French Society in the Seventeenth Century

French society had been a hierarchy since the early Middle Ages. It was organized like a pyramid, with relatively few people, the aristocrats, near the top, and many workers and serfs at the bottom. The king, of course, was at the top of the pyramid. The aristocrats had many privileges, and paid few taxes. The Church was also privileged. It had the right to tax peasants 10 percent of their income (a tithe).

THE PEASANTS

In seventeenth-century France, most French farmers owned only small plots of land and still used medieval farming methods. In general, their farms did not produce nearly the same value in produce per hectare as farms in countries such as England and Holland. Peasants, few of whom could read or write, worked hard, but most had little to show for their labour. Writers of the time described their existence as brutal. Often victims of epidemics and famine, they tended to regard life with a certain amount of superstition. And they had no access to education.

Peasants were forced to spend part of their time working on the lord’s property and on government projects. They were forbidden to kill or drive off those animals that killed livestock or destroyed crops, because these animals were often hunted by aristocrats. At times, hundreds of mounted aristocrats chased game animals through planted fields. Crops were trampled, but the aristocrats owed the peasants nothing.

Figure 3-5 This painting shows the main living area of a well-off peasant family. How can you tell that they are better off than most? Look again at Figure 3-4. Where might this family live?
This gloomy account of French country life was written by an English agricultural expert. There are many facts about peasant life—but there are also many inferences and opinions. An “inference” is something you conclude or decide based on something you have observed. For example, you observe a cat meowing; you infer that the cat is hungry. An opinion is a belief based on what seems to be true to you. Inferences and opinions are not bad, but they should still be supported with good evidence.

As you are reading this account and evaluating its usefulness as a primary source, think about the author’s point of view and his audience—the people who would probably get the chance to read this account. Look for words that show bias—despotism, for example, a word for harsh rule. Also examine how much information Young tried to obtain from real people. Information obtained by talking to people instead of merely observing them often strengthens the reliability of a report.

YOUR TURN

1. List the statements and/or phrases in Arthur Young’s account that are observed facts. Next, list the inferences and the opinions. How many facts are there compared to inferences and opinions? What does this suggest about Young’s account?

2. Look closely at the second paragraph. What emotion does Young inspire in you? To whom is he speaking?

3. List several points for and against Arthur Young’s account as a reliable source of information. Refer to all the information in this feature.

CITY LIFE

Paris was the largest city in France in the 1700s, many times larger than the next largest city. It had a population of 600 000 people. Situated on the Seine, and only 145 kilometres from the English Channel, Paris was truly the hub of the country. Most people who lived in Paris and other cities had recently come from the countryside in search of work. Unfortunately, even those who were lucky enough to have
jobs—as shopkeepers, artisans, clerks, or labourers—had to spend half their incomes on food. This meant that many people were poor and lived in slums. As a result, Paris had many beggars, vagrants, and thieves.

On the other hand, prosperous merchants and aristocrats displayed their extraordinary wealth without embarrassment. Because of the great influx of cash into the cities, the cost of goods rose steeply and ordinary people had to deal with inflation. Inflation eventually made flour very expensive—a great burden, because bread was the staple diet of most French people.

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**THE BOURGEOISIE**

France did have a middle class—the bourgeoisie. This group of people was important to the economy because they invested in new business ventures.

However, laws and regulations made it very difficult for the bourgeoisie to make a profit. Some people held monopolies on the production of certain goods. In some regions, guilds held special privileges granted by the king and could control how many goods were produced and how much they would cost.

Moreover, France was divided into many different districts, each with its own internal tariffs and tolls. The lack of decent roads and canals only made the situation worse. France lacked what modern economists call infrastructure—and the government seemed to be doing very little to develop one.

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**ACTIVITIES**

1. Life was very hard for poor peasants in France before the revolution. Imagine you are a local official concerned about the welfare of people in your district. Make up a petition requesting three changes or improvements that you think would benefit the poor.

2. Reread Arthur Young’s account of French country life on page 60. Most nobles would not think the same way as Young. Make a list of reasons why these people were so poor from a nobleman’s or noblewoman’s point of view.

3. What was the bourgeoisie? What economic restrictions were placed on the bourgeoisie?