

THE COMING
OF THE
FRENCH
REVOLUTION



BY GEORGES LEFEBVRE

Translated and with a preface by

R. R. PALMER

With a new introduction by

TIMOTHY TACKETT

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Contents

<i>Introduction by Timothy Tackett</i>	vii
<i>Note to the Princeton Classic Edition</i>	xxxii
<i>From the Translator's 1988 Preface</i>	xxxiii
<i>Prologue</i>	1
PART I THE ARISTOCRATIC REVOLUTION	
CHAPTER 1 The Aristocracy	7
CHAPTER 2 The Crisis of the Monarchy	21
PART II THE BOURGEOIS REVOLUTION	
CHAPTER 3 The Bourgeoisie	39
CHAPTER 4 The First Victory of the Bourgeoisie	49
CHAPTER 5 The Estates-General	73
PART III THE POPULAR REVOLUTION	
CHAPTER 6 The Mobilization of the Masses	93

CHAPTER 7	The Paris Revolution of July 14	108
CHAPTER 8	The Municipal Revolutions in the Provinces	121
<i>PART IV THE PEASANT REVOLUTION</i>		
CHAPTER 9	The Peasantry	129
CHAPTER 10	The Agrarian Revolts and the Great Fear	142
<i>PART V THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND CITIZEN</i>		
CHAPTER 11	The Problem of the Privileges	153
CHAPTER 12	The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen	167
<i>PART VI THE OCTOBER DAYS</i>		
CHAPTER 13	The Revolutionary Solution in the Balance	183
CHAPTER 14	The Popular Agitation	190
CHAPTER 15	The October Days: Confirmation by Violence	196
	Conclusion	207
	APPENDIX I: Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen	219
	APPENDIX II: Other Books by Georges Lefebvre	223
	Index	225

Introduction

BY TIMOTHY TACKETT

THE Revolution that occurred in France in the last decade of the eighteenth century was one of the pivotal moments in the recent history of the Western world. The modern concepts of liberalism, nationalism, republicanism, feminism, abolitionism, and de-Christianization were all powerfully influenced and propagated, if not invented, by the French Revolution. This event took place, moreover, not in an obscure country on the fringes of Western culture, or in a nation in decline, but in one of the world's great powers, with economic strength, military might, and cultural influence second to none. Indeed, once the new regime turned outward and became expansionist, the Revolutionary state and the Napoleonic imperium that followed profoundly disrupted and sometimes transformed regimes throughout Europe and the Atlantic world.

Perhaps no single issue concerning this extraordinary event has seemed more puzzling than the problem of its origins in 1789. How was it that such a vast upheaval broke out in the first place? Was it a question of material suffering or a sense of injustice and envy between different social groups in France? Or did it come about through the power of a new ideology or through an internal breakdown of central

The author gratefully acknowledges the advice and assistance of James Friguglietti, T. G. A. Le Goff, and Helen Chenut.

authority or even through the conspiracy of a small minority of dedicated fanatics? Like the fall of Rome or the rise of capitalism, the origins of the French Revolution have been debated again and again, with interpretations invariably colored by the problems and perspectives prominent in each generation. Indeed, in France itself an understanding of the Revolution and its origins was linked to the very concept of national identity, and a whole series of statesmen-writers—from François Guizot, Louis Blanc, and Alphonse de Lamartine to Alexis de Tocqueville, Adolphe Thiers, and Jean Jaurès—felt compelled to confront and write at length on this moment in their nation's past.

Only toward the end of the nineteenth century did the history of the Revolution become an academic discipline. The first scholarly review consecrated to the subject was created in 1881, and ten years later a chair in the Revolution was established at the University of Paris. Thereafter a series of remarkable French specialists (from Alphonse Aulard and Albert Mathiez at the beginning of the twentieth century to Albert Soboul and Michel Vovelle at the end) wrote, directed, or inspired thousands of carefully documented archival studies on almost every aspect of the Revolutionary experience, not only in Paris but in hundreds of regions and towns throughout the country. Yet even with this great accumulation of writings and new knowledge, the resolution of the problem of the Revolution's outbreak remained elusive.

I

In this long and distinguished line of historians, no one grappled longer and harder with the origins of 1789, no one attained a greater mastery of both the archives and the scholarly literature of the Revolution, than the author of the present study, Georges Lefebvre.

Lefebvre's life spanned virtually the entire period of the French Third and Fourth Republics.¹ Born in 1874 in the industrial city of Lille near the Belgian border, he was the son of a minor accountant for a commercial firm, the grandson of a simple textile worker. With such modest family resources, he was able to attend school only by means of a series of scholarships, and he could never afford studies in Paris. Moreover, the peculiarities of his education in Lille led him to concentrate on modern languages, science, and mathematics rather than on the Latin, Greek, and philosophy that formed the core curriculum in France's elite institutions. Though such an education made it more difficult for Lefebvre to penetrate the Parisian intellectual elite, it would also make him more open than most of his contemporaries to scholarship published outside France and to the application of the social sciences and statistics to history.

At the University of Lille his earliest love was for medieval English history. The eminent medievalist Charles Petit-Dutaillis took on the young Lefebvre as a "collaborator" in the publication of a French edition of William Stubbs's massive constitutional history of medieval England. Lefebvre did the

¹ A biography of Lefebvre remains to be written. Among the principal sources for the following paragraphs are Georges Lefebvre, "Pro Domo," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* [hereafter cited as *AHRF*] (1947): 188–90; and "Allocution [on his eightieth birthday]," *La Pensée. Revue du rationalisme moderne*, no. 69 (May–June 1955): 27–34. See also the series of articles commemorating Lefebvre's death in *AHRF* 32 (1960): 1–128; Richard Cobb, "Georges Lefebvre," in *A Second Identity: Essays on France and French History* (London, 1969), 84–100; P. L'Huillier, "Georges Lefebvre à Strasbourg," *Bulletin de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg* 38 (1959–60): 371–76; Jacques Godechot, *Un jury pour la Révolution* (Paris, 1974), 311–22; and Michel Vovelle, *Combats pour la Révolution française* (Paris, 1993), 33–43. Lawrence Harvard Davis, "Georges Lefebvre: Historian and Public Intellectual, 1928–1959" (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 2001), is particularly useful for its bibliography. A full *Bibliographie de Georges Lefebvre* was published by James Friguglietti (Paris, 1972).

entire translation from the English—well over two thousand pages of text and notes—and added a lengthy supplement to the final volume, summarizing with immense erudition works published on the subject since Stubbs's death, a supplement that would later be translated into English.²

It seems to have been sometime after he had passed the *agrégation* examination in 1899 and had completed his requisite military service that he discovered the French Revolution. Of particular importance in this conversion, as he would recall many years later, was his encounter with the multivolume "socialist" history of the Revolution written by the political leader and statesman Jean Jaurès. Though he never met Jaurès personally, and saw him only twice, listening to his speeches in the midst of great crowds, he would always refer to Jaurès as his "teacher."³

Since his youth Lefebvre had been nurtured on the Marxist theories of Jules Guesde, the representative from Lille to the French National Assembly. But he seems to have found a particular affinity with Jaurès's less doctrinaire brand of Marxism. He joined the unified socialist party (the S.F.I.O.), founded by Jaurès in 1905, and maintained his membership to the end of the Third Republic, even after the formation of the more radical Communist Party in 1920. Through his early readings and his political initiation, Lefebvre came firmly to believe in the importance of Karl Marx's understanding of social class in the development of history. Yet throughout his life such convictions existed in a curious and complex tension with his commitment to the positivist,

² William Stubbs, *L'histoire constitutionnelle de l'Angleterre, son origine et son développement*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1907, 1913, and 1927); also Charles Petit-Dutaillis and Georges Lefebvre, *Studies and Notes Supplementary to Stubbs' Constitutional History* (Manchester, 1930).

³ Jean Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste, 1789–1900*, 13 vols. (Paris, 1901–8). The first four volumes written by Jaurès (1901–4) dealt with the Revolution. Also, Lefebvre, "Pro Domo," 188.

empirical approach to history that he had learned from Petit-Dutaillis. He was a voracious but meticulous researcher, who always promoted careful erudition and pursued it himself with almost obsessive dedication: "without erudition there can be no history." He looked for inspiration in Descartes' *Discourse on Method* as much as in the social theories of Marx, and he would be critical of Soviet historians for "confusing history and propaganda." As one of his students described him in the late 1940s, "he was not really at ease with doctrine."⁴

Inspired by Jaurès's history "from below," Lefebvre threw himself into a massive doctoral thesis on the peasantry in the region near Lille (the *département* of Nord) before and during the Revolution. The completion of the work was long delayed by World War I, since he was forced to abandon his research notes during the German invasion and occupation of Lille and then served for a time in the army home guard (though he was now over forty). But when he recovered his notes at the end of the war and was finally able to complete and publish the study in 1924, the work became one of the most remarkable and influential doctoral theses in French history.⁵ Lefebvre not only created the modern field of peasant studies but also pioneered many of the approaches later promoted by the celebrated *Annales* school of history. It was a massive local study of the rural population developed through a layered analysis: first of the geography, then of the socioeconomic "structures" and landholding patterns, then of the "culture" of agricultural practices and peasant life, and finally of the "event" of the French Revolution and its transformation of both the structures and the culture of the peasant's world. Throughout, the analysis was

⁴ Cobb, "Georges Lefebvre," 56 and 62; Madeleine Rebérioux in *AHRF* 32 (1960): 79.

⁵ *Les paysans du Nord pendant la Révolution française* (Paris, 1924).

buttressed by extensive statistical tables—all produced by laborious hand calculation.

It was only after the defense of this thesis at the Sorbonne, at age fifty, that Lefebvre was able to leave secondary-school teaching and become a university professor, first in the small town of Clermont-Ferrand and then in the more important post of Strasbourg. His eight years in Strasbourg were among the most creative and prolific of his career. In rapid succession, he completed a first synthesis on the French Revolution—published in 1930 in collaboration with Philippe Sagnac and Raymond Guyot—a study of agrarian problems during the Terror, and a massive overview on the Napoleonic age.⁶ But perhaps the single most important work of this period was his study of the Great Fear, the momentous chain-reaction panic that swept across much of France in July and August 1789.⁷ With extraordinarily patient erudition pursued both in Paris and in local archives, he was able to reconstruct the origins and currents of the various panics and propose a complex explanation based on social and political conditions, the nature of communications networks, and the psychology of fear and rumor. Lefebvre's innovative approach to history and his interest in popular mentality probably both influenced and were influenced by two remarkable colleagues at Strasbourg, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, who founded their pathbreaking historical review, the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, soon after his arrival there.⁸

⁶ Georges Lefebvre, Raymond Guyot, and Philippe Sagnac, *La Révolution française*, vol. 13 of *Peuples et Civilisations* (Paris, 1930); *Questions agraires au temps de la Terreur* (Strasbourg, 1932); *Napoléon*, trans. Henry F. Stockhold and J. E. Anderson, 2 vols. (New York, 1969; originally published in French in 1935).

⁷ *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, trans. Joan White (New York, 1973; originally published in French in 1932).

⁸ First published in 1929. Still appearing today under the title *Annales. Histoire et sciences sociales*.

In 1935, at the age of sixty-one, Lefebvre was finally named to a professorship in Paris. Two years later he took over the chair in the French Revolution at the Sorbonne (in 1932 at the death of Albert Mathiez he had already assumed editorship of the most important French Revolutionary review, the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*). It was a moment of great turmoil and political confrontation in the university and in France generally. Passionately committed to defending republican and democratic values in the face of fascism, he founded and served as president of the Cercle Descartes, a group of university and secondary-school teachers dedicated to promoting free and rational discussion on the issues of the time. With the support of the left-leaning Popular Front government, he also threw himself into preparations for the 150th anniversary of the Revolution. He took part in a series of radio broadcasts on the subject and served as historical adviser for Jean Renoir's celebrated film on the Revolution, *La Marseillaise*. It was in 1939, on the very eve of World War II, that he published the present study of the origins of the French Revolution, conceived as his contribution to the anniversary commemoration.⁹

The war years were a sad and difficult time for Lefebvre. The tragedy of France's defeat in 1940 was compounded by the sudden death of his wife in 1941 and the execution by the Nazis of his brother Théodore, a university professor in Poitiers, and his close Jewish friends, Marc Bloch and Maurice Halbwachs—the first shot near Lyon, the second killed in a German concentration camp. But he carried on with his teaching at the Sorbonne, continuing well after his normal retirement age, for fear that the German occupiers might take the occasion to abolish the chair on the French Revolution. He also pushed on with the preparation of a major publication of

⁹ *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* (Paris, 1939). His other major publication of this period was *Les Thermidoriens* (Paris, 1937).

documents on the origins of the Revolution, giving employment to a number of graduate students, attempting to protect them in this way from forced factory work in Germany.¹⁰

Although he retired from the Sorbonne soon after the war, he stayed on as editor of the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* and as director of the university institute for the study of the Revolution, which he had founded in 1937. In 1946 he published a study of the Directory period (1795–99), and in 1951 he brought out an extensively rewritten version of his general synthesis on the age of the French Revolution.¹¹ Though there is some suggestion that he moved closer to communism during this period, he never joined the Communist Party and maintained his non-doctrinaire position on Marxism to the end of his life. He spent most of his final years in his small house in the working-class town of Boulogne-sur-Seine, southwest of Paris, a house that became a destination for aspiring French Revolutionary scholars from around the world.

The British historian Richard Cobb, who frequently visited him in Boulogne, has left us an unforgettable description of Lefebvre in his eighties. With his small white goatee, piercing blue eyes, and the light complexion of northern France (which turned purple, however, at the mention of Marie-Antoinette), he sat at a desk piled high with books, positioned between a portrait of Jaurès and a bust of Robespierre. He

¹⁰ Eventually published as Georges Lefebvre and Anne Terroine, eds., *Recueil de documents relatifs aux séances des Etats généraux*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1953–62). For information on Lefebvre's activities during World War II, I have also relied on a personal conversation with Olga Ilovaïsky, one of his assistants during this period.

¹¹ The first was grouped with his 1937 publication and translated as *The Thermidorians and the Directory: Two Phases of the French Revolution*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, 1964); the second as *The French Revolution*, trans. Elizabeth Moss Evanson, John Hall Stewart, and James Friguglietti, 2 vols. (New York, 1962–64).

was the “living embodiment of republican rectitude, of lay probity, a sort of French Abraham Lincoln, dressed in antiquated clothes.”¹² He died in 1959 in his eighty-sixth year, pursuing his writing and research to the end.

II

The Coming of the French Revolution, originally entitled *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* (Eighty-nine), was written by Lefebvre in 1939 at the pinnacle of his career. It was self-consciously conceived for a broader audience of students and the general public and was published without the scholarly apparatus of footnotes and bibliography. Yet it represented the sum of a lifetime of reflection on the origins and meaning of the events of 1789.

As the reader will discover, much of the book's persuasive power comes from its brilliant and elegant construction. The first two-thirds of the study are organized around a sequence of “four acts,” as Lefebvre himself describes them, each associated with one of four major groupings in French society. The first act, the “Aristocratic Revolution,” began in 1787 when elements of the French nobility, working first through the provincial parlements and estates and then through an Assembly of Notables, forced King Louis XVI to convoke a national representative body, the Estates General. In Lefebvre's view, this action capped several decades of “aristocratic reaction” in which the nobility attempted both to regain political power lost to the royalty in the seventeenth century and to reassert its social position in the face of a rising middle class or “bourgeoisie”—by reinvigorating its seigneurial rights and closing off entry by commoners to all positions of authority in the kingdom. But in successfully

¹² Cobb, “Georges Lefebvre,” 52.

weakening the royal government, the aristocracy opened the door to the second act of the drama, a very different revolution of the bourgeoisie. The latter group began mobilizing politically in the fall of 1788 and effectively took over the Estates General in May and June 1789, transforming that body into a sovereign National Assembly. Thereafter, in the third and fourth "acts," first the popular classes of Paris and then the rural peasantry successively mounted the stage of history, each promoting its own somewhat separate revolutionary goals. But while the bourgeois leaders, the people of Paris, and the peasants often pursued different objectives, they were bound together in their common hatred and suspicion of the very aristocrats who had launched the Revolution. Indeed, all three groups of commoners, Lefebvre believed, were obsessed with the idea of an "aristocratic conspiracy" in which the nobles were thought to be planning an attack against the nation. This conspiracy obsession, in Lefebvre's view, "is one of the keys of the history of the Revolution," influencing both the attack on the Bastille on July 14 and the peasant insurrections against the seigneurial system that exploded during the summer.

Yet the climax of the book comes not with the descriptions of the social dramas of 1789, but rather in part 5 with Lefebvre's analysis of two foundation acts crafted by the National Assembly: the declaration of August 4 abolishing "feudalism" and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of August 26. Even though in Lefebvre's view these twin decrees emerged from the ideology of the bourgeois class—as expressed in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment—they were conceived as having universal meaning applicable to all classes in society.¹³ It is in this sense that the two declarations constituted "the essential work of the Revolution of 1789."

¹³ Note that Lefebvre never actually uses the word "Enlightenment" in his text.

Part 6 of the book appears almost as an epilogue and presents Lefebvre's version of the so-called October Days (October 5–6, 1789). This tumultuous series of events originated, in his view, when the bourgeois leaders of the assembly decided on the need to administer a "second dose of revolution" to Louis XVI, encouraging the Parisian masses, women and men, to march on the royal palace in Versailles. In this way the king was compelled to accept the August declarations and to take up residence in Paris, thus bringing the Revolution of 1789 to a close.

Yet beneath the book's simple, almost classical architecture lies a deceptively complex analysis of the causes and early development of the Revolution. Perhaps more than in any of Lefebvre's other major works, there is a tension between the conceptual assumption of the primacy of economic class and the positivist imperative of basing all assertions on empirical research. In his notion of the "four revolutions" of 1789, each associated with a specific social group or class, Lefebvre made a substantial departure both from the syntheses of Jaurès and Mathiez and from his own earlier overview of 1930. Significantly, the "bourgeois revolution" of *The Coming of the French Revolution* was described in 1930 as the "jurists' revolution"; the "peasant revolution" was previously termed an "agrarian revolt." At times in the text printed here Lefebvre seems almost to personify each of the four social actors, as though they were single individuals: "the bourgeoisie" or "the aristocracy" or "the people" are said to have such-and-such thoughts or to make such-and-such decisions. Nevertheless, Lefebvre also went to great lengths to demonstrate the multiple components and even contradictory attitudes coexisting within each of those social groups—only two of which, the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, were actually referred to as "classes." It is clear from his analysis, moreover, that there was a great deal of interaction among the four groups throughout 1788 and 1789. In this sense, Lefebvre's successive "acts" describe periods in which one

group was the most important but not the sole actor in the revolutionary drama.

In addition, Lefebvre's understanding of the origins of the Revolution was very much dependent on the level of analysis and the chronological perspective under consideration. He anticipated Fernand Braudel's distinction between short-term and long-term developments (*temps court* vs. *longue durée*). The opening paragraphs of the book emphasize the "ultimate" or "deeper" causes of the Revolution in phrases that might have come from the *Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. For centuries, it is argued, a growing contradiction had developed between the political and social domination of an aristocratic class, whose power was based in its ownership of land, and the emerging class of the bourgeoisie, characterized by its control of a new kind of mobile wealth originating in commerce and industry. This social contradiction was pushing inexorably toward a class confrontation that would restore "the harmony between fact and law."

Yet after the initial invocation of a Marxist *longue durée*, Lefebvre rapidly modulates to the problem of the "immediate," shorter-term causes of the Revolution that is the primary subject of the book and of fundamental importance in his explanation of why the Revolution occurred at this moment and why it assumed the specific character that it did. In the course of the book's development and conclusion, at least five other factors are designated as direct "causes" affecting the origins of the Revolution in a major way: the collapse of the central government; the personalities of the king and queen; the American Revolution; the climatic disasters of 1788 and the consequent economic distress; and the writings of the French philosophers of the eighteenth century. Lefebvre also gives significant weight to the economic, administrative, and cultural centralization of France and even to the long-term impact of a Christian

concept of individualism. All such elements were further complicated, moreover, by the decisions of the king and of a succession of individual ministers who, in their conflicts with the aristocracy, were not averse to using a "revolutionary language" of their own. In fact, the royal government frequently appears in the book as a veritable fifth independent actor, sharing the stage with the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the people of Paris, and the peasantry.

Summarizing in his conclusion the Revolutionary actions of the French in 1789, Lefebvre underlines the intricate mix of motives: "Class interests and personal interests, humbled pride, mass suffering, philosophical propaganda all made their contributions, in proportions different for each individual, but with the net effect of producing . . . a collective mentality that was strangely complex." Indeed, some of the most striking and insightful pages in the book emphasize the peculiar psychological traits of the bourgeoisie, the masses of Paris, and the peasant populations, and explore how these led the Revolution to take the particular course that it did. Rumor, fear (of both real and imagined threats), utopian expectations, envy, fear of envy, desire for revenge: all played a role in the course of events in 1789. Set beside the complex and sophisticated analysis that characterizes most of the book, the occasional slippage into a simplistic language of reified class seems somewhat discordant and inconsistent.

In any case, Lefebvre's agenda in writing the book was complicated by two other implicit goals. First, certain aspects of his analysis were undoubtedly colored by events in France in the late 1930s. This presentist perspective is particularly evident in the conclusion, where he takes care to delineate the differences between fascism, on the one hand, and the values of the French Revolution, on the other. As he described it in early 1940 to his Swiss friend Alfred Rufer, the book was dedicated to advancing "the cause of liberty." This

was the origin of the concluding appeal to the French youth of his day, urging them to seek inspiration not in fascism but in the glorious heritage of the Revolution. But one can also perceive the impact of the French Popular Front of 1936 in Lefebvre's eagerness to emphasize elements of unity among the three major classes of commoners, notably in their putative opposition to an "aristocratic conspiracy" and in their subscription to the universal message of the Declaration of Rights. Given the implicit and explicit antifascist message of the text, it is hardly surprising that the book was condemned and systematically burned by the Germans after they occupied France in 1940.¹⁴

A second implicit goal of the book is to reflect on the links between the events of 1789 and the period of the Terror of 1793–94. Lefebvre rejects the distinction made by some historians between a "good" Revolution of 1789–90 and a Revolution that somehow went astray after 1791 or 1792. One could speculate—and Lefebvre does so briefly—on how 1789 might have led to a peaceful evolutionary transformation in the direction of democracy, similar to that which occurred in England. But for the most part he eschews such speculations. He carefully explores the violent propensities of the Revolutionary crowds, their fear of conspiracy, their "will to punish" the perceived enemies of the nation. In the end, however, it was the complete lack of statesmanship on the part of Louis XVI and the unalterable opposition of the great bulk of the aristocracy that made violence unavoidable. Lefebvre ultimately adheres to the assessment of the Third Republic

¹⁴ "Correspondance d'Albert Mathiez et de Georges Lefebvre avec Alfred Ruffer," *AHRF* 51 (1979): 436. See also the lecture given by Lefebvre at the time he was writing the book: "Les principes de 1789 dans le monde actuel," *Cahiers du Cercle Descartes*, no. 9 (1939): 5–20. Lefebvre gave all the proceeds he received from the book to charity: Cobb, "Georges Lefebvre," 54. On the destruction of the French edition, see Robert Palmer's preface to the first edition of *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton, 1947).

leader Georges Clemenceau, that "the Revolution is a *bloc*, a single thing."

III

For a half century after its publication, *The Coming of the French Revolution* was probably the single most influential book in the world on the origins of the French Revolution. In conjunction with Lefebvre's general synthesis of 1951—which summarized most of its conclusions—the book established an interpretive paradigm with enormous impact both in fixing an agenda for future research and in setting the terms of scholarly debate.

At the time of his death, Lefebvre received a remarkable series of tributes from around the world. Historians from England, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Russia all professed their admiration for his work and testified to its influence on Revolutionary studies pursued in their countries. Similar words of praise came from many of the major American specialists of eighteenth-century France, including Robert Palmer, Beatrice Hyslop, Leo Gershoy, Crane Brinton, and Harold Parker—all of whom had met Lefebvre in France and consulted him on their research.¹⁵ As early as 1939, Palmer had arranged to produce an English version of *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf*, though because of the war, he was unable to bring out the publication until 1947. Thereafter, and in no small measure owing to Palmer's remarkable translation, the book would become basic reading for several generations of American and other English-speaking readers, remaining in print continuously from 1947 to the present.

Within the academic milieu in France, Lefebvre's work and his explanation of the origins of the Revolution long stood as

¹⁵ *AHRF* 32 (1960): 1–128.

the unquestioned canon in the field. The *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* published renewed tributes to the master on both the tenth and the twentieth anniversaries of his death, and an international colloquium was organized in Paris on the fifteenth anniversary, dedicated to the memory of both Lefebvre and Mathiez.¹⁶ Albert Soboul, who had been Lefebvre's student and who assumed the chair in the French Revolution in 1967, passionately defended his teacher's interpretations, though he also tended to give them a much more rigid Marxist reading. He published a new French edition of *The Coming of the French Revolution* in 1970 with an elaborate introduction and afterword.¹⁷

Yet beginning even before his death and continuing through the end of the twentieth century, an array of historians would call into question various aspects of the explanatory paradigm identified most closely with Lefebvre. The most prominent attacks came from a loose coalition of critics, soon widely referred to as "revisionists" and initially dominated by a younger generation of British and American historians. Much of their work was based on new empirical research that claimed to invalidate the Marxist aspects of Lefebvre's analysis, especially the concepts of an "aristocratic reaction" at the end of the Old Regime and a "bourgeois revolution" in 1789.¹⁸ As

¹⁶ *AHRF* 41 (1969): 549–69; and 51 (1979): 357–442; Albert Soboul, ed., *Voies nouvelles pour l'histoire de la Révolution française. Colloque Albert Mathiez–Georges Lefebvre* (Paris, 1978).

¹⁷ Georges Lefebvre, *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* (Paris, 1970).

¹⁸ It would be impossible here to develop all of the arcane debates between the "orthodox" historians and their "revisionist" critics. For a more thorough development, see, e.g., William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1980), 7–40; Michel Vovelle, "L'historiographie de la Révolution française à la veille du bicentenaire," *AHRF* 60 (1988): 113–26; and Norman Hampson, "The French Revolution and Its Historians," in *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and Its Legacy, 1789–1989*, ed. Geoffrey Best (London, 1988), 211–34.

early as the 1950s the British historian Alfred Cobban questioned how the Revolution of 1789 could be termed "bourgeois," when the Third Estate deputies who created the National Assembly were primarily lawyers, judges, and other professional men. Through a careful statistical analysis he demonstrated that members of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie by Lefebvre's own definition—merchants, manufacturers, bankers, and the like—constituted scarcely more than 10 percent of the Third Estate representatives. Elizabeth Eisenstein continued in a similar vein in 1965, with a critique of Lefebvre's analysis of the individuals who led the "bourgeois" mobilization in the fall of 1788, suggesting on the basis of Lefebvre's own text that they were primarily great aristocrats and clergymen. About the same time George Taylor questioned the very basis of the class analysis at the heart of Lefebvre's understanding of the "ultimate" causes of the Revolution. After extensive new research on the structures of wealth in Old Regime France, he concluded that nobles and commoners had almost identical forms of income. While both groups had placed some of their investments in merchant capitalism, the bulk of their revenues were drawn from identical forms of proprietary wealth.¹⁹

Other historians set their sights on Lefebvre's contention that the French nobility was closing itself off in the course of the eighteenth century. They demonstrated empirically that the composition of the power elites—in the administration, in the army, in the church, in the magistracy—had changed very little since the reign of Louis XIV in the seventeenth century,

¹⁹ Alfred Cobban, *The Myth of the French Revolution* (London, 1955); and *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964); Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, "Who Intervened? A Commentary on *The Coming of the French Revolution*," *American Historical Review* 71 (1965): 77–103; George V. Taylor, "Types of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France," *English Historical Review* 79 (1964): 478–97; and "Noncapitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 72 (1967): 469–96.

and that substantial numbers of commoners continued to enter the nobility during the last century of the Old Regime. Additional criticisms came from those who questioned Lefebvre's tight identification of the ideas of the Enlightenment with the bourgeois class, an assertion that seemed dubious given the substantial representation of the nobility among writers of the period and in salons, academies, Masonic lodges, and other forms of Enlightened sociability. In 1980, on the basis of such studies and of his own research, William Doyle launched a frontal attack against the Lefebvre paradigm, disputing the whole concept of an "aristocratic reaction," and arguing that in 1789 there had been neither a social crisis nor an economic crisis—beyond the "accident of nature" caused by hailstorms in the summer of 1788.²⁰

However, the revisionists were probably more successful in criticizing certain aspects of Lefebvre's interpretation than in developing alternative proposals of their own. In general, both Doyle and Taylor stressed the political origins of 1789, the extent to which an internal breakdown of the Old Regime government opened the door to what "was essentially a political revolution with social consequences," as Taylor put it. But another strand of revisionism, proposed first by Eisenstein, returned to the influence of the Enlightenment, arguing that the early revolutionaries were above all an Enlightened elite, "a loose coalition of like-minded men drawn from all three estates." The French historian and public intellectual François Furet, who eventually became the reigning prince of the revisionist school, would also downplay the importance of social factors and would lay great stress on the impact of ideas on the French Revolution. In

²⁰ E.g., Vivian Gruder, *The Royal Provincial Intendants* (Ithaca, 1968); David Bien, "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789: l'exemple de l'armée," *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 29 (1974): 23–48, 505–34; Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1978); Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 197.

Furet's view the writings of Rousseau, in particular, were fundamental to the origins of both 1789 and the Terror.²¹

But beyond the revisionist onslaught against the class analysis of the French Revolution, a half century of research—much of it initially inspired by Lefebvre's work—suggests the need for a variety of other modifications and updates to *The Coming of the French Revolution*. Four directions of explicit or implicit criticism can be indicated briefly. First, Lefebvre's treatment of religion and the church now seems remarkably thin, if not dismissive. Maurice Hutt, John McManners, and others have shown how long-standing opposition between commoner parish priests and aristocratic bishops—involving both theological and pastoral issues and the distribution of church power and wealth—culminated in the parish priests' highly visible pamphlet war on the eve of the Revolution that strongly underwrote the struggle of the Third Estate against the nobility. And Dale Van Kley has argued that the battles between Jansenists and Jesuits, which unrolled over much of the century, influenced the discourse and vocabulary of the pre-Revolutionary patriot party.²²

Second, studies over the last twenty years have brought to light Lefebvre's general neglect of the role played by women in the early phases of the Revolution. His explanation of the uprising of October 5–6 seems particularly weak in this

²¹ Taylor, "Noncapitalist Wealth," 491; Eisenstein, "Who Intervened?" 99; François Furet, *Interpreting the Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1981).

²² Maurice G. Hutt, "The Role of the Curés in the Estates General of 1789," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 6 (1955): 190–220; and "The Curés and the Third Estate: The Ideas of Reform in the Pamphlets of the French Lower Clergy in the Period 1787–1789," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 8 (1957): 74–92; John McManners, *French Ecclesiastical Society under the Ancien Régime* (Manchester, 1960); also Timothy Tackett, *Priest and Parish in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, 1977); and Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven, 1996).

regard. In the end, as we have seen, he largely relied on a plot theory, implying that the patriot revolutionaries consciously initiated the October Days in order to administer a "second dose of revolution" to the king. He concluded that the women's march on the 5th must have been instigated from above by male actors—even though he admitted that there was no evidence for such an influence. Yet more recent studies by George Rudé and Olwen Hufton—as well as the older study by Mathiez—seem clearly to refute the conspiracy explanation. They provide ample evidence of the spontaneity and substantial autonomy of the women's actions, actions that were central in initiating the event, even though the coercive strength of the Paris national guard, who followed the women to Versailles some six hours later, was probably more influential in forcing the king to return to Paris.²³

Third, recent scholarship suggests a far more complex picture of what Lefebvre's student Jean Egret called the "Pre-Revolution" of 1787–1788. Both Lefebvre and Eisenstein believed that the mobilization of the Third Estate began only in the fall of 1788 with the conservative ruling of the Parlement of Paris on voting in the Estates General and with the organization in Paris of the liberal "Committee of Thirty." But evidence now places far greater emphasis on earlier political activities in the provinces, stimulated not by Parisian liberals, but by the royal government's circular letter of July 1788 soliciting advice on how the Estates General should be organized. The "Committee of Thirty" began its activities only after several weeks of intense activity in the provinces. It also seems clear that the political organization

²³ George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959); Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1992); Albert Mathiez, "Etude critique sur les journées des 5 et 6 octobre 1789," *Revue historique* 67 (1898): 241–81; 68 (1899): 258–94; 69 (1899): 41–66.

of the conservative aristocracy was by no means confined to the Assembly of Notables, as Lefebvre strongly implied. By the end of 1788, a "committee of one hundred" centered on the parliamentary noble Duval d'Epréménil was vigorously organizing nobles throughout the kingdom in the name of a conservative political agenda and a surprisingly well defined conservative ideology. Indeed, the writings of Jean-Clément Martin and others have asserted the existence of a counter-revolution developing more or less concurrently with the Revolution itself.²⁴

Finally, research over the last several decades has revised Lefebvre's interpretation of the relations between the peasantry and the nobility. It now seems clear that through June 1789 the overwhelming majority of peasant riots arose not from anger against the aristocracy, but from the problems of obtaining food in conditions of near famine. When true antiseigneurial revolts did break out in July and August—as distinguished from the panic of the Great Fear—they occurred in only seven quite limited regions of France. The rioters in question targeted not only nobles but clergymen, middle-class townsmen, royal officials, tax collectors, and even some elements of the wealthier peasantry. Moreover, renewed studies of the Great Fear underscore the widespread and continuing collaboration between the countryside and the nobles in the face of the panic. The belief in an "aristocratic conspiracy," which Lefebvre saw as central in 1789 to the perceptions of peasants and townsmen alike, now

²⁴ Jean Egret, *The French Pre-Revolution, 1787–1788* (Chicago, 1977; originally published in French in 1962); Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789–1790)* (Princeton, 1996); Jean-Clément Martin, *Contre-Révolution, Révolution, et Nation en France, 1789–1799* (Paris, 1998). On the Committee of Thirty see Daniel L. Wick, *A Conspiracy of Well-Intentioned Men: The Society of Thirty and the French Revolution* (New York, 1987).

appears to have been little in evidence outside of Paris and a few of the larger towns. Such an obsession, along with peasant antiseigneurial sentiments in general, probably arose much more gradually over the first several years of the Revolution, instigated in part—as John Markoff has suggested—by the new legislation of the various national assemblies.²⁵

IV

Inevitably, then, some sixty-five years of new research have revealed both errors and omissions in George Lefebvre's interpretation of the origins of 1789. Given what we know of his commitment to a "scientific" history and his willingness to modify his views based on new evidence, it seems likely that he would have welcomed much of this new research and supported its integration into a revised synthesis on the subject. One can imagine that he might well have been persuaded to reconsider his views on the pre-Revolutionary period and on the peasantry and to have inserted an expanded treatment of women and of Old Regime religious issues. Whether he would also have been won over by the contentions of the "revisionists," however, seems more problematic. Reacting to the early critiques of Alfred Cobban, he praised the British

²⁵ John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, Pa., 1996). See also Anatoli Ado, *Paysans en révolution. Terre, pouvoir et jacquerie, 1789–1794* (Paris, 1996); and Timothy Tackett, "La grande peur de 1789 et la thèse du complot aristocratique," *AHRF* 76 (2004): 1–17; and "Collective Panics in the Early French Revolution, 1789–1791: A Comparative Perspective," *French History* 17 (2003): 149–71. See also Peter M. Jones, "Georges Lefebvre and the Peasant Revolution: Fifty Years On," *French Historical Studies* 16 (1990): 645–63.

historian for his new quantitative analysis of the social origins of the deputies to the Estates General, but he remained unconvinced by Cobban's broader attack on the concept of a bourgeois revolution, and he continued to insist on the importance of social and economic factors in the origins and development of the Revolution.

In any case, the last decade of the twentieth century would see the publication of a number of "revisionist" reconsiderations of revisionism.²⁶ If Lefebvre's *longue durée* explanation of the Revolution as the result of the struggle between two economic classes seems less persuasive than it once did, many scholars are unprepared to reduce the Revolution entirely to issues of ideology and politics. The questioning of a Marxist analysis of socioeconomic forces in the Revolution should not prevent historians from exploring the significance of social and economic factors more generally—very much in the spirit of the complex and multivariate empirical analysis that marked most of Lefebvre's writing.

The Coming of the French Revolution is no longer a summation of the latest research in the field—as it certainly was when it was first written in 1939 and first translated into English in 1947. Nevertheless, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it remains a masterpiece of narrative and analytical concision, a powerful and extraordinarily readable account of one of the most dramatic moments in recent world history. It continues to impress us in its sensitive and subtle probing of collective mentality and psychology, in its ability to bring the Revolution to life, not as an affair of logic and calculation, but as an experience of

²⁶ See, e.g., Bill Edmonds, "Successes and Excesses of Revisionist Writing about the French Revolution," *European Historical Quarterly* 17 (1987): 195–217; Colin Jones, "Bourgeois Revolution Revivified, 1789 and Social Change," in *Rewriting the French Revolution*, ed. Colin Lucas (Oxford, 1991), 69–118; and Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*.

intense emotion and quasi-utopian enthusiasm, intermingled with strong elements of fear and suspicion. In this sense, like the earlier works of Jules Michelet, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Jean Jaurès, it will remain one of the great classics of French Revolutionary history.

Paris
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Note to the Princeton Classic Edition

I HAVE taken advantage of this new edition to correct a handful of minor errors and inconsistencies that slipped into R. R. Palmer's otherwise superb translation. The opening section has been entitled "Prologue," rather than "Introduction," since this seems a more appropriate designation for the ideas developed within, and it also distinguishes the section more clearly from the general introduction to the edition (Lefebvre gave no title to his opening in the original French version). But the most important change has been the insertion of the final two paragraphs of Georges Lefebvre's original text, omitted by Palmer in all previous editions. I have translated the paragraphs myself from the 1939 French edition (assisted by suggestions from James Friguglietti). As I have argued above, the book has become a true classic of historical literature. In order to fully appreciate the work and the context in which it was written, it now seems essential to provide the integral of Lefebvre's text—including his final appeal to French youth, as they faced the threat of fascism in 1939, to remember the ideals of the French Revolution.

In addition, it seemed appropriate to include substantial excerpts from Palmer's most recent preface of 1988. For over forty years, Palmer, who died in 2002, closely associated himself with *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* and its translation and subsequent editions. As he explains elsewhere, he had been