Chapter 7

Society and Economy under the Old Regime in the Eighteenth Century

The period known as the *ancien régime*, or the Old Regime, usually refers to the various political and social relationships and situation prior to the French Revolution of 1789. During this time both nobles and peasants called for the return to traditional rights, and society was fairly hierarchical.

**Major Features of Life in the Old Regime**

- Tradition remained the most important factor shaping the lives of Europeans in this period. The peasants, above all, were committed to maintaining the status quo, and they were opposed to change.
- Likewise, a hierarchical society remained the accepted model. Each layer of the hierarchy had its own rights, duties, and privileges.

**AP® Key Concepts**

1.5 III. Population shifts and growing commerce caused the expansion of cities, which often found their traditional political and social structures stressed by the growth.
   - I. Economic change produced new social patterns, while traditions of hierarchy and status persisted.

**The Aristocracy**

- Aristocrats represented a mere 5 percent of the population but controlled the majority of land, as well as social, economic, and political power. As monarchs’ powers expanded, European aristocrats used existing governmental institutions to limit the power of the monarchy.
- In England, game laws gave aristocratic landowners the exclusive legal rights from 1671 to 1831 to hunt. The English aristocracy owned one-fourth of all arable land and consisted of about 400 families, many of whom controlled the House of Lords and the House of Commons.
- In France, the nobility consisted of military officers, bureaucrats, or other individuals who paid for it. French nobles fell into two groups: those who held court at Versailles, and those who did not.
- In eastern Europe, the nobility had more rights over peasants. Polish aristocrats exerted total control over serfs. In Austria and Hungary, nobles were exempt from taxation. In countries like Hungary and Poland, nobles were the only ones with political representation. In Prussia, nobles had authority over serfs. In Russia, nobles became determined to resist compulsory
state service. In the 1785 Charter of the Nobility, Catherine the Great defined the legal rights of nobles and their families in exchange for the nobility’s voluntary service of state.

AP® KEY CONCEPTS

2.1 Different models of political sovereignty affected the relationship among states and between states and individuals.

I. In much of Europe, absolute monarchy was established over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

THE LAND AND ITS TILLERS

- Over three-quarters of all Europeans lived in the country in the eighteenth century; many of them were peasants who were quite poor and lived through subsistence agriculture.
- In Great Britain, farmers had legal rights of English citizens, but the courts were run by landowners. French peasants had to pay feudal dues and were responsible for a certain amount of forced labor, known as corvée.
- In Prussia and Austria, landlords exercised almost complete control over serfs. The condition of serfs in Russia was worst; serfs had no legal rights and were effectively slaves. Russia experienced numerous peasant revolts between 1762 and 1769, a period culminating in Pugachev’s Rebellion between 1773 and 1775. Southeastern European peasants were free, but only because of a scarcity of labor. Balkan peasants eventually became dependent on their Ottoman Empire landlords because they sought their protection from bandits and rebels.

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FAMILY STRUCTURES AND FAMILY ECONOMY

- The family economy continued to prevail across most of Europe. Households in northwestern Europe often consisted of a married couple, children through their teens, and servants (people who were hired under contract to work for the head of the household in exchange for room, board, and wages). Households were small, usually no more than five or six people. Mortality was high, and no more than two generations lived together under one roof. Most children eventually married and formed their own household—a phenomenon known as neolocalism. The marriage age was in the mid-twenties for men and women.
- In eastern Europe, the marriage age was much earlier, usually before the age of twenty. Wives were often older than their husbands. Russian households often consisted of as many as three or four generations living together in one house.
AP® KEY CONCEPTS
1.5 European society and the experiences of everyday life were increasingly shaped by commercial and agricultural capitalism, notwithstanding the persistence of medieval social and economic structures.

IV. The family remained the primary social and economic institution of early modern Europe and took several forms, including the nuclear family.

THE REVOLUTION IN AGRICULTURE

The agricultural revolution began in the Netherlands, where farmers built dikes, expanded land, and experimented with new crops. English landlords popularized these Dutch innovations. Jethro Tull financed the experiments of others and conducted his own, including permitting land to be cultivated for longer periods without having to be left fallow. Robert Bakewell pioneered new methods of animal breeding. Charles Townsend learned how to use fertilizer and instituted crop rotation. By the second half of the seventeenth century, enclosures replaced the open-field method of farming. Enclosures commercialized agriculture, maximizing the profits of the landowner.

AP® KEY CONCEPTS
2.2 The expansion of European commerce accelerated the growth of a worldwide economic network.

I. Early modern Europe developed a market economy that provided the foundation for its global role.

2.4 The experiences of everyday life were shaped by demographic, environmental, medical, and technological changes.

I. In the seventeenth century, small landholdings, low-productivity agricultural practices, poor transportation, and adverse weather limited and disrupted the food supply, causing periodic famines. By the eighteenth century, Europeans began to escape from the Malthusian imbalance between population and the food supply, resulting in steady population growth.

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The second half of the eighteenth century witnessed the industrialization of the European economy, which made possible the production of more goods and services than ever before: the consumer revolution. New machinery was invented that enabled this industrialization, including the spinning jenny, the water frame, and the steam engine. Iron production during this era was essential to the manufacturing of machinery. The Industrial Revolution forced women into cottage industries and resulted in the workplaces of men and women becoming more separate.

AP® KEY CONCEPTS
2.2 The expansion of European commerce accelerated the growth of a worldwide economic network.

II. The European-dominated worldwide economic network contributed to the agricultural, industrial, and consumer revolutions in Europe.
2.4 The experiences of everyday life were shaped by demographic, environmental, medical, and technological changes.

II. The consumer revolution of the eighteenth century was shaped by a new concern for privacy, encouraged the purchase of new goods for homes, and created new venues for leisure activities.

III. By the eighteenth century, family and private life reflected new demographic patterns and the effects of the Commercial Revolution.

THE GROWTH OF CITIES

- Between 1650 and 1700, cities that grew most in population were capitals and ports; the urban Industrial Revolution, overseas trade, and governmental bureaucracy came to control European economies. New cities began to emerge in the middle of the eighteenth century; improved agricultural production enabled the growth of nearby urban centers that gave farmers access to consumer goods. Social divisions were marked between the upper classes, middle class, artisans, and peasants.

AP® KEY CONCEPTS

2.4 The experiences of everyday life were shaped by demographic, environmental, medical, and technological changes.

II. The consumer revolution of the eighteenth century was shaped by a new concern for privacy, encouraged the purchase of new goods for homes, and created new venues for leisure activities.

IV. Cities offered economic opportunities, which attracted increasing migration from rural areas, transforming urban life and creating challenges for the new urbanites and their families.


- The majority of Jews lived in Eastern Europe, with the Netherlands being a notable exception. The Jewish population was concentrated in Lithuania, Poland, and the Ukraine.

Catherine the Great was intolerant of the Jewish population in Russia and discouraged their settlement there. Jews were often victims of intolerance in the countries where they settled.

AP® KEY CONCEPTS

2.3 The popularization and dissemination of the scientific revolution and the application of its methods to political, social, and ethical issues led to an increased, although not unchallenged, emphasis on reason in European culture.

IV. During the Enlightenment, the rational analysis of religious practices led to natural religion and the demand for religious toleration.