

## Why were the peasants dissatisfied?

Revolution often breaks out in a country when conditions are so bad that the people desperately want a change. Some of the troubles that led to revolution in eighteenth-century France had existed for a long time. These troubles are known as the evils, or abuses, of the OLD REGIME (the old order).

Instead of reforming these abuses, Louis XV and Louis XVI allowed them to grow worse. The next selection describes the bad economic conditions in France. It was written by Arthur Young, an Englishman who traveled through France from 1787 to 1789. Why were the difficulties he describes among the basic causes of the French Revolution?

### ***August 4, 1787***

In this journey, I have passed a great number of splendid bridges and many superb roads. This only proves the foolishness of the government. These splendid bridges and large roads cannot be made merely for the use of the people who live here. One-fourth of the expense would be enough for useful travel. These things are therefore objects of public display. They are meant for the eye of travelers.

Public works are usually done by the corvée system. In this system, the peasants of the area are required to do several days' work each year without pay. In the south of France, money is collected by the taille. This is a tax on the land and its produce. There has been injustice in levying the amount each person must pay. Lands held by the nobility are taxed very little. Lands held by commoners are taxed heavily.

### ***August 23, 1787***

We passed a rich and highly cultivated valley on the way to Aiguillon. I saw the castle of the duke of Aiguillon. It was begun about twenty years ago. At that time, the duke was exiled here for eight years [from the royal court]. Thanks to that banishment, the building went on very well. However, as soon as the sentence was reversed, the duke went back to Paris. He has not been here since. As a result, all stands still. It is thus that banishment alone will force the French nobility to do what the English do for pleasure—live on and take care of their estates.

### ***October 14, 1787***

We came to the abbey [monastery] of St. Germain. It is the richest abbey in France. The abbot [head of the abbey] receives 300,000 livres [about 1.5 million] a year. I lose my patience at such revenues being granted in this manner. What a noble farm one-fourth of this income could establish! What turnips, what potatoes, what sheep, what wool! Are not these things better than a fat clergyman?

### **September 5, 1788**

We came to Montauban. The poor people seem poor, indeed. The children are terribly ragged. They are worse clad, if possible, than if they had no clothes at all. I saw a beautiful girl six or seven years old playing with a stick. She smiled under such a bundle of rags as made my heart ache to see her. One-third of what I have seen of this province seems uncultivated. Nearly all of it seems in misery.

### **July 1789**

Walking up a long hill to rest my horse, I was joined by a poor woman who complained of the hard times. She said her husband had only a tiny piece of land, one cow, and a poor little horse. Yet they had to pay 42 pounds of wheat and three chickens as rent to a noble. They also paid 168 pounds of oats and one chicken to another noble, besides very heavy *tailles* and other taxes. "The *tailles* and fuedal dues [rents owed the lords since the fuedal time] are crushing us," she said. This woman, at no great distance, might have been taken for sixty or seventy years old. Her figure was bent, and her face was wrinkled and hardened by labor. However, she said she was only twenty-eight.

The capitaineries [hunting reserves] are another curse on all the people who occupy the land. These reserves are districts granted by the king to princes of the royal blood. The princes own all the game in these districts, even on lands not belonging to them. Game means whole droves of wild boars and herds of deer that are not confined by any wall or fence. The animals wander at pleasure over the whole country, destroying the crops. The game in a single reserve did damage to the amount of 184,263 *livres* [almost one million] a year. No wonder that we find people saying, "We loudly demand the destruction of the capitaineries and all sorts of game."

They also ask, as a favor, to be allowed to "harvest their grain, mow their meadows, and remove the leftover stalks without regard to partridges [a bird] and other game." There are many laws for preserving game. These laws forbid weeding and hoeing, which might disturb the young partridges. Mowing hay before a certain time, so late as to spoil the crop, and taking away the stalks are also forbidden. These harvest activities would take away the birds' shelter.

Adapted from Arthur Young, *Tavels in France*, 1794

## **THINKING IT THROUGH**

1. This passage describes the evils of Old Regime.
  - A. What are these evils?
  - B. Which do you consider the worst ones? Why?
2. What difference does Arthur Young note between the English and the French nobility? Was the difference an important one? Explain.
3. If you had been a peasant in eighteenth-century France, would you have supported a revolt against the king? Why or why not?