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The French Revolution

Class War or Culture Clash?

Second Edition

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Introduction

Few if any inaugural lectures can have had the enduring impact of 'The myth of the French Revolution', delivered by the late Alfred Cobban to University College, London, in 1954 [145 (b)]. It marked the beginning of a controversy about the origins, nature and consequences of the French Revolution which has dominated writing on the subject ever since and which shows no signs of flagging. So voluminous has the literature become, that this short book can do no more than outline the present state of hostilities and suggest how further reading might add substance to the sketch offered.

After thirty years of vigorous argument, consensus is as far away as ever. For the supporters of the 'myth' that Cobban was attacking, the old view still stands like a *rocher de bronze*, despite all the revisionist criticism which has washed around it. In the defiant first words of a recent general history of post-revolutionary France: 'Despite recent attempts by French, British and American writers to reinterpret the French Revolution, the only plausible, coherent analysis remains that of scholars who, in the tradition of the great French historian Georges Lefebvre, see it as a "bourgeois Revolution"' [180]. Compare that with the equally confident, and even more recent, pronouncement in the volume in the same series which deals with the revolutionary-Napoleonic period: 'Research and reflective criticism over the past twenty years have rendered the classical [Marxist] view of the origins of the Revolution utterly untenable' [12]. As the firmness – not to say trenchancy – of these and a host of other similar verdicts suggests, the controversy has been a dialogue of the deaf.

If scholars who have devoted their lives to the study of French history in the period cannot reach even a modicum of agreement, passing each other unhailed like ships in the night, one might wonder what mere amateurs can hope to make of it all. As we shall

see, in fact it is a game we all can play, for 'solutions' depend less on factual knowledge than on presuppositions about such precise matters as the course of modern history, social relationships and human nature. One man's 'fundamental insight' turns out to be another man's 'out-dated shibboleth' – and vice versa.

Our point of entry must be the 'myth' which Cobban was attacking in his inaugural lecture. His target can be termed 'the Marxist interpretation', although – as we shall see later – that convenient label covers several different shades of meaning. Its most succinct formulation can be found in a short but penetrating book by Georges Lefebvre: *The Coming of the French Revolution* [17]. The essential cause of the Revolution he located in a growing discrepancy between public pretension and economic reality. In legal terms, the old regime was dominated by the first two estates: the clergy and the nobility. It was they who occupied the commanding heights of state and society, it was they who enjoyed all the prestige. In feudal society, when land had been virtually the only form of wealth, their privileged position had had a secure economic base, but by the late eighteenth century it had become an anachronism. For by then the development of commerce and industry had created a new class, the bourgeoisie. Increasingly numerous, prosperous and self-confident, their sense of frustration sharpened by the growing exclusiveness of their social superiors ('the aristocratic reaction'), the bourgeois would not tolerate indefinitely their subordinate position: 'Such a discrepancy never lasts for ever. The Revolution of 1789 restored the harmony between fact and law' [17]. Ironically, it was the nobles who thrust the first battering-ram against the old regime, with their suicidal attack on the absolute monarchy in 1787, thus opening the breach through which the bourgeois poured. As Chateaubriand commented: 'The patricians began the Revolution, the plebeians completed it'.

In other words, the French Revolution represented the decisive stage in the progression from feudalism to capitalism and thus to the modern world. Every country in Europe, of course, made this transition at some stage. What made the French version so special – the greatest revolution in the history of the world, in Marx's view – was its speed, violence and completeness. This radicalism it owed to two interrelated developments. Firstly, there was the

determined rearguard action fought by the privileged orders and their foreign allies, in the form of counter-revolution at home and war abroad. Secondly, there was the crucial assistance the essentially timid bourgeois received from the urban masses and the peasants. If the bourgeois had had their way, the Revolution would have been closed down by 1791 at the latest. It was only insistent pressure from below which drove them on to destroy feudalism in its entirety [26].

Yet although separate social strands can be identified, they were not discrete entities but were woven into the seamless whole. Like the acts of a play or the movements of a symphony, the peasant or urban revolutions acquired meaning only when seen as parts of the one and indivisible Revolution. As Albert Soboul, Lefebvre's successor as professor of French revolutionary studies at the Sorbonne, wrote: 'There were not three revolutions in 1789, but just the one alone, bourgeois and liberal, with popular support and especially with peasant support' [25]. Although in a subjective sense the masses may have appeared at times anti-capitalist and at odds with the bourgeois leadership, objectively their participation drove the Revolution on to its goal – the elimination of feudalism.

This was no quick or easy process. The bourgeoisie may have claimed to speak in the name of all humanity, proclaiming universal and eternal truths in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in 1789, for example, but in reality their objectives were narrowly circumscribed. Always prone to compromise with the old order, always seeking to frustrate the genuinely egalitarian and democratic aspirations of the masses, as time passed they allowed their naked class-interests to show through the increasingly revealing garb of revolutionary rhetoric. One crucial stage in this ideological striptease was reached with the *coup d'état* of Thermidor in July 1794, when the revolutionary dictatorship of the Committee of Public Safety was overthrown. Another was the recourse to a military saviour in the shape of General Bonaparte in 1799. Neither of those solutions proved permanent. It was not until 1830 and the July Revolution which toppled the last Bourbon that the French bourgeoisie reached safety, by now not even bothering to pretend that they represented anyone but themselves.

Against this 'classic interpretation', as Soboul called it, the revisionists have launched a series of attacks. At the outset it must be stressed that not all revisionists would subscribe to every individual point of the summary which follows, necessarily painted with broad brush-strokes. Chronologically, the first target has been the nature of social and economic change during the eighteenth century. That the economy expanded is not questioned; that it intensified class-conflict between the nobility and the bourgeoisie most certainly is. The expansion of capitalist enterprise was not the exclusive achievement of the bourgeoisie; on the contrary, many of the most progressive entrepreneurs were nobles [52]. Most bourgeois proved to be positively timid, preferring to invest their capital in land, seigneuries, venal office and government stock [39]. Low in risk – and low in returns – such investments could open the way to the realisation of every bourgeois' dream: the acquisition of noble status. Far from seeking to fight the nobles, the most earnest wish of the *bourgeois gentilhomme* was to join them. It was not difficult to do so. So many ennobling offices were for sale, that anyone with sufficient funds could make the transition [49]. The result was that the French nobility was very numerous; even if the lowest of many possible estimates is taken, the figure (c. 25,000 families) is more than one hundred times larger than that yielded by the British peerage (220 peers in 1790). Far from being an increasingly closed caste, the French nobility was an open elite – too open for its own good, indeed. The 'aristocratic reaction' was a myth [33].

The revisionists have also stressed the heterogeneity of the nobility and the bourgeoisie. So diverse were the members of each group in terms of wealth, position and outlook that neither constituted a class. On the contrary, the upper echelons of each came together to form a single elite – 'the notables' – united by wealth and talent [36]. As an alternative label – *Pétite des lumières* – suggests, this fusion found ideological expression in the Enlightenment, not the creed or creation of the bourgeoisie but in large measure the work of the liberal nobility.

If relative harmony ruled among the commanding heights of the old regime, why then did it fall? The answer lies in the fortuitous coincidence of two separate crises at the end of the 1780s. They were not 'discrete' in the sense that each was self-sufficient, for they interacted one with the other, but they were essentially

separate [38]. The first crisis was political, deriving from the financial bankruptcy of the monarchy following French participation in the American War of Independence. It brought the virtual collapse of royal government by the summer of 1788 and with it the decision to convene the Estates General. The second crisis was economic, stemming most immediately from the general harvest failure of 1788 but with longer-term origins in population pressure and the recession which had begun in the 1770s [1]. It was the fusion of these two crises in the spring and summer of 1789 which allowed the mass of discontents to become critical and to turn a crisis into a revolution.

What then followed was no class struggle between nobility and bourgeoisie, despite the emotive rhetoric of the Revolution's supporters, but a political contest for power. There were relatively few representatives of the financial, commercial and industrial bourgeoisie at the Estates General: the great majority of the Third Estate's deputies were local officials, professional men and, above all, lawyers [145 (b)]. Moreover, the leaders of the National Assembly – which the Estates General became at the end of June – were nobles, not only in 1789 but throughout the most constructive phase of the Revolution. The sort of France they tried to create was certainly tailored to suit the needs of the bourgeoisie, but would have provided an equally snug fit for the enterprising and wealthy nobles too. In short, it was to be a France created by the notables for the notables.

There are several possible explanations for their failure – in the short term, at least – to achieve this goal. There was the artificial division between noble and commoner created by the manner in which the Estates General were organised [36]. There was the unforeseen and unwanted intervention by the masses, which prompted the bourgeoisie to save their own skins by diverting popular fury against the aristocratic scapegoats [30]. There was the temporary inability of both nobles and bourgeois to look beyond rhetoric to their true interests [151]. There were the persistent economic difficulties which kept the pot of social unrest on the boil. Most crucially perhaps, there was the refusal of the king to play the role allocated to him by the notables, which in turn allowed a group of political radicals to take France into a foreign war [142, 143].

None of these explanations are mutually exclusive. Whatever permutation is preferred, the upshot was that the Revolution was

'blown off course' between 1792 and 1794 [6]. With the compass spinning crazily, this sudden squall brought the abolition of the monarchy, the execution of the king and queen, the attack on Catholicism, counter-revolution, both civil and foreign war, revolutionary dictatorship and the Terror. But the *coup d'état* of Thermidor put the notables back on the bridge, this time for good: political forms may have come and gone, but they stayed on for ever [177].

The France they ruled was a country whose economy had changed astonishingly little as a result of the Revolution. The agriculture of the old regime had been characterised by small units, cultivated by peasants aiming only at subsistence; the agriculture of post-revolutionary France was just the same. The manufacturing sector of the old regime had been characterised by small units, staffed by artisans aiming only at local markets; the manufacturing sector of post-revolutionary France was just the same. Indeed, the changes introduced by the Revolution had been retrograde rather than progressive. The land settlement and the laws of inheritance encouraged fragmentation and kept the peasantry on the land. The monetary chaos of the 1790s, the embargo on British technology and the loss of overseas markets slowed industrialisation. The 'expansion' of the first decade of Napoleon's rule represented only recovery, not a new advance. Most damaging of all, the collapse of overseas trade and the loss of overseas colonies brought poverty to the ports of the Atlantic seaboard and deindustrialisation to their hinterlands [146]. 'Economically', William Doyle has commented, 'the Revolution was a disaster for France' [57].

Certainly France did experience, in due course, a process of modernisation which in certain respects can be termed bourgeois – the creation of a national market, urbanisation, industrialisation, mass literacy, and so on – but it did so in spite of, not because of, the revolutionary legacy. The real destroyer of the old regime was not the Revolution but the railway network constructed more than half a century later [57, 184]. Indeed, one influential historian of rural France has dated its transformation to the very end of the nineteenth century [188].

It has been much easier to identify what the French Revolution was *not* than what it actually was. Not unreasonably, Marxists and their sympathisers reacted to their critics by pointing to the essen-

tially negative nature of the revisionist project. If the Revolution was not caused by the tension between the ossified old regime and progressive forces of production, then where *did* it come from? If the Revolution did not represent the victory of the bourgeoisie over the monarchy and the aristocracy, then what *did* it mean? In answer to those questions, some revisionists maintained a prudent silence, while others offered answers as hesitant and qualified as their critiques had been confident and dismissive. It was a major step forward in revisionist historiography, therefore, when François Furet published *Penser la Révolution française* in 1978, translated into English as *Interpreting the French Revolution* two years later [35]. Although this collection of essays included one of the more intemperate (and effective) attacks on Soboul, it also opened the way towards an alternative interpretation which was cultural rather than social. In the last two decades, a growing host of other scholars has followed Furet's example, spurred on by the bicentenary of the fall of the Bastille and the attendant explosion of conferences and publications (no fewer than 170 conferences were held across the world to mark the event in 1988–9). This post-revisionist group concentrates on what has now become a very well-worn concept: 'political culture'. Led by Furet himself, Mona Ozouf, Arlette Farge, Keith Michael Baker, Lynn Hunt, Dena Goodman, Jack Censer, Jeremy Popkin, and Joan Landes – just to mention a few – it has produced myriad studies of the old regime and Revolution whose distinction, originality and sophistication are not always, alas, matched by corresponding clarity and cogency. In particular, one sometimes wonders whether the gorgeous verbiage with which their findings are decked out is supported by an equally muscular body of meaning.

It was doubly unfortunate for the Marxists that just as their intellectual citadel crumbled, so did their contemporary focus of loyalty – the Soviet Union and its empire – collapse. As we shall see, much of the writing about the French Revolution was inspired by the need to seek a historical pedigree for what was thought to be the even greater revolution of 1917. So, once the state created by the Bolsheviks was revealed in all its unpopularity, criminality and impotence, there was less need to cram what evidence could be found of a 'bourgeois revolution' in 1789 into anachronistic categories. But did the cortège which bore Bolshevism to the 'rubbish-tip of history' (to employ one of Lenin's favourite images when

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describing the destination of anyone who disagreed with him) also take with it the controversy over the bourgeoisie nature of the French Revolution? This has certainly been the verdict of some historians, who have dismissed it as 'an old debate, which is not worth pursuing' [8]. But this sort of dismissal fails to take account of what Hegel called 'the cunning of history'. In the same way that 1789 did not usher in a new millennium of liberty, equality and fraternity, 1989 was followed not by the universal acceptance of liberal democracy and thus the end of history, but by waves of crime, impoverishment, ethnic cleansing, neo-fascism and civil war. It can only be a matter of time before a de-bolshevised form of Marxism regains its intellectual credibility, not least because of its inherent force.

Moreover, if there is more than one way of killing a cat, there is more than one way of identifying the French Revolution as bourgeois. If the revisionists have had the best of the argument over the past two decades, the social interpretation is rising rather than dying, as the occasional twitch of its limbs indicates [13, 16, 161]. Fortunately for Marxists and others who look to society for the driving forces of history, the course of historiography is not dialectical but cyclical and it will not be long before cultural explanations of the decline and fall of the old regime begin to seem old hat in their turn. There is every reason, therefore, to go on analysing and arguing about the social character of the French Revolution, not least because it is a debate which addresses the fundamentals of the history of France and Europe and indeed of historical debate *per se*. On the other hand, this is not to deny that Furet and his followers have greatly enhanced our understanding of the period. Their arguments deserve to be taken seriously, especially now that they have reached maturity. In what follows, therefore, the rise and fall of the social interpretation will be charted and a friendly but critical eye will be cast at the alternatives offered by the exponents of 'political culture'.

1 Origins: the Old Regime

(i) Economic Growth and Economic Problems

'The essential cause of the Revolution', wrote Albert Soboul, 'was the power of a bourgeoisie arrived at its maturity and confronted by a decadent aristocracy holding tenaciously to its privileges' [23]. Born in the first stirrings of a market economy in the middle ages, passing through a troubled adolescence with the overseas discoveries and colonial expansion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the French bourgeoisie certainly grew in numbers and in wealth in the course of the eighteenth century. The interrelated phenomena of more favourable meteorological conditions, increasing agricultural production and population growth created the necessary conditions for sustained economic expansion.

Beneficent nature was given a helping hand by the state. By providing France with the best network of arterial roads in Europe, so that the time taken to travel from Paris to Lyon, for example, was halved in the course of the eighteenth century, it contributed towards the formation of a national market. By dismantling the restrictive practices of the guilds, it opened the way for capitalist entrepreneurs to exploit growing market opportunities. The rapid expansion of rural industry on a putting-out basis achieved rates of growth comparable to those of Great Britain, even in cottons [54]. Iron production and coal extraction also recorded spectacular percentage increases. Evidence of the international hegemony of the luxury industries of Paris can still be found in every stately home and museum in Europe.

But the real success story of the French economy in the eighteenth century was overseas commerce. In the Mediterranean, French merchants established a near-monopoly of the lucrative trade with the Levant, to such an extent that in 1780 an official