



THE
COMING
OF THE

FRENCH
REVOLUTION

BY GEORGES LEFEBVRE

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GEORGES LEFEBVRE

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY

R. R. PALMER

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sive, arising as early as July 1789 from fear of an "aristocratic conspiracy" against the Third Estate.

It is perhaps in his exact perception of social classes that M. Lefebvre is at his best. His exhaustive knowledge of the French peasantry of the eighteenth century makes him a sure guide into the society of the time, for four-fifths of the people were peasants, most wealth was in land and most income derived from it, and the social position of the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the town laboring classes was defined largely by their relation to the rural population. Antagonisms between nobles and bourgeois, and between bourgeoisie and proletariat, are for Lefebvre only part of a much larger and more complicated structure. He shows that among the peasants themselves there were all sorts of class divisions, and that peasant opinion would have prevented a systematic redistribution of property or full social revolution. He notes that when the Revolution began the bourgeoisie probably owned as much rural land in France as did the nobility, a fact singularly awkward to a purely materialist theory of class conflict. He observes that between bourgeoisie and wage-earning class there was no sharp dividing line, and adds that, if there had been, the French Revolution as we know it could not have occurred, since the bourgeoisie would have been afraid to accept the support of the lower classes, and would probably have come to terms with the titled aristocracy instead, as, he says, later happened in Germany. But he shows too that the bourgeoisie and the masses obtained very different benefits from the Revolution; that the masses of city workers and poorer peasants wished to perpetuate the old controlled and regulated economy, with collective rights for the peasant communities, rather than to accept the regime of economic individualism and commercial freedom with which the Revolution presented them, in this respect continuing the tendency of the monarchy.

The different interests of social classes in the Revolution are nowhere more clearly and succinctly set forth than in this book. Yet it is not the struggle of classes that oc-

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potism. Making an idol of Louis XVI, they turned their attack against the aristocracy. A social struggle, a "class war" as M. Sagnac has said, broke out openly. "The controversy has completely changed," observed Mallet du Pan in January 1789. "King, despotism and constitution are now minor questions. The war is between the Third Estate and the other two orders." Mme. Roland and Rabaut-Saint-Etienne now took passionately to public affairs. Brissot wrote, just back from a visit to the United States: "Scarcely six months had passed since I left France. I hardly knew my fellow countrymen on my return. They had advanced an enormous distance."

In aligning themselves against the privileged classes the bourgeoisie took the name hitherto claimed in common by all who opposed the royal power. They formed the "national" or "patriot" party. Those of the privileged groups who had unreservedly adopted the new ideas ranged themselves on the same side; they included great noblemen, the duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, the marquis de La Fayette, the marquis de Condorcet; and certain members of the Parliament, Adrien du Port, Hérault de Séchelles, Le Pelletier de Saint-Fargeau. These men, to take lead of the movement, joined with bankers like the Labordes, academicians like the lawyer Target and jurists and writers of note, such as Bergasse and Lacretelle, Servan and Volney. The party organized itself for propaganda. Like the Parliaments and the Breton nobility before them, each man made use of his personal connections. Correspondents in the depths of the provinces did the same. Ties created by clubs and societies were certainly very useful. Since 1786 true political organizations had appeared in Paris—a Gallo-American Society, a Society of Friends of the Negro, which demanded abolition of slavery, and political clubs in the strict sense, for example, the one at the Palais-Royal. These last had been forbidden by Breteuil in 1787, but Necker again tolerated them. The general staff of the new party met in certain drawing rooms, like that of Mme. de Tessé, soon to be Mounier's Egeria.

deputies to go to Versailles. Thus for the Third Estate, where secondary bailiwicks existed, an additional step was introduced between the original voter and the national deputy.

Some opinions had been expressed in the Assembly of Notables in favor of limiting the vote, even for privileged persons, to those paying a certain sum in direct taxes. No such requirement was adopted for the privileged orders. All hereditary nobles were admitted to the bailiwick assembly of their order, in person or by proxy, whether or not they were in possession of a fief. But those with no fiefs received no individual invitations; they complained that on this point they were treated like commoners. As for newly made nobles, with personal title only, they were thrown into the Third Estate. All bishops and parish priests were likewise admitted in person or by proxy, whereas canons and members of monastic orders could merely send representatives, the latter only one for each house. Hence, in the bailiwick assembly of the clergy, the parish priests were assured of an overwhelming majority. This was a rude blow to the aristocracy, since, while the bishops were all nobles, the parish priests were almost all commoners. The nobility, meeting in person in their bailiwick assemblies, named their deputies to the Estates-General directly. Among the clergy, the same was true of bishops and parish clergy, while for other clergy the election took place in two steps. Whether a bailiwick was principal or secondary made no difference.

For the Third Estate the electoral system was far more complex. Directly or indirectly, payment of some tax was prerequisite to voting. In the towns the primary elections went by guilds, persons belonging to no guild meeting in a body of their own. Journeymen, in principle, were supposed to vote; but at Reims the drapers invaded the assembly, causing a riot, which had to be put down by force; and in fact the guild assemblies either included the master craftsmen only, or were dominated by them. In Paris it seemed impossible to organize the vote by guilds, and voting went by neighborhoods or districts; but only