III) The causes of the French Revolution have been debated by many for centuries and there is no direct bulleted list of the exact causes and their importance to the outbreak of Revolution. Some of the many causes mentioned are: large government deficits, a weak monarch, rising food costs, high taxes, no free press, and an untouchable aristocratic government. The strongest candidates for the cause of the French Revolution are the rising cost of food, especially bread, the inability to do anything about increasing taxes, and a lack of social mobility. These three rank in the top of the list of causes because they directly impacted the Third Estate the most.

The rising cost of food is arguably the most direct cause of the French Revolution due to the fact that it impacted everyone in France, but the lower classes in the Third Estate had to bear the majority of the brunt. Most common people, especially in the 18th century when illiteracy rates were much higher, are not too emotionally or intellectually invested in political science and politics. However, life changes drastically when one cannot support themselves and their families. When the cost of food goes up dramatically and there is no increase in wages to counteract it, the working class/poor have to buy less food and therefore not have one of their basic needs met all the time. By 1788 (the year before the Revolution began) French families were spending up to 50% of their income on bread alone due to poor harvests, stagnant wages, and urban unemployment. (Cole 428). The contention of food prices was noted to be all over France by English travelers. (Sherman 57). These conditions understandably make people upset with the status quo, especially when upper classes are not showing any signs of food insecurity themselves. This phenomenon is not isolated to the French Revolution either. Other examples of food insecurity causing massive political outcry include the bread riots of Mobile, Alabama, and Richmond, Virginia, during the American Civil War. Food insecurity can also be traced to the birth of fascism in Italy and Germany in the 1920s. When commoners simply cannot meet their own needs, do not receive substantial relief, and see upper classes carry on with little to no interruption, they tend to get radicalized. Part of the reason that the French poor were so economically devastated and starving was the increase of taxation.

The French tax system was a complete mess before the Revolution and is another of the glaring causes of the Revolution’s outbreak in 1789. The taxation rate differed due to one’s rank in the Old Regime and due to one’s location in the country, with shocking regional differences. Peasants in the countryside were obligated with a mandatory tithe to the Catholic Church, had to pay varying and oftentimes grossly inflated fees for the use of a landlord’s wine press or mill, rent to their landlords, and fees when the land titles/deeds changed hands between nobles. With what was left of their income after that, they had to pay the *corvee*, a road maintenance fee, and maintain hunting grounds for nobility use. (Cole 428). One of the primary reasons that the French king and nobility passed tax increases for ordinary goods (paper, salt, harvests, etc.) was the impressive amount of debt France had accrued in helping the Americans during the American Revolution. (Cole 428). The Third Estate also wished for more representation in the political sphere so they could vote on the taxes that directly affected them, echoing the American Revolutionary sentiment that the French government itself had helped push along in the previous decade. This sentiment is noted in the many *cahiers*, or “complaints” published by literate Third Estate members. One directly states the desire that “the nation should hereafter be subject only to such laws and taxes as it shall itself freely ratify.” (Sherman 57). This same document also goes on to state their demand that “All taxes should be assessed on the same system throughout the nation.” (Sherman 57). This *cahier* provides primary evidence of the Third Estate’s frustration with the French taxation system. The tax system would not have been such a large issue if the common Frenchman had his own social mobility to gain exemptions.

The third most important cause of the French Revolution was the lack of social mobility in the nation. The Old Regime had the First Estate (clergy), Second Estate (nobility), and the Third Estate (everyone else). The first half of the 18th century showed the ease of getting a noble title, as 50,000 new nobles were created between 1700 and 1789. However, the increase of taxation on the Third Estate made the ability to climb upwards increasingly difficult. Additionally, the Third Estate grouped everyone from wealthy commissioners and lawyers to peasants and urban laborers together. There was much social tension regarding the wealth disparities in the Third Estate. The top members of the Third Estate desperately tried to distance themselves from the working poor, often trying to possess the values of the nobility they tried to enter. (Cole 427). The lines often blurred between the top group of the Third Estate and the nobility, as the wealthy Third Estate members highly valued proprietary wealth (land, buildings, farms) just as the nobility did. The nobility was different in the fact that they also invested in shipping, the slave trade, and mining. (Cole 427). This collusion of the top Third Estate group with the nobility, along with the immense pressure from the Second Estate to keep the urban poor and peasantry in their place, helped ignite the resentment of the French poor. The increasingly contempt lower class eventually decided the blurring of lines between the Estates with their bottom rung status being the firmest foundation of French society was too much to bear and that enough was enough.

In all, the French Revolution is one of history’s most complicated and studied events. Its dramatic kick start of social uprisings in both Europe and South America lasted for decades. The violence and radicalism that characterizes this era is one of the primary points of interest to historians. The causes of the French Revolution have been debated since the Revolution’s beginning, and will continue to be for as long as humans study history. Out of the many causes, the rising costs of food, the increase of taxation without any political power, and the lack of social mobility combined with wealth disparities are the three most important causes to study. These causes are important because they are direct causes of distress in a society, and all three exploded into the chaos we know as the French Revolution.