

Chapter VII - The Intellectuals

There is still an important category of the bourgeoisie that ought to be mentioned, the bourgeois intelligentsia. The capitalist mode of production separated two functions that were previously united in craftsmanship and assigned them to two different categories of workers, manual and intellectual workers. It has furthermore, in the society wherein it formed, pushed the division of labour to its limit and given birth to many professions devoted solely to intellectual labour.

The eighteenth century engineer played only a small role in industry. The industrial applications of scientific mechanics and chemistry were still in their infancy by the end of the century. In transportation however, the new mode of production already assigned important tasks to its technicians: it had to build boats, bridges, roads, canals. Just as important as its know-how was its art of war.

The ever-increasing concentration of the population into the cities, in addition to the increasing proletarianization of large popular strata had resulted in the spread of diseases and devastating epidemics. The need for doctors only went up. However, with the development of the bourgeoisie as well as the inflow of the rural gentry towards the capital, the numbers of those who could afford to pay a doctor increased.

We have seen in the fourth chapter how the need for jurists came to be and grew.

The new centralised State, taking over from the looser association of feudal entities, could not function with the only administrative relay of the gentry and the Church. That actually became bothersome. It was eventually replaced by a centralised bureaucracy, a category of people for whom administration was not an accessory occupation, but an exclusive and professional activity.

In order to train these elements, many schools were needed, many teachers.

It is in this way that a numerous class of individuals took shape. Originating largely from the bourgeoisie and making a living from the usage of their intelligence, this is the reason why we can call this class the "intelligentsia", which of course doesn't mean that all its members were smart nor that intelligence could only be found within this group. From their ranks came thinkers whose goal wasn't to use their knowledge for concrete applications but rather to explore the fundamental relations structuring nature and society and to extract laws therefrom, without asking oneself if these laws really have a practical use in civil life. These thinkers saw research as a goal sufficient in and out of itself, not a means to an end. However abstract their theories could be, their personal needs were of a very of a very concrete nature. They wanted to live, and live well.

For the Greeks and in particular the Athenians, the search for the truth, philosophy, was the most noble activity of the free men of the possessing class, their prerogative. Leisure, provided for by slave labour and other methods of exploitation, was put to the service of science and the arts.

The same was true for the Romans, but in a coarser way. They had gone too fast from being peasants to becoming the rulers of the world in order to prevent that the hunger of exploitation and the impulsive desire for extravagant and ridiculous boasting could take root in the spirits of most free possessors instead of the thirst for knowledge and aesthetic pleasures.

But what became of science and the arts, when at the end of the Middle-Ages, both started to wake up from their slumber! On the one hand, apart from the high nobility which we shall talk about later, there were many poorly civilised feudal lords as well as many dull priests only interested in primitive pleasures. On the other we could find a world of merchants which, with only few exceptions, used to calculating and speculating for profit, started to lose its capacity to make abstract speculations as competition increased. We could of course not expect of the lower classes, condemned to hard labour, to get attracted to scientific thought. Everything failed them: the basis of education, occasion and time.

None of the possessing dominant classes, interested only in the pleasures of life, had the resources necessary for the development of science and the arts. Thought and literature were left to the intellectuals, people who were forced to go offer their intellectual labour power on the market, just like the wage labourer offers the strength of his arms. But the only public that could afford to pay these philosophers and artists was the high nobility. This nobility had cut itself off from the crudeness of the rural nobility and had developed an inclination for more delicate pleasures. It also had more recreations and less immediate worries than the merchants. However, no real court ever became an academy nor a philosophical school. Courtesans never transformed into thinkers or researchers, they were only "protectors", the patrons of artists and philosophers. It was more comfortable. They loathed perseverant work directed towards an objective. The arts as well as science were there only to contribute to their amusement. Courts needed buffoons and dwarfs as much as they needed artists and philosophers. Naturally, philosophy must not have required a great intellectual effort. It had to be presented in a funny, spiritual and pleasant manner.

A social theory that would not have fulfilled these conditions, or worse, who would have dared go against the high nobility, would not have gained the slightest attention in France during the first decades of the eighteenth century. As admirable as these ideas could have been, as long as the social conditions did not make them audible, they could not have had more success than a high-quality seed falling on a rock.

Given such conditions, The oppositional tendencies of the Third-Estate only had few occasions to find a theoretical manifestation. The only field where this was still more or less possible was religion. The high nobility and the bourgeoisie were both hostile to the Roman Catholic Church. It is however significant that, in the first half of the eighteenth century, the most violent attacks of the enlightened philosophers were directed not against the most feudal and decrepit forms of the Church but in the contrary, against the form best suited to modern realities. This is explained, not by the power of abstract ideas, but by class interests. The old feudal organisation of the Church, founded on land ownership, had long since become "national" in France. It was not the pope, but the king that nominated its dignitaries and distributed payments, and only exclusively to members of the gentry as we have seen. This gentry liked to mock religion, but found it to be to its taste. It didn't tolerate attacks that could have disturbed the interests of the Church.

There existed however another ecclesiastic organisation that was not controlled by the king but by the pope. This stranger had at his disposal incomes which were not meagre. They benefited not only the French but also the Italians, the Spanish, the Germans,..., because this order was international. These incomes were not used in order to fill the chests of the privileged, because the order did not recognise differences between different states and promoted its members based only on their merit.

This order was hated by the nobility, but just as much by the bourgeoisie which it competed against. Because all modern means of getting rich were made available to the Church, that it was able to get rid of any competitors and accumulate gigantic fortunes, that it had missionaries, agents and spies all over the world, even in China, Japan, Mexico and Peru, wherever its rivalry with protestants did not prevent it, this order not only did business in Europe but also organised a coherent system of colonial exploitation and was the first European power to successfully profit from the colonies by other means than pillaging, doing commerce, and establishing plantations but by also using the indigenous people in industrial undertakings, sugar plants and other ventures. These advised businessmen, cunning and merciless, were always cooperating. These individuals without homeland whom the catholic bourgeois competed or thought he was competing against in every place where money could be made, these individuals whom he hated as much as he feared superstitiously weren't Jews, as a modern "Arian" or "Christian" would think, they were Jesuits. It is against them, against these enemies, common to both the bourgeoisie and the high nobility, that the most violent attacks of the enlightened philosophers, the courts and their police, were directed.

But the hunt for Jesuits hadn't solved the eighteenth century's problem more than the anti-Semitic speeches here solving ours. The burden weighed more and more on the mass of the nation, as we have seen. It became increasingly obvious that the court was responsible for all these abuses, these obstacles to growth, that was the main oppressor.

At the same time, the links which had kept most thinkers and researchers subservient to the princely courts had started to fade away. The "intelligentsia" had grown in numbers, the bourgeoisie was waking up to politics. Publications on politics and economics were starting to find buyers. Alongside this new market for books there was journalism. The bourgeois philosopher and literary man could find other means of living than pensions and the court's gifts. He could now make a living, even if only meagrely, as a spokesperson for the bourgeoisie. From this moment on, it became possible to create and push forward theories that were not only independent from the court, but sometimes even hostile towards it.

Given the number of different capitalist categories benefiting from the court's extravagant expenses and thus taking part in the State's exploitation, even certain anti-capitalist theories started to gather some support. In fact, these attempts to abolish abuses aroused their hostility. It became increasingly obvious that the only way to put an end to the reign of the court and privileges were the peasants and the "petites gens"^[1] of the cities, the people who were this reign's first victims.

Bourgeois thinkers ceased to be philosophers. They were now economists and politicians. They were increasingly expressing themselves in favour of the people and were become increasingly hostile towards priesthood but also the "rich" in general. Nevertheless, the first socialist critiques that appeared in the second half on the eighteenth century found little support and were misunderstood. Popular theories such as those of J.J. Rousseau had nothing in common with communism, even though a superficial observer might have considered them to. What these times required was the abolition of feudal barriers obstructing market production^[2]. The bourgeois intelligentsia was too astute to not realise that and go for a socialism without any perspectives. Despite all the sympathy it might have held for the lower and toiling classes, it could not go further than the bourgeois horizon to which it belonged to, given its familial relations, its social positions and its conditions of existence. But its vision was not limited by the blinkers of temporary interests and in particular by the interests

of this or that capitalist clique, preventing it from seeing what the mode of production needed most or preventing it from discerning the long terms interest of its class as a whole and working in order to satisfy those needs. Thus many capitalists were partisans of the feudal regime and loathed innovation. The intelligentsia was well-ahead of the bourgeois' narrow-mindedness, too preoccupied by business. Their tasks led them to generalise, to follow a certain logic. They knew in detail the social and political structures of past times as well as today's. This is why it was the intelligentsia that identified the fundamental interests of the bourgeoisie as a class. These interests happened to coincide with the necessities of economic development. It was the intelligentsia that was the spokesperson, not only against the court, the aristocracy the clergy ,against the peasants, the petite-bourgeoisie and the proletarians, but also against certain capitalist cohorts when their interest at that time was in contradiction with the basic permanent interest of the capitalist class as a whole. Unmoved by personal interests nor by temporary interest, acting on the basis of a profound understanding of society that was the fruit of their long intellectual labour, the enlightened bourgeois appeared not as the defenders of material interests but as the representatives of void principles, pure ideas, against the capitalist "practitioners", whom, proud of their ignorance, thought about nothing else than using the State for their personal undertakings.

The bourgeois intellectuals would not adapt their theories to the wishes of the "practitioners of politics" but they could not ask of them to apply their theories either, that is, until the Revolution. They acquired in France the power to realise their theories. After the fall of the high nobility and the court as well as high finance which was its ally, one and only one class was able to govern, that class being the bourgeois intelligentsia. Today too, in most constitutional countries large popular strata, and in the first place, the urban working class, have familiarised themselves with the tasks of legislation and administration of a large modern State thanks to their political activities, it is still the bourgeois intelligentsia that dominates parliaments. It could not be more different a hundred years ago in France, a country where all political actions had been banned for centuries!

Even the petite-bourgeoisie of Paris hadn't elected deputies from its ranks, but from jurists, journalists,...

It is in this way that the bourgeois intelligentsia could take central power in its hands and use it in order put its theories in effect, that is, their bourgeois class interests. And given that these options were the best available to respond to a necessary development, they were the ones best suited with real revolutionary tendencies. It is of these options that we hear the most of during the whole Revolution. It is these speeches, these books, these journals that have been the best kept. It is thus not surprising that ideologues looking only at the superficial aspect of things come to imagine that it is these thinkers and their ideas that have made and led the Revolution.

There is no doubt that this class is one of those who have left a brilliant mark upon the French Revolution. It is its masterpiece in all that concerns the management of the State and legislation. It would however be wrong to believe that the Revolution was made exclusively by ministerial decrees and parliamentary motions. In crucial times, the initiatives and the decisions came from popular uprisings, in particular from the suburbs of Paris and from the peasants. The most important motions made by successive assemblies, the Constituent, the Legislation and the Convention only formalised what the people had already done. During revolutionary struggles, these assemblies showed themselves to be without compass, they received orders from the people, not the other way around.

It is not during the events that marked the Revolution that the importance of the intelligentsia manifested itself, but in its makings. The intelligentsia did not take the Bastille, it did not destroy the old feudal burdens, it did not purge the new France of its external and internal enemies. But it is the intelligentsia that laid the groundwork upon which rests its political organisation to this day. It created the civil rights that continue to be what exists the best in accord with modernity. This code may have been annexed just like many other things by a victorious general who put it to the service of his own ideas. Even though the civil code became the Napoleonic code, it is no less the creation of the Convention's revolutionary Intelligentsia.

Translator's notes:

[1] : literally "little people"

[2] : Originally "production marchande" which would literally translate to "merchant production".