CH 18 READINGS
THE 18TH CENTURY: EUROPEAN STATES, INTERNATIONAL WARS, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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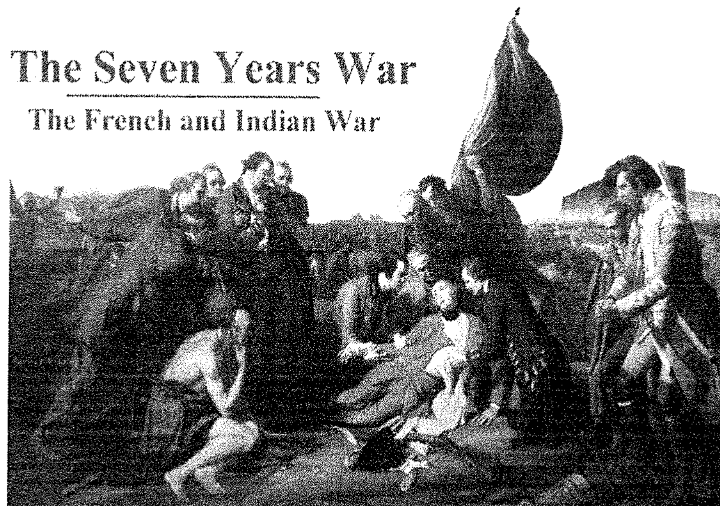

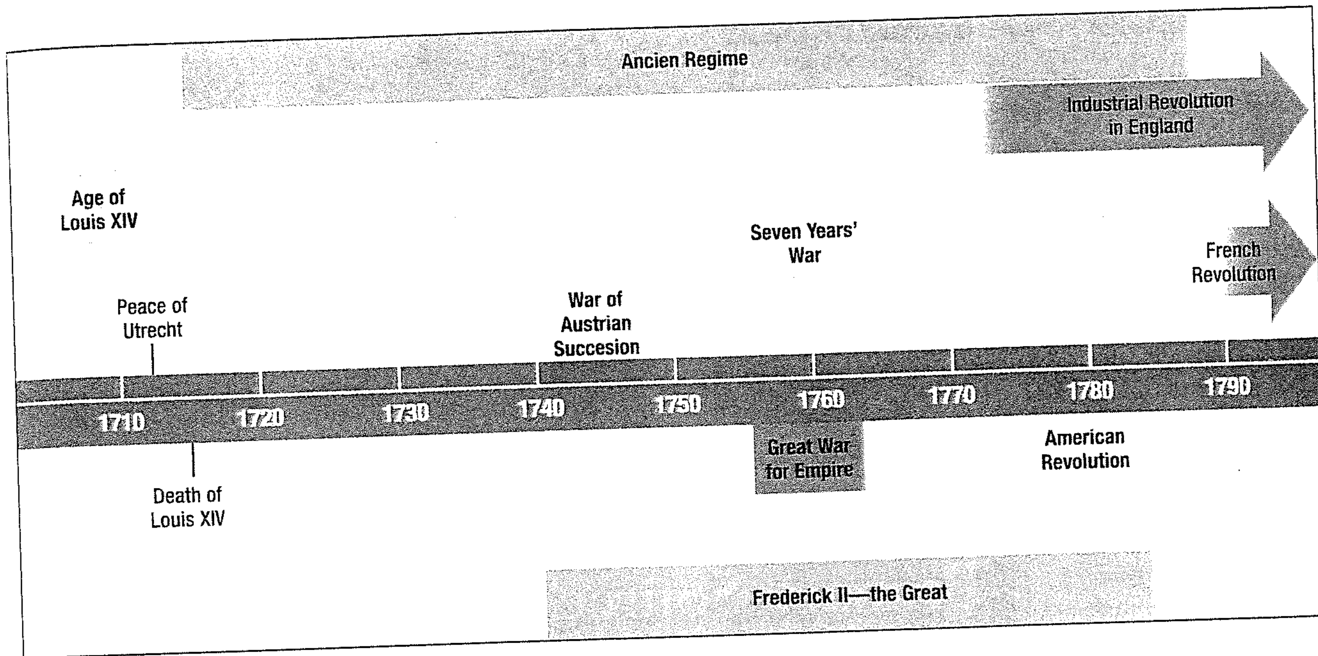

7 Politics and Society in the Ancien Régime

By the time of the death of Louis XIV in 1715, France no longer threatened to overwhelm the rest of Europe. Indeed, during most of the eighteenth century a rough balance of power developed amid the shifting diplomatic alliances and wars. There were two major sets of rivalries among states between 1715 and 1789. In Central Europe, the older Hapsburg Empire was pitted against the newer, assertive Prussia. Although Prussia acquired the status of a major power as a result of this competition, the Hapsburg Empire managed to hold on to most of its lands and to expand at the cost of weaker states like Poland and the Ottoman Empire. Outside of Europe, England and France struggled for supremacy over colonial territories in the Great War for Empire.

During this period preceding the French Revolution, referred to as the "Ancien Régime," most of the same political and social trends that had characterized the second half of the seventeenth century continued, namely, aristocratic dominance, strong monarchies, expanding central governments, and traditional ways of life. Important changes that were initiated—such as agricultural, commercial, and industrial developments that strengthened the middle classes and led to urban growth—were limited in scope and area.

The sources in this chapter center on four aspects of the Ancien Régime between 1715 and 1789. First, the nature and position of the still-dominant aristocracy are examined. What were its responsibilities? What was the position of women within the aristocracy and outside of the aristocracy? Is it true that the aristocracy was frivolous? How did the aristocracy react to pressures from the monarchy on the one side and the middle classes on the other? What were the attitudes of the aristocracy toward the peasantry? Second, the development of the eighteenth-century state is analyzed. What role did Prussia's monarchs play in making her a major power? How did wars contribute to and reflect the growing importance of the state? Third, the importance of commerce and the middle class in

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England is explored. What were the connections among commerce, the middle classes, and the English aristocracy? What was the relationship between the development of commerce and industry and England's colonial concerns and growing nationalism? What were some of the effects of the commerce in slaves engaged in by the English and others? Fourth, the assumptions most people held during the Ancien Régime are examined.

The sources in this chapter stress the relative political stability that characterized much of the period between 1715 and 1789. Stability was not the rule in intellectual matters, as will be seen in the next chapter.

For Classroom Discussion

Were politics and society in the Ancien Régime dominated by the aristocracy? Use the analyses by Krieger and Roberts, the source by Frederick the Great, and the paintings by Fragonard and Lawson.

Primary Sources

Political Testament

Frederick the Great

From a distance it may seem that eighteenth-century monarchs were much like those of the seventeenth century, similar in powers, position, and prestige. On closer examination, however, some differences are evident. Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia (1712–1786) was one of the most admired eighteenth-century monarchs. He ascended the throne in 1740 and ruled actively until his death in 1786. Frederick II continued the Prussian tradition of relying on a strong army to maintain and increase his holdings and prestige. At the same time he reorganized the army and the bureaucracy and introduced new ideas into both the theory and the practice of government. In the following excerpts from his Political Testament *(1752), he sets out his conception of politics and the proper role of the sovereign.*

CONSIDER: *How this conception of the monarch differs from that expressed by seventeenth-century monarchs; why Frederick emphasized the need to protect and support the nobility; who the crown's greatest political rivals for power were; the advantages and disadvantages to the monarch of religious toleration.*

Politics is the science of always using the most convenient means in accord with one's own interests. In order to act in conformity with one's interests one must know what these interests are, and in order to gain this knowledge one must study their history and application. . . . One must attempt, above all, to know the special genius of the people which one wants to govern in order to know if one must treat them leniently or severely, if they are inclined to revolt . . . to intrigue. . . .

[The Prussian nobility] has sacrificed its life and goods for the service of the state, its loyalty and merit have earned it the protection of all its rulers, and it is one of the duties [of the ruler] to aid those [noble] families which have become impoverished in order to keep them in possession of their lands: for they are to be regarded as the pedestals and the pillars of the state. In such a state no factions or rebellions need be feared . . . it is one goal of the policy of this state to preserve the nobility.

A well conducted government must have an underlying concept so well integrated that it could be likened to a system of philosophy. All actions taken must be well reasoned, and all financial, political and military matters must flow towards one goal: which is the strengthening of the state and the furthering of its power. However, such a system can flow but from a single brain, and this must be that of the sovereign. Laziness, hedonism and imbecility, these are the causes which restrain princes in working at the noble task of bringing happiness to their subjects . . . a sovereign is not elevated to his high position, supreme power has not been confined to him in order that he may live in lazy luxury, enriching himself by the labor of the people, being happy while everyone else suffers. The sovereign is the first servant of the state. He is well paid in order that he may sustain the dignity of his office, but one demands that he work efficiently for the good of the state, and that he, at the very least, pay personal attention to the most important problems. . . .

You can see, without doubt, how important it is that the King of Prussia govern personally. Just as it would have been impossible for Newton to arrive at his system of attractions if he had worked in harness with Leibnitz and Descartes, so a system of politics cannot be arrived at and continued if it has not sprung from a single brain. . . . All parts of the government are inexorably linked with

SOURCE: Frederick II, *Political Testament,* in *Europe in Review,* eds. George L. Mosse et al. (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1957), pp. 110–112. Reprinted by permission of George L. Mosse.

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each other. Finance, politics and military affairs are inseparable; it does not suffice that one will be well administered; they must all be . . . a Prince who governs personally, who has formed his [own] political system, will not be handicapped when occasions arise where he has to act swiftly: for he can guide all matters towards the end which he has set for himself. . . .

Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, Jews and other Christian sects live in this state, and live together in peace: if the sovereign, actuated by a mistaken zeal, declares himself for one religion or another, parties will spring up, heated disputes ensue, little by little persecutions will commence and, in the end, the religion persecuted will leave the fatherland and millions of subjects will enrich our neighbors by their skill and industry.

It is of no concern in politics whether the ruler has a religion or whether he has none. All religions, if one examines them, are founded on superstitious systems, more or less absurd. It is impossible for a man of good sense, who dissects their contents, not to see their error; but these prejudices, these errors and mysteries were made for men, and one must know enough to respect the public and not to outrage its faith, whatever religion be involved.

The Complete English Tradesman

Daniel Defoe

During the eighteenth century England was growing in strength and prosperity, particularly in the areas of commerce and manufacturing. A primary beneficiary of these economic developments was the rising commercial middle class. This class was becoming more assertive as the English were becoming more nationalistic. Daniel Defoe (1659c.–1731) speaks about these trends in the following selection from The Complete English Tradesman *(1726). Although best known for Robinson Crusoe, Defoe wrote many works and followed a commercial career for some time.*

CONSIDER: *The support Defoe offers for his view that commerce rightly dominates the country economically; how the economic policies that Defoe would recommend compare with policies typical of mercantilism; the connections between commerce and social class in England; the apparent advantages of having colonies and the colonial policies that Defoe's views imply.*

I . . . advance these three points in honour of our country —1. That we are the greatest trading country in the world, because we have the greatest exportation of the growth and product of our land, and of the manufacture and labour of our people; and the greatest importation and consumption of the growth, product, and manufactures of other countries from abroad, of any nation in the world.

2. That our climate is the best and most agreeable to live in, because a man can be more out of doors in England than in other countries.

3. That our men are the stoutest and best, because, strip them naked from the waist upwards, and give them no weapons at all but their hands and heels, and turn them into a room or stage, and lock them in with the like number of other men of any nation, man for man, and they shall beat the best men you shall find in the world.

And so many of our noble and wealthy families, as we have shown, are raised by and derived from trade, so it is true, and indeed it cannot well be otherwise, that many of the younger branches of our gentry, and even of the nobility itself, have descended again into the spring from whence they flowed, and have become tradesmen; and thence it is that, as I said above, our tradesmen in England are not, as it generally is in other countries, always of the meanest of our people. Nor is trade itself in England, as it generally is in other countries, the meanest thing that men can turn their hand to; but, on the contrary, trade is the readiest way for men to raise their fortunes and families; and therefore it is a field for men of figure and of good families to enter upon. . . .

As to the wealth of the nation, that undoubtedly lies chiefly among the trading part of the people; and though there are a great many families raised within few years, in the late war, by great employments and by great actions abroad, to the honour of the English gentry, yet how many more families among the tradesmen have been raised to immense estates, even during the same time, by the attending circumstances of the war; such as the clothing, the paying, the victualling and furnishing, &c., both army and navy. And by whom have the prodigious taxes been paid, the loans supplied, and money advanced upon all occasions? By whom are the banks and companies carried on, and on whom are the customs and excises levied? Have not the trade and tradesmen borne the burden of the war? And do they not still pay four million a year interest for the public debts? On whom are the funds levied, and by whom the public credit supported? Is not trade the inexhausted fund of all funds, and upon which all the rest depend?

Again; in how superior a port or figure (as we now call it) do our tradesmen live, to what the middling gentry either do or can support! An ordinary tradesman now, not in the city only, but in the country, shall spend more money by the year, than a gentleman of four or five hundred pounds a year can do, and shall increase and lay up every year too; whereas the gentleman shall at the

SOURCE: Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman*, vols. 17–18 of *The Novels and Miscellaneous Works of Daniel Defoe* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1840–1841), chap. 25.

best stand stock still just where he began, nay, perhaps, decline: and as for the lower gentry, from a hundred pounds a year to three hundred, or thereabouts, though they are often as proud and high in their appearance as the other; as to them, I say, a shoemaker in London shall keep a better house, spend more money, clothe his family better, and yet grow rich too. It is evident where the difference lies; an estate's a pond, but trade's a spring: the first, if it keeps full, and the water wholesome, by the ordinary supplies and drains from the neighbouring grounds, it is well, and it is all that is expected; but the other is an inexhausted current, which not only fills the pond, and keeps it full, but is continually running over, and fills all the lower ponds and places about it.

This being the case in England, and our trade being so vastly great, it is no wonder that the tradesmen in England fill the lists of our nobility and gentry; no wonder that the gentlemen of the best families marry tradesmen's daughters, and put their younger sons apprentices to tradesmen; and how often do these younger sons come to buy the elder sons' estates, and restore the family, when the elder and head of the house, proving rakish and extravagant, has wasted his patrimony, and is obliged to make out the blessing of Israel's family, where the younger son bought the birthright, and the elder was doomed to serve him!

Trade is so far here from being inconsistent with a gentleman, that, in short, trade in England makes gentlemen, and has peopled this nation with gentlemen; for, after a generation or two, the tradesman's children, or at least their grandchildren, come to be as good gentlemen, statesmen, parliamentarian, privy-counsellors, judges, bishops, and noblemen, as those of the highest birth and the most ancient families; as we have shown. . . .

All this confirms what I have said before, viz., that trade in England neither is or ought to be levelled with what it is in other countries; or the tradesmen depreciated as they are abroad, and as some of our gentry would pretend to do in England; but that as many of our best families rose from trade, so many branches of the best families in England, under the nobility, have stooped so low as to be put apprentices to tradesmen in London, and to set up and follow those trades when they have come out of their times, and have thought it no dishonour to their blood. . . .

The greatness of the British nation is not owing to war and conquests, to enlarging its dominions by the sword, or subjecting the people of other countries to our power; but it is all owing to trade, to the increase of our commerce at home, and the extending it abroad.

It is owing to trade, that new discoveries have been made in lands unknown, and new settlements and plantations made, new colonies planted, and new governments formed, in the uninhabited islands, and the uncultivated continent of America; and those plantings and settlements have again enlarged and increased the trade, and thereby the wealth and power of the nation by whom they were discovered and planted; we have not increased our power, or the number of our subjects, by subduing the nations which possess those countries, and incorporating them into our own; but have entirely planted our colonies, and peopled the countries with our own subjects, natives of this island; and, excepting the negroes, which we transport from Africa to America, as slaves to work in the sugar and tobacco plantations, all our colonies, as well in the islands, as on the continent of America, are entirely peopled from Great Britain and Ireland, and chiefly the former; the natives having either removed further up into the country, or, by their own folly and treachery raising war against us, been destroyed and cut off. . . .

The Slave Trade

Anonymous

Part of the commercial prosperity enjoyed by several Western nations was built on the slave trade, which flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Slaves were generally shipped in British vessels, but the French and others engaged in this trade as well. Most slaves were taken across the Atlantic to Europe's colonial holdings, which in turn shipped goods such as sugar, metals, and wood products to the home country. Although there was little widespread opposition to slavery in Europe during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, by the middle of the eighteenth century antislavery sentiments were growing. The following is an account of what was involved in the slave trade, written in 1771 by an anonymous Frenchman who argued for its abolition.

CONSIDER: *The attitudes that permitted and supported the slave trade; the effects of this experience on the blacks; the legacy of this trade for the colonies.*

As soon as the ships have lowered their anchors off the coast of Guinea, the price at which the captains have decided to buy the captives is announced to the Negroes who buy prisoners from various princes and sell them to the Europeans. Presents are sent to the sovereign who rules over that particular part of the coast, and permission to trade is given. Immediately the slaves are brought by inhuman brokers like so many victims dragged to a sacrifice. White men who covet that portion of the human race receive them in a little house they have erected on the shore, where they have entrenched themselves

SOURCE: Leon Apt and Robert E. Herzstein, eds., *The Evolution of Western Society*, vol. II (Hinsdale, IL: The Dryden Press, 1978), pp. 279–280.

with two pieces of cannon and twenty guards. As soon as the bargain is concluded, the Negro is put in chains and led aboard the vessel, where he meets his fellow sufferers. Here sinister reflections come to his mind; everything shocks and frightens him and his uncertain destiny gives rise to the greatest anxiety. At first he is convinced that he is to serve as a repast to the white men, and the wine which the sailors drink confirms him in this cruel thought, for he imagines that this liquid is the blood of his fellows.

The vessel sets sail for the Antilles, and the Negroes are chained in a hold of the ship, a kind of lugubrious prison where the light of day does not penetrate, but into which air is introduced by means of a pump. Twice a day some disgusting food is distributed to them. Their consuming sorrow and the sad state to which they are reduced would make them commit suicide if they were not deprived of all the means for an attempt upon their lives. Without any kind of clothing it would be difficult to conceal from the watchful eyes of the sailors in charge of any instrument apt to alleviate their despair. The fear of a revolt, such as sometimes happens on the voyage from Guinea, is the basis of a common concern and produces as many guards as there are men in the crew. The slightest noise or a secret conversation among two Negroes is punished with utmost severity. All in all, the voyage is made in a continuous state of alarm on the part of the white men, who fear a revolt, and in a cruel state of uncertainty on the part of the Negroes, who do not know the fate awaiting them.

When the vessel arrives at a port in the Antilles, they are taken to a warehouse where they are displayed, like any merchandise, to the eyes of buyers. The plantation owner pays according to the age, strength and health of the Negro he is buying. He has him taken to his plantation, and there he is delivered to an overseer who then and there becomes his tormentor. In order to domesticate him, the Negro is granted a few days of rest in his new place, but soon he is given a hoe and a sickle and made to join a work gang. Then he ceases to wonder about his fate; he understands that only labor is demanded of him. But he does not know yet how excessive this labor will be. As a matter of fact, his work begins at dawn and does not end before nightfall; it is interrupted for only two hours at dinnertime. The food a full-grown Negro is given each week consists of two pounds of salt beef or cod and two pots of tapioca meal, amounting to about two pints of Paris. A Negro of twelve or thirteen years or under is given only one pot of meal and one pound of beef or cod. In place of food some planters give their Negroes the liberty of working for themselves every Saturday; others are even less generous and grant them this liberty only on Sundays and holidays. Therefore, since the nourishment of the Negroes is insufficient, their tendency to cheat must be attributed to the necessity of finding the food they lack.

Letter to Lady R., 1716: Women and the Aristocracy

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

During the eighteenth century women continued to remain limited in the economic and political roles they could play, but it was possible for aristocratic women to take up influential social and cultural roles. In particular, many women used letter writing as an art, and from these letters much insight about the position and attitudes of women can be gained. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762) was a well-known British literary figure, writing essays and poetry in addition to her volumes of letters. The following is a selection from a letter written in 1716 to Lady R.

CONSIDER: *The assumptions about marriage among the aristocracy; connections among marriage, love, and economic interests; the position of aristocratic women reflected by this letter.*

No woman dares appear coquette enough to encourage two lovers at a time. And I have not seen any such prudes as to pretend fidelity to their husbands, who are certainly the best natured set of people in the world, and look upon their wives' gallants as favourably as men do upon their deputies, that take the troublesome part of their business off their hands. They have not however the less to do on that account; for they are generally deputies in another place themselves; in one word, 'tis the established custom for every lady to have two husbands, one that bears the name, and another that performs the duties. And these engagements are so well known, that it would be a downright affront, and publicly resented, if you invited a woman of quality to dinner, without, at the same time, inviting her two attendants of lover and husband, between whom she sits in state with great gravity. The submarriages generally last twenty years together, and the lady often commands the poor lover's estate, even to the utter ruin of his family.

These connections, indeed, are as seldom begun by any real passion as other matches; for a man makes but an ill figure that is not in some commerce of this nature; and a woman looks out for a lover as soon as she's married, as part of her equipage, without which she could not be genteel; and the first article of the treaty is establishing the pension, which remains to the lady, in case the gallant should prove inconstant. This chargeable point of honour I look upon as the real foundation of so many

SOURCE: Mary Wortley Montagu, *Works,* vol. II (London: Richard Phillips, 1803), pp. 57–59.

wonderful instances of constancy. I really know some women of the first quality, whose pensions are as well known as their annual rents, and yet nobody esteems them the less; on the contrary, their discretion would be called in question, if they should be suspected to be mistresses for nothing. A great part of their emulation consists in trying who shall get most.

Women of the Third Estate

The vast majority of eighteenth-century Europeans were not members of the aristocracy. More than 90 percent were peasants, artisans, domestics, and laborers—often referred to in France as members of the Third Estate. While both men and women of the Third Estate shared much, women's positions and grievances often differed from those of men. Articulate records of these women's grievances are difficult to find, but the flood of formal petitions preceding the French Revolution of 1789 provides us with some rich sources. The following is a "Petition of the Women of the Third Estate to the King," dated several months prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution.

CONSIDER: *What options seem available to women; the problems identified and solutions proposed; ways in which men's interests and women's interests might clash.*

1 January 1789. Almost all women of the Third Estate are born poor. Their education is either neglected or misconceived, for it consists in sending them to learn from teachers who do not themselves know the first word of the language they are supposed to be teaching. . . . At the age of fifteen or sixteen, girls can earn five or six sous a day. If nature has not granted them good looks, they get married, without a dowry, to unfortunate artisans and drag out a grueling existence in the depths of the provinces, producing children whom they are unable to bring up. If, on the other hand, they are born pretty, being without culture, principles, or any notion of morality, they fall prey to the first seducer, make one slip, come to Paris to conceal it, go totally to the bad here, and end up dying as victims of debauchery.

Today, when the difficulty of earning a living forces thousands of women to offer themselves to the highest bidder and men prefer buying them for a spell to winning them for good, any woman drawn to virtue, eager to educate herself, and with natural taste . . . is faced with the choice either of casting herself into a cloister which will accept a modest dowry or of going into domestic service. . . .

If old age overtakes unmarried women, they spend it in tears and as objects of contempt for their nearest relatives.

To counter such misfortunes, Sire, we ask that men be excluded from practicing those crafts that are women's prerogative, such as dressmaking, embroidery, millinery, etc. Let them leave us the needle and the spindle and we pledge our word never to handle the compass or the set-square.

We ask, Sire . . . to be instructed and given jobs, not that we may usurp men's authority but so that we may have a means of livelihood, and so that the weaker among us who are dazzled by luxury and led astray by example should not be forced to join the ranks of the wretched who encumber the streets and whose lewd audacity disgraces both our sex and the men who frequent them.

SOURCE: Excerpts from *Not in God's Image* by Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines. Copyright © 1973 by Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines. Reprinted by permission of Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

Visual Sources

Happy Accidents of the Swing

Jean-Honoré Fragonard

The aristocracy remained dominant culturally during the Ancien Régime, commissioning most of the art of the period. It is not surprising, then, that the art reflected aristocratic values and tastes. The Swing *by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (figure 7.1) exemplifies a type of painting quite popular among France's eighteenth-century aristocracy.*

Fragonard was commissioned by Baron de Saint-Julien in 1767 to paint a picture of his mistress on a swing being pushed by a bishop who did not know that the woman was the baron's mistress, with the baron himself watching from a strategic place of hiding. In the picture the woman on the swing seems well aware of what is happening, flinging off her shoe toward a statue of the god of discretion in such a way as to cause her gown to billow out revealingly.

This painting reflects a certain religious irreverence on the part of the eighteenth-century aristocracy, for the joke is on the unknowing bishop. The significance of this irreverence is magnified by the fact that Saint-Julien had numerous dealings with the clergy, since he was at this time a government official responsible for overseeing clerical wealth.

The lush setting of the painting and the tenor of the scene suggest the love of romantic luxury and concern for sensual indulgence by this most privileged but soon to be declining part of society.

CONSIDER: *The evidence in this picture of the attitudes of lifestyle of the eighteenth-century French aristocracy.*

Secondary Sources

The Ancien Régime: Ideals and Realities

John Roberts

It is difficult to look back at past societies with other than our own assumptions. However, people in the Ancien Régime—eighteenth-century Europe—had their own beliefs, values, and perceptions about the world and their place in it. In the following selection John Roberts describes what most eighteenth-century Europeans would take for granted, emphasizing their mental conservatism.

CONSIDER: *The ways in which their assumptions differ from our own; the ways in which they are the same as ours; why their view of innovation and the past is so important.*

What would be taken for granted by most continental Europeans in the eighteenth century and, to some extent, by Englishmen and English settlers abroad, would be assumptions which can be sketched briefly in such propositions as these: God made the world and gave it a moral and social structure; His revelation in Jesus Christ imposes a duty upon society to protect the Church, Christian truth and moral principles in a positive way by promoting sound behaviour and belief and harrying bad; Christianity teaches that the existing structure of society is in principle good and should be upheld; this structure is organized hierarchically and for the most part its hierarchies are hereditary, their apex usually being found in a monarch; privileges and duties are distributed in a manner which can be justified by reference to this hierarchy. It is also true (our list of assumptions could continue) that while the organization of society around hereditary units was a fundamental datum of society under the *ancien régime*, it took for granted respect for other groups in which men came together for religious, professional, economic or social purposes; corporations with these ends were thought the proper regulators of much of daily life—the practice of trade or the enjoyment of legal rights, for example—and the interests of individuals belonging to them came emphatically second to those of these legal persons. . . .

It was also then assumed that much more of personal behaviour should be regulated by law and traditional practice than today. . . .

Social restraint reflected the pervasive anti-individualism of the *ancien régime*. Moreover, moral and ideological truth were thought indivisible and this left little room in theory for the vagaries of the individual. . . .

Across all these assumptions ran an overriding mental conservatism. One of the deepest differences between our own age and the *ancien régime* is the pervading conviction of those times that it was innovation which needed to be justified, not the past. A huge inertia generated by usage, tradition, prescription and the brutal fact of simple ignorance, lay heavily upon the institutions of the eighteenth century. As there had been for centuries, there was a self-evident justification for the ways of our fathers, for the forms and laws they had evolved and set down. One way in which this expressed itself was in an intense legalism, a fascination with old documents, judgments, lineage and inheritance. The higher classes were preoccupied with questions of blood, ancestry and family honour. Yet none of this preoccupation with the past was true historical-mindedness. Men were obsessed with the past as guidance, as precedent, even as spectacle, but not for its own sake. Few men had much sense that they were not looking at the same world as their ancestors.

SOURCE: From John Roberts, *Revolution and Improvement: The Western World, 1775–1847*, pp. 34–35. Copyright © 1976 John Roberts. Reprinted by permission of the Regents of the University of California Press, and the University of California Press.

The Resurgent Aristocracy

Leonard Krieger

Historians have at times exaggerated the importance of the rise of the middle class and the decline of the aristocracy in the eighteenth century. Recently, historians have begun to emphasize the middle of the eighteenth century as a period during which the aristocracy was actually resurgent, making efforts to regain its position and increase its influence—often with considerable success. This view is illustrated in the following selection by Leonard Krieger of the University of Chicago.

CONSIDER: *The evidence Krieger offers for a resurgence of the aristocracy; the ways in which the aristocracy adapted to eighteenth-century political needs.*

In the eighteenth century, surprisingly, aristocracies—or at least important parts of them—were resurgent. Appreciating the principle of what would later become a proverbial prescription for men to join what they could not beat, nobles in the several countries of Europe picked themselves up and began to appropriate commanding positions in the governmental structures of the new states and even in the network of commercial relations. The Whig oligarchy that ruled Britain without serious challenge between the accession of the Hanoverian dynasty in 1714 and George III's assertion of royal influence after 1760 represented a landowning aristocracy that was sponsoring a capitalized and scientific agriculture in response to demands of the market and that had

SOURCE: Reprinted from *Kings and Philosophers, 1689–1789*, by Leonard Krieger, with the permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Copyright © 1970 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

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economic ties with merchants and bankers of the City. The French peers, refueled by Louis XIV's calculated infusion of subsidies, made a serious bid to refashion the monarchy in their own image after the death of the Sun King in 1715, and when this attempt failed, a more economically progressive and modern-minded judicial and administrative aristocracy (*no-blesse de robe* and *noblesse d'office*) rose to continue the counteroffensive on behalf of the privileged. In Russia various sections of the military and landed nobility dictated the succession to the throne—in general they preferred tsarinas in the expectation that they would behave consistently as members of the "weaker sex"—and dominated the social policy of the government from the death of Peter the Great in 1725 through the accession of Catherine the Great in 1762. The long period from 1718 to 1772 that the Swedes euphemistically called their "era of liberty" was actually an age of aristocratic sovereignty, exercised constitutionally in a nominal monarchy through the nobles' oligarchic control over both the *Riksdag*, or parliament, and the bureaucracy. The Dutch gave the same high-flown label to the period from 1702 to 1747, when the small but influential class of Regents, an oligarchy comprised of urban patricians, resumed its sway after the death of William III and kept the office of *stadholder* vacant. The seven provinces that made up the Dutch "Republic" were, in this respect, expanded versions of the independent city-states in Europe. Concentrated mainly in Switzerland and Germany, they too were stabilized during the first half of the eighteenth century under the rule of exclusive patrician oligarchies. . . .

The aristocracies' new lease on life for the eighteenth century was thus predicated upon the modernization of their premises, and they thereby shifted the arena of social conflict from outside to inside the structure of the state. Where they had formerly defended their privileged rights to landownership, manorial lordship, judicial immunities, and tax exemptions by denying the jurisdiction of the central governments, they now defended these privileges by occupying and controlling the governmental agencies which exercised the jurisdiction. This aristocratic penetration of the state ran counter to the standards of general law, equal citizenship, and uniform administration which had served and continued to serve bureaucrats as guides in extending the scope of central government. But the hierarchical tendency was no mere atavism. Despite the obvious and reciprocal hostility between it and the leveling tendency with which it shared the state, the coexistence of the two tendencies, however mismatched in logic, was a faithful response to a fundamental social demand of the age. European society required, for the military security of its inhabitants, for the direction and subsidization of its economy, and for the prevention of religious turbulence and popular disorder, the imposition of unified control over a larger area and more people than the contemporary instruments of government could manage. Hence the employment of the traditional social and corporate hierarchies by the government as extensions of the governing arm into the mass of inhabitants. All people were subject, but some were more subject than others.

Lords and Peasants

Jerome Blum

The aristocracy made up a small percentage of Europe's population. Some 80 to 90 percent of the people were still peasants. While peasants lived in a variety of different circumstances, most lived at not much more than a subsistence level. They were usually thought of as at the bottom of society. In the following selection Jerome Blum analyzes attitudes held toward the peasants by seigniors (lords) and by peasants themselves.

CONSIDER: *How lords viewed peasants in relation to themselves; how the lords' attitudes reflected actual social conditions; possible consequences of the negative attitudes held about peasants.*

With the ownership of land went power and authority over the peasants who lived on the land. There were a multitude of variations in the nature of that authority and in the nature of the peasants' subservience to their seigniors, in the compass of the seigniors' supervision and control, and in the obligations that the peasants had to pay their lords. The peasants themselves were known by many different names, and so, too, were the obligations they owed the seigniors. But, whatever the differences, the status of the peasant everywhere in the servile lands was associated with unfreedom and constraint. In the hierarchical ladder of the traditional order he stood on the bottom rung. He was "the stepchild of the age, the broad, patient back who bore the weight of the entire social pyramid . . . the clumsy lout who was deprived and mocked by court, noble and city." . . .

The subservience of the peasant and his dependence upon his lord were mirrored in the attitudes and opinions of the seigniors of east and west alike. They believed that the natural order of things had divided humankind into masters and servants, those who commanded and those who obeyed. They believed themselves to be naturally superior beings and looked upon those who they believed were destined to serve them as their natural inferiors. At

SOURCE: From Blum, Jerome, *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe*, pp. 29–31, 44–49. Copyright 1978 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

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best their attitude toward the peasantry was the condescension of paternalism. More often it was disdain and contempt. Contemporary expressions of opinion repeatedly stressed the ignorance, irresponsibility, laziness, and general worthlessness of the peasantry, and in the eastern lands the free use of the whip was recommended as the only way to get things done. The peasant was considered some lesser and sub-human form of life; "a hybrid between animal and human" was the way a Bavarian official put it in 1737. An eyewitness of a rural rising in Provence in 1752 described the peasant as "an evil animal, cunning, a ferocious half-civilized beast; he has neither heart nor honesty. . . ." The Moldavian Basil Balsch reported that the peasants of his land were "strangers to any discipline, order, economy or cleanliness . . . ; a thoroughly lazy, mendacious . . . people who are accustomed to do the little work that they do only under invectives or blows." A counselor of the duke of Mecklenburg in an official statement in 1750 described the peasant there as a "head of cattle" and declared that he must be treated accordingly. . . .

The conviction of their own superiority harbored by the seigniors was often compounded by ethnic and religious differences between lord and peasant. In many parts of central and eastern Europe the masters belonged to a conquering people who had established their domination over the native population. German seigniors ruled over Slavic peasants in Bohemia, Galicia, East Prussia and Silesia, and over Letts and Estonians in the Baltic lands; Polish lords were the masters of Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and White Russian peasants; Great Russians owned manors peopled by Ukrainians and Lithuanians and Poles; Magyars lorded it over Slovaks and Romanians and Slovenes—to list only some of the macroethnic differences. Few peoples of the rest of the world can match Europeans in their awareness of and, generally, contempt for or at least disdain for other ethnic and religious groups. . . . The dominant group, though greatly outnumbered, successfully maintained its cultural identity precisely because it considered the peasants over whom it ruled as lesser breeds of mankind, even pariahs. . . .

Schooling for most peasants was, at best, pitifully inadequate and usually entirely absent, even where laws declared elementary education compulsory. . . . [B]y far the greatest part of Europe's peasantry lived out their lives in darkest ignorance.

The peasants themselves, oppressed, condemned, and kept in ignorance by their social betters, accepted the stamp of inferiority pressed upon them. "I am only a serf" the peasant would reply when asked to identify himself. They seemed without pride or self-respect, dirty, lazy, crafty, and always suspicious of their masters and of the world that lay outside their village. Even friendly observers were put off by the way they looked and by their behavior. One commentator complained in the 1760's that "one would have more pity for them if their wild and brutish appearance did not seem to justify their hard lot."

Women's Work in Preindustrial Europe

Merry E. Wiesner

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most women worked. However, the types of work available to them and the wages they could earn were more limited than for men. Moreover, women were not perceived as "workers" in the same way that men were. Nevertheless, women's work was essential for Europe's economy and for the growth of capitalism during these centuries. In the following selection, Merry E. Wiesner evaluates the changes in women's work and the meaning of work during the early modern period.

CONSIDER: *The main "generalizations" Wiesner makes about changes in women's work; what Wiesner means by "the meaning of work"; how the gender division between production and reproduction was reinforced.*

Despite wide variety and strong continuities, however, there are a few generalizations we can make about changes in the work of many women in Europe during this period. Occupations that required university education or formal training were closed to women. Women rarely controlled enough financial resources to enter occupations that required large initial capital outlay, and social norms kept them from occupations with political functions. Family responsibilities prevented them from entering occupations that required extensive traveling. These attributes of women's work were true both in 1350 and in 1750, but over these four centuries their meaning changed, for it was exactly those with formal education, political functions, capital investment, or international connections, such as physicians, merchants, bankers, lawyers, government officials, and overseas traders, who were gaining in wealth, power, and prestige.

Indeed, it is in the meaning of work that we can see the most change during this period. Women's productive tasks were increasingly defined as reproductive—as housekeeping—or as assisting—or helping out. Thus a woman who sewed clothes, took in boarders, did laundry, and gathered herbs for pay was increasingly thought of as a housewife, a title that became enshrined in statistical

SOURCE: Merry E. Wiesner, "Spinning Out Capital: Women's Work in Preindustrial Europe, 1350–1750," in Renate Bridenthal et al., eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History,* 3rd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998), pp. 226–227.

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language by the nineteenth century, when her activities were no longer regarded as contributing to the gross national product or relevant to other sorts of economic measurements.

This gender division between production and reproduction was reinforced in the early modern period by parish, city, and state governments, various tasks because these were not really "work," but simply "support." This even included allowing women to sell items that they had produced. Women themselves sometimes adopted the same rhetoric, for they knew that arguing that they had a right to work would be much less effective than describing the children they had to support or how much public money might otherwise be spent if they did not work.

And work women did. A recent study of the London labor market has found that 72 percent of women in 1700 were doing full- or part-time paid work outside the home, most of it low-status work. Historians have posited many reasons for the dramatic development of the European economy and for European expansion around the world. Recently an "Industrious Revolution" has been added to these factors; Europeans are seen as reducing their leisure time and working more in order to have money to purchase consumer goods from around the world. This Industrious Revolution not only involved women; it required their labor. Though it may have been conceptualized as assisting or supporting, women's work provided an enormous pool of labor, in the same way that women and children in developing countries provide the mass of labor for the global market today.

CHAPTER QUESTIONS

1. In what ways did competing groups and historical conditions put pressure on aristocrats who wanted to maintain their position and influence?
2. What were the assets and liabilities of the eighteenth-century aristocracy in the face of pressures to diminish its position and influence?
3. How do eighteenth-century assumptions reflect the nature of politics and society during the Ancien Régime?
4. In what ways was the rise of the Atlantic slave trade related to other developments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries?

Propaganda and the Enlightened Monarch

Joseph II of Austria

Emperor Joseph II of Austria (1765-1790) is generally thought to have been one of the most enlightened eighteenth-century kings and indeed considered himself to be an enlightened monarch. Some of what this meant is indicated by this picture of Joseph II. It shows him plowing a field with a farmer and members of his court. To make sure he and his office were recognizable to viewers, Joseph remained appropriately dressed, including wearing his powdered wig. (He was also rumored to dress as a peasant and converse with locals at the market). This scene also affirms the growing interest in agricultural improvements during the eighteenth century, particularly among aristocratic innovators. Joseph II tells some of his hopes in a number of letters excerpted here.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor- The present system of taxation in my dominions, and the inequality of the taxes which are imposed on the nation, form a subject too important to escape my attention. I have discovered that the principles on which it is founded are unsound, and have become injurious to the industry of the peasant; that there is neither equality, nor equity, between the hereditary provinces with each other, nor between individual proprietors, and therefore it can no longer continue. With this view I give you the necessary orders to introduce a new system of taxation, by which the contribution, requisite for the wants of the state, may be effected without augmenting the present taxes, and the industry of the peasant, at the same time, be freed from all impediments.

Since my accession to the throne, I have ever been anxious to conquer the prejudices against my station, and have taken pains to gain the confidence of my people; I have several times since given proof, that the welfare of my subjects is my passion; that to satisfy it, I shun neither labor, nor trouble, nor even vexations, and reflect well on the means which are likely to promote my views; and yet in my reforms, I everywhere find opposition from people, of whom I least expect it.

Sir, - Till now the Protestant religion has been opposed in my states; its adherents have been treated like foreigners; civil rights, possession of estates, titles, and appointments, all were refused them.

I determined from the very commencement of my reign to adorn my diadem with the love of my people, to act in administration of affairs according to just, impartial, and liberal principles; consequently, I granted toleration, and removed the yoke which had oppressed the Protestants for centuries.

Fanaticism shall in future be known in my states only by the contempt I have for it; nobody shall any longer be exposed to hardships on account of his creed; no man shall be compelled in future to profess the religion of the state, if it be contrary to his persuasion, and if he have other ideas of the right way of insuring blessedness.

In future my Empire shall not be the scene of abominable intolerance. Fortunately no sacrifices like those of Calas or Sirven have ever disgraced any reign in this country.

If, in former times, the will of the monarch furnished opportunities for injustice, if the limits of executive power were exceeded, and private hatred acted her part, I can only pity those monarchs who were nothing but kings.

Tolerance is an effect of that beneficent increase of knowledge which now enlightens Europe, and which is owing philosophy and the efforts of great men; it is a convincing proof of the improvement of the human mind, which has boldly reopened a road through the dominions of superstition, which was trodden centuries ago by Zoroaster and Confucius, and which, fortunately for mankind, has now become the highway of monarchs. Adieu!

The Problem of Enlightened Absolutism

H. M. Scott

Historians have long debated exactly how much the Enlightenment influenced monarchs of the time. Traditionally, there has been considerable acceptance of the view that monarchs such as Joseph II of Austria and Frederick II of Prussia were enlightened. In recent decades this view was seriously narrowed and questioned to the point where many historians felt that enlightened despotism and enlightened absolutism were no longer terms that could usefully be applied to these eighteenth-century monarchs. More recently, other historians have come to the conclusion that the term is useful. In the following selection H. M. Scott surveys this controversy and concludes that enlightened absolutism was real.

CONSIDER: *The characteristics of enlightened absolutism; why Joseph II (see the visual sources in this chapter) and Frederick II (see the primary sources in the preceding chapter) might be considered enlightened monarchs; how enlightened absolutism differs from seventeenth-century absolutism (see sources in Chapter 16).*

Few historical concepts have had their obituaries written more frequently than enlightened absolutism, yet so obstinately refuse to die. In its classical form, the theory of enlightened absolutism asserted that during the second half of the eighteenth century the domestic policies of most European states were influenced and even dictated by the ideas of the Enlightenment and were therefore sharply distinguished from what had gone before. Government became a systematic and rational attempt to apply the best recent knowledge to the task of ruling, while the main aim of internal policy came to be the improvement of educational opportunities, social conditions and economic life. . . .

Together, rulers and their influential advisers carried through a wide-ranging series of reforms, the principal inspiration for which was the political philosophy of the Enlightenment. Administrations and legal and fiscal systems were modernised; commercial and economic development was encouraged; efforts were made to improve agriculture and even to abolish the institution of serfdom; state control over the Catholic Church was extended and a determined attempt was made to channel some of its wealth into increased and improved pastoral activity; teaching in universities was brought up to date; and the provision of secondary and primary education was vastly increased. These reforms, and the amount of success achieved, were remarkable in the context of the later eighteenth century, and the sense of social responsibility which lay behind many of these measures was also novel and striking. Though the precise policies adopted varied from country to country, a common explanation was found in the movement of ideas known as the European Enlightenment, which was at its peak exactly when the policies of enlightened absolutism were being pursued: the middle decades of the eighteenth century until the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.

During the past two generations, the historical reputation of enlightened absolutism has undergone remarkable vicissitudes, above all in Anglo-American historical writing about later eighteenth-century Europe. It first rose to prominence during the 1930s, and for a generation thereafter was widely accepted among historians. By the 1960s, however, the tide was beginning to turn and the sceptics, who saw only the conventional aims of state-building in these policies and regarded the enlightened professions which accompanied them as mere window-dressing, were gaining the ascendant. The critics of enlightened absolutism argued that few monarchs, and certainly none of the major rulers, could afford to adhere blindly to an enlightened blueprint and ignore, or even neglect, the demands of self-defence. The competitive states-system within which the great powers operated required large and powerful armies and administrative and fiscal systems to support them. These priorities pre-empted much of the scope for enlightened reform. Above all, critics of the notion of enlightened absolutism argued that the success of these initiatives was often incomplete and could, at times, be very limited indeed. . . .

During the 1970s, the widespread assumption that enlightened absolutism was a fiction came to be challenged by a growing number of monographic studies of particular countries which make clear that the reforms of this period were influenced by ideas and were not simply another stage in the growth of the absolutist state. This trend has increased during the 1980s. . . .

[I]t has become clear that enlightened absolutism is not an idea in the mind of historians. The remarkable extent and the considerable success of the reforming initiatives is now established beyond question.

CHAPTER QUESTIONS

1. What core of ideas and attitudes most clearly connects Enlightenment thinkers as revealed in these sources? How do these ideas relate to eighteenth-century society and institutions?
2. What policies would an eighteenth-century ruler have to pursue to fit to the greatest degree the ideas and assumptions of Enlightenment thinkers? What hindrances were faced by monarchs who wanted to be more enlightened?
3. What ideas and attitudes of Enlightenment thinkers do you think remain valid for the problems facing today's world? What Enlightenment ideas and attitudes no longer seem valid or appropriate?
4. In what ways do the sources support the argument that together, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment constitute a single intellectual revolution of great long-term significance?