

The Old Regime

The 18th century is a major turning point not only in European History, but also in World History. The ideas of the Enlightenment would be implemented in Great Britain's American colonies and in France during the last quarter of the century, fundamentally altering the political development of the West, and later the entire world. Yet, the 18th century began as a world of hierarchy, privilege, and tradition. The Old Regime, or *ancien regime*, is the term used to refer to the political, economic, and social world prior to the French Revolution of 1789.

The politics of the Old Regime included the power of monarchy, either the **absolutism** of France or the **constitutionalism** of Great Britain, and the aristocratic dominance of legislatures and assemblies. The economics of the Old Regime was characterized by a scarcity of food, lack of consumer goods, and the influence of **mercantilism**. The society of the Old Regime was hierarchical, traditional, and community-based. The notion of "individual rights" had not yet replaced the "group rights" associated with a specific class or occupation, and the community's expectations for the individual were more influential than the individual's own sense of identity. The **rationalism** and **empiricism** of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment gradually influenced politics, economics, and society. **Commercialization** had already begun to alter local economies and the **Industrial Revolution** at the end of the 18th century would fundamentally alter the traditional agrarian community's value-system by ushering in an age of radical **individualism**.

In the 18th century, specifically the second half, the European population increased dramatically due to new crops such as corn and potatoes from the Americas, agricultural advances that increased the production of food, and the end of significant outbreaks of the bubonic plague. The advances in agriculture included the **seed drill** invented by **Jethro Tull**, which improved the planting of seeds and enabled higher yields. The open-field (three-field) system was gradually abandoned in favor of large-scale farms in the **Enclosure Movement**, which resulted in small landowners being replaced by wealthier landowners and commonly-owned land used by peasants being privatized through legislation enacted by a wealthy landowner Parliament. Many small farmers were forced to become wage laborers, but the overall food supply increased and population increased, as well.

European industry mainly produced **textile products**, which were traditionally made by master artisans who were members of guilds. Gradually, textile production moved out of the hands of master artisans (small business owners) in small towns and shifted to the countryside because merchant-capitalists would purchase raw materials and equipment to loan to rural workers. This process was called the "**putting-out**" or "**domestic**" system. This "**cottage industry**" enabled the rural poor to earn extra money, while enriching merchant-capitalists and undermining guilds. As the demand for cotton goods increased, the "cottage industry" failed to adequately increase supply and new inventions such as the "**water frame**" designed by **Richard Arkwright** were used to increase the speed of production. **Mechanization** was just around the corner, and rural workers and master artisans alike feared the constant changes in production.

The maintenance of tradition was desired by a majority of the people. Both landowning aristocrats and peasants did not desire change. Nobles wanted to reassert their rights against the expanding powers of monarchs and peasants wanted to retain their feudal rights to the commons (public lands). The **guilds** wanted to keep their social and economic status in the urban centers and maintain the control they had over working conditions. The merchant-capitalists of the upper-middle class, however, supported the increased commercialization and industrialization of society.

Europeans of the Old Regime lived in highly stratified societies and generally accepted their fixed place in the hierarchy. In most of Europe, law and custom divided people into “**estates**” with specific rights, duties, and laws attached to their estate. Such a “**corporative**” society granted rights and privileges to groups rather than individuals. Corporate society originated in the Middle Ages, and while the existence of legal “estates” gradually disappeared in Western Europe, a “caste” system characterized Eastern Europe. The social structure was hierarchical and resembled a pyramid. The social structure was considered divinely sanctioned (part of the design of the world) and people were neither encouraged to question their place nor to desire social mobility. French society was divided into three “estates” and the aristocracy continued to possess inherited legal privileges. In Great Britain, the legal distinction between social classes was abolished during the 17th century, but in Russia a rigid social hierarchy existed into the 18th century.

Peasantry – Land and agriculture was the economic basis of 18th century life and ¾ of Europe’s population lived in the countryside. Land and agriculture was the foundation of the nobility’s status and power. Most of the peasants in Western Europe were legally free, but did not own any land. Many were **tenant farmers** who owed 1/3 of their crops to the landlord. **Serfdom**, which bound the laborer to the land and gave the landlord legal rights over the laborer, was more prominent in Eastern Europe. Russia’s serfs lived in the worst conditions. Both free peasants and serfs were often subject to local courts controlled by their landlords and high taxes. The family was the basic unit of economic production. Everyone capable of work contributed to production and goods/income were for the benefit of the family, not the individual.

Aristocracy – The 18th century is often referred to as the “**Age of the Aristocrat**” and the aristocracy ranged from 1% to 5% of the population. The aristocracy had the widest degree of political, economic, and social power. Within the aristocracy itself there existed a hierarchy of status, which depended on the length of time that a family had been noble, the means by which the family had acquired its title, and the political influence of the family. The gap between rich and poor nobles could be enormous.

The British aristocracy was the smallest and wealthiest. About 400 families controlled both the House of Lords and House of Commons. They possessed few legal privileges, but maintained their wealth by controlling legislation in Parliament. The French aristocracy, the **Second Estate**, was divided between **nobles of the sword** and **nobles of the blood**. The French nobility was exempt from the land tax and rarely paid the income tax. They could also collect feudal dues from tenants and enjoyed exclusive hunting rights. The **Third Estate**, everyone except the clergy and nobility, made up 97% of the French population.

The aristocracy in Central and Eastern Europe possessed more rights and privileges over the lower class. Austria’s nobility was exempt from many taxes and possessed broad judicial powers. Prussia’s nobility monopolized the officer corps and had extensive authority over their serfs. Russia’s nobility was very class conscious as a result of Peter the Great’s **Table of Ranks**, while the **Charter of the Nobility** passed by Catherine II formalized various noble privileges such as tax exemptions.