Fourth Estate

The **Fourth Estate** (or *fourth estate*) is a societal or political force or institution whose influence is not consistently or officially recognized. "Fourth Estate" most commonly refers to the news media; especially print journalism or "The Press". Thomas Carlyle attributed the origin of the term to Edmund Burke, who used it in a parliamentary debate in 1787 on the opening up of Press reporting of the House of Commons of Great Britain.\[1\] Earlier writers have applied the term to lawyers, to the British queens consort (acting as a free agent, independent of the king), and to the proletariat. The term makes implicit reference to the earlier division of the three Estates of the Realm.

### The Press

In current use the term is applied to the Press,\[2\] with the earliest use in this sense described by Thomas Carlyle in his book *On Heroes and Hero Worship*:

> Burke said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all.\[3\]

In Burke's 1787 coining he would have been making reference to the traditional three estates of Parliament: The Lords Spiritual, the Lords Temporal and the Commons.\[4\] If, indeed, Burke did make the statement Carlyle attributes to him, the remark may have been in the back of Carlyle's mind when he wrote in his *French Revolution* (1837) that "A Fourth Estate, of Able Editors, springs up; increases and multiplies, irrepressible, incalculable."\[5\] In this context, the other three estates are those of the French States-General: the church, the nobility and the townsfolk.\[4\] Carlyle, however, may have mistaken his attribution: Thomas Macknight, writing in 1858, observes that Burke was merely a teller at the "illustrious nativity of the Fourth Estate".\[6\] If Burke is excluded, other candidates for coining the term are Henry Brougham speaking in Parliament in 1823 or 1824\[7\] and Thomas Macaulay in an essay of 1828 reviewing *Hallam's Constitutional History*: "The gallery in which the reporters sit has become a fourth estate of the realm."\[8\]

By 1835, when William Hazlitt (another editor of Michel de Montaigne—see below) applied the term to an individual journalist, William Cobbett, the phrase was well established.\[9][10\]

Oscar Wilde wrote:

> In old days men had the rack. Now they have the Press. That is an improvement certainly. But still it is very bad, and wrong, and demoralizing. Somebody — was it Burke? — called journalism the fourth estate. That was true at the time no doubt. But at the present moment it is the only estate. It has eaten up the other three. The Lords Temporal say nothing, the Lords Spiritual have nothing to say, and the House of Commons has nothing to say and says it. We are dominated by Journalism.\[11][12]

In American English, the phrase "fourth estate" is contrasted with the "fourth branch of government", a term that originated because no direct equivalents to the estates of the realm exist in the United States. The "fourth estate" is used to emphasize the independence of the Press, while the "fourth branch" suggests that the Press is not independent of the government.\[12\]

### Alternative meanings

### In European law

In 1580 Montaigne proposed that governments should hold in check a *fourth estate* of lawyers selling justice to the rich and denying it to rightful litigants who do not bribe their way to a verdict:\[13][14\]

> What is more barbarous than to see a nation [...] where justice is lawfully denied him, that hath not wherewithall to pay for it; and that this merchandize hath so great credit, that in a politickal government there should be set up a fourth estate [tr. Latin: *quatresme estat*] of Lawyers, breathsellers and pettifoggers [...].

—Michel de Montaigne, in the translation by John Florio, 1603
The proletariat

An early citation for this is Henry Fielding in *The Covent Garden Journal* (1752):

None of our political writers...take notice of any more than three estates, namely, Kings, Lords, and Commons...passing by in silence that very large and powerful body which form the fourth estate in this community...The Mob.[15]

(This is an early use of “mob” to mean the *mobile vulgus*, the common masses.)

This sense has prevailed in other countries: In Italy, for example, striking workers in 1890s Turin were depicted as *Il quarto stato*—The Fourth Estate—in a painting by Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo.[16] A political journal of the left, *Quarto Stato*, published in Milan, Italy, in 1926, also reflected this meaning.[17]

British Queens Consort

In a parliamentary debate of 1789 Thomas Powys, 1st Baron Lilford, MP, demanded of minister William Pitt, 1st Earl of Chatham that he should not allow powers of regency to "a fourth estate: the queen".[18] This was reported by Burke, who, as noted above, went on to use the phrase with the meaning of "press".

Fiction


Notes

[4] OED: "estate, n, 6a"
[14] For a more recent translation, see Hazlitt's edition of 1842: "What can be more outrageous than to see a nation where, by lawful custom, the office of a Judge is to be bought and sold, where judgments are paid for with ready money, and where justice may be legally denied him that has not the wherewithal to pay...a fourth estate of wrangling lawyers to add to the three ancient ones of the church, nobility and people, which fourth estate, having the laws in their hands, and sovereign power over men's lives and fortunes, make a body separate from the nobility." (Hazlitt 1842: 45)


Edmund Burke, ed. (1792). Dodsley's Annual Register for 1789. 31. London: J Dodsley. p. 112. The Whigs in parliament supported the transfer of power to the Regent, rather than the sick king's consort, Queen Charlotte.

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