14.1: Prelude to The Society of Orders

The eighteenth century was the (last) great century of monarchical power and the aristocratic control of society in Europe. It was also the end of the early modern period, before industrialism and revolution marked the beginning of the modern period at the end of the century. Ironically, the enormous changes that happened at the end of the century were totally unanticipated at the time. No one, even the most radical political philosopher, believed that the political order or the basic technological level of their society would be fundamentally changed.

One example of that outlook is that of a philosopher and writer, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who in 1781 published The Painting of Paris, which depicted a more orderly and perfect French society of the future. In the Paris of the future, an enlightened king oversees a rationally-governed society and extends personal audiences to his subjects. The streets are clean, orderly, well-lit, and (unlike the Paris of his day) houses are numbered. Religious differences are calmly discussed and never result in violence. Strangely, from a present-day perspective, however, there is no new technology to speak of, and the political and social order remains intact: a king, nobility, clergy, and commoners occupy their respective places in society - they simply interact more “rationally.”

The Painting of Paris depicted an idealized version of Mercier’s contemporary society. With the exception of Britain’s constitutional monarchy and strong parliament, the monarchs of the major states of Europe succeeded in the eighteenth century in controlling governments that were at least “absolutist” in their pretensions, even though the nobility and local assemblies had a great deal of real power almost everywhere. In turn, the social orders were starkly divided, not just by wealth but by law and custom as well. This set of divisions was summarized in the system of “Estates” in France, the societal descendants of the divisions between “those who pray, those who fight, and those who work” in the Middle Ages.
The **First Estate**, consisting of the clergy, oversaw not just the churches, but education, enormous tracts of land held by the church and the monasteries, orders like the Jesuits and Benedictines, and great influence in royal government. In Protestant lands, there was the equivalent in the form of the official Lutheran or Anglican churches, although the political power of the clergy in Protestant countries was generally weaker than was the Roman Church in Catholic countries.

The **Second Estate**, the nobility, was itself divided by the elite titled nobility with hereditary lordships of various kinds (Dukes, Counts, etc.) and a larger group of lesser nobles who owned land but were not necessarily very wealthy. In Britain, the latter were called the gentry and controlled the House of Commons in parliament; the House of Lords was occupied by the “peers of the realm,” the elite families of nobles often descended from the ancient Normans. Generally, the nobility as a whole represented no more than 4% of the overall population (with peculiar exceptions such as Poland and Hungary that had large numbers of nobles, most of whom were scarcely wealthier than peasants).

The **Third Estate** was simply everyone else, from rich bankers and merchants without titles down to the destitute urban poor and landless peasant laborers. During the Middle Ages, the Third Estate was represented by wealthy elites from the cities and large towns, with the peasantry - despite being the majority of the population - enjoying no representation whatsoever. By the eighteenth century, the Third Estate was far more diverse, dynamic, and educated than ever before. It did not, however, enjoy better political representation. As the century went on, a growing number of members of the Third Estate, especially those influenced by Enlightenment thought, came to chafe at a political order that remained resolutely medieval in its basic structure.