet *What Is the Third Estate?* to argue for voting by head. (CD-ROM p. 41) It was one of hundreds of pamphlets that now poured off the presses, raising the political temperature. The king invited nearly all adult males to participate in elections of deputies. Just as bread prices began to escalate, an unprecedented political mobilization took place as French men met in their villages and towns to choose deputies and draw up their lists of grievances. Asked to state their complaints, ordinary men found their voices. When the Estates General opened at Versailles on 5 May 1789 the country held its collective breath in anticipation. France had entered new and uncharted territories.

**Documents**

**The Question of Equality**

Inequality permeated the fabric of the Old Regime’s social structure. Legal as well as economic inequality followed from the widely shared belief in a “Great Chain of Being,” a natural ordering principle set up by God in which members of society, layered by function, had different rights and privileges. In this chain, those at the top, the clergy and the nobility, possessed more rights and privileges than those lower down, the commoners. Within this latter group, which comprised more than 95 percent of the population, there were also gradations of rank beginning with the professional classes and descending all the way down to the homeless. Despite these considerable differences, almost everyone possessed privileges and the right to defend them. And even those without any meaningful enumerated privileges of their own lived in a country in which such privileges served to constrain the actions of the government and of social superiors. The superiors on the Great Chain had an obligation to help those lower down.

The system of “orders,” based on the legal inequalities created by particular rights and privileges, came under attack in the eighteenth century, most obviously from the Enlightenment. The *philosophes* wanted to substitute talent for birth as the basis for distinctions. They especially criticized the nobility for their tax exemptions. Nobles originally gained tax exemptions in exchange for raising troops for the king and providing protection and justice for their serfs. As kings took charge of raising armies and feudal forms of landholding disappeared, noble privileges came to seem unjustified. When peasants were asked to state their grievances in preparation for the Estates General, such privileges aroused bitter commentary.

During the Revolution, criticism of noble privileges soon boiled over into a general attack on all forms of social inequality. The most radical revolutionaries attacked the