

The Awakening of the Third Estate

by Unknown Artist

The following political cartoon is a symbolic representation of the events of the French Revolution in 1789. Before the revolution, French society was divided into three estates (hierarchical social classes). At the top was the First Estate comprised of land-owning aristocrats, followed by the Second Estate of religious leaders known as the clergy. The much larger Third Estate comprised the merchants and the working class, such as artisans and peasants. Each of the estates was represented in the **Estates General** (a political entity that could be called together by the French Monarchy to address policy matters) although the Third Estate was greatly misrepresented. In 1789, his government deeply in debt, King Louis XVI called the Estates-General together to vote on taxes to support him. At the meeting, members of the Third Estate took control: they assaulted the royal prison known as the Bastille in July, and then marched on the royal palace at Versailles. In August 1789, members of the Third Estate abolished feudalism and the rights of the nobility and soon after began to attack the privileges of the church. The caption at the bottom says “My sleep was a lie— it is time that I woke up, as the oppression of my irons [chains] caused me to dream a little too hard.”

Primary Source:



Citation: Unknown artist, *Reveil du Tiers Etat*, 1789, etching and hand coloring on paper, 20.6 cm. x 25.3 cm., Washington DC. Library of Congress.