The king of France needed no coronation. He reigned by the grace of God from the moment his predecessor breathed his last, and a coronation was purely customary. So the argument was heard, even in the highest circles, that the elaborate consecration of Louis XVI, arranged for 11 June 1775 in the traditional setting of Rheims cathedral, was a waste of public money. A month beforehand, the countryside around Paris, and many districts of the city, had been shaken by rioting against high flour and bread prices. The disturbances led to talk of postponing the ceremony, and the approaches to Rheims were ringed with precautionary troops. And far fewer people than expected made the journey to the capital of Champagne to witness the historic spectacle. Innkeepers complained of unlet rooms, and caterers of wasted supplies. But when, that brilliant morning, the cathedral doors were flung open to reveal the young monarch crowned and enthroned in glory, invested with the sceptre of Charlemagne and anointed with the holy oil of Clovis, men broke down and wept despite themselves.

The son of St Louis, the Most Christian King of France and Navarre, had sworn that day to uphold the peace of the Church, prevent disorder, impose justice, exterminate heretics, maintain forever the prerogatives of the Order of the Holy Spirit, and pardon no duellist. Three days later, in the summer heat, he ritually touched 2,400 stinking sufferers from scrofula, the disfiguring disease believed by countless generations to be curable through the miraculous touch of an anointed king. And all this still left him time to write letters to his 74-year-old chief minister, who had remained at Versailles; and to resist the attempts of an empty-headed queen to have her favourites given office. Court intrigues could not be expected to stop merely because the king was being crowned. And so the ceremonies that Louis XVI observed that week, the motions he went through, were a strange blend of momentous and trivial, significant, and purely formal, meaningful and empty. The powers he exercised, the promises he made, the regalia he wore, all resulted from a long, tortuous, and often haphazard evolution. Few knew or remembered why things had to be the way they were. And this was typical of the kingdom over which he had ruled since 10 May 1774.

The domains of the king of France in the 1770s, excluding overseas territories in the Americas and east of the Cape, covered some 277,200 square miles and had over 27 million inhabitants. By 1789 there would be a million more. These realms had been built up since the early Middle Ages by a process of conquest and dynastic accident or design, and during the last century of the monarchy they were still being added to. In 1678 Louis XIV acquired Franche Comté, in 1766 Louis XV inherited Lorraine, and in 1768 he took over Corsica. But deep inside French territory Avignon and its surrounding district still belonged to the Pope, and in Alsace there were islands of territory nominally under the sovereignty of German princes and an independent city-state at Mulhouse. Nobody thought such enclaves anomalous, for they were well established by law, prescription, and international consensus. In any case, they were only extreme examples of the variety which prevailed within the kingdom itself.

Its most ancient division was into provinces. Originating as independent feudal domains that had been progressively swallowed up by the kings of France, they varied enormously in size. Vast regions like Languedoc, Dauphiné, or Brittany counted as provinces alongside tiny Pyrenean counties like Foix or narrow frontier strips like Flanders or Roussillon. Even the precise number of provinces was uncertain, for historical traditions were often far from explicit, but in 1776, 39 provincial governorships were recognized. The functions of governors were largely honorific, however, since for most administrative purposes the kingdom was divided into 36 generalities, each presided over by an intendant. The origin of the generalities was much less ancient, and it was still only a century since intendants had become established everywhere. But these administrative units were far

more uniform in size than the old provinces, and consequently their boundaries seldom coincided. Closer to provinces in this respect were the ressorts or jurisdictional areas of the parlements, the 13 sovereign courts of appeal. That of Paris, for example, covered a third of the kingdom, whereas those of Pau or Douai were scarcely larger than the smallest provinces.

The parlements had their origins in the supreme courts of the great feudal rulers of medieval times. When their lands fell to the king of France, he tended to accept or adapt the institutions he found there rather than impose his own. Normans still called the parlement of Rouen the Exchequer 500 years after the English king had ceased to be their duke and hold court there; and the last parlement was established at Nancy in succession to the old ducal court of Lorraine only in 1775. But inevitably most ressorts took in all or part of several provinces and generalities, a rich source of conflicts of jurisdiction. And the Church, meanwhile, divided up the kingdom in its own way, into 18 archiepiscopal provinces and 136 dioceses. The majority were in the south, where dioceses were much smaller and older. But many bishops enjoyed enclaves of jurisdiction in dioceses other than their own: the bishop of Dol in Brittany had no less than 33. Such uneven, illogical patterns of organization were repeated in a thousand different ways at the more local levels of town and village.

Nor did complexity end there. Apart from royal edicts on certain general issues, the king's domains were subject to no law and no administrative practice common to them all without exception. Southern provinces regulated their affairs by written, Roman law; but even there, in isolated regions like the Pyrenees, local customs were more important. In northern France they were all-important. Here nearly all law was customary, and at least 65 general customs and 300 local ones were observed. This meant that the law relating to marriage, inheritance, and tenure of property could differ in important respects from one district to another; and those who had property in several might hold it on widely differing terms. Every district, too, had its own range of weights and measures, and the same term often meant different values in different places. In these circumstances fraud, or fear of it, bedevilled all exchanges and provided endless business for the hundreds of petty courts and jurisdictions on the lower slopes of the judicial pyramid. So did taxation, where again there was no uniformity. Northern and central France notoriously bore a heavier taxburden than the south, or the periphery of the kingdom in general. The main direct tax, the taille, was levied on persons in central provinces, but on land in peripheral ones like Languedoc. The salt tax, the notorious gabelle, was levied at six different rates according to area, while six other specially privileged districts, including Brittany, were exempt. And the whole country was criss-crossed with innumerable internal customs barriers, whether at the gates of towns, along rivers, or between provinces, where excises, tolls, and tariffs could be collected—again at a bewildering series of rates, on a limitless range of items. Goods shipped down the Saône and Rhône from Franche Comté to the Mediterranean, for example, paid duty at 36 separate customs barriers, some public and some private, on the way. To rational observers such complexities appear, and appeared, an arbitrary shambles; the product of routine and meaningless historical traditions. But these traditions were often as not rooted in geography, climate, culture, and economic necessity, as any traveller could readily testify The kingdom of France had originated, and first expanded, in the rolling, open country of the Paris basin where communications were easy. The river systems of the Seine and the Loire were navigable, or easily made so, and gave ready access to the sea. Paris stood at the centre of overland routes that were little diverted by natural obstacles for miles on end; and by the late eighteenth century the main roads were constructed to a standard unparalleled elsewhere in Europe, and the wonder of foreigners. With a temperate climate, fertile soils, and ready access to markets, the agriculture of the Paris basin, especially north of the capital and towards the

Flemish lowlands, was the most advanced and commercialized in the kingdom. It sustained not only the 650,000 inhabitants of Paris itself, but also the most densely concentrated population in France, along the Channel coast. Rouen, the capital of Normandy, drew on these abundant reserves of manpower to work the expanding cotton industry, which made it, as all English travellers agreed, the Manchester of France. Rich in resources and tightly organized, the Paris basin was a metropolitan area, easily dominated by central authority. More people could read and write there than in any other part of the kingdom, and all spoke recognizable French. But none of this could be taken for granted more than 150 miles from the capital.