CHAPTER XVI.

THAT THE REIGN OF LOUIS XVI. WAS THE MOST PROSPEROUS ERA OF THE OLD MONARCHY, AND HOW THAT PROSPERITY REALLY HASTENED THE REVOLUTION.

It can not be questioned but the exhaustion of France under Louis XIV. commenced long before the reverses of that monarch. Symptoms of weakness may be detected in the most glorious years of his reign. France was ruined before she had ceased to conquer. Who has not read the terrible essay on Statistics of Administration which Vauban has left us? In memorials addressed to the Duke of Burgundy at the close of the seventeenth century, before the outbreak of the disastrous war of Succession, all the intendants allude to the growing decay of the nation, and do not speak as though it were of recent origin. One observes that population has greatly fallen off within his province of late years; another says that such a town, formerly rich and flourishing, now affords no demand for labor. One reports that there used to be manufactures in the province, but they have been abandoned; another, that the soil was more productive, and agriculture more flourishing twenty years ago than it is now. An intendant of Orleans was positive that population and production had fallen off twenty per cent. within thirty years. Partisans of despotism and warlike sovereigns should be recommended to read these documents.

As these evils grew out of the faults of the Constitution, neither the death of Louis XIV. nor even the advent of peace restored public prosperity. Writers on government and social economy, in the first half of the eighteenth century, invariably held to the opinion that the provinces were not recovering—that their decline was steadily progressive. They asserted that Paris alone was increasing in size and wealth. Intendants, ministers, men of business, agreed with men of letters on this point.

I confess that, for my part, I disbelieve this steady decline of France during the first half of the eighteenth century; but the universality of the belief in it, even among those who were best fitted to judge, shows that no sensible progress was being made. All the public documents of the time which I have seen, in fact, indicate a sort of social lethargy. The government revolved in the old routine circle, creating nothing new; cities made hardly any effort to render the condition of their inhabitants more comfortable and more wholesome; no private enterprise of any magnitude was undertaken.

About thirty or forty years before the Revolution broke out, the scene changed. Every portion of the social body seemed to quiver with internal motion. The phenomenon was unprecedented, and casual observers did not notice it; but it gradually became more characteristic and more distinct. Year after year it became more general and more violent, till the whole nation was aroused. Beware of supposing that its old life is going to be restored! 'Tis the awakening of a new spirit, which gives life only in order to destroy.

Every one is dissatisfied with his condition, and seeks to change it. Reform is the cry on every side. But it is sought impatiently and angrily; men curse the past, and dream of a state of things opposite in every particular to that which they see before them. The spirit soon penetrates the government itself; transforms it inwardly without changing its outward form; leaves the laws as they were, but alters their administration.

I have said elsewhere that the comptroller-general and the intendants of 1740 were very different personages from the comptroller-general and the intendants of 1780. This is shown in detail in the official correspondence of the time. At both periods intendants were invested with the same authority, employed the same agents, used the same arbitrary means; but their objects were different. In 1740 intendants were engrossed with the business of keeping their province in order, levying militia, and collecting the taille; in 1780 their heads were full of schemes for enriching the public. Roads, canals, manufactures, commerce, and agriculture above all, absorbed their attention. Sully was then the fashionable model of an administrator.

It was at this period that the agricultural societies I have mentioned began to be established; that fairs began to be common, and prizes to be distributed. I have seen circulars from the comptroller-general which read more like agricultural treatises than public state papers.

The change that had come over the spirit of the governing class was best seen in the collection of the taxes. Though the laws were as unequal, as arbitrary, as harsh as ever, their faults were materially alleviated in practice.
M. Mollien, in his Memoirs, observes that, when he “began to study the fiscal laws, he was terrified by what he discovered: exceptional courts allowed to sentence men to fine, imprisonment, corporal punishment for mere omissions; tax–farmers exercising plenary authority over persons and property on the sole responsibility of their own oath, &c. Fortunately, he did not confine his studies to the letter of the law, and he soon discovered that there was as much difference between the text of the law and its application, as there was between the style of living of the old and modern school of financiers. The courts were always inclined to extenuate offenses and mitigate penalties.”

The Provincial Assembly of Lower Normandy said, in like manner, in 1787, “The tax levy may lead to abuses and vexations innumerable; we are, however, bound to admit that in practice the law has been carried out with moderation and discretion of late years.”

Official documents abundantly justify this assertion. They prove conclusively that life and liberty were respected; they indicate, moreover, a general concern for the ills of the poor: a new sentiment. The state rarely employed violence with the poor, but often remitted their taxes or granted them alms. The king subscribed to all the country work–houses or poor–houses, and occasionally founded new ones. I find that more than 80,000 livres were distributed by the state in charity, in Haute–Guienne alone, in the year 1779; 40,000 in Touraine in 1784; 48,000 in Normandy in 1787. Louis XVI. would not always leave this branch of public business to his ministers; he often took charge of it himself. When a decree was drawn to fix the indemnity due to the peasantry for the damage done to their fields by the royal game in the neighborhood of the captainries, the king drafted the preamble himself, and indicated the method which the peasants were to pursue in order to obtain speedy justice. Turgot describes this good and unfortunate sovereign bringing the draft in his own handwriting, and saying, “You perceive that I work, too, on my side.” If the old regime were described as it really was during the last years of its existence, the portrait would be flattering and very unfaithful.

Simultaneously with these changes in the mind of governed and governors, public prosperity began to develop with unexampled strides. This is shown by all sorts of evidence. Population increased rapidly; wealth more rapidly still. The American war did not check the movement: it completed the embarrassment of the state, but did not impede private enterprise; individuals grew more industrious, more inventive, richer than ever.

An official of the time states that in 1774 “industrial progress had been so rapid that the amount of taxable articles had largely increased.” On comparing the various contracts made between the state and the companies to which the taxes were farmed out, at different periods during the reign of Louis XVI., one perceives that the yield was increasing with astonishing rapidity. The lease of 1786 yielded fourteen millions more than that of 1780. Necker, in his report of 1781, estimated that “the produce of taxes on articles of consumption increased at the rate of two millions a year.”

Arthur Young states that in 1788 the commerce of Bordeaux was greater than that of Liverpool, and adds that “of late years maritime trade has made more progress in France than in England; the whole trade of France has doubled in the last twenty years.”

Due allowance made for the difference of the times, it may be asserted that at no period since the Revolution has public prosperity made such progress as it did during the twenty years prior to the Revolution.q In this respect, the thirty–seven years of constitutional monarchy, which were periods of peace and rapid progress for us, can alone compare with the reign of Louis XVI.

Considering the vices of the government and the burdens which weighed upon industry, the spectacle of this great and increasing prosperity is astonishing; so astonishing, indeed, that some political writers, finding themselves incapable of explaining the fact, have denied it altogether, on the same principle that Molière’s doctor refused to believe that a patient could be cured contrary to rule. How was it possible that France could prosper and grow rich with unequal taxes, diversified customs, town dues, feudal rights, trade guilds, venal offices, etc.? For all these, France did begin to grow rich and develop its resources on all sides; and for the simple reason that, independently of these misshapen and inharmonious machines, which seemed better calculated to retard than to accelerate social progress, society was held together and driven toward public prosperity by two very simple but very powerful agents: the one a government, strong without being despotic, which maintained order every where; the other a nation whose upper classes were the most enlightened and the freest people on the Continent, and in
which individuals were at liberty to make money if they could, and to keep it when made.

Though the king used the language of a master, he was, in reality, the slave of public opinion. From public opinion he derived all his inspirations; he consulted it, feared it, flattered it. Absolute in theory, he was limited in practice. As early as 1784, Necker said in a public document, "Foreigners rarely realize the authority wielded by public opinion in France; they can not readily understand the nature of that invisible power which rules even over the royal palace. It does so, however." He mentions the fact as a matter beyond dispute.

It is a superficial error to ascribe the greatness and power of a nation to the mechanism of its legislation; for in this matter the product is due less to the perfection of the instrument than to the strength of the power used. Look at England; how much more complicated, and varied, and irregular do her laws seem than ours! Yet where is the European nation whose public credit stands higher, or in which private property is more extensive, more varied, and safer, or society sounder or more opulent? The fact does not spring from the excellence of this or that law, but from the spirit which pervades the whole body of English legislation. The imperfection of special organs is immaterial, the vital spirit is so strong.

Measurably with the increase of prosperity in France, men’s minds grow more restless and uneasy; public discontent is imbittered; the hatred of the old institutions increases. The nation visibly tends toward revolution. More than this, those districts where progress makes the greatest strides are precisely those which are to be the chief theatre of the Revolution. The extant archives of the old district of Ile de France prove that the old regime was soonest and most thoroughly reformed in the neighborhood of Paris. In no other pays d’élection were the liberty and property of the peasant so well secured. Corvées had disappeared long before 1789. The taille was more moderate, more regular, more evenly distributed there than in any other part of France. A perusal of the law which reformed it in 1772 is absolutely essential to those who would understand how powerful an intendant could be, whether for good or for evil. In this law the tax appears in a new light. Government commissioners visit each parish once a year and convene the whole community; the relative value of estates is settled publicly; the means of each citizen ascertained by fair discussion; the taille is distributed with the concurrence of all who are to pay it. The arbitrary power of the syndic, the old useless recourse to violence, are done away with. The taille retains its inherent vices, no doubt, under the best system of collection; it is levied on one class of taxables only, and weighs upon their industry as well as upon their property, but in all other respects it is a very different affair from the tax of the same name in the neighboring districts.

On the other hand, the old regime was nowhere in so high a state of preservation as on the borders of the Loire, especially near its mouth, in the swamps of Poitou and the moors of Brittany. That is the very place where the civil war broke out, and the Revolution was resisted with most obstinacy and violence. So that it would appear that the French found their condition the more insupportable in proportion to its improvement.

One is surprised at such an anomaly, but similar phenomena abound in history.

Revolutions are not always brought about by a gradual decline from bad to worse. Nations that have endured patiently and almost unconsciously the most overwhelming oppression, often burst into rebellion against the yoke the moment it begins to grow lighter. The regime which is destroyed by a revolution is almost always an improvement on its immediate predecessor, and experience teaches that the most critical moment for bad governments is the one which witnesses their first steps toward reform. A sovereign who seeks to relieve his subjects after a long period of oppression is lost, unless he be a man of great genius. Evils which are patiently endured when they seem inevitable, become intolerable when once the idea of escape from them is suggested. The very redress of grievances throws new light on those which are left untouched, and adds fresh poignancy to their smart: if the pain be less, the patient’s sensibility is greater. Never had the feudal system seemed so hateful to the French as at the moment of its proximate destruction. The arbitrary measures of Louis XVI.—insignificant as they were—seemed harder to bear than all the despotism of Louis XIV. The short imprisonment of Beaumarchais aroused more emotion in Paris than the Dragonnades.

No one in 1780 had any idea that France was on the decline; on the contrary, there seemed to be no bounds to its progress. It was then that the theory of the continual and indefinite perfectibility of man took its rise. Twenty years before, nothing was hoped from the future; in 1780 nothing was feared. Imagination anticipated a coming era of unheard-of felicity, diverted attention from present blessings, and concentrated it upon novelties.
Besides these general reasons for the phenomenon, there were others of a particular nature and equally potent. Though the administration of the finances had been improved with the other departments, it was still marked by the faults which are inseparable from absolute governments. It was secret and irresponsible, and hence many of the mischievous practices of Louis XIV. and XV. were still in use. The very efforts which the government made to develop public prosperity, the assistance it occasionally lavished upon the needy, the public works it undertook, increased its expenses without proportionally increasing its revenue; hence the king’s embarrassments were even greater than those of his predecessors. Like them, he often made his creditors suffer; like them, he borrowed on all sides privately, and without calling for tenders. His creditors were never sure of their interest; indeed, their only guarantee for their capital was the personal faith of the sovereign.

An observer who is reliable, for he was an eye-witness, and better placed for observation than most people, says on this subject, “The French ran great risks in dealing with their own government. If they invested money in its securities, they were never sure of the time when the interest would be paid. If they built ships, mended roads, clothed soldiers for the government, they had no security for repayment of their advances, no certainty when the debt would be considered due; in fact, they were forced to calculate the chances of losing on a contract with ministers just as they would do on a bottomry bond.” He adds, very sensibly, “At this time, especially when the development of industry created an unusual thirst for the acquisition of property, and a new liking for ease and comfort, those who had lent money to the state felt more keenly than they would have done at another time the bad faith of the creditor who, of all others, ought to have been the last to forget the sanctity of a contract.”

The abuses with which the French government was charged were not new, but the light in which they were viewed was. More crying faults had existed in the financial department at an earlier period, but since then changes had taken place, both in government and in society, which made them more keenly felt than before.

Within the last twenty years the government had acquired an unwonted activity, and had taken part in all kinds of new enterprises. It had thus become the largest consumer of industrial products, and the greatest contractor in the kingdom. A prodigious increase had taken place in the number of those who had money relations with it, who were interested in its loans, speculated in its bargains, or were its salaried servants. At no former period were private fortunes so deeply involved with the state finances. Bad financial management had formerly been a public evil, now it became disastrous to a thousand private families. In 1789 the state owed nearly 600 millions to creditors who were themselves in debt, and whose grievances were aggravated by the personal injury inflicted on them by the remissness of the state. And be it remarked that the irritation of this class of malcontents increased in proportion to their number; for a speculative mania, a thirst for riches, a taste for comfort spreading as business became extended, troubles of this kind appeared intolerable to those who, thirty years before, might have borne them without complaint.

Hence it happened that capitalists, merchants, manufacturers, and other business men or financiers—who are usually the most conservative class of the community, and the stanchest supporters of government, and who will submit patiently to laws which they despise or detest—were now more impatient and more resolutely bent on reform than any other section of the people. They were especially determined on a revolution in the financial department, never dreaming that a radical change in that branch of the government must involve the ruin of the whole.

How could a catastrophe have been avoided? On one side, a nation in which the desire for wealth increased daily; on the other, a government unceasingly engaged in exciting and disturbing men’s minds, now inflaming their avarice, now driving them to despair—rushing to its ruin by both roads.

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had not been present. It appeared as though it was supposed that the discussion would only be heard by the upper classes, and that the only danger was lest these might not be made to understand the case.

The very classes which had most to fear from popular fury declaimed loudly and publicly against the cruel injustice which the people had so long suffered. They took pleasure in pointing out to each other the monstrous vices of the institutions which weighed upon the people. They employed rhetoric to paint their sufferings and the inadequate rewards for their labor. Thus, in their endeavor to relieve the lower classes, they roused them to fury. I am not speaking of writers—I allude to the—government, to its chief agents, themselves members of the privileged classes.

When the king endeavored to abolish corvées thirteen years before the Revolution, he stated in the preamble of the ordinance, “With the exception of a few provinces (pays d’états), nearly all the roads of the kingdom have been made gratuitously by the poorest portion of our subjects. The whole burden has fallen upon those who have no property but their labor, and whose interest in the roads is very slender; the landowners, who are really interested in the matter—for their property increases in value in proportion to the improvement in the roads—are privileged exempts. By compelling the poor to keep the roads in repair, to give their time and their labor for nothing, we have deprived them of their only safeguard against poverty and hunger, in order to make them toil for the benefit of the rich.”

When an effort was made, at the same time, to remove the restraints which the system of industrial corporations imposed on workmen, it was proclaimed in the king’s name “that the right to labor is the most sacred of all properties; that any law which infringes that right is essentially null and void, as being inconsistent with natural right; that the existing corporations are, moreover, abnormal and tyrannical institutions, the product of selfishness, cupidity, and violence.” Such expressions were perilous indeed; but it was more dangerous still to utter them in vain. A few months later, corporations and corvées were re-established.

It was Turgot, it is said, who put these words in the king’s mouth. Most of his successors followed the example. When the king announced, in 1780, that from that time forth the augmentations of the taille would be made public by registry, he took pains to add as a commentary, “The persons liable to pay the taille have been not only tormented by the vexatious manner in which it is collected, but have been exposed besides to unexpected augmentations in the amount levied, and that to such an extent that the taxes paid by the poorest portion of our subjects have increased much more rapidly than those levied on the richer classes.” Again, when the king, not daring to equalize all the taxes, endeavored to establish the principle of equality in the collection of those which were already paid by all classes in common, he said, “His majesty hopes that the rich will not complain of being placed on the same level as the poor in the performance of a duty which they ought long ago to have shared more equally.”

In times of scarcity, especially, greater efforts seem to have been made to inflame the passions of the people than to supply their necessities. An intendant, desirous of stimulating the charity of the rich, would speak of “the injustice and the harshness of those landowners who owe all they have to the labor of the poor, and who leave the unfortunate laborers, broken down in their service, to perish of hunger.” On a similar occasion, the king declared that it was “his majesty’s intention to protect the poor against schemes which compelled them to work for the rich at a rate of wages fixed by the latter, and thus exposed them to lack the very necessaries of life. The king will not permit one portion of mankind to be surrendered to the cupidity of another.”

To the close of the monarchical era, the struggle between the various administrative branches of government gave rise to all sorts of manifestations of this kind; each disputant accused his rival of being the cause of the people’s misery. This is seen distinctly in the quarrel which took place between the king and the Parliament of Toulouse on the subject of the movement of breadstuffs. The Parliament declared that “the false policy of the government endangered the subsistence of the poor;” and the king replied that it was “the ambition of the Parliament and the greed of the rich which caused the public distress.” Thus on both sides efforts were made to convince the people that their sufferings were the work of their superiors.

These matters were not stated in private letters; they are to be found in public documents, which the government and the Parliament took care to print by thousands. In the course of his explanations, the king told some harsh truths both of his predecessors and of himself. “The state treasury,” said he once, “has been embarrassed by the
profusion of several reigns. Several of our inalienable domains have been sold far below their value. “Industrial corporations,” he is made to say on another occasion, with more truth than prudence, “are the especial product of the fiscal greed of kings.” Farther on he says, “If money has often been thrown away in useless expenses, and the taille has increased beyond measure, the fact must be charged upon the administrators of the finances, who, finding an increase of the taille the easiest, because the most secret method of meeting their difficulties, have had recourse to that plan, though almost any other would have been less burdensome to our subjects.”

All this was addressed to the educated classes, in order to prove the merit of measures which certain private interests opposed. As for the people, it was taken for granted that they heard all, but understood nothing. It must be admitted that the very benevolence which prompted the relief of these poor people concealed a large share of contempt for them. One is reminded of Madame de Duchatelet, who, according to Voltaire’s secretary, had no objection to undress before her servants, as she was not convinced that valets were men.

Nor was the dangerous language quoted above confined to Louis XVI. or his ministers. The very privileged classes who were the most immediate objects of popular hatred never spoke otherwise. It must be acknowledged that the upper classes in France concerned themselves about the condition of the poor long before they learned to fear them: their interest in popular sufferings was prior to the first suspicion that those sufferings might eventuate in their ruin. This is especially visible in the ten years which preceded 1789. The peasantry were the theme of constant conversations, of abiding sympathy. Remedies for their evils were suggested incessantly. Light was thrown on their chief grievances, and the fiscal laws which pressed heavily on them were loudly censured. But their new friends were as thoughtless in their sympathy as they had formerly been in their insensibility.

Read the reports of the Provincial Assemblies which were convened in some parts of France in 1779, and, at a later period, throughout the kingdom; study the public documents which they have left us, and you will be touched with the humanity and amazed at the singular imprudence of their language. The Provincial Assembly of Normandy declared, in 1787, that “the money appropriated by the king to the roads has often been so used as to be convenient to the rich, but useless to the poor. It has often been employed to render the approach to a chateau more agreeable, while the entry of a bourg or village has been neglected.” At the same assembly, the two orders of the nobility and the clergy, after having described the vices of the system of corvées, offered spontaneously to devote 50,000 livres to the improvement of the roads, “so that,” as they say, “the internal communications of the province may be made practicable without costing the people anything.” It would have been less onerous to the privileged classes to have substituted a general tax for the corvées, and to have paid their share; but even in abandoning the benefit of unequal taxation, they liked to preserve the name of being exempt. They sacrificed the useful portion of their rights, but they preserved what was odious.

Other assemblies, wholly composed of persons who were, and intended to remain, exempt from the taille, painted, in equally sombre colors, the evils which that tax inflicted on the poor. They drew a frightful sketch of its abuses, and scattered copies broadcast. And, singular to state, with these striking marks of interest in the people’s welfare, they intermingled, from time to time, public expressions of contempt. The people had inspired sympathy without ceasing to inspire disdain.

The Provincial Assembly of Upper Guienne, pleading with warmth the cause of the peasantry, alluded to them as “ignorant and gross beings, turbulent spirits, and rude and indocile characters.” Turgot, who did so much for the people, used language very similar.

Expressions as harsh were commonly used in documents destined to a wide publicity, and intended to be seen by the peasantry. It was as if the writers had been living in one of those European countries like Gallicia, where the upper classes speak a different tongue from the lower, and can not be understood by them. Feudal lawyers of the eighteenth century, who often evince an unusual spirit of justice, moderation, and tenderness for copyholders and other feudal debtors, still occasionally speak of low peasants. These insults appear to have been technical (de style), as the notaries say.

Toward 1789, the sympathy for the people grew warmer and more imprudent. I have had in my hands circulars, addressed by several Provincial Assemblies, in the early part of 1788, to the people of several parishes, inquiring for the details of their grievances. One of these was signed by an abbé, a nobleman of high degree, three men of
rank, and a burgher, all members of the assembly and acting in its name. This commission directed the syndic of each parish to convene the peasantry, and inquire of them what complaints they had to make of the manner in which the taxes were levied upon them. “We are aware,” it said, “that most of the taxes, and especially the gavel and the taille, are disastrous in their effects upon farmers; but we desire to ascertain the particulars of each abuse.” Nor does the curiosity of the Assembly rest there. They want to know the number of persons who are exempt from taxation in the parish; whether they are noblemen, ecclesiastics, or commoners; what is the nature of their privileges; what is the value of their property; whether they reside on their estates; whether the parish contains much Church property, or, as the phrase then was, much land in mortmain, not merchantable; and what its value may be. Even these inquiries fall short of their requirements. They desire to know what sum of money would represent the share which each privileged person would have to bear in taxes, taille and its accessories, capitation-tax, corvées, if taxation weighed equally on all.

This was simply inflaming the passions of each individual by the recital of his wrongs, pointing out their authors to him, encouraging him by indicating the smallness of their number, stealing into his inmost heart to light up his cupidity, his envy, his hatred. It seemed as though the Jacquerie, the Maillotins, the Sixteen, had been wholly forgotten; and as if no one knew that the French, who are naturally the gentlest and even the kindest people in the world so long as they are in repose, become the most barbarous race alive when violent passions pervert their natural disposition.

I have, unhappily, been unable to procure all the answers which the peasants made to these murderous inquiries, but I have found a few of them, and they suffice to indicate the spirit of the whole.

They give with care the name of every privileged person, whether belonging to the nobility or the middle classes. Occasionally they describe, and invariably criticise his mode of life. They enter into curious calculations with regard to the value of his property; they enlarge upon the number and nature of his privileges, and especially upon the injury which they inflict upon the neighborhood. They enumerate the bushels of wheat which he receives by way of dues; they estimate enviously his revenue, which they say is advantageous to no one. The curate’s fees—his salary, as they have already begun to say—are excessive; they remark bitterly that the Church exacts money for every thing, and that a poor man can not even be buried gratuitously. As for the taxes, they are all ill-distributed and oppressive; not one obtains favor at their hands, and all are spoken of in violent language breathing absolute fury.

“The indirect taxes are odious,” they say; “not a household but the tax-gatherer invades; nothing is sacred either from his eyes or his hands. The registry duties are crushing. The receiver of the taille is a tyrant whose cupidity shrinks from no measure of annoyance for honest people. The bailiffs are no better; no honest farmer is safe from their ferocity. The collectors are obliged to ruin their neighbors in order to save themselves from the voracity of these despots.”

The inquiry is no mere preliminary of the Revolution; it is part of it, speaks its language, wears its features.

One among the many points of difference between the religious revolution of the sixteenth century and the French Revolution is especially striking. In the sixteenth century, most of the nobility took the side of the new religion from ambitious or interested motives; while the people, on the contrary, embraced it from conviction, and without expecting any profit from the change. In the eighteenth century this was not the case. It was disinterested principle and generous sympathy which roused the upper classes to revolution, while the people were agitated by the bitter feeling of their grievances, and a rage to change their condition. The enthusiasm of the former fanned the flame of popular wrath and covetousness, and ended by arming the people.

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called revolutionary—principles of hostility to individual and private rights, and arguments in favor of appeals to violence.

The king set the example of treating the oldest and most solidly established institutions with contempt. Louis XV. shook the monarchy, and hastened the Revolution as much by his innovations as by his vices, by his energy as by his dissipation. When the people saw the Parliament—an institution coeval with, and apparently as strong as the monarchy—fall and disappear, they inferred, in a vague manner, that a period of violence was at hand, when age would prove no guarantee of respectability, and novelty no indication of risk.

During the whole course of his reign, Louis XVI. talked of nothing but reform. The Revolution overthrew very few institutions whose overthrow he did not foreshadow. He issued ordinances abolishing some of the worst, but he restored them soon afterward, as though he intended only to uproot them, leaving to others the task of pulling them down.

Some of the reforms which he effected changed violently and unexpectedly old and respected customs; others did violence to acquired rights. They paved the way for the Revolution less by striking down obstacles which stood in its way than by showing the people how it might be brought about. The mischief was aggravated by the pure and disinterested motives of the king and his advisers; for no example is so dangerous as that of violence employed by well-meaning people for beneficial objects.

Long before, Louis XIV. had publicly promulgated in his edicts the theory that all the lands in the kingdom had been in the origin conditionally granted by the state, which was therefore the only real landowner—the actual holders having mere possessory rights, and an imperfect and questionable title. This doctrine sprang out of the feudal system, but it was never openly professed in France till that system was on the point of death; courts of justice never admitted it. It was the mother of modern socialism, which thus, strange to say, seems to have been the offspring of royal despotism.

During the subsequent reigns, the government took pains to teach the people, in practical lessons which they could easily understand, that private property was to be regarded with contempt. During the second half of the eighteenth century the government was seized with a mania for public works; it took possession without scruple of all the lands it required for its enterprises, and threw down the houses which stood in its way. The Department of Bridges and Roads was, then as now, smitten with admiration for the geometrical charm of the straight line. It would have nothing to do with roads in which there was the slightest curve; to avoid a bend, it would cut through a thousand estates. Properties thus injured or destroyed were always arbitrarily and tardily paid for; sometimes they were not paid for at all.

When the Provincial Assembly of Lower Normandy took the administration of the province out of the hands of the intendent, it was ascertained that the price of all the lands taken by public authority during the twenty years previous was yet unpaid. The debt which the state thus owed to this little corner of France amounted to 250,000 livres. But few large landholders were injured; the burden fell chiefly on the smaller proprietors, for lands were very generally parcelled out into small lots. Here were a large number of persons whose own experience taught them that private rights were not for a moment to be balanced against the public interest: a doctrine they were not likely to forget when the time came for its application to their own benefit.

In many parishes persons had bequeathed sums of money to be employed in supporting charitable institutions for the benefit of the parishioners in certain specific cases. Most of these institutions were either destroyed or transformed during the later period of the monarchy, by mere Orders in Council, that is to say, by the arbitrary will of government. The fund was usually taken away from the village, and bestowed on neighboring hospitals. Carrying out the principle still farther, the government simultaneously diverted the property of the hospitals from its original destination, and applied it to purposes of which the founder of the charity would doubtless have disapproved. Much of this property had been left to the hospitals, to be held by them inalienably: the government authorized them to sell it, and to pay over the price to the public treasury, which was to pay interest thereon. This, the administrators said, was making a better use of the bequest than the testator himself had done. They forgot that the very best way to teach men to violate the individual rights of the living is to disregard the wishes of the dead. No subsequent government has displayed such marked contempt for testamentary injunctions as the old monarchy. Never, on any occasion, did it evince any of those fastidious scruples which in England rally the
whole weight of the social body to the support of the citizen’s last will, and secure for his memory a respect that is never paid to his person.

Requisitions, compulsory sales of produce, the *maximum*, were all in use under the government of the old regime. I find that in times of scarcity the public officials would fix the price at which farm produce must be sold, and punish farmers who refused to send their grain to market by the imposition of a fine.

But the most pernicious of all lessons was that inculcated by judicial proceedings in criminal cases in which the people were concerned. Poor men were far better protected against the rich and the powerful than is generally supposed. But when they had to deal with the state, they were judged, as I said before, by abnormal tribunals composed of partial judges: the proceedings were speedy and delusive; the decision, which was final, might be anticipated by preliminary execution. “His majesty appoints the provost of police (*prévôt de la maréchaussée*) and his lieutenant to take cognizance of all movements and assemblages to which the scarcity of provisions may give rise; ordains that cases shall be heard and decided by them summarily and without appeal; and forbids all courts of justice to take cognizance of any such.” This Order in Council was the law throughout the eighteenth century. Police reports of the time show that, in cases of this character, suspected villages were surrounded at night; houses were entered before daybreak; peasants designated for arrest were seized without other warrant or authority. They were often detained for a length of time in prison before they could speak to a judge, though edicts declared that every person accused should be examined within twenty-four hours after his arrest. That provision of the law was neither less formal nor more respected than it is in our own day.

It was thus that a benign and solidly-established government taught the people, day by day, the system of criminal procedure best adapted to the requirements of revolution and the desires of tyranny. It kept open school, and to the last gave to the lower classes this perilous education. Even Turgot faithfully copied his predecessors in this respect. When his legislation of 1775 on the subject of breadstuffs gave rise to resistance in the Parliament and riots in the country parts, he obtained from the king an ordinance which removed the cases of the rioters from the jurisdiction of the ordinary courts, and gave them exclusively to the cognizance of the provost. “The police jurisdiction,” the ordinance said, “is principally designed to repress popular disturbances when it is desirable that speedy examples be made.” Under this ordinance, peasants traveling out of their parish without a certificate signed by the curate and the syndic were liable to prosecution before the provost, arrest, and punishment as vagabonds.

It is true that, under terrible forms, the monarchy of the eighteenth century concealed moderate penalties. Its principle was rather to terrify than to injure; or, rather, it was arbitrary and violent from habit and indifference, but, at the same time, instinctively gentle. But summary judicial proceedings were none the less popular with government. The lighter the penalty, the easier the vice of its infliction was forgotten. The mildness of the sentence cloaked the harshness of the trial.

I venture to state—for I hold the proofs in my hand—that precedents and examples for very many of the proceedings of the revolutionary government were found in the records of the measures employed against the lower classes during the two last centuries of the monarchy. The old regime furnished the Revolution with many of its forms; the latter merely added the atrocity of its genius.

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developed; so that, between the two, the mechanic, cramped and embarrassed, knew not to which side he ought
to look for protection or control. This state of uncertainty and anomaly, in which all the lower classes of the large
cities had been suddenly placed, led to very grave consequences when the people appeared on the political stage.

A year before the Revolution a royal edict overturned the whole judicial system. New jurisdictions were created,
old ones abolished, all the old rules governing the competency of judges changed. Now I have already had
occasion to remark that the number of persons who were employed in France, either in hearing cases or
executing judgments, was immense. In fact, nearly all the middle class had something to do with the courts.
Hence the effect of the law was to disturb the condition and means of several thousand families, whose situation
was rendered uncertain and precarious. Nor was it less prejudicial to litigants, who, in the judicial confusion, had
some trouble in finding out the law which was applicable to their case, and the court that was to hear it.

But it was especially the radical reform effected in the government proper, in 1787, which threw public business
into disorder, and brought trouble into the home of every private family.

I stated that in the pays d’élection, that is to say, in three fourths of France, the whole government of each
district (généralité) was placed in the hands of a single man, the intendant, who was not only uncontrolled, but
without advisers.

In 1787 provincial assemblies were created, which became the real governors of the country. In every village an
elective municipal body took the place of the old parochial assemblies, and, generally speaking, of the syndic
also.

Thus a system diametrically opposed to the past, and completely subversive, not only of the old methods of
transacting business, but of the relative positions of men, had to be applied to every part of the country by one
uniform plan, quite independently of old usages and of the particular situation of the several provinces. So
profundely was the old government imbued with the unitarian spirit of the Revolution by whose hands it was to
perish.

It was then plainly seen how large an influence habit exercises over the working of political institutions, and how
much more easily men manage their affairs with obscure and complicated laws to which they are used than with a
far simpler system which is new to them.

There were in France, under the old regime, all kinds of authorities, infinitely diversified according to locality,
with powers of unknown and unlimited scope, so that the field of action of each was always common to several
others; yet business was transacted in an orderly and tolerably easy manner. The new authorities, on the
contrary, which were few in number, carefully limited in their sphere, and harmoniously adjusted, were no sooner
put in force, than they encroached upon one another, and clashed, throwing every thing into confusion and
paralyzing each other.

The new system, moreover, had a great fault, which alone would have rendered its execution difficult, at the
outset especially; all the authorities it created were corporate.

Under the old monarchy, but two methods of governing were known. Where the government was in the hands of
a single individual, he acted without the concurrence of any assembly. Where, on the other hand, assemblies were
used, as was the case in pays d’états and in cities, the executive power was confided to no one in particular: the
assembly not only governed and controlled the administration, it executed the laws, either directly or through the
medium of temporary committees which it appointed.

These being the only two plans known, when one was abandoned the other was adopted. It is not a little singular
that, in so enlightened a society, and one in which government had so long played a leading part, no one should
have thought of combining the two systems, and drawing a distinction between the executive branch and that
which was supervisory or directory, without disuniting them. This idea, simple as it is, never struck any one; it is
a discovery which dates from this century, and almost the only discovery in administrative science that we can
fairly claim. We shall perceive the effects of the contrary system when we see the old administrative methods
applied to politics, the traditions of the detested old regime followed, and the plan of the Provincial States and
small municipalities adopted by the National Convention. Causes which had formerly led to nothing but
embarrassment in the transaction of public business then gave rise to the Reign of Terror.
The Provincial Assemblies of 1787 were authorized to administer their own government, and to supersede the intendant in almost all matters. They were intrusted with the distribution and levy of the taille, under the authority of the central government, and with the selection and general direction of all public works. All the agents of the Bridges and Roads, from the inspector to the overseer of works, were under their immediate orders. The assemblies decided according to their own discretion what was to be done, reported to the ministers, suggested the names of persons deserving reward. They were the guardians of the communes, heard most of the lawsuits which had formerly been brought before the intendant, &c., and discharged a variety of functions that were ill suited to a corporate and irresponsible body, especially when composed of persons who were entirely new to such duties.

The confusion was completed by an error; the intendant was stripped of his power, but the office was retained. After being deprived of their absolute authority, the intendants were expected to aid the assembly and supervise its acts—as though a fallen functionary could ever help to execute and enter into the spirit of laws which dispossess him.

A similar course was adopted with regard to the office of sub-delegate. District assemblies were appointed to discharge its functions under the direction of the Provincial Assembly, and on similar principles.

From all that we can learn of the proceedings of the Provincial Assemblies of 1787, including their own reports, it would appear that from the first they found themselves at war, sometimes open, sometimes secret, with the intendants, who employed all their superior business experience in defeating the aims of their successors. One assembly complains that it can hardly succeed in wresting from the hands of the intendant the most necessary papers. Another is accused by the intendant of seeking to usurp powers which the edicts reserve to him. He appeals to the minister, who makes no answer, or answers doubtfully, being as new to the business as the others. Sometimes the assembly decides that the intendant has been guilty of maladministration, that the roads he has made are in the wrong direction or in bad repair; he is accused of ruining the communities whose guardian he was. In their inexperience, every thing is obscure to the assemblymen, and they often hesitate, send to distant assemblies for advice, keep couriers constantly on the road from one to another. The intendant of Auch pretends that he is entitled to oppose the assembly, which had authorized a commune to tax itself; the assembly replies that in this matter the intendant may offer advice, but nothing more, and sends to the assembly of Ile de France to ask what that body thinks on the point.

These recriminations and interchange of opinions often delay, and sometimes stop altogether, the transaction of public business. National life seems suspended. The Provincial Assembly of Lorraine—a mere echo of others—declares that “the stagnation of public business is complete, and all good citizens are afflicted thereat.”

Others of these new administrations go wrong by excessive activity and self-reliance; they are full of a restless and disturbing zeal, which prompts them to want to change all the old methods with a stroke of the pen, and to correct the most deeply-rooted abuses in a day. Under the pretext that they are henceforth the guardians of cities, they assume the management of municipal affairs; in a word, their efforts to improve matters succeed in throwing every thing into confusion.

Now consider the immense influence which the government had long exercised in France, the multitude of interests which it affected, the vast number of affairs which depended on it for support or aid; bear in mind that private individuals relied more on it than on themselves to secure the success of their own business, to develop their industry, to insure their means of subsistence, to make and mend their roads, to preserve the peace among them, and to guarantee their well-being; and then calculate how many individuals must have been personal sufferers by its disorder.

The vices of the new organization were more conspicuous in the villages than anywhere else; for there it not only disturbed the old divisions of authority, but changed suddenly the relative position of individuals, and drove the several orders into mutual hostility.

When Turgot, in 1775, proposed to the king to reform the administration of the rural districts, the greatest difficulty he met with, as he states himself, arose from the unequal distribution of taxes. For the chief parochial business was the distribution, levy, and appropriation of the taxes, and how was it possible to make people, on whom they pressed unequally, and some of whom were wholly exempt from them, deliberate and act in concert
on their subject? Every parish contained some men of rank, or churchmen, who paid no taille, peasants who were partially or wholly exempt, others who paid an integral share. These formed three distinct parishes, each of which would have required a separate administration. The problem was insoluble.

Nowhere was the inequality of taxation so conspicuous as in the country; nowhere were people so divided into distinct and mutually hostile classes. Before attempting a collective administration and a free government in villages, the taxes should have been equalized, and distinctions of class and rank modified.

This was not the plan pursued when reform was attempted in 1787. Within the parish, the old distinctions of rank were maintained with the unequal taxation which marked them; yet the whole government was intrusted to elective bodies. This led directly to most singular results.

The curate and the seignior had no business to appear in the assembly which elected municipal officers; for they were respectively members of the orders of the clergy and the nobility, while the officials elected were the special representatives of the Third Estate.

But when the Municipal Council was chosen, the curate and the seignior were members *ex officio*, for it would not have been seemly to exclude from the government of the parish its two leading inhabitants. It was the seignior who presided over the municipal councilors, though he had not contributed to elect them, and could not take part in the bulk of their acts. Neither seignior nor curate, for instance, could vote on the distribution or levy of the taille, in consequence of their exemption. In return, the Council could not interfere with their capitation-tax, which continued to be regulated according to particular forms by the intendant.

Lest this president—so carefully isolated from the body which he was said to direct—should still exercise an indirect influence in opposition to the interest of the order to which he did not belong, it was proposed to disfranchise his tenants; and the Provincial Assemblies, to which the point was referred, considered the proposal proper, and in conformity with correct principle. Other men of rank, resident in the parish, were excluded from this municipal body, unless they were elected by the peasants; and then, as the regulation is careful to observe, they were representatives of the Third Estate alone.

The seignior then only appeared there to exhibit his subjection to his old subjects, who were now his masters, while he was more like their prisoner than their chief. Indeed, the principal object of the assemblage appeared to be less to bring the different ranks together than to show them how widely they differed, and how adverse their interests were.

Was the office of syndic still so discredited that it was never willingly accepted, or had it risen in importance side by side with the community whose chief agency it was? No one knew precisely. I have seen a letter from a village bailiff of 1788, complaining indignantly that he has been elected syndic, “which is in violation of the privileges of his office.” The comptroller-general replied that the ideas of this personage required to be rectified; “that he must be made to understand that it was an honor to be elected by his fellow-citizens; and that, moreover, the new syndics would not resemble the functionaries hitherto known by the title, and might expect more consideration at the hands of government.”

On the other hand, the moment the peasantry became a power in the state, the leading citizens of the parishes and men of rank were suddenly attracted to their side. A seignior and high justiciary of a village near Paris complained that the edict prevented his taking part, even as a simple inhabitant of the parish, in the proceedings of the parochial assembly. Others “consent,” they said, “to devote themselves for the public good, and accept the office of syndic.”

It came too late. In proportion to the advances of the wealthy classes, the people of the rural districts shrank back; when they tried to mingle with them, the people sheltered themselves in the isolation into which they had been driven. Some municipal assemblies declined to admit their seignior as a member; others made all sorts of objections to the reception of commoners who were rich. The Provincial Assembly of Lower Normandy states, “We are informed that several municipal assemblies have refused to admit absentee landholders, who, as commoners, have an indisputable right to seats there. Other assemblies have declined to admit farmers who owned no land within their jurisdiction.”

Thus all was novelty, obscurity, conflict between the secondary laws, even before the chief laws which regulated
the government of the state had been touched. Those which were still in force were shaken, and there was not a law or a regulation which the government had not announced its intention to abolish or modify. Our Revolution, then, was preceded by a sudden and thorough remodeling of all administrative rules and habits. The event is barely remembered now, yet it was one of the greatest perturbations that ever marked the history of a great people. It was a first revolution, which exercised a prodigious influence over the second, and rendered it a very different affair from all former or subsequent revolutions.

The first English revolution, though it overthrew the political constitution of the country, and for a time abolished royalty itself, barely touched the secondary class of laws, and made no change in the prevailing customs and usages. Justice and government were administered in the old forms and in the beaten track. At the height of the civil war, it is said that the twelve judges of England continued their semi-annual circuits throughout the country to hold the assizes. The agitation was not universal. The effects of the revolution were circumscribed, and English society, though shaken at the top, was unmoved at the base.

We have ourselves seen in France, since 1789, several revolutions which have altered the whole edifice of government. Most of them have been very sudden, and have been achieved by violence, in open violation of existing laws. Yet none have given rise to long continued or general disorder; they have been scarcely felt, in some cases hardly noticed by the majority of the nation.

The reason is that, since 1789, the administrative system has always remained untouched in the midst of political convulsions. The person of the sovereign or the form of the central power has been altered, but the daily transaction of business has neither been disturbed nor interrupted. Each citizen has remained subject to the laws and usages which he understood, in the small matters which concerned him personally. He had to deal with secondary authorities, with which he had done business before, and which were rarely changed. For if each revolution struck off the head of the government, it left its body untouched and alive, so that the same functionaries continued to perform their functions, in the same spirit, and according to the same routine, under every different political system. They administered justice or managed public affairs in the name of the king, then in that of the republic, lastly in that of the emperor. Fortune’s wheel turning on and on, the same individuals began again to administer and manage in the same way for the king, for the republic, for the emperor; what mattered the name of the master? It was their business to be good administrators and managers—not citizens. Thus, the first shock over, it seemed as though nothing had changed in the country.

At the outbreak of the Revolution, those branches of the government which, though subordinate, are most felt by individuals, and exercise the largest and most steady influence on their welfare, had just been overturned; the government had suddenly changed all its agents and all its principles. At first the state did not seem to have felt a severe shock from this sweeping reform; but every Frenchman had experienced a slight commotion. Not a man but was affected either in his rank, or in his habits, or in his business. Though great state affairs continued to be transacted in a sort of regular order, in those smaller transactions which constitute the routine of every-day life, no one knew whom to obey, where to apply, how to act.

Every part of the nation being thus thrown off the level, one final blow was enough to set the whole in motion, and produce the greatest convulsion and the most terrible disorders that were ever witnessed.

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CHAPTER XX.

HOW THE REVOLUTION SPRANG SPONTANEOUSLY OUT OF THE PRECEDING FACTS.

I DESIRE, in conclusion, to put together some of the features which I have separately sketched, and, having drawn the portrait of the old regime, to watch the Revolution spring from it by its own unaided effort. Let it be borne in mind that France was the only country in which the feudal system had preserved its injurious and irritating characteristics, while it had lost all those which were beneficial or useful; and it will seem less surprising that the Revolution which was to abolish the old constitution of Europe should have broken out there...
rather than elsewhere.

Let it also be borne in mind that France was the only feudal country in which the nobility had lost its old political rights, lost the right of administering government and leading the people, but had nevertheless retained and even largely increased its pecuniary indemnities and the individual privileges of its members; had, in its subordinate position, remained a close body, growing less and less of an aristocracy and more and more of a caste; and it will at once be understood why its privileges seemed so inexplicable and detestable to the French, and why their hearts were inflamed with a democratic envy that is not yet extinguished.

Let it be borne in mind, finally, that the nobility was separated from the middle classes, which it had eschewed, and from the people, whose affections it had lost; that it stood alone in the midst of the nation, seemingly the staff of an army, really a group of soldierless officers; and it will be easy to conceive how, after an existence of a thousand years, it was overthrown in a single night.

I have shown how the royal government abolished the provincial liberties, usurped the place of the local authorities in three fourths of the kingdom, and monopolized public business, great and small; and I have also shown how Paris consequently became of necessity the master of the country instead of the capital, or rather, became itself the whole country. These two facts, which were peculiar to France, would alone suffice to show how a revolt could achieve the overthrow of a monarchy which had endured so violent shocks during so many centuries, and which, on the eve of its destruction, seemed immovable to its very assailants.

Political life had been so long and so thoroughly extinguished in France—individuals had so entirely lost the habit of mixing in public affairs, of judging for themselves, of studying popular movements, and even understanding the people at all, that the French quite naturally drifted into a terrible revolution without seeing it—the very parties who had most to fear from it taking the lead, and undertaking to smooth and widen the way for its approach.

In the absence of free institutions, and, consequently, of political classes, active political bodies, or organized parties, the duty of leading public opinion, when it revived, naturally fell to the lot of philosophers. Hence it might be expected that the Revolution would be conducted less in view of specific facts than in conformity with abstract principles and general theories. It might be conjectured that, instead of assailing specific laws, it would attack all laws together, and would assume to substitute for the old Constitution of France a new system of government which these writers had conceived.

The Church was mixed with all the old institutions that were to be destroyed. Hence it was plain that the Revolution would shake the religious while it overthrew the civil power; and this done, and men’s minds set free from all the restraints which religion, custom, and law impose on reformers, it was impossible to say to what unheard-of lengths of boldness it might not go. Every careful student of the state of the country could perceive that there were no lengths of boldness that were too distant, no pitch of violence too frantic to be attempted.

“What!” cried Burke, in one of his eloquent pamphlets, “one can not find a man that can answer for the smallest district; not a man who can answer for his neighbor. People are arrested in their houses for royalism, for moderation, or any thing else, and no one ever resists.” Burke had no idea of the state in which the monarchy he so deeply regretted had left us. The old government had deprived the French of the power and the desire to help each other. When the Revolution broke out, there were not ten men in the greater part of France who were in the habit of acting in concert, in a regular manner, and providing for their own defense; every thing was left to the central power. And so, when that power made way for an irresponsible sovereign assembly, and exchanged its former mildness for ferocity, there was nothing to check or delay it for an instant. The same cause which had overthrown the monarchy had rendered every thing possible after its fall.

At no former period had religious toleration, gentleness in the exercise of authority, humanity, and benevolence, been so generally advocated or so thoroughly accepted as sound doctrine as during the eighteenth century: the very spirit of war—last refuge of the spirit of violence—had been limited, and its rigors softened. Out of the bosom of this refined society how inhuman a revolution was about to spring! And yet the refinement was no mere pretense, for no sooner had the first fury of the Revolution been deadened than the spirit of the laws and political customs was softened and assuaged.
To comprehend the contrast between the benign theories and the violent acts of the Revolution, one must remember that it was prepared by the most civilized classes of the nation, and executed by the roughest and most unpolished. The former having no bond of mutual union, no common understanding among themselves, no hold on the people, the latter assumed the whole direction of affairs when the old authorities were abolished. Even where they did not govern they inspired the government; and a glance at the way they had lived under the old regime left no room for doubt as to what they would prove.

The very peculiarities of their condition endowed them with some rare virtues. They had long been free and landholders; they were temperate and proud in their independent isolation. They were hardened to toil, careless of the refinements of life, resigned to misfortune however great, firm in the face of danger. A simple, manly race, hereafter to constitute armies under which Europe shall bow the neck; but hence, also, a dangerous master. Crushed for centuries under the weight of abuses which no one shared with them, living alone, and brooding silently over their prejudices, their jealousies, and their hatreds, they were hardened by their hard experience, and were as ready to inflict as to bear suffering.

Such was the French people when it laid hands on the government, and undertook to complete the work of the Revolution. It found in books a theory which it assumed to put in practice, shaping the ideas of the writers to suit its passions.

The careful student of France during the eighteenth century must have noticed in the preceding pages the birth and development of two leading passions, which were not coeval, and not always similar in their tendencies. One—the deepest and most solidly rooted—was a violent, unquenchable hatred of inequality. It took its rise and grew in the face of marked inequalities; drove the French with steady, irresistible force to seek to destroy utterly all the remains of the mediæval institutions; and prompted the erection on their ruins of a society in which all men should be alike, and as equal in rank as humanity dictates.

The other—of more recent date, and less solidly rooted—prompted men to seek to be free as well as equal.

Toward the close of the old regime these two passions were equally sincere, and apparently equally active; they met at the opening of the Revolution, and, blending together into one, they took fire from contact, and inflamed the whole heart of France. No doubt 1789 was a period of inexperience, but it was also a period of generosity, of enthusiasm, of manliness, of greatness—a period of immortal memory, upon which men will look back with admiration and respect when all who witnessed it, and we who follow them, shall have long since passed away.

The French were then proud enough of their cause and of themselves to believe that they could enjoy freedom and equality together. They planted, therefore, free institutions in the midst of democratic institutions. Not content with pulverizing the superannuated laws which divided men into classes, castes, corporations, and endowed them with rights more unequal even than their ranks, they likewise annulled at a blow those other laws which were a later creation of the royal power, and which had stripped the nation of all control over itself, and set over every Frenchman a government to be his preceptor, his tutor, and, in case of need, his oppressor.

Centralization fell with absolute monarchy.

But when the vigorous generation which began the Revolution perished or became enervated, as all generations must which undertake such enterprises; when, in the natural course of events of this character, the love of liberty had been discouraged and grown languid in the midst of anarchy and popular despotism, and the bewildered nation began to grope around for a master, immense facilities were offered for the restoration of absolute government; and it was easy for the genius of him who was destined both to continue and to destroy the Revolution to discover the m.

The old regime contained, in fact, a large body of institutions of modern type which, not being hostile to equality, were susceptible of being used in the new order of things, and yet offered remarkable facilities for the establishment of despotism. They were sought for and found in the midst of the ruins. They had formerly given birth to habits, passions, and ideas which tended to keep men divided and obedient; they were restored and turned to account. Centralization was raised from its tomb and restored to its place; whence it happened that, all the checks which had formerly served to limit its power being destroyed, and not revived, there sprang out of the bosom of a nation which had just overthrown royalty a power more extensive, more detailed, more absolute than any of our monarchs had ever wielded. The enterprise seemed incredibly bold and unprecedentedly successful,
because people only thought of what they saw before them, and forgot the past. The despot fell; but the most substantial portion of his work remained: his administrative system survived his government. And ever since, whenever an attempt has been made to overthrow an absolute government, the head of Liberty has been simply planted on the shoulders of a servile body.

During the period that has elapsed since the Revolution, the passion for liberty has frequently been extinguished again, and again revived. This will long be the case, for it is still inexperienced, ill regulated, easily discouraged, easily frightened away, easily overcome, superficial, and evanescent. Meanwhile, the passion for equality has retained its place at the bottom of the hearts it originally penetrated, and linked with their dearest sentiments. While the one is incessantly changing, now increasing, now diminishing, now gaining strength, now losing it, according to events, the other has remained uniformly the same, striving for its object with obstinate and often blind ardor, willing to sacrifice every thing to gain it, and ready to repay its grant from government by cultivating such habits, ideas, and laws as a despotism may require.

The Revolution will ever remain in darkness to those who do not look beyond it; it can only be comprehended by the light of the ages which preceded it. Without a clear view of society in the olden time, of its laws, its faults, its prejudices, its suffering, its greatness, it is impossible to understand the conduct of the French during the sixty years which have followed its fall; and even that view will not suffice without some acquaintance with the natural history of our nation.

When I examine that nation in itself, I can not help thinking it is more extraordinary than any of the events of its history. Did there ever appear on the earth another nation so fertile in contrasts, so extreme in its acts—more under the dominion of feeling, less ruled by principle; always better or worse than was anticipated—now below the level of humanity, now far above; a people so unchangeable in its leading features that it may be recognized by portraits drawn two or three thousand years ago, and yet so fickle in its daily opinions and tastes that it becomes at last a mystery to itself, and is as much astonished as strangers at the sight of what it has done; naturally fond of home and routine, yet, once driven forth and forced to adopt new customs, ready to carry principles to any lengths and to dare any thing; indolent by disposition, but better pleased with the arbitrary and even violent rule of a sovereign than with a free and regular government under its chief citizens; now fixed in hostility to subjection of any kind, now so passionately wedded to servitude that nations made to serve can not vie with it; led by a thread so long as no word of resistance is spoken, wholly ungovernable when the standard of revolt has been raised—thus always deceiving its masters, who fear it too much or too little; never so free that it can not be subjugated, nor so kept down that it can not break the yoke; qualified for every pursuit, but excelling in nothing but war; more prone to worship chance, force, success, eclat, noise, than real glory; endowed with more heroism than virtue, more genius than common sense; better adapted for the conception of grand designs than the accomplishment of great enterprises; the most brilliant and the most dangerous nation of Europe, and the one that is surest to inspire admiration, hatred, terror, or pity, but never indifference?

No nation but such a one as this could give birth to a revolution so sudden, so radical, so impetuous in its course, and yet so full of missteps, contradictory facts, and conflicting examples. The French could not have done it but for the reasons I have alleged; but, it must be admitted, even these reasons would not suffice to explain such a revolution in any country but France.

I have now reached the threshold of that memorable Revolution. I shall not cross it now. Soon, perhaps, I may be enabled to do so. I shall then pass over its causes to examine it in itself, and to judge the society to which it gave birth.

APPENDIX.

[OPTIONAL!! READ ONLY IF YOU HAVE EXTRA TIME AND THE DESIRE. WHAT FOLLOWS WILL NOT BE DISCUSSED IN CLASS.]
OF THE PAYS D'ÉTATS, AND LANGUEDOC IN PARTICULAR.

IT is not my intention to examine in detail, in this place, the condition of affairs in each of the pays d’états, as they stood before the Revolution.

I merely design to state how many there were; which of them were distinguished by local activity; on what footing they stood as regards the royal government; wherein they departed from the rules I have mentioned, and in what particulars they were governed by these rules; and, lastly, to show, by the example of one of them, what they all might have become.

States had existed in most of the French provinces—that is to say, their government had been administered by members of the Three Estates (gens des trois états), as it was then the fashion to say; in other words, by an assembly composed of representatives of the clergy, the nobility, and the burghers. This provincial institution, like most of the political institutions of the Middle Ages, had flourished in a similar form throughout almost all civilized Europe, or, at all events, in every country into which German customs and ideas had made their way. In many German provinces States existed up to the French Revolution; in the others they did not disappear till the seventeenth or eighteenth century. For two centuries sovereigns had uniformly and steadily waged war against them, sometimes openly, sometimes secretly. No attempt had been any where made to adapt them to the improved condition of the times; but monarchs had never let slip an opportunity of destroying them, or deforming them when this was the worst they could do.

In France there were but five provinces of any extent, and a few small, insignificant districts, in which States still existed in 1789. Provincial liberty, properly speaking, subsisted in two only, Bretagne and Languedoc; everywhere else the substantial features of the institution had been taken away, leaving only the semblance behind. I shall examine Languedoc separately, and at some length.

It was the largest and most populous of the pays d’états. It contained more than two thousand communes, or, as they were then called, communities, and nearly two millions of inhabitants. It was, moreover, the best ordered and prosperous, as well as the largest of these provinces. We may therefore learn, from an inquiry into its condition, what provincial liberty was under the old regime, and to what extent, in those sections of country where it was most vigorous, it had been subordinated to the royal power.

In Languedoc the Estates could not meet without an express order from the king. Each member must have received individually a letter addressed to him inviting him to be present at each session. Hence a malcontent of the time remarked: “Of the three bodies which compose our Estates, one, the clergy, is appointed by the king, as all livings and bishoprics are in his gift; and the two others are assumed to be in the same position, for the king can prevent any member from being present by simply withholding the invitation, though the member excluded has not been exiled or even put on his trial.”

The period when the session of the Estates must end was likewise fixed by the king. An Order in Council limited their ordinary sessions to forty days. The king was represented in the assembly by commissioners who had seats whenever they chose to demand them, and were the organ of the government. The authority of the Estates was strictly limited. They could come to no important decision, pass no appropriation bill, without an Order in Council approving the measure: they could neither impose a tax, nor effect a loan, nor institute an action at law without the express permission of the king. All their rules, including those which regulated their own sittings, were invalid till the king had sanctioned them. Their receipts and expenditures, their budget, as we should say at present, was subject to the same control.

The government exercised the same political rights in Languedoc as elsewhere. Whatever laws it chose to promulgate, whatever general rules it laid down, whatever measures it took, applied to Languedoc as well as the pays d’élection. It performed the natural functions of government, maintained the same police, employed the same agents there as elsewhere, and created, from time to time, a host of new functionaries, whose offices the province was obliged to buy up at very high rates.

Languedoc, like the other provinces, was governed by an intendant. In every district this intendant had sub-delegates, who were in relation with the heads of the communities, and directed them. The intendant was public
guardian, precisely as in the pays d’élection. The smallest village, buried in the gorges of the Cevennes, could not make the least outlay without being authorized by an Order in Council from Paris. That branch of legal business which is now called the Department of Private Claims (contentieux administratif) was even more extensive there than elsewhere. The intendant had original jurisdiction over all questions of highways and roads, and generally over all disputes in which the government was, or chose to consider itself, interested. Nor were government agents less carefully protected there than elsewhere against prosecutions by citizens who were aggrieved by them.

Wherein, then, did Languedoc differ from the other provinces? How came it to be so envied by its neighbors? It differed from the rest of France in three respects:

1st. It possessed an assembly composed of substantial men, enjoying the confidence of the people and the respect of the general government. No government functionary, or, as they were called, king’s officer, could be a member. The assembly discussed freely and seriously the affairs of the province every year. The proximity of this centre of intelligence obliged the government to exercise its privileges very cautiously and moderately: though its agents and its tendencies were the same there as elsewhere, they produced very different results.

2dly. Many public works were carried on in Languedoc at the cost of the king and directed by his agents; others were partly defrayed and substantially directed by the crown; but a still larger number were executed at the cost of the province. When the king had once approved the design and authorized the outlay necessary for the latter, they were prosecuted by officials chosen by the States, under the inspection of commissioners selected from the assembly.

3dly. The province was entitled to levy, in the way it liked best, a portion of the royal taxes, and all the taxes that were required for its own necessities.

We shall now see the use which Languedoc made of these privileges. It is a matter which deserves close attention.

A most striking feature in the pays d’élection was the rarity of local taxes. The general taxes were often burdensome, but the province spent little or nothing on itself. In Languedoc, on the contrary, enormous sums were spent by the province for public works; in 1780 the annual appropriation exceeded 7,000,000 livres.

The central government was occasionally shocked at such extravagance. It began to fear that such appropriations would exhaust the province, and incapacitate it from paying the royal taxes. It reproached the States with a want of moderation. I have read a memorial in which the assembly replied to these criticisms. A few extracts from that document will depict the spirit which animated that little government better than any thing I could say.

The memorial admits that the province has certainly undertaken and is prosecuting immense works; but, instead of apologizing therefor, it declares that, if the king has no objection, this policy will be still farther carried out. The province has already improved and facilitated the navigation of the chief rivers which cross its territory, and is now engaged in prolonging the Burgundy Canal—which was constructed under Louis XIV., and is now inadequate—through Lower Languedoc, by Cette and Agde to the Rhone. It has adapted the port of Cette to commercial purposes, and keeps it in repair at great expense. These outlays, it is observed, are for national rather than provincial objects, but the province has made them, as it will be the chief gainer by the works. It is further engaged in draining and reclaiming the marsh of Aigues-Mortes. But its chief outlays have been for roads. It has either opened or repaired all the high roads which traverse its surface and lead into neighboring provinces. It has mended all the roads between the different cities and bourgs of Languedoc. All these roads are excellent even in winter, and compare very favorably with the hard, rough, ill-kept roads which are met with in most of the neighboring provinces, such as Dauphiné, Quercy, and Bordeaux (which, it is observed, are pays d’élection). On this head the memorial refers to the judgment of travelers and merchants; nor without reason, for Arthur Young, who traveled through the country a year afterward, notes, “Languedoc, pays d’état—good roads, made without corvées.”

If the king will grant permission, continues the memorial, the Estates will do more yet; they will undertake to improve the parish roads, which affect as many interests as the others. “For if produce,” continued the memorial, “can not find its way from the producer’s barn to the market, it is of very little use to provide for its exportation to a distance.” “The principle of the States with regard to public works,” the memorial adds, “has always been to
look at their usefulness, not at their cost.” Rivers, canals, roads, give value to all products of the soil and of industry, by facilitating their conveyance at all seasons and at small expense to a market, and spreading commercial activity throughout the province; they are always worth more than they cost. Moreover, works of this character, if undertaken moderately, and spread uniformly over the territory of the province, sustain the value of labor, and give employment to the poor. “The king,” adds the memorial, proudly, “need be at no expense for the establishment of work-houses in Languedoc, as he has been obliged to do in the rest of France. We seek no favors of the kind: the works of public utility which we undertake ourselves stand us in the stead of work-houses, and furnish a remunerative demand for all our labor.”

The more I study the regulations which the king permitted the States of Languedoc to establish in those branches of administration which were left under their control, the more I admire the wisdom, the equity, the mildness which characterize them, and the more satisfied am I of the superiority of the policy of the local government over that which obtained in the provinces administered by the king.

The province was divided into communities, towns, or villages—into administrative districts, which were called dioceses; and, lastly, into three great departments, called sénéchaussées. Each of these divisions was separately represented in the Assembly; each had its own separate government, which acted under the direction of the States or the king. Public works for the benefit of any particular division were only undertaken when that division expressed a desire for them. If the work demanded by the community would be beneficial to the diocese, the latter was bound to bear a proportionate share of the expense. If the sénéchaussée was interested, it paid a share. But diocese, sénéchaussée, and province were all bound to contribute to works which the interests of a community required, if they were necessary, and beyond the means of the body directly concerned; for, as the States frequently observed, “The fundamental principle of our constitution is that all the divisions of the province are jointly and severally liable to each other, and bound to contribute to each other’s progress.”

Works undertaken by the province were required to have been planned deliberately, and to have received the assent of all the secondary bodies concerned. All labor consumed was paid for in cash; corvées were unknown. I have stated that in pays d’élection land taken for objects of public utility was always tardily and inadequately paid for, and that occasionally the owner was not paid at all. This was one of the leading grievances of the Provincial Assemblies when they met in 1787. Some even complained that it was impossible to estimate the debts that had been thus incurred, as the property taken had been destroyed or transformed before it had been valued. In Languedoc, every foot of land taken from its owner was carefully valued before it was touched, and the value paid before the expiration of a year from the time the works were begun.

This system of the States of Languedoc with regard to public works appeared so excellent to the central government, that, without imitating, it admired it. The Royal Council, after having authorized its establishment, had it printed at the royal printing-office, and sent it to the intendants as a useful document to consult.

All that I have said with regard to public works is applicable, even in a greater degree, to that other and equally important branch of the provincial administration, the collection of the taxes. When one examines this department, first in the kingdom, then in the province, it seems impossible to believe that both are parts of the same empire.

I had occasion some time since to mention that the system used in Languedoc for the distribution and collection of the taille was substantially the same as the one now employed for the collection of our modern imposts. I shall not again revert to the subject, but will add simply that the province was so well convinced of the superiority of its method that, whenever the king established new taxes, the States paid heavily for the right of levying them in their own way, and by the hands of their own agents.

Notwithstanding all the outlays I have enumerated, the financial condition of Languedoc was so prosperous, and her credit so well established, that the central government often applied to it for endorsements, and borrowed in the name of the province at lower rates than would have been charged to the crown. I find that Languedoc borrowed in its own name, but for the use of the king, in the later years of the monarchy, 73,200,000 livres.

Yet the government watched these provincial liberties with a very jealous eye. Richelieu first mutilated, then abolished them. The weak and slothful Louis XIII., who loved nothing, detested them: he had such a dislike for provincial privileges, according to Boulainvilliers, that he would fly into a rage at the mere mention of the subject.
Weak minds always find energy enough to hate things which oblige them to exert themselves; their whole vigor is concentrated upon that one point, and, weak as they are every where else, they contrive to hate with some force. Good fortune happily restored the Constitution of Languedoc during the infancy of Louis XIV.; and that monarch, regarding it as his work, respected it. Louis XV. suspended it for a couple of years, but suffered its restoration afterward.

The creation of municipal offices involved great indirect dangers for the province. This detestable institution tended not only to destroy the constitution of cities, but to disfigure that of provinces. I am not aware whether the deputies of the Third Estate in the Provincial Assemblies had ever been chosen in view of the business they had to perform; certain it is that for a long period of time they had not been so elected. The only legitimate representatives of the middle classes and the people were the municipal officers of cities.

So long as the cities chose their magistrates freely by universal suffrage, and generally for a short period of time, but little inconvenience was occasioned by the fact that these deputies had not been specially appointed to represent the people, and defend their interest at that particular moment. Perhaps the mayor, council, or syndic was as faithful an exponent of the popular will as if he had been expressly chosen to represent the people in the assembly. But it will at once be understood that this ceased to be the case when the official had acquired his office for money. In this case he represented no one but himself, or, at best, only the small interests and petty passions of his coterie. Yet the powers of the magistrate by purchase were the same as those of the elected magistrate had been. Hence a total change in the character of the institution. Instead of a firm body of popular representatives, the nobility and the clergy had to contend in the Provincial Assembly with no one but a few isolated, timid, and powerless burghers; the Third Estate became more and more insignificant in the government as it grew more and more powerful in society. This was not the case in Languedoc, as the province always took care to buy up the offices which the king established from time to time. For this object a loan of more than four millions of livres was effected in the year 1773 alone.

Other causes, more potent still, had operated to imbue these old institutions with a modern spirit, and imparted to the States of Languedoc an indisputable superiority over all others.

In that province, as in a large portion of the South, the taille was a tax on the realty, not on the person. It was regulated by the value of the property, not the fortune of the owner. True, certain lands enjoyed a privilege of exemption. These lands had formerly all belonged to the nobility; but, in the course of events and the progress of industry, part of them had fallen into the hands of commoners, while, on the other hand, noblemen had in many cases become proprietors of lands subject to the taille. The absurdity of privileges was enhanced, no doubt, by their transfer from persons to property; but their burden was diminished, because, inconvenient as they were, they involved no humiliation. They were no longer inseparably bound up with class ideas; they created no class interests hostile to those of the public; they threw no obstacle in the way of a general administration of the public business by all classes. Nor was there, in fact, any part of France in which all classes mixed so freely, or on so decided a footing of equality as in Languedoc.

In Bretagne, all men of rank were entitled to be present in person at the States; hence these latter bore some resemblance to Polish Diets. In Languedoc, the nobility was represented in the States by twenty-three deputies; the clergy was represented by twenty-three bishops. It is worthy of remark, that the cities had as many members as the other two orders combined.

There was but one assembly, and votes were taken by heads, not by orders; hence the Third Estate naturally became the preponderating body, and gradually imbued the whole assembly with its peculiar spirit. The three magistrates, known as syndics--general, who were intrusted with the general management of business before the States, were always lawyers, that is to say, commoners. The nobility was strong enough to maintain its rank, but not to rule. The clergy, on the other hand, though counting many men of rank among its members, always maintained a good understanding with the Third Estate. It took an ardent interest in many of the schemes proposed by the burghers, labored in concert with them to augment the material property of citizens, and extend commerce and industry, and often placed at their service its extensive knowledge of men, and its peculiar skill in the management of affairs. It was almost always an ecclesiastic who was sent to Versailles to discuss with ministers questions that were in dispute between the States and the crown. It may be said that during the whole of the last century the government of Languedoc was administered by burghers, under the control of noblemen,
and with the aid of bishops.

Thanks to the peculiar constitution of the province, the spirit of the new era penetrated Languedoc easily, and made many modifications in its old system without destroying any thing.

This might have been the case every where. A portion of the perseverance and energy that were employed by the kings in abolishing or crippling the Provincial States would have sufficed for their improvement and adaptation to the necessities of modern civilization, had those monarchs ever sought any thing beyond extending and maintaining their own power.