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"The standard of Living of France's 3rd Estate vs all other Factors perceived to contribute to the Outbreak of the French Revolution"

There have been numerous conflicting arguments concerning the main cause of the French Revolution and so far no consensus has been reached. The theory that I wish to propose is that the primary factor contributing to the outbreak of the French Revolution was the **standard of living** of France's 3rd Estate.

The standard of living refers to the degree of material comfort enjoyed by a person or class of persons, this includes :-

housing, food, recreational time, working conditions and disposable income.

Education can also be added to this list as it has a direct effect on the level of disposable income.

In order to understand the plight of the 3rd Estate it is important to understand the economic conditions which prevailed in France at this time. The population had grown by 33% over a period of 70 years and, as a result, the area of land farmed by the peasant farmer had become smaller and smaller thereby reducing his income. Costs had increased by 45% during the period 1771 - 1789 whilst wages had only increased by 22%. The purchasing power of the peasants therefore, fell by 25%. To make the situation even more difficult, France had one of its worst recorded droughts in 1785. The position of the peasant farmers was such that the smallest variant, be it economic or climatic, could destroy their livelihood. The rate of inflation and the adverse climatic conditions created a situation whereby the peasant farmer was no longer able to make a living. These conditions gave rise to hostility towards the system of seigneurism.

The French 3rd Estate was loosely grouped into 2 classes, the Bourgeoisie (the middle class), who were the minority, and the peasant farmers. The reasons behind the dis-

content of these 2 groups, although different, both related back to their standard of living. The Bourgeoisie had a relatively "high" standard of living and could therefore afford a better education, which, in turn, led them to have higher aspirations and greater desires. The peasants had a very low standard of living and what little they had was taken from them by the way of taxes and feudal dues. They, the poorest in the land, carried the bulk of the tax burden. The hardships of the peasants are highlighted in the following extract from the English writer, Arthur Young's journals written shortly before the outbreak of the Revolution, whilst travelling in France.

"Walking up a long hill, to ease my mare, I was joined by a poor woman who complained of the times; and that it was a sad country. Demanding her reasons; she said her husband had but a morsel of land, one cow and a poor little horse, yet they had a francher (421b) of wheat and 3 chickens to pay as quit rent to one seigneur and 4 francher of oats, 1 chicken and a number of eggs to pay another, besides very heavy tailles and other taxes."

It was obvious from this observation that these people were suffering great economic hardship.

In addition to this miserable existence, the 3rd Estate were also subjected, by the state, to live in constant fear of doing something even remotely wrong, for it meant the dreaded lettre de cachet, or arrest warrant. Punishment could be anything from a term as a galley slave, to flogging, mutilation or branding.

Now that we know what the 3rd Estate's standard of living was, let's compare it to the other perceived causes of the Revolution.

As regards to the system of government, at the time, I

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feel that it should not be seen as a major cause, but rather as a catalyst to the outbreak of the Revolution. To the peasants, it made no difference what form of government ruled the country as long as they were able to make a living. They were not educated enough to question the form of government, unlike the Bourgeoisie who held many meetings and formed clubs to discuss and argue about the system of government in France and what they perceived to an ideal form of government. These debates didn't amount to much, though, as they had been on going for many years without them causing any change. The reason for this being that, although they didn't have the privileges enjoyed by the nobility, they enjoyed a reasonable standard of living which they were not prepared to give up because of a revolutionary ideology.

Another favourite cause given by historians is the writing of the philosophers. Here again I feel that these were of little importance at the outbreak of the Revolution, as the populace of France were more concerned at that stage in keeping body and soul together rather than lofty ideals. It is estimated that 96% of the populace were illiterate and as such few of the peasants had the opportunity to be exposed to the thoughts of the philosophers. These thoughts, however, became important in the formation of the Revolutionary France and the subsequent French Republics.

One might argue that the French 3rd Estate had the highest standard of living of that class in Europe. This, though, was not the case immediately prior to the Revolution, when poor weather destroyed harvests and diseases decimated stock. This led to severe unemployment, loss of homes, squatting and an increase in disease. The peasants, facing starvation, turned to the state to abolish the seigneurial regime which they felt was one of the major causes of their plight.

Unfortunately the government did not understand the seriousness of the situation and effected only superficial changes.

To support my theory that the economic plight of the 3rd Estate was in fact the cause of the Revolution and that the social, political and intellectual problems were merely contributory factors, I wish to refer you to A H Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs". At the bottom of this hierarchy there are the physiological needs, ie food, shelter. Security and safety needs ie job security and personal safety are found at the 2nd level. The 3rd level is taken up by what Maslow calls "the love and affection needs" needs that can generally be categorized as social needs.

Next in line are the esteem needs ie prestige and respect. At the apex of the Maslow hierarchy is the need for self actualization, or a need to fulfill what a person considers to be his mission in life. The 3rd Estate never satisfied to any great degree their physiological needs and therefore the greatest motivation to the revolution was poverty and a low standard of living.

Also, as evidence, to back my theory, I'd like to show you excerpts from 2 documents. The **Cahier de Doleance** clearly highlights the fact that the people were suffering under the hardships that the upper classes placed upon them.

Most of the suggestions for improvement, found in the **Cahier de Bordeaux**, concern the abolition of unfair taxation and other matters placing a heavy financial burden on France's 3rd Estate.

Thus, in conclusion, from the evidence presented to you I believe that the main cause of the French Revolution, like all subsequent revolutions, was the standard of living of the 3rd Estate. No revolution has ever taken place when the populace enjoys economic prosperity. **Revolutions are bred in poverty.** From the French Revolution to the revolutions of the present day, the same principle applies. If we look at the Russian Revolution and the revolution in Nicaragua, the main cause of these is identical to that of the French Revolution - the majority of the population being economically deprived.