Alexis de Tocqueville was born of a noble family at Verneuil, in Normandy, in 1805. He became an assistant magistrate in the French government, and in 1831 he received permission to go to America to study the penal system, together with a fellow magistrate and friend, Gustave de Beaumont. He traveled in America for nine months. On his return, he wrote, with Beaumont, a report on the American penal system. He then wrote Democracy in America, which was published in 1835, and was immediately recognized as a masterpiece. He was active in French politics, serving briefly as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Republican government established after the Revolution of 1848. He described this period in his Recollections. As a result of the coup d'état of Louis Napoleon, he retired from public life. He died in Cannes in 1859.

Tocqueville spent the last years of his life working on a major study of the French Revolution and its consequences. He completed only the first volume of this study before his death. This volume was published under the title L'Ancien régime et la révolution in 1856, and was translated into English the same year.

For the Anchor edition of this classic work, Stuart Gilbert has translated the text of the fourth French edition (published in December, 1858), the last to appear in Tocqueville's lifetime. The notes at the back of the book have not been translated anew; we have used the translation of John Bonner, published in New York in 1856, and have revised and corrected them for this edition.
Part 2

CHAPTER ONE

Why feudalism had come to be more detested in France than in any other country

At first sight it may appear surprising that the Revolution, whose primary aim, as we have seen, was to destroy every vestige of the institutions of the Middle Ages, should not have broken out in countries where those institutions had the greatest hold and bore most heavily on the people instead of those in which their yoke was relatively light.

At the close of the eighteenth century serfdom had not yet been completely abolished anywhere in Germany; indeed, in most parts of that country the peasants were still literally bound to the land, as they had been in the Middle Ages. The armies of Frederick II and Maria Theresa were composed almost entirely of men who were serfs on the medieval pattern.

In most German states in 1788 the peasant was not allowed to quit his lord's estate; if he did so, he was liable to be tracked down wherever he was and brought back in custody. He was subject to the jurisdiction of his lord, who kept a close eye on his private life and could punish him for intemperance or idleness. He could neither better his social position, change his occupation, nor even marry without his master's consent, and a great number of his working hours had to be spent in his master's service. The system of compulsory labor, known in France as the corvée, was in full force in Germany, and in some districts entailed no less than three days' work a week. The peasant was expected to keep the buildings on his lord's estate in good repair and to carry the produce of the estate to market; he drove his lord's carriage and carried his messages. Also he had to spend some years of his youth in his lord's household as a member of the domestic staff. However, it was possible for the serf to become a landowner, though his tenure was always hedged round with restrictions. He had to cultivate his land in a prescribed manner, under his lord's supervision, and could neither alienate nor mortgage it without permission. In some cases he was compelled to sell its produce, in others forbidden to sell it; in any case he was bound to keep the land under cultivation. Moreover, his children did not inherit his entire estate, some part of it being usually withheld by his lord.

It must not be thought that I am describing ancient or obsolete laws; these provisions can be found even in the code drawn up by Frederick the Great and put in force by his successor at the very time when the French Revolution was getting under way.

In France such conditions had long since passed away; the peasants could move about, buy and sell, work, and enter into contracts as they liked. Only in one or two eastern provinces, recent annexations, some last vestiges of serfdom lingered on; everywhere else it had wholly disappeared. Indeed, the abolition of serfdom had taken place in times so remote that its very date had been forgotten. However, as a result of recent research work it is now known that as early as the thirteenth century serfdom had ceased to exist in Normandy.

Meanwhile another revolution, of a different order, had done much to improve the status of the French peasant; he had not merely ceased to be a serf, he had also become a landowner. Though this change had far-reaching consequences, it is apt to be overlooked, and I propose to devote some pages to this all-important subject.

Until quite recently it was taken for granted that the splitting up of the landed estates in France was the work of the Revolution, and the Revolution alone; actually there is much evidence in support of the contrary view. Twenty years or more before the Revolution we find complaints being made that land was being subdivided to an unconscionable extent. "The practice of partitioning inheritances," said Turgot, writing at about this time, "has gone so far that a piece of land which just sufficed for a single family is now parcelled out between five or six sons. The result is that the heirs and their families soon find that
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they cannot depend on the land for their livelihood and have to look elsewhere.” And some years later Necker declared that there was “an inordinate number” of small country estates in France.

In a confidential report made to an Intendent shortly before the Revolution I find the following observation: “Inheritances are being subdivided nowadays to an alarming extent. Everybody insists on having his share of the land, with the result that estates are broken up into innumerable fragments, and this process of fragmentation is going on all the time.” One might well imagine these words to have been written by one of our contemporaries.

I have been at great pains to make, as it were, a cadastral survey (i.e., of the distribution of land) of the old régime and have to some extent, I think, succeeded. Under the provisions of the law of 1790, which imposed a tax on land, each parish was required to draw up a return of all the privately owned land within its boundaries. Most of these documents are lost, but I have discovered some in certain villages and on comparing them with their modern equivalents have found that in these villages the number of landowners was as high as half, often two thirds, of the present number. These figures are impressive, and all the more so when we remember that the population of France has risen by over twenty-five per cent since that time.

Then, as in our own day, the peasant’s desire for owning land was nothing short of an obsession and already all the passions to which possession of the soil gives rise in present-day France were active. “Land is always sold above its true value,” a shrewd contemporary observer remarked, “and this is due to the Frenchman’s inveterate craving to become a landowner. All the savings of the poorer classes, which in other countries are invested in private companies or the public funds, are used for buying land.”

When Arthur Young visited France for the first time, among a multitude of new experiences, none impressed him more than the extent to which ownership of the soil was vested in innumerable peasant proprietors; half the cultivable land was owned by them. “I had no idea,” he often says, “that such a state of affairs existed anywhere”—and in fact none such existed outside France.

There had once been many peasant proprietors in England, but by now their number had greatly dwindled. Everywhere in Germany and in all periods a limited number of free peasants had enjoyed full ownership of the land they worked.7 The special, often highly peculiar laws regulating the cultivator’s ownership of land are set forth in the oldest German Books of Customs, but this type of ownership was always exceptional, there never were many of these small landed proprietors.

It was chiefly along the Rhine that at the close of the eighteenth century German farmers owned the land they worked and enjoyed almost as much freedom as the French small proprietor; and it was there, too, that the revolutionary zeal of the French found its earliest adepts and took most permanent effect.8 On the other hand, the parts of Germany which held out longest against the current of new ideas were those where the peasants did not as yet enjoy such privileges—and this is, to my mind, a highly suggestive fact.

Thus the prevalent idea that the breakup of the big estates in France began with the Revolution is erroneous; it had started long before. True, the revolutionary governments sold the estates owned by the clergy and many of those owned by the nobility; however, if we study the records of these sales (a rather tedious task, but one which I have on occasion found rewarding) we discover that most of the parcels of land were bought by people who already had land of their own. Thus, though estates changed hands, the number of landowners was increased much less than might have been expected. For, to employ the seemingly extravagant, but in this case correct, expression used by Necker, there were already “myriads” of such persons.9

What the Revolution did was not to parcel out the soil of France, but to “liberate” it—for a while. Actually these small proprietors had much difficulty in making a living out of the land since it was subject to many imposts from which there was no escaping.
That these charges were heavy is undeniable, but, oddly enough, what made them seem so unbearable was something that, on the face of it, should have had the opposite effect: the fact that, as in no other part of Europe, our agriculturists had been emancipated from the control of their lords—a revolution no less momentous than that which had made them peasant proprietors.

Although the old régime is still so near to us in time—every day we meet persons born under its auspices—it already seems buried in the night of ages. So vast was the revolution that has intervened that its shadow falls on all that it did not destroy, and it is as if centuries lay between the times we live in and the revolutionary epoch. This explains why so few people know the answer to the quite simple question: How was rural France administered previous to 1789? And indeed it is impossible to give a full and accurate answer without having studied not the literature but the administrative records of the period.

I have often heard it said that though they had long ceased to play a part in the government of the country as a whole, the nobility kept in their hands, right up to the end, the administration of the rural districts; that, in fact, the landed proprietor “ruled” his peasants. This idea, too, seems based on a misconception of the true state of affairs.

In the eighteenth century all that touched the parish, the rural equivalent of the township, was under the control of a board of officials who were no longer agents of the seigneur or chosen by him. Some were nominated by the Intendant of the province, others elected by the local peasantry. Amongst the many functions of these officials were those of assessing the tax to be paid by each member of the community, of keeping churches in repair, of building schools, of summoning and presiding over the parish assemblies. They supervised the municipal funds, decided how these were to be expended, and in litigation to which the parish was a party acted as its representatives. Far from controlling the administration of parish affairs the lord had no say at all in them. All members of the parish councils were ex officio public servants or under the control of the central power (as will be explained in the following chapter). As for the lord, he rarely figured as the King’s representative in the parish or as an intermediary between him and its inhabitants. He was no longer expected to see to the maintenance of law and order, to call out the militia, to levy taxes, to publish royal edicts, or to distribute the King’s bounty in times of shortage. All these rights and duties had passed into the hands of others and the lord was in reality merely one of the inhabitants of the parish, differentiated from the others by certain exemptions and privileges. His social rank was higher, but he had no more power than they. In letters to their subdelegates the Intendants were careful to point out that the lord was only “the first resident.”

When we turn from the parish to the larger territorial unit, the canton, we find the same arrangement; the nobles play no part, collectively or individually, in the administration of public affairs. This was peculiar to France; in all other countries what was the chief characteristic of ancient feudalism persisted to some extent and possession of the land carried with it the right to govern the people living on it.

England was administered as well as governed by the great landed proprietors. Even in those parts of Germany, for example Prussia and Austria, where the ruling Princes had been most successful in shaking off the control of the nobility in the conduct of affairs of State, they had allowed the nobles to retain to some extent the administration of the rural areas. Though in some places they kept a firm hand on the local lord, they had not, as yet, supplanted him.

The French nobility, however, had long ceased to play any part in public administration, with one exception: the administration of justice. The leading nobles retained the right of delegating to judges appointed by them the trial of certain kinds of suits and still issued police regulations, from time to time, that held good within the limits of their domains. But the central authority had gradually curtailed and subordinated to itself the judicial powers of the
landed proprietor; to such an extent that the lords who still exercised them regarded them as little more than a source of revenue.

The same thing had happened to all the special powers of the nobility; on the political side these powers were now defunct and only the pecuniary advantages attaching to them remained (and in some cases had been much increased). At this point something must be said about those lucrative privileges which our forefathers usually had in mind when they spoke of “feudal rights,” since it was these that most affected the life of the general public.

It is hard to say today which of these rights were still in force in 1789 and in what they consisted. There had been a vast number of them and by then many had died out or been modified almost out of recognition; indeed, the exact meaning of the terms in which they are described (about which even contemporaries were not very clear) is extremely hard to ascertain today. Nevertheless, my study of works by eighteenth-century experts on feudal law and my researches into local usages have made it clear to me that the rights still functioning in 1789 fell into a relatively small number of categories; others survived, no doubt, but they were operative only in exceptional cases.

Of the old seigneurial corvée, or statutory labor obligation, traces remained everywhere, but half obliterated. Most of the toll charges on the roads had been reduced or done away with, though there were few provinces in which some had not survived. Everywhere the resident seigneur levied dues on fairs and markets, and everywhere enjoyed exclusive rights of hunting. Usually he alone possessed dovecotes and pigeons, and it was the general rule that farmers must bring their wheat to their lord’s mill and their grapes to his wine press. A universal and very onerous right was that named lods et ventes; that is to say an impost levied by the lord on transfers of land within his domain. And throughout the whole of France the land was subject to quitrents, ground rents, dues in money or in kind payable by the peasant proprietor to his lord and irredeemable by the former. Varied as they were, all these obligations had one common feature: they were associated with the soil or its produce, and all alike bore heavily on the cultivator.

The lords spiritual enjoyed similar privileges. For though the Church derived its authority from a different source and had aims and functions quite different from those of the temporal power, it had gradually become tied up with the feudal system and, though never fully integrated into it, was so deeply involved as to seem part and parcel of it.10,11

Bishops, canons, and abbots owned fiefs or quitrents in virtue of their ecclesiastical status, and usually monasteries had seigneurial rights over the villages on whose land they stood.12 The monastery had serfs in the only part of France where servitude had survived, employed forced labor, levied dues on fairs and markets, had the monopoly of the communal wine press, bakehouse, mill, and the stud bull. Moreover, the clergy enjoyed in France—as indeed in all Christian Europe—the right of levying tithes.

The point, however, on which I would lay stress is that exactly the same feudal rights were in force in every European land and that in most other countries of the continent they pressed far more heavily on the population than in France. Take, for example, the lord’s right to forced labor, the corvée. It was rarely exercised and little oppressive in France, whereas in Germany it was stringent and everywhere enforced.

Moreover, when we turn to the feudal rights which so much outraged our fathers and which they regarded as opposed not merely to all ideas of justice but to the spirit of civilization itself (I am thinking of the tithe, irredeemable ground rents, perpetual charges, lods et ventes, and so forth, all that in the somewhat grandiloquent language of the eighteenth century was styled “the servitude of the land”), we find that all these practices obtained to some extent in England and, indeed, are still found there today. Yet they do not prevent English husbandry from being the best organized and most productive in the modern world; and, what is perhaps still more remarkable, the English nation seems hardly aware of their existence.
Why then did these selfsame feudal rights arouse such bitter hatred in the heart of the French people that it has persisted even after its object has long since ceased to exist? One of the reasons is that the French peasant had become a landowner, and another that he had been completely emancipated from the control of his lord. (No doubt there were other reasons, but these, I think, were the chief ones.)

If the peasant had not owned his land he would hardly have noticed many of the charges which the feudal system imposed on all real estate. What could the tithe matter to a man who had no land of his own? He could simply deduct it from the rent. And even restrictions hampering agriculture mean nothing to an agriculturist who is simply cultivating land for the benefit of someone else.

Moreover, if the French peasant had still been under his lord's control, the feudal rights would have seemed much less onerous, because he would have regarded them as basic to the constitution of his country.

When the nobles had real power as well as privileges, when they governed and administered, their rights could be at once greater and less open to attack. In fact, the nobility was regarded in the age of feudalism much as the government is regarded by everyone today; its exactions were tolerated in view of the protection and security it provided. True, the nobles enjoyed invidious privileges and rights that weighed heavily on the commoner, but in return for this they kept order, administered justice, saw to the execution of the laws, came to the rescue of the oppressed, and watched over the interests of all. The more these functions passed out of the hands of the nobility, the more uncalled-for did their privileges appear—until at last their mere existence seemed a meaningless anachronism.

I would ask you to picture to yourself the French peasant as he was in the eighteenth century—or, rather, the peasant you know today, for he has not changed at all. His status is different, but not his personality. See how he appears in the records from which I have been quoting: a man so passionately devoted to the soil that he spends all his earnings on buying land, no matter what it costs. To acquire it he must begin by paying certain dues, not to the government but to other landowners of the neighborhood, who are as far removed as he is from the central administration and almost as powerless as he. When at long last he has gained possession of this land which means so much to him, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that he sinks his heart in it along with the grain he sows. The possession of this little plot of earth, a tiny part, his very own, of the wide world, fills him with pride and a sense of independence. But now the neighbors aforesaid put in an appearance, drag him away from his cherished fields, and bid him work elsewhere without payment. When he tries to protect his seedlings from the animals they hunt, they tell him to take down his fences, and they lie in wait for him at river crossings to exact a toll. At the market there they are again, to make him pay for the right of selling the produce of his land, and when on his return home he wants to use the wheat he has put aside for his daily needs, he has to take it to their mill to have it ground, and then to have his bread baked in the lord's oven. Thus part of the income from his small domain goes to supporting these men in the form of charges which are imprescriptible and irredeemable. Whatever he sets out to do, he finds these tiresome neighbors barring his path, interfering in his simple pleasures and his work, and consuming the produce of his toil. And when he has done with them, other fine gentlemen dressed in black step in and take the greater part of his harvest. When we remember the special temperament of the French peasant proprietor in the eighteenth century, his ruling interests and passions, and the treatment accorded him, we can well understand the rankling grievances that burst into a flame in the French Revolution.

For even after it had ceased to be a political institution, the feudal system remained basic to the economic organization of France. In this restricted form it was far more hated than in the heyday of feudalism, and we are fully justified in saying that the very destruction of some of the
institutions of the Middle Ages made those which survived seem all the more detestable.

CHAPTER TWO

How administrative centralization was an institution of the old régime and not, as is often thought, a creation of the Revolution or the Napoleonic period

In the bygone years when we still had political assemblies in France I remember hearing one of the speakers referring to the centralization of our country's government as "a glorious achievement of the Revolution, the envy of all Europe." Far be it from me to deny that this centralization was a glorious achievement and that other nations envy us in this respect, but I do deny that it was an achievement of the Revolution. On the contrary, it was a legacy from the old régime and, I may add, the only part of the political constitution of that régime which survived the Revolution—for the good reason that it alone could be adapted to the new social system sponsored by the Revolution. I venture to think that readers who have the patience to read with care the present chapter will be satisfied that this assertion is fully justified by the facts.

Let us for the moment disregard the so-called pays d'états, that is to say the provinces which managed their own affairs or, rather, had the appearance of enjoying relative autonomy. Situated on the outskirts of the kingdom, the pays d'états contained barely a quarter of the population and only two of them were free in any real sense, that is to say self-governing. I shall revert later to this subject and show how far the central power had forced even the pays d'états into line with the over-all administrative pattern.

Here, however, I am chiefly concerned with what in the official terminology of the period were described as pays d'élection—though in actual fact there were fewer elec-

tions in them than anywhere else. They formed a compact bloc, surrounding Paris on all sides, the nucleus of the kingdom and its vital core.

A first glance at the administration of France under the old order gives the impression of a vast diversity of laws and authorities, a bewildering confusion of powers. In all parts of the kingdom we find administrative bodies and officials vested with rights acquired by purchase, which could not be withdrawn from them. There was no co-operation between them and often their functions overlapped to such an extent that they hampered each other or came into conflict when their activities covered the same ground.

The courts of justice indirectly took a hand in legislation; they had the right to frame administrative rules which had the force of law within their jurisdictions. Sometimes they made a stand against the central administration, vigorously censured its procedures and even issued writs against its representatives. Local magistrates drew up police regulations for the towns and boroughs where they resided.

In the towns systems of administration were very varied; the chief officials had different titles and derived their powers from different sources. In some towns there were "Consuls," in others "Syndics," in others Mayors. Some were appointed by the King, others by the seigneur or a princely holder of the appanage. Some were elected annually by their fellow townsmen, others bought the right of governing the latter in perpetuity.

Obviously we here have vestiges of the old system of a multiplicity of powers, but meanwhile there had gradually arisen new or greatly modified methods of local government, which I shall now describe.

At the heart of the realm, very near the throne, an administrative body, vested with high authority and combining in a new manner all the pre-existing powers, had little by little taken form; this was the conseil du roi or Royal Council. Though it was of ancient origin, most of its functions were of recent date. It was at once the supreme court of appeal (for it could set aside the judgments of all ordinary courts) and the highest administrative authority,
for on it depended in the last resort all the "special jurisdictions." Moreover, as a governing council it also possessed, subject to the King's approval, the power of legislation. Most of the new laws were proposed and debated by the Council, which also fixed the sums to be levied by taxation and their distribution. As the highest administrative body in the land it was called on to enact the regulations determining the duties of government officials in their various spheres. It made decisions on all important matters and supervised the work of the subordinate civil authorities. In fact, all the affairs of the realm came before it in the last instance and it gave directives in every field of the administration. All the same, it had no inherent right of jurisdiction; this remained vested in the King even when, ostensibly, decisions emanated from the Council. Indeed, even in the administration of justice the powers of the Council were merely those of an advisory board—as was pointed out by the parlement in one of its remarquances addressed to the King.

The Royal Council was composed not of great lords but of persons of middle-class or even low extraction: former Intendants and others who had practical experience in the handling of public business, and any of its members could be dismissed at the King's will. As a rule the Council acted with discretion, never flaunting the power which, in fact, it wielded. It disavowed publicity regarding its activities or, rather, always functioned in the shadow of the throne, with which it was so closely associated. The Council was so powerful that it took a hand in everything; yet so inconspicuous that most historians hardly mention it.

In the same way as the general administration of the country was in the hands of a single group of men, almost the entire management of internal affairs was in the hands of a single official, the Controller-General. When we examine any of the yearbooks issued under the old régime we find that nearly every province had its own Minister of State; but when we turn to public records of the administration, it soon becomes apparent that the provincial Minister was given few opportunities of acting independently. It was the Controller-General who had the whip hand in the conduct of public business and he had gradually brought under his control everything that had to do with money, in other words almost the entire administration of the country, and we find him acting as Finance Minister, Minister of the Interior, of Public Works, of Commerce.

Just as the central administration had to all intents and purposes only one executive officer in Paris, so it had only one such representative in each province. True, in the eighteenth century we still find great lords bearing the title of Governors of Provinces, these men being traditional, often hereditary representatives of the feudal monarchy of the past. But though they still were treated with deference, they had ceased to have any power now that all real authority was vested in the Intendants.

The Intendant was a young man of humble extraction, who had still his way to make and was never a native of the province to which he was posted. He did not obtain his office by purchase, by right of birth, or by election, but was chosen by the government from amongst the junior members of the Council and he was always liable to dismissal. In the official jargon of the time he was described as a commissaire dépari, because he had been "detached" from the Council to act as its provincial agent. Most of the powers possessed by the Council itself were vested in him and he was entitled to use them as he thought fit. Like those of the Council these were both administrative and judicial; he corresponded directly with Ministers and was sole executor of all the measures enacted by the government in the province to which he had been posted.

Under him and appointed by him were the officials known as "subdelegates," one for each canton, and he could dismiss them at will. The Intendant was usually a man
who had recently been raised to noble rank, the subdelegate always a commoner. Nevertheless, within his smaller sphere of influence the latter—like the Intendant as regards the généralité (administrative district) as a whole—was a plenary representative of the government. He was subordinate to the Intendant in the same way as the latter was subordinate to the Minister of State. In his Memoirs the Marquis d'Argenson cites a remark made to him by the famous Scots financier John Law. “Until I held the post of Controller-General I could hardly believe that such a state of affairs existed. Believe it or not, the French kingdom is ruled by thirty Intendants. Your parlements, Estates, and Governors simply do not enter into the picture. The Intendants play the part of Masters of Requests assigned to the provinces, whose fortunes, for better or for worse, rest entirely in the hands of these thirty men.”

All-powerful though he was, the Intendant cut a relatively humble figure beside the last representatives of the feudal aristocracy, which had lost nothing of its ancient glamour, and this explains why, though he made his authority felt at every turn, he attracted so little notice. Socially the nobles had the advantage of the Intendants, being not only wealthier but benefiting by the prestige that always attaches to ancient institutions. Moreover, as members of the Court, the nobles were in touch with the King and they commanded the French fleets and armies; in a word, their activities were of the showy kind that most impresses contemporaries and all too often focuses the attention of posterity. A great lord would have felt insulted by the proposal that he should be given the post of Intendant, and a gentleman by birth, however impoverished, would normally have disdained any such offer. To his thinking these Intendants were the creations of a usurped authority, upstarts whose task it was to superintend the middle class and the peasants—anyhow, not the kind of people a gentleman would wish to associate with. Yet, as Law noticed, these were the men who governed France.

Let us begin by considering the right of levying imposts, which in a way contains within itself all other powers. It is common knowledge that some taxes were farmed out; as regards these, it was the Royal Council that negotiated with companies of tax farmers, drew up the contracts, and regulated the methods of collection. All other imposts, such as the taille, capitation tax, and the vingtièmes, were assessed and levied directly by agents of the central government or under their absolute control.

It was the Council that each year voted, in secret session, the amount of the taille and the subsidiary imposts annexed to it, also its apportionment between the various provinces. It had been increased from year to year, without notice to the taxpayer or any sort of warning. Originally the assessment and collection of the taille, a very ancient form of taxation, had been entrusted to local officials who were more or less independent of the central government since they held their posts by the right of birth or election, or in some cases by purchase. These were the seigneur, the parish tax collector, the Treasurers of France and the élus, authorities which still existed in the eighteenth century. By then, however, some of them had altogether ceased to have anything to do with the taille, while the powers of the others had been gradually whittled down till they were mere subordinates. For in this field, too, all real power had passed into the hands of the Intendant and his underlings; it was he alone who, appearances notwithstanding, apportioned the incidence of the taille between the various parishes within his jurisdiction, supervised the tax collectors, granted remissions or extensions of time for payment.

As for the other imposts such as capitation tax, which were new creations, the government had a still freer hand since it was not hampered by precedents and could act alone, without regard to local authorities. The Controller-General, Intendants, and Council fixed the amount to be levied by each tax.

So much for the fiscal system. Let us now consider the position of the individual Frenchman as regards his civic duties. Surprise is sometimes expressed at the fact that the French should have so meekly accepted the rigors of conscription at the time of the Revolution, and that they still
put up with it today. But we must not forget that they had long been inured to obligations of this order and before conscription there had been service in the militia, which, though fewer men were called up, involved many hardships. Periodically all the young men in a rural area were compelled to draw lots for military service, this being the method of recruiting for the militia regiments, in which they had to serve six years. Since the militia was a relatively modern institution, none of the old feudal authorities had anything to do with it; recruiting was solely in the hands of representatives of the central government. The Council fixed the total number of men to be called up and the share to be borne by each province. Next, the Intendant decided on the number of men to be enrolled in each parish and his subdelegate presided over the drawing of lots, settled applications for exemption, announced which men could stay at home and which must enroll in the militia; then made the latter over to the military authorities. There was no appeal except to the Intendant and the Council.

Moreover, outside the pays d’états all public works, even those of purely local interest, were decided on and carried out by agents of the central power alone.

True, there still existed independent local authorities such as the seigneur, the finance committee, and the district surveyors, who were entitled to take an active part in this branch of the administration.

In practice, however, they exercised their ancient powers very little and had, in many cases, relinquished them altogether; even the most cursory perusal of the administrative records makes this clear. All the great highways and even the local roads from one township to another were maintained by the public funds and it was the Council that drew up plans for them and made the contracts. The Intendant supervised the work of the engineers, while the subdelegate recruited the forced labor it involved. The activities of the local authorities were confined to the upkeep of parish roads, which gradually fell into a shocking state of disrepair.

As far as public works were concerned the chief executive of the central government was then as now the Highways Department (Ponts et Chaussées). Despite the lapse of time this department has undergone remarkably little change. The Ponts et Chaussées included a governing board and a school; had traveling road surveyors who sent in annual reports on the condition of all the roads in France, and civil engineers with fixed headquarters who supervised, under the control of the Intendant, the making or repairing of the roads. Though far more institutions of the old régime were carried over into the new social order than is generally supposed, they usually changed their names in the process, even when their general structure remained the same. Exceptionally, the Ponts et Chaussées retained both its name and its original composition.

Seconded by its subordinates, the central government alone saw to the maintenance of public order in the provinces. Small brigades of mounted police under the direct control of the Intendants were posted to every part of France. The Intendants used them for coping with all sudden emergencies (calling in the army if these were serious), for arresting vagabonds, preventing begging, and quelling the riots which frequently broke out owing to the price of grain. The ordinary citizen was never called on, as in the past, to aid the government in the task of keeping order—except in towns where there was a civic guard, whose members were enrolled, and its officers appointed, by the Intendant.

The judiciary had retained, and often exercised, the right of making police regulations, but these applied only to local areas, usually to a single town. The Council could always annul these regulations and often did so when they emanated from judicial bodies of an inferior status. Meanwhile the Council constantly issued regulations of its own, which were binding on the whole kingdom. These either dealt with matters other than those on which the courts of law passed orders, or with the same matters in cases where the Council thought fit to overrule the orders issued by the courts. These arrêts du conseil, as they were called, were
promulgated in ever increasing numbers as the Revolution drew near. Indeed, there was hardly any detail of the internal economy and political organization of the nations that was not modified by arrêts du conseil during the forty years preceding the Revolution.

Under the feudal system the lord, while possessing extensive powers, had no less imperative duties, one of these being to succor the needy within his domain. A last vestige of this ancient obligation, which once obtained throughout Europe, can be found in the Prussian Code of 1795, where we read that “the lord must see to it that poor peasants are given education. As far as possible he should provide means of livelihood for such of his vassals as have no land, and if any are reduced to poverty he must come to their aid.”

In France, however, no such law had existed for a long while; having been divested of his power, the lord no longer felt bound by his traditional obligations. And no local authority, no poor relief committee or parish council had taken them over. Now that nobody was bound by law to see to the welfare of the poor in rural areas, the central government had, somewhat venturesomely, accepted sole responsibility for this duty. Every year the Council allotted to each province a sum of money taken from the public funds for poor relief. This was divided up by the Intendant between the parishes under his control and it was to him that the cultivator had to apply in time of need. It was he, too, who made distributions of wheat or rice when the crops had failed. Each year the Council issued orders for the setting up in various places (specified by itself) of poorhouses, in which impoverished peasants were given work at a low wage. For obvious reasons a system of relief operating from such a distance was bound to be capricious, sometimes misdirected, and always quite inadequate.

However, the central government did not limit itself to coming to the rescue of the peasantry when times were hard; it aspired to teach them how to become rich and to help them to make their land pay, even if this meant using what was little short of compulsion. Pamphlets on agricultural science were issued periodically by the Intendants and their subdelegates, farmers' associations were founded and prizes awarded; moreover, nurseries, whose seed grains were available to all, were maintained at considerable expense. Still one cannot help feeling that it would have been more to the point to have lightened some of the fiscal burdens under which the agriculturist was laboring and equalized their incidence. But as far as one can see, no such idea ever crossed the minds of the authorities.

Sometimes the Council tried to force workers to make more money, willy-nilly. Dozens of laws were passed ordering artisans to use “improved” methods and to manufacture certain specified kinds of goods. Since the Intendants were unable to cope with the work involved in the enforcement of all these regulations “Inspectors-General of Industry” were appointed who toured the provinces to make sure they were complied with.

We find decrees prohibiting the growing of certain crops on land which the Council declared unsuitable for them; thus vinegrowers were ordered to uproot their vines when these were planted—according to the omniscient Council—on a bad soil. In short, the central power had taken to playing the part of an indefatigable mentor and keeping the nation in quasi-paternal tutelage.

**CHAPTER THREE**

How paternal government, as it is called today, had been practiced under the old régime

Municipal autonomy survived the feudal system, and long after the lords had ceased to administer the country districts French towns retained the right of governing themselves. Indeed, until almost the end of the seventeenth century some towns were still to all intents and purposes small democratic republics, their officials being elected by the townsfolk and answerable to them alone. In short, there was an active municipal life in which all took part, and
tury. Though the men of ’89 had overthrown the ancient edifice, its foundations had been laid immutably in the minds of all Frenchmen, even its destroyers; thus there was little trouble in re-establishing it not only rapidly but in a more stable, shockproof form.

CHAPTER SEVEN

How in France, more than in any other European country, the provinces had come under the thrall of the metropolis, which attracted to itself all that was most vital in the nation

It is not the geographical position of a capital, nor its size or wealth, that gives it political supremacy over the rest of the country; that depends, rather, on the nature of the country’s government.

London, for example, though its population is as great as that of some entire kingdoms, has not so far had any determinant influence on the political destinies of Great Britain. Nor does any citizen of the United States imagine that the populace of New York can shape the course of the American Union—not even the residents in New York State would advance any such claim. Nevertheless, present-day New York can boast of a population as large as that of Paris at the outset of the Revolution.

During the Wars of Religion the population of Paris stood in the same proportion to that of the rest of France as it stood in 1789; yet its voice was not decisive in national affairs. And at the time of the Fronde insurrection Paris was still no more than the largest town in France. But by 1789 things were very different; it is no exaggeration to say that Paris was France.

In 1740 Montesquieu wrote in a letter to a friend: “In France there is only Paris—and a few outlying provinces Paris hasn’t yet found time to gobble up.” And in 1750 the Marquis de Mirabeau, who, if fanciful in his ideas,

could be a shrewd observer, wrote, with Paris in mind (though without naming it specifically): “Capitals are indispensable, but when the head becomes too swollen, the body develops apoplexy, with fatal results. What, then, must we expect if the provinces are reduced to a state of dependence on the capital, their inhabitants treated as a sort of inferior species and given no outlet for their ambitions, with the result that everyone with any gumption migrates to the metropolis?” He goes on to describe this gradual draining of the provinces of their natural leaders, their best businessmen and intellectuals as “a sort of bloodless revolution.”

Those of my readers who have read the foregoing chapters with some care already know the reasons for this momentous change, and I need not revert to them.

The government saw only the most obvious aspect of what was taking place in France, that aspect being the steady growth of the metropolis. From day to day Paris was extending her boundaries and the authorities feared that the proper administration of so big a city might soon become impracticable. Thus many royal edicts issued in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were intended to put a stop to this expansion, and the paradoxical situation arose that at the very time when our Kings were concentrating more and more the public life of France in the capital, or its near vicinity, they were also trying to keep Paris a small town. People were either forbidden altogether to build new houses, or else forced to build on the costliest scale and on specified—often definitely unattractive—sites. Each edict takes regretful notice of the fact that, despite previous ordinances, Paris is continuing to expand. Six times during his reign Louis XIV tried to check the growth of Paris, yet all-powerful as he proved himself in many other fields, he failed in this. Meanwhile the capital’s authority over the rest of France was being enlarged even more rapidly than the city’s area, this being due less to what was being done within its walls than to what was taking place outside them. For throughout this period local autonomy was everywhere becoming a dead letter; the char-
acteristic traits of the ancient provinces were steadily being ironed out and the last traces of an independent public life obliterated. Not that the nation was sinking into lethargy; far from it, there was increased activity throughout the land, but the driving force behind it came exclusively from Paris. I shall cite only one instance out of many. Reports made to the Minister concerned with the state of the book trade show that whereas in the sixteenth century and at the beginning of the seventeenth there had been printing presses in many provincial towns, these had closed down at the time when the report was made, as no work was forthcoming. Yet it is common knowledge that at the end of the eighteenth century vastly more printed matter of all sorts was being turned out than in the sixteenth.

What had happened was that by then Paris had absorbed the intellectual life of the whole country at the expense of the provinces.

When shortly after the meeting of the Estates-General and a few days before the taking of the Bastille that famous English traveler Arthur Young set out from Paris to the country, he was greatly struck by the different atmosphere he found once he had left the capital. Paris had been all agog with excitement, a steady stream of propaganda was flowing from the presses—it was reckoned that no less than ninety-two political pamphlets were issued in a single week. "Never," Young says, "had I seen such a craze for pamphleteering, even in London." Outside Paris, however, he got an impression of inertia and apathy; no newspapers and few brochures were being printed. Yet appearances were deceptive and the provinces were only biding their time, waiting for a signal to embark on violent action. On the rare occasions when the citizens got together it was to listen to the latest news from Paris. In every country town he visited Young asked the people he met what they proposed to do. Everywhere he got the same answer. "We are only a provincial town; we must wait till Paris gives us a lead." These people, he ironically observes, seemed not to dare even to form an opinion until they knew what was being thought in Paris.

Some have been surprised at the extraordinary ease with which the Constituent Assembly annihilated at one fell swoop all the historic divisions of France—the provinces—and split up the kingdom into eighty-three well-defined units—the departments—almost as if they were partitioning not an ancient kingdom but the virgin soil of the New World. Nothing surprised and, indeed, shocked the rest of Europe more than this. "It is the first time," Burke said, "that we have seen men hack their native land to pieces in so barbarous a manner." But though it might seem that living bodies were being mutilated, actually the "victims" were already corpses.

During the same period as that in which Paris was coming to dominate the entire country another change was taking place within the city itself, a change which all historians do well to take into account. Besides being at once a business and commercial center, a city of pleasure seekers and consumers, Paris had now developed into a manufacturing city—a change which, in conjunction with the political ascendancy of Paris described above, was destined to have great and dangerous consequences.

As a matter of fact, this was not a new development and its origins can be traced back to the remote past; already in the Middle Ages, Paris was by all accounts the most hard-working as well as the largest town in the kingdom. This becomes still more apparent as we approach modern times. Along with the centralization of administrative power, industrial activities tended to converge on the capital. And now that Paris was becoming more and more the national arbiter of taste, sole center of authority and of the arts, the focal point of all that was most vital in France, it was natural enough that big industrial concerns throughout the country should be attracted to the capital and make it their headquarters.

Though the statistical records of the old régime are far from trustworthy, we are justified, I think, in saying that during the sixty years preceding the Revolution the number of workers employed in Paris more than doubled, while
in the same period the general population of the city rose by hardly a third.

Aside from these considerations of a general order there were specific reasons for the influx of workers into Paris from all parts of France and the development of districts of the city inhabited almost exclusively by the working class. The handicaps imposed on industry by the fiscal authorities were less onerous in the capital than in other parts of France, and the control exercised by the trade and craft guilds was easier to evade. Some city districts, such as the Faubourg St.-Antoine and the Faubourg du Temple, enjoyed great privileges in this respect. Those of the Faubourg St.-Antoine were much extended by Louis XVI, who did his best to convert this part of Paris into a vast workers' center. "It is our desire," this ill-starred monarch announced in one of his decrees, "to confer on the workers of the Faubourg St.-Antoine a further token of our concern for their welfare and to free them from restrictions prejudicial both to their interests and to the freedom of trade."

The number of factories, mills, and blast furnaces increased to such an extent in the period just before the Revolution that the government took alarm, though the grounds for this alarm were in most cases purely imaginary. Several decrees were issued on the subject, one of which (an Order in Council dated 1782) ran as follows: "Fearing that the rapid increase in the number of factories may lead to a consumption of wood so great as to cause a shortage of fuel within the City of Paris, the King forbids the erection of any new factories within a radius of fifteen leagues around the capital." Meanwhile the very real dangers inherent in this concentration of labor at one spot passed quite unnoticed.

Thus Paris had mastered France, and the army that was soon to master Paris was mustering its forces.

Most qualified observers, so far as I can judge, concur in the opinion that chief among the reasons for the collapse of all the various governments that have arisen in France during the past forty years are this administrative centralization and the absolute predominance of Paris. And I shall have no difficulty in proving that the catastrophic downfall of the monarchy was largely due to the same causes. They should, indeed, rank among the chief factors of this first revolution, progenitor of all the others.

CHAPTER EIGHT

How France had become the country in which men were most like each other

One of the things which cannot fail to strike an attentive student of the social system under the old order is that it had two quite contradictory aspects. On the one hand, we get an impression that the people composing it, at least those belonging to the upper and the middle classes—the only ones that is to say who catch the eye—were all exactly like each other. Nevertheless, we also find that this seemingly homogeneous mass was still divided within itself into a great number of watertight compartments, small, self-contained units, each of which watched vigilantly over its own interests and took no part in the life of the community at large.

If we bear in mind the number of these minute gradings and the fact that nowhere else in the world were citizens less inclined to join forces and stand by each other in emergencies, we can see how it was that a successful revolution could tear down the whole social structure almost in the twinkling of an eye. All the flimsy barriers between the various compartments were instantaneously laid low, and out of the ruins there arose a social order closer knit and less differentiated, perhaps, than any that the Western World had ever known.

I have pointed out how local differences between the various provinces had long since been obliterated throughout practically the entire kingdom; this had greatly contributed to making Frenchmen everywhere so much like each other. Behind such diversities as still existed the unity