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Chapter 1

France in the Nineteenth Century

The Third Republic was proclaimed on 4 September 1870. Two days earlier, Napoleon III, Emperor since 1852, had surrendered his army to the Prussians at Sedan. The Second Empire – the First was that of his uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte – lost all legitimacy. When news of the defeat reached Paris, crowds invaded the Palais Bourbon, seat of the Empire's 'Legislative Body'. The legislators melted into the crowd. As in 1830 and 1848, the throng proceeded to the Town Hall, where the Republic was proclaimed, as it had already been in Marseille and Lyon. The First Republic had lasted 12 years (1792–1804), the Second barely four (1848–52). This Republic, the Third, began inauspiciously, facing a hopeless war, but it lasted nearly 70 years, longer than any regime France has known since 1789.

Paris, 'Capital of the Nineteenth Century'¹

Since the time of Louis XIV, if not before, Paris had been Europe's greatest cultural centre. The Second Empire rebuilt Paris. The Third Republic completed the project, creating a city which became the pole of attraction for artists and intellectuals across Europe for the next century, the capital of the nineteenth century as the German philosopher Walter Benjamin famously called it.

The reconstruction of Paris was a key project of Napoleon III. Elected President of the Second Republic on 10 December 1848, he staged a coup d'état on 2 December 1851 and made himself president for ten years. A year later, on 10 December, he used a referendum to make himself emperor. He immediately appointed Baron Georges Haussmann (1809–91) as Prefect of the Seine (the Paris region) and together they planned Paris as we know it today: great tree-lined boulevards with broad footpaths and harmonious façades of apartments for the wealthy; 200 000 new buildings and 18 000 gas street lamps, which led people to call Paris the 'City of Light'.

New aqueducts brought in water and new sewers took out waste. The Louvre was completed by the addition of the immense northern wing. Six major rail stations were built to handle the people pouring into the city. Henri Labrousse's celebrated reading room of the Imperial Library, now the Bibliothèque Nationale Richelieu, and Victor Baltard's famous covered market, Les Halles, exploited the new possibilities of light and airy construction offered by iron frameworks. An extravagant new Opera was begun, now known as the 'Garnier Palace' after its architect. At each end of Paris, two enormous parks were created: the Bois de Vincennes and the Bois de Boulogne. In 1860, nearby suburbs were annexed to the city. The new city was divided into the 20 arrondissements (districts) we know today.

France since 1870

Hausmann demolished 117 000 buildings; 600 000 people who had lived in central Paris – almost all of them poor – were forced to move to the outskirts of the city, joining another 600 000 workers who came from the provinces to take advantage of the jobs resulting from the greatest urban renewal project in history. The demography of central Paris changed dramatically as it became the preserve of the well-to-do.

The Emperor convoked the world's elite to what came to be known as *la fête impériale* (the imperial festival), welcoming them in the spectacular state apartments of the new wing of the Louvre – today restored and open to tourists – grand and grandiose rooms with acres of red plush carpet and red velvet furniture, black marble columns, clocks, fireplaces, and gold wherever possible. Millions flocked to the Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867.

No visit to Paris was complete without seeing one of Jacques Offenbach's operettas; between 1855 and his death in 1880 he produced 90. While they lampooned the loose morals and corruption endemic in imperial society, they also glamorized them. Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, his great success of 1859, gave us the cancan, which to visitors symbolized the new Paris in which sex seemed to be flaunted openly. Offenbach triumphed again with *La Vie parisienne* (Parisian Life) in 1866.

The new lights and safe footpaths attracted *flâneurs* (strollers) and opened city streets to respectable women. New department stores made shopping a pastime for well-to-do women who, in earlier times, had sent their maids to market. The department stores' courteous staff gave the impression of a well-ordered, well-off household, and their fixed prices ended unseemly bargaining. Au Bon Marché, the Left Bank department store which Émile Zola immortalized in *Au bonheur des dames* (Ladies' Delight or Ladies' Paradise, 1883), offered 'a reading room with newspapers and writing paper, and a buffet with wines and syrups'. Even more important, it offered ladies' lounges with toilets. The new stores thus created a respectable environment for women, encouraging them to go out in public, a step towards women's emancipation. Before 1850, well-to-do women went out with male escorts. Now they could be seen on the street or in cafés with other women or even on their own.²

Au Bon Marché opened in 1852; the building in use today – engineered by the young Gustave Eiffel – was begun in 1869. Zola described it in glowing terms:

There was more space everywhere, air and light entered in abundance, people moved around freely under the solid span of the broad girders. It was the cathedral of modern commerce, solid yet light, made for a congregation of shoppers.³

Other department stores followed quickly: Le Louvre and Le Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville in 1855, Le Printemps in 1865 and La Samaritaine in 1870. By the 1880s, they were the dominant force in Parisian retailing.

An Economy in Transition

Behind the glitter lay France's Industrial Revolution, which doubled the country's GDP in the 50 years from 1825 and tripled it by World War I. While French economic development was less spectacular than that of Britain and the United States, by the

early twentieth century France reached growth rates equivalent to Britain's, both substantially aided by income from colonized countries.⁴

The population of metropolitan France (that is, excluding overseas possessions) grew from 29.3 million in the 1811 census to 37.4 million in 1861. The loss to Prussia of Alsace and Lorraine reduced the population under French control to 36.1 million. As the French learned the economic benefit of smaller families, population expanded more slowly, reaching 39.6 million in 1911, an increase of less than 10 per cent over 1872.⁵

By 1870, all major cities of France were linked by trains which travelled at speeds of up to 100 km/h (62 mph). From 1860, rails carried more freight than roads; by 1905, seven times more. Railways required coal, iron and steel. Production of all three tripled during the Second Empire and tripled again between 1870 and 1914. Mines and mills modernized. Many became enormous complexes employing thousands of workers, like Le Creusot in Burgundy and Anzin on the northern frontier, the site of Zola's masterpiece, *Germinal*.

The Second Empire also oversaw a revolution in finance, facilitating the creation of modern, limited liability (or incorporated) companies (*sociétés anonymes*), in which the public could buy shares without becoming liable for the company's debts, as investors had been under the old partnership arrangements. The Paris Bourse (Stock Exchange) grew to new importance. Seven major banks were founded. Three remain pillars of French finance today: the Crédit Industriel et Commercial (1859), the Crédit Lyonnais (1863) and the Société Générale (1864). The new banks contributed to a more dynamic and entrepreneurial capitalism. Before 1850, most people got their loans from local notables. After 1870, most towns had a bank. People got used to depositing their savings: both the number of accounts and the total amount deposited increased tenfold between 1870 and 1914.⁶

While national wealth increased substantially during this period, the increase was not evenly spread. In 1870, the wealthiest 10 per cent of the population owned more than 80 per cent of the nation's wealth. By 1910, which turned out to be the high point of inequality around the developed world (except for the contemporary United States, where inequality is now even higher), the wealthiest 10 per cent had increased their share of the nation's wealth to nearly 90 per cent. The result was substantial income inequality: the wealthiest 10 per cent of the population received almost half the national income. These economic inequalities, however, were reinforced by social inequalities which continued despite the challenge posed to them by the great Revolution, the Revolution of 1789.⁷

French Society in the Nineteenth Century: Nobles and Bourgeois

In many respects, the fundamental division of society by 1870 was not simply a division between the haves and the have-nots. The have-nots were divided between workers and peasants. The haves were divided between nobles, who claimed pre-eminence by birth, and bourgeois, who claimed status by wealth, irrespective of birth.

The great Revolution had eroded the nobility's economic and political hegemony. Nobles still enjoyed social pre-eminence, but that too was in decline. Indeed, genuine nobles were in decline. Most of those who sported noble titles had obtained them

France since 1870

only after the first Napoleon re-established nobility in 1808. Many had got their titles as recently as the Second Empire. Others had titles from foreign rulers, often for ‘financial service’. Some simply invented them. David Higgs estimates that in 1870 fewer than 40 000 old regime nobles remained of perhaps 125 000 before 1789.⁸

Nobles were once distinguished by their distinctive costumes, which only they could legally wear, but such visible differences in clothing had disappeared. How were people to know you were an aristocrat if you looked the same as a wealthy non-noble and if there was no guarantee your title meant anything? People began to use the term *notable* for whoever lived in the chateau, offered patronage, dispensed financial support and demonstrated political clout in Paris. Conversely, they began to use the term *grands bourgeois* for the very wealthy, irrespective of their titles.

Thus while nobles still sought to distinguish themselves from bourgeois, the distinction meant less than it once had and was decreasing. By the end of the century, while nobility still carried great prestige in the small, declining world of high society described by the novelist Marcel Proust, the wealth, respectability and education of the *grands bourgeois* counted for more in the wider world. Such persons retained significant power: in 1893, by one historian’s count, 56 per cent of deputies – members of the lower house of the National Assembly (the Chamber of Deputies) – were *grands bourgeois*; in 1919, 40 per cent.⁹

The word *bourgeois* troubles English-language speakers because of usage. *Bourgeois* is a noun for a male, *bourgeoise* for a female. *Bourgeois* is also an adjective: the quality of being bourgeois. *Bourgeoisie* is the collective noun for all bourgeois as a group. The word *bourgeois* also troubles English-language speakers because it is wrongly thought to be a pejorative or Marxist term. It derives from *bourg*, meaning town. In the Middle Ages, town-dwellers lived by making money, while nobles and peasants lived off the land, so *bourgeois* came to mean a non-noble with money.

By the nineteenth century, a bourgeois meant someone who possessed independent wealth, did no manual labour and was considered respectable; respectability was conferred by having at least one servant and maintaining a home appropriate for formal visits. The philosopher Alain (1868–1951) quipped, ‘I define the bourgeois as a man who profits from the results without thinking about the work.’¹⁰ In popular speech it often meant the one with the money or the one who didn’t have to work: a taxi driver referred to his client as his ‘bourgeois’ and a working-class man called his wife ‘la bourgeoise’. Today still, well-to-do French people are proud of their bourgeois standing; they were much more so in the nineteenth century.

The bourgeoisie thought it had replaced the nobility as the dominant class of society and this claim was widely accepted: an 1864 workers’ manifesto spoke of ‘the bourgeoisie, our elder in emancipation’.¹¹ At the time of the great Revolution and well into the nineteenth century, this status was justified by a notion that the bourgeoisie was morally superior, practising family values and living in a sober and discreet manner. Zola described just such a traditional bourgeois in *La Curée* (The Booty, or The Kill, 1871–72):

M. Béraud du Châtel, a tall old man of sixty, was the last representative of an old bourgeois family whose pedigree went further back than that of certain noble houses In ’93 [1793, the period of the Terror], his father died on the scaffold after welcoming the Republic with all the enthusiasm of a bourgeois

of Paris in whose veins flowed the revolutionary blood of the city. He himself was a Republican of ancient Sparta, whose dream was a reign of universal justice and true liberty.¹²

Zola's description of a bourgeois household reflected the same values of discretion and sobriety:

The rooms of the house had the sad calm, the cold solemnity of the courtyard. All the luxury of the old-fashioned Parisian bourgeoisie was there, a hard-wearing, Spartan luxury. Chairs whose upholstery barely covered their oak frames, beds made with stiff sheets, linen presses whose rough planks threatened to tear the delicate fabric of modern-day garments.¹³

Zola contrasted such virtuous, traditional bourgeois with the grands bourgeois, the new speculative and spendthrift bourgeoisie profiting shamelessly from the reconstruction of Paris. For Zola, as for many of his generation, these new bourgeois had forfeited their moral pre-eminence.

Bourgeois status required at least one domestic servant. Nearly half a million households, the wealthiest 4½ per cent, earned enough to have servants and so could be termed bourgeois. But there were enormous disparities within the bourgeoisie. A parliamentary enquiry in 1894–95 found that the top 3000 households had annual incomes above 100 000 francs. They were the super-rich, the top of the top 1 per cent, the very *grande bourgeoisie*: bankers, captains of industry, wealthy nobles who had invested well or married into wealth (intermarriage between nobles and wealthy bourgeois further fudged the distinction between noble and bourgeois). Given that the annual wage of a female domestic servant varied between 300 francs in the provinces and 500 francs in Paris, they could have as many servants as they wished. Below them, the next 60 800 households had incomes of 20 000–100 000 francs. They were the very solid bourgeoisie who lived in luxury and had several servants. Together, these two groups accounted for the wealthiest ½ per cent of households.¹⁴

Below them, 417 000 households had incomes of 5000–20 000 francs a year. This included many *rentiers* – people living off land or investments – but some doctors, lawyers and higher civil servants fell into this category, especially if they inherited or married wealth. This makes nearly half a million households – the wealthiest 4½ per cent – on annual incomes of 5000 francs or more, which Christophe Charle suggests was the minimum required to have at least one servant and live in bourgeois fashion; not coincidentally, it was the threshold set when income tax was adopted in 1914.¹⁵

Another 1 009 000 households had incomes between 2500 and 5000 francs a year; some had a servant, many did not. Those who did were considered *petits* or small bourgeois, a term which emerged to cover those with pretensions to gentility, such as secondary school teachers or shopkeepers. In English, we might call them white-collar workers or middling classes. Those who did not have a servant were hard to distinguish from the vast bulk of the population, 9.5 million of France's 11 million households – the poorest 86 per cent of the population – who survived on less than 2500 francs a year.¹⁶

French Society in the Nineteenth Century: Women

These social and economic divisions obviously applied to women as to men. In some respects, however, women's position was outside of or independent of such divisions. Their roles as women were over-determined by custom and constrained by law.

The difference in gender roles was highlighted by costume. Before the great Revolution, aristocrats, male and female, dressed colourfully, while bourgeois, male and female, dressed soberly. In the 1830s, the bright silks and knee breeches of the aristocracy disappeared as well-to-do males adopted dark coat and trousers, ancestor of today's men's suits. At the same time, the subdued, often black clothing of the *bourgeoise* disappeared as well-to-do females adopted elegant, coloured dresses like those female aristocrats had worn. These dresses displayed their sexual attractiveness and their family's wealth. They were often cumbersome and constraining and certainly not intended to facilitate manual labour or housework. This contrast in costume corresponded to the different gender roles in bourgeois culture: men were to participate in what was called the public sphere, supporting and representing their families; women were to marry and remain in the private sphere, to be 'la femme au foyer', the woman at the hearth, or, in more formal terms, to be man's companion, responsible for home and family; the English equivalent was 'angel of the home', the notion of 'separate spheres'.

This ideal was possible only in households where the family's needs were covered without the wife's having to work for wages or spend endless hours on household drudgery. In that sense, it was a bourgeois ideal. But it served to justify confining all women to the private or domestic sphere. And in that sense, it was, in the words of Mary Louise Roberts, of 'absolute centrality to the bourgeois democratic society'.¹⁷ As Robert Nye puts it,

the division of the social world into gendered public and private spheres was completed and legally sanctioned, confining women to the private realm but permitting men to roam over both ... A biomedical model of male and female was constructed by medical scientists in this era that made the sexes 'naturally' suited for their respective social and familial roles.¹⁸

A prominent republican explained this model of gender complementarity by comparing marriage to 'constitutional government. The husband minister of foreign affairs, the wife minister of the interior.' However nicely it was phrased, women were discouraged if not excluded from roles in the public sphere.¹⁹

This is not, of course, to suggest that women were better off under the old regime, except perhaps noblewomen. Margaret Darrow has shown that the social and economic position of most women improved significantly after the Revolution. Moreover, recent research has emphasized the many creative tactics women used to find modes of self-expression despite the obstacles placed in their way. During the early nineteenth century, women began to participate in charitable organizations, civic festivals and theatre, and to write and publish, though not on a level playing field: Carla Hesse estimates that works by women authors constituted 4 per cent of total published works in 1820, up from 2 per cent in 1784.²⁰

Women still faced legal restrictions on the basis of their sex. By the Revolutionary Constitution of 1791, women, children and indigent men were ‘passive citizens’; only ‘active citizens’ – men over 25 who paid taxes – could participate in politics. The Civil (or Napoleonic) Code of 1804 confirmed women’s inferior legal status. Men enjoyed total authority in the family and total control over finances, including moneys brought by the spouse. Indeed, married women ‘had no independent legal existence’ because they were ‘covered’ by their husbands. Women could not, for example, open bank accounts, witness contracts or sign birth certificates. And the Code enshrined a sexual double standard, allowing men to have mistresses (so long as they kept them outside the home) and forbidding any resulting illegitimate children from bringing paternity suits. Feminism would develop as a response to these restrictions, but most of them remained in place until the twentieth century. Most fundamentally, women could neither stand for public office nor vote. France granted women’s suffrage in 1944, after Germany, Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia (1919), but before Italy (1945), Belgium (1948), Greece (1952), Switzerland (1971) and Spain (1976).²¹

French Society in the Nineteenth Century: Workers from Farm to Factory

How did families on less than 2500 francs a year – the poorest 86 per cent of the population – survive? Most adults in these households were either workers, from artisans to labourers and servants, or peasants, from small farmers to rural labourers, but primary school teachers (*instituteurs*), clerks and shop assistants could also fall into this income level. The Education Law of 1850 had set 600 francs a year as the minimum salary for *instituteurs*, and 20 years later few earned more than 1000 francs.²²

The base of French society was rural. The census defined ‘urban’ as living in a town of over 2000 and everyone else as ‘rural’. It counted 73 per cent of the population as rural in 1856. Some of the rural population, of course, were well-to-do, such as large landowners or doctors. Others were small to medium landowners. The vast majority, however, were what were commonly called peasants: agricultural labourers or families working small farms. Few farmers lived entirely off the land. Probably three-quarters of rural households had mixed survival strategies, some members tilling the land, others working for wages or for piece rates. Most farmers lived poorly. One farming and labouring family studied by the sociologist Frédéric Le Play had bread and bread soup for breakfast, and then, for lunch and again for dinner, ‘potatoes boiled in water and salt, or seasoned with a bit of lard, and eaten with bread’.²³

The life and culture of rural people varied across France, though they were beginning to form a unified group committed to a common culture. One way this occurred was through the steady stream of migration from country to city (not a torrent as in Britain and Germany): the 1911 census found that the rural population had fallen to 56 per cent of the whole, a 17 point decline from 1870. Many of those who left for the cities were workers and artisans; most who stayed behind were farmers. Indeed, the number of persons earning their living from agriculture went up during this period, from 7.3 to 8.6 million. As men left for the cities, women’s paid employment increased from 30 per cent of the agricultural workforce in 1854 to nearly

France since 1870

40 per cent in 1911, the high point of women's paid work as recorded in the census (which did not consider unpaid work in the family farm or workshop).

Whether in the country or the city, workers remained unequal before the law: until 1890 they were required to carry a *livret ouvrier* (worker passport), in which each employer recorded his comments before the worker could leave and go to another job: this made it easy to blacklist 'troublemakers'. Workers' lives varied enormously. On the one hand, many workers, perhaps a majority in the 1870s, were artisans. These were usually men who had served apprenticeships and had pretensions to skill and respectability. They often worked in smaller shops and hoped to set up on their own. Their lives were hard, but they could eat their fill and still save a bit for old age. Disciples of Le Play studied a relatively well-off family in the 1860s: they ran their own laundry in the suburbs of Paris and ate adequately, though poorly by our standards. At 5 a.m. they had bread and butter with chicory substituting for coffee; at 9 a.m. they had bread and leftovers. For dinner they had soup, vegetables, sometimes even meat or cheese. They went to bed as night fell to avoid the expense of lighting.²⁴

On the other hand, an increasing number worked for wages in large-scale industry. Whatever skills they had were not enough to give them bargaining power: the employer needed only their capacity to operate his machines. They struggled to make ends meet. Their number more than doubled in the half-century before World War I, going from 3.1 million to 6.7 million. In working-class families, everyone worked. Women made up over a third of this workforce and, as on the land, their number increased faster than that of men. In 1906, almost two-fifths of workers in manufacturing were women.

Most workers struggled to obtain food, even with all members of the household employed. The Ministry of Labour calculated that in 1889, a family of six rural workers, with every member working, spent two-thirds of its income on food; a similar family in Paris spent three-quarters of its income on food and the rest on rent. Bread was the staple because everything else was too expensive. The average worker consumed 1 kilogram (2.2 lbs) of bread and a half-kilogram of potatoes every day: for breakfast, bread with coffee till the weekly pay ran out; for lunch, bread with butter while the money lasted; for dinner, bread and potatoes, with butter, or bread and vegetable soup, or bread and cheese, washed down with a glass of cheap wine. Perhaps once a week, their meal would include a small piece of meat, about 100 grams (3.5 oz) on average.²⁵

Workers had virtually no social protection. An 1874 law did prohibit the employment of children under the age of 13 in large factories and limited children between 13 and 16 to a 12-hour day (reduced to ten in 1892). An 1898 law limited women and those under 18 to 11-hour days. This points up, however, that adults were usually working more than 12 hours a day, six and a half days a week!

When they got home, workers enjoyed little comfort. For the rural poor, one- or two-room dwellings remained the norm for families, however large. Urban workers were somewhat better housed. Even so, the 1906 census recorded that, of those in cities of over 5000, 26 per cent lived more than two people to a room. Only 21 per cent enjoyed the luxury of having more than one room per person, that is, a bedroom of one's own and a kitchen and/or living room.²⁶

Jean Guéhenno, born in 1890, recalled his childhood as the son of a shoemaker in a small Breton town. His family lived in one room, where they 'worked, ate, and on

some nights even entertained friends': 'Along the walls we had to find space for two beds, a table, two armoires, a buffet, and a gas stove, as well as room to hang pots, photos of the family, and pictures of the Czar and the President of the Republic.' Since both his parents worked in the same room, it also contained 'my mother's sewing machine, my father's bench [for shoe-making], and a large bucket of water in which arches and soles were always kept soaking'.²⁷

During the Second Empire, workers began to join the French section of the International Workingmen's Association, now known as the First International, founded in 1864. Initially, the French section sought to avoid political struggle, which would have pitted them against the Emperor. Instead they looked towards the ideal articulated by P.-J. Proudhon (1809–65) – a society of small farmers and artisans living and working with their wives and children in their own households. Proudhon thought that such a society 'would result naturally from the suppression of all governmental apparatus', and in that sense pre-figured anarchism; what he preached was neither revolution nor political action.²⁸

Proudhon called for 'association' and 'mutualism' (mutual self-help), cooperatives and workers' banks to help such family economies rather than for trade unions, political change or state-based social reform. This brought him into conflict with Karl Marx and the English, Belgian and German sections of the Association: all of which advocated participating in democratic politics to achieve reforms. Proudhon's emphasis on the family and male supremacy also brought him into conflict with French feminists. He is infamous for his statement that woman must be 'prostitute or housewife, there is no other choice': the only appropriate role for women was to work alongside their husbands in the shop or on the farm.²⁹

The development of large-scale industry increased the number of workers for whom Marx's ideas were more relevant than Proudhon's. The last years of the Empire saw major strikes: glass makers in southern France, textile workers in the north around Lille, miners in seven different areas. On 16 June 1869, troops fired on striking miners at Saint Étienne (southwest of Lyon), killing 13 and wounding nine. Four days later, miners at Aubin, 40 kilometres (25 miles) northeast of Rodez in the centre of France, published their demands in the 'radical republican' Parisian newspaper for which the young Émile Zola was a journalist: they sought a ten-hour day with eight hours at the coalface – five hours if working in water more than waist-deep – wages of 5 francs a day, pensions for widows and for miners incapacitated by injury at work, and free medical care. Management deemed these demands impossible. Troops were sent in, leaving 14 dead and 20 injured. This incident became the basis of Zola's great novel *Germinal*.

In 1870, workers at Eugène Schneider's immense coal-mining and metallurgy centre, Le Creusot in Burgundy, demanded control of the pension fund regularly docked from their pay. After a massive walk-out, 25 strikers received jail sentences of three months to three years. The judge's sentencing comments demonstrated the anxiety and incomprehension of the well-to-do: the causes of the strike were 'mysterious', 'the blackest ingratitude against an administration which has exhausted itself in the most prodigious efforts to spread well-being'. When the workers capitulated, they 'proclaimed aloud [their] adherence to the great International Workingmen's Association, that sublime Free-Masonry of the workers of the world, that hope for a future of equality'.³⁰ In Le Creusot, a Commune would be proclaimed on the same day as in Paris, 26 March 1871.

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