

**Rethinking the French
Revolution**

Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge



GEORGE C. COMNINEL



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Introduction

This book was first inspired by a desire to understand *precisely* how a revolution emerges from class society. Like so many others, my interest in the French Revolution had been originally directed towards understanding the social radicalism of the popular movement, for which the social interpretation of the Revolution as a bourgeois revolution seemed to provide a lucid and logically necessary backdrop. It was striking, however, that while the history of the popular movement had been set out in great social and political detail, there was nowhere to be found a comparably detailed account of the bourgeoisie, their interests as a rising capitalist class, and the political dynamics of their revolutionary career. Indeed, when the snippets of evidence offered in demonstration of the emergence of a capitalism were actually pinned down, one was left with the unmistakable impression that despite the strength of the *theory* of bourgeois revolution, its *history* was marked by looseness and vague allusions. Most troubling was the fact that the strongest evidence with regard to the social and political interests of the bourgeoisie seemed to be that offered by Alfred Cobban in his polemically charged attack upon the Marxist position. Approaching, then, the Revolution from a Marxist theoretical perspective that was virtually predicated upon the existence of bourgeois revolution, it came at first as something of a shock to discover just how much of a case against it had been made by revisionist historians in Cobban's wake.

For, over the last two decades, a truly radical transformation

has taken place in the opinions prevailing among historians as to the causes and meaning of the French Revolution. It is now generally recognized that with Cobban's publication of *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* a new era in the historiography of the Revolution has opened.¹ Through the mid 1960s, the long-established 'orthodox' conception recognized in the Revolution an epochal *social* phenomenon – the political expression of fundamental changes in economic conditions and the balance of classes. Historians generally, and not only Marxists, held that the Revolution marked the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie as a class, the defeat of a more or less feudal-aristocracy, and, hence, the triumph of capitalism.

Before Cobban, as will be seen, there had been other challenges to the interpretation of bourgeois class revolution. On the one hand, an alternative reactionary interpretation viewed the Revolution as a calamity for which 'the Mob' or 'the lower orders' were responsible; and on the other hand, there had been a tendency for conservatives to quietly downplay the role of class interests, without challenging the standard social interpretation itself. Cobban, however, accepted all the standard scholarship associated with the social interpretation and yet forcefully argued that the social interpretation was inconsistent with it. In particular, he argued, the evidence demonstrated that the French aristocracy was not feudal, the bourgeoisie was not capitalist, and the Revolution itself did not consolidate the triumph of a capitalist society.

Indeed, the new 'revisionist' historiography is to an important extent – but *only* in part – precisely the product of the many decades of increasingly sophisticated and thorough historical research inspired by the social interpretation. Our knowledge of the ancien régime has been impressively expanded by both extensive and highly detailed studies of its social history – further informed by the development of the sub-disciplines of economic, demographic, and regional history. Pre-eminent among the standard bearers of this research was Georges Lefebvre, who had a great deal to do with the nearly universal acceptance of the social interpretation. The breadth and nuances of Lefebvre's own exposition of this interpretation – as most clearly expressed in *The Coming of the French Revolution*² – were further enhanced by both admiration of his ground-breaking monographic studies, and respect for his Chair in the History of the Revolution at the Sorbonne. Yet, within a few years of Cobban's book, in both France and the English-speaking world, the revisionist approach

to the Revolution had simply routed the social interpretation, and gained ascendancy.

This revisionist history, which has by now acquired the status of a 'new international consensus',³ follows Cobban in arguing that the entire body of social historiography of the ancien régime stands in refutation of the idea of bourgeois class revolution. The implications of the revisionist challenge therefore reach far beyond the historiographical issues of the French Revolution itself, to embrace fundamental issues of method in historical analysis. Cobban himself pointedly maintained that it was the considerations of 'abstract social theory' and historical sociology – that is to say, Marxist theory – that had led historians to misconstrue the facts and impose a preconceived model of the social origins of modern capitalist society upon the history of France. The whole subsequent development of the revisionist historical perspective has continued this attack on Marxism, both explicitly and implicitly. Indeed, agreement has been reached among the revisionists not so much on any new interpretation of the Revolution, as on the way that facts have been distorted by theory among the proponents of the social interpretation. While attacks on Marxism are nothing new, the revisionist historians have enjoyed remarkable success in reversing this outstanding instance of Marxist credibility, because their challenge has in fact been backed by substantial and very compelling historical evidence.

Virtually all non-Marxist historians have now been won away from the social interpretation, essentially because – ideological issues aside – its supposed historical foundations have simply been found wanting when subjected to scrutiny. Powerfully challenged on the 'facts' which had for long been taken for granted, Marxists have increasingly been reduced to defending the idea of bourgeois revolution through purely theoretical arguments, based on abstract conceptions of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Reformulations of the Marxist interpretation have been put forward from both structuralist and 'orthodox' perspectives, but neither has been successful in resolving either the real historical inconsistencies or the underlying theoretical problems of the original account of bourgeois revolution.

It must now be accepted that the long-standing claims to historical validity of the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution have been exploded. Granting this, but also upholding a commitment to understanding the role of class relations in historical development, the primary purposes of this work will

be: to argue that, despite his incisive criticism of the ideology of political economy, it was Marx's own *uncritical* appropriation of bourgeois-liberal⁴ materialist history that introduced distortions into Marxist history; to demonstrate, however, that the method of historical social analysis which Marx actually created is *not* implicated in these distortions; and, finally, to consider both the nature and practice of this method itself – historical materialism – as the necessary foundation for a new interpretation of the French Revolution as an event in the historical development of class society. In order to justify this contentious line of argument, the responses which already have been made to the revisionist challenge by other Marxists will be examined to reveal the sources and extent of their weaknesses. Perhaps the central point of this work will be that the theory of bourgeois revolution did not originate with Marx, and in fact is not even consistent with the original social thought which Marx did develop.

While this book emerges from a recognition of the need to develop a new interpretation of the French Revolution, based on a fresh analysis of the ancien régime as a class society, that task must itself await a future work. The unfortunate extent to which the theory of bourgeois revolution, and the whole conception of 'historical' modes of production associated with it, have been understood to be *the* key to Marx's historical social theory has made an initial theoretical ground-clearing necessary. By way of a conclusion, however, a 'preface' to a historical materialist account of the origins and dynamic of the Revolution will be offered, indicating in broad strokes the sort of analysis which can be expected on the basis of current evidence.

Notes

1. Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, London 1968.

2. Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, New York n.d.

3. William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, Oxford 1980, p.24.

4. Throughout this work, the term 'liberal' is used to convey the meaning of a commitment to representative government and civil liberties, and/or a commitment to freedom of trade and enterprise. It is clear that virtually everyone in British public life after about 1720 falls into this category, including many Tories who would not usually be classified as 'liberals'. One of the points of this work, however, is precisely that no such liberal consensus existed in *France* until the twentieth century. The term 'bourgeois-liberal', which is usually used by Marxists to convey this meaning, will generally be avoided because it begs the question of what is meant by 'bourgeois'.

1

The French Revolution as Bourgeois Revolution: Orthodoxy and Challenge

The Social Interpretation and Bourgeois Revolution

In the mid 1960s, after a decade in the chair of French History at the University of London, Alfred Cobban returned to the provocative theme of his inaugural lecture, *The Myth of the French Revolution*.¹ With his slender but highly charged volume, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, Cobban attacked head-on a broad and long-established consensus over the general character and meaning of the French Revolution.² This 'social' interpretation was the established academic opinion, refined over time by the most notable historians of the Revolution, with an appropriate range of scholarly variation on its basic theme. What Cobban most took issue with – and what was central to this interpretation – was viewing the Revolution as a *social* revolution, one that embodied fundamental and necessary processes of historical development. Cobban did not object to examining the origins or events of the Revolution in terms of social or economic interests. On the contrary, Norman Hampson criticized Cobban for having produced no more than a 'non-Marxist economic interpretation of the revolution'.³ What Cobban rejected, as he saw it, was history written to reflect 'the deterministic operation of an historical law', history which had been combined with 'general sociological theories'.⁴ In his eyes this was both the defining characteristic and the cardinal sin of Marxist history, and it was as Marxist history that Cobban took on the social interpretation. Indeed, as has since come to be true of much of the revisionist 'new consensus', Cobban's criticism was explicitly intended to be at least as much an attack on Marxist historical

sociology, as such, as an effort to shed new light on the Revolution.

Cobban recognized Georges Lefebvre's work to be the most authoritative expression of the social interpretation, and the central idea to which he objected was clearly stated by Lefebvre:

The revolution is only the crown of a long economic and social evolution which has made the bourgeoisie the mistress of the world.⁵

All the elements central to interpreting the Revolution as a bourgeois social revolution are incorporated in this statement: that the Revolution was only the 'crown' of a more fundamental historical process; that behind this historical development lay social, and particularly economic, progress; and that the agent and chief beneficiary of this evolution was the bourgeois class that rose to social ascendancy in liberal capitalism.

Lefebvre was a consummate practitioner of the historian's craft, justly noted for the depth of his research and for his grasp of the historically concrete, and he applied this attention to detail even to so sweeping an interpretive perspective as this. Not only did Lefebvre recognize that 'many motives combined to bring the French people to their supreme dilemma', but he specifically developed the idea that the Revolution was at once *four* different revolutions – those of the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the sans-culottes, and the peasantry.⁶

Yet, beyond the proximate causes of the many separate elements which went into the Revolution in its distinctive complexity, Lefebvre did not hesitate to identify a 'deeper cause of the French Revolution', one which revealed these four revolutions to be expressions of an integral whole, a necessary bourgeois social revolution:

The ultimate cause of the French Revolution of 1789 goes deep into the history of France and of the western world. At the end of the eighteenth century the social structure of France was aristocratic. It showed traces of having originated at a time when land was almost the only form of wealth, and when the possessors of land were the masters of those who needed it to work and to live. . . .

Meanwhile the growth of commerce and industry had created, step by step, a new form of wealth, mobile or commercial wealth, and a new class, called in France the bourgeoisie. . . . This class had grown much stronger with the maritime discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. . . . In the eighteenth century commerce, industry and finance occupied an increasingly important place in the national economy. . . . The role of the nobility had correspondingly

declined; and the clergy . . . found its authority growing weaker. These groups preserved the highest rank in the legal structure of the country, but in reality economic power, personal abilities and confidence in the future had passed largely to the bourgeoisie. Such a discrepancy never lasts forever. The Revolution of 1789 restored the harmony between fact and law. This transformation spread in the nineteenth century throughout the west and then to the whole globe, and in this sense the ideas of 1789 toured the world.⁷

This was the established interpretation of the Revolution, offered from the Chair in History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne, and it clearly embraced the concept of bourgeois revolution as its general theory of cause.

The implications of the concept of bourgeois revolution by far transcend the issue of interpreting the French Revolution. In the first place, of course, it is a *general* historical concept: prior to the revisionist challenge, even non-Marxists were often willing to admit some such measure of commonality between the French Revolution and the English Civil War, even among a whole range of eighteenth-century 'Atlantic' revolutions. Marxists have defined such revolutions far more rigorously as instances of bourgeois class revolution, and, taking this to be a normal expression of necessary social development, have looked for it in all modern national histories. In this sense, then, 'bourgeois revolution' implies an entire theory of historical process, a conspectus of world-historical development. At this level of explicit theorizing, 'bourgeois revolution' is far more than an interpretation of the causes and character of a given political revolution; it is a concept which places that political conflict in the context of a fundamental transformation of the entire structure of material, institutional and cultural reproduction in society.

This is the sense in which Marxist theory has embraced the idea of bourgeois revolution. It has been taken to express a necessary stage of the development of class society in world history. (Whether or not a *discrete* bourgeois revolution and a corresponding stage of bourgeois democracy is necessary in historical development became a prime issue of polemical dispute between Stalinists and Trotskyists; it is important to be cognizant of such implications without being paralyzed by them – particularly since the main point of this work is to question the whole framework of that debate.⁸) Marxism, as will be seen, has been particularly concerned with stages of history; and bourgeois revolution – the political expression of the transformation of feudal society into capitalist society by the bourgeoisie – is a

major theoretical element of this historical perspective. Indeed, in terms of both historical analysis and political theorizing, there have been few if any ideas more central to Marxism than bourgeois revolution.

The most celebrated characterization of bourgeois revolution as such appears in the *Communist Manifesto*:

- Each step in the development of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by a corresponding political advance of that class . . . the bourgeoisie has at last, since the establishment of Modern Industry and of the world market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative State, exclusive political sway. . . .
- The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. . . .
- The bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production, and of property. . . . The necessary consequence of this was political centralisation. Independent, or but loosely connected provinces with separate interests, laws, governments and systems of taxation, became lumped together into one nation, with one government, one code of laws, one national class interest, one frontier and one customs tariff. . . .
- We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and exchange . . . the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.⁹

An important discussion of this conception in a more analytical vein can be found in Marx's 'Moralizing Criticism and Critical Morality', a response to the ideas of Karl Heinzen, and it is implicit or taken for granted in much of the rest of Marx's work.¹⁰

The Prevalence of the Social Interpretation

The concept of bourgeois revolution has always held a central place in Marxist theory and history,¹¹ with the result that the term itself has tended to have only limited academic currency outside Marxist circles, particularly in the English-speaking countries. Nevertheless, some version of bourgeois revolution can be found at the heart of most of the historical interpretations of the French Revolution put forward since the founding of the

Third Republic. Throughout this century, a wide variety of historians, and not only those closely associated with the 'official' orthodox account, have treated the origins and social consequences of the Revolution in terms which have reflected the general perspective of bourgeois revolution.¹²

In France, until after the end of the Fourth Republic, there was more than similarity between the liberal and Marxist interpretations of the Revolution – they were clearly identical. The social interpretation was shared unhesitatingly by left-liberals everywhere, for in its 'official' version it was as much Republican as Marxist. Between the Paris Commune and World War II, Western liberal democracy simply could not be taken for granted. The virtues or vices of political and economic liberalism; the celebration or disparagement of enlightenment and modern society; the affirmation or denial of historical progress: all these continued to be vital issues of contention, and not least for historians.

Wherever popular democracy was a real issue, and particularly in the political context of the Third Republic where serious right-wing opposition to liberal republicanism had long been a factor, it was unavoidable that the historiography of the Revolution should become confused with contemporary politics.¹³ Indeed, everywhere, whether as an expression of the immediate political context, or as an echo of distant conflicts and underlying ideology, the Revolution tended to be simplified from the complex struggle of aristocracy, bourgeoisie, sans-culottes, and peasants, to fit either of a pair of archetypal conflicts: 'the People vs. Aristocracy' or 'Society vs. the Mob'. Under such circumstances, liberals were politically constrained to identify with the Revolution as a whole, to defend it against anti-popular reactionaries, on the grounds of its announced ideals, however much they may have regretted the Terror. Liberals, radicals and Marxists were uneasily allied in defending the liberal-democratic Republic, and this meant defense of the principles of the Revolution as well – however each group chose to construe them. This general political alignment was not limited to France; it was recognized everywhere that the Revolution had brought down the ancien régime and its absolutism in order to replace political aristocracy with liberal democracy.

Interpretation of the Revolution therefore closely conformed to the lines of conflict drawn by its own ideology: the achievement of political democracy, legal equality, and civil liberty through overthrow of the old order of aristocracy. For liberals

everywhere, the Revolution stood as one expression, a central expression, of the general social and political progress associated with the Enlightenment. The liberal goals of the Revolution being both reasonable and progressive, it was not hard for liberals to deduce that the 'excesses' of the Terror were somehow necessary, if regrettable; or that they had been called down upon the aristocracy by its own intransigence in the face of the people's legitimate aspirations. At worst, for conservative liberalism the Terror was an unavoidable symptom of the 'disease' of revolution, a 'disease' brought on by the inability of old institutions and 'modes of thought' to cope with the stresses inherent in the progress of 'modernizing' society.

This latter interpretation of the Revolution, perhaps the most conservative that still embraced liberalism, was well expressed in the avowedly anti-Marxist and non-'Republican' historical work of Crane Brinton.¹⁴ Brinton has not loomed large in the historiography of the French Revolution. He is remembered, however, for his ideas on revolution in general, and particularly for his remarkably conservative conception of revolution as a 'fever', which a growing society might have to endure in order to restore a 'normal' and 'healthy' state of social equilibrium.¹⁵ This allowed him to describe one of the primary 'symptoms' of revolution as 'a feeling on the part of some of the chief enterprising groups that their opportunities for getting on in this world are unduly limited by political arrangements', while asserting that this 'is rather less than what Marxists seem to mean when they talk about the revolutions of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries as deliberately the work of a class-conscious bourgeoisie'.¹⁶

Brinton carefully separated the politics of liberalism from both class interests and the disorder of social revolution, for unlike the French republicans and left-liberal historians, he had no enthusiasm for conceptions of a heroic people driven to arms by tyranny. Indeed, Brinton anticipated the revisionist historians by forty years in his insistence that the 'real' Revolution was fully realized *before* 'the lurid affair of the Bastille', simply by the creation of the National Assembly.¹⁷ Yet, even this profoundly conservative historian accepted the essential premises of the official social interpretation: that the Revolution of 1789 was the necessary work of the bourgeoisie in bringing about modern, liberal-capitalist society,

working for a bourgeois domination, for that triumph of natural

rights over prescription which meant the triumph of the businessman over the gentleman.¹⁸

Even in America, then, some variation of the social interpretation of the Revolution as a bourgeois revolution was the norm among historians. Among those who saw the Revolution as a *philosophical* expression of the emergence of democracy from the 'Age of Reason', there was still a ready identification of egalitarianism, civil nationalism, anti-clericalism, and organizational rationalism with the self-made men of commerce, industry, and the professions. The growth of trade; the industrial revolution; the ascendancy of science and rationality; the emergence of religious tolerance and secular society: all have been taken as being of a piece with the establishment of democracy and civil equality, and all together have been seen as the substance of *progress*.¹⁹ Initiative, talent, and knowledge have been the cardinal virtues of progress – and of liberalism – and these were most demonstrably possessed by those who made their way in the world without special privilege or favor. Thus, even R. R. Palmer, whose interpretation of the Revolution is almost purely political – couched in terms of the necessary and proper advance of democratic principles in the whole of the Atlantic world, which economic conditions simply encouraged – can be seen to share in the general perspective of bourgeois revolution, while virtually denying its social character.²⁰

These conservative, and primarily American, perspectives on the Revolution occupied the margins of established historiography. In the main, historians were far less reluctant to admit to a 'social' dimension of history, clearly associating both progress and the Revolution with 'the rise of the middle classes' and the growth of capitalism and industry. J. M. Thompson expressed well the more typically British liberal perspective on the Revolution:

It has become fashionable to condemn 'a bourgeois revolution'. There is a sense, and one creditable to the intelligence and energy of the middle class, in which every revolution is a bourgeois revolution. The French nation at the end of the eighteenth century was not exceptional in having to rely on its professional and propertied minority for liberalism and leadership. It was unusually fortunate in that this minority was too weak to establish its rule without the help of the majority, and too patriotic to exploit its private interests until it had carried through a programme of national reform.²¹

Despite, therefore, the obvious reluctance of some, who took pains to qualify their agreement with the Marxists, liberal historical opinion was on the whole consistent with the theory of bourgeois revolution. Cobban acerbically took note of this 'Whig' perspective in observing that 'as every schoolboy knows, the perfect cliché for any period in history since the expulsion from the Garden of Eden is the rise of the middle classes'.²² The role of this perspective in the development of not only liberal but also Marxist thought will be explored at some length later in this work, but nowhere was its impact more clear than in interpreting the French Revolution.

The Social Interpretation as 'Official' History

There is a vast and well-known historiography of the French Revolution. Historians have long recognized the connections between this body of history and a range of republican, radical, socialist, and counter-revolutionary political positions.²³ To summarize: during the Second Empire and the early years of the Third Republic, Michelet's history, renowned for its 'mystical' evocation of *the people* as the generative principle of the Revolution, held sway. 'The people' included the whole of the Third Estate; the downfall of their Republic was disunity – the mutual recriminations of Girondins and Montagnards in the Convention – a disunity for which there was no real basis but misunderstanding.²⁴ Michelet's history reflected the frustration of popular and bourgeois liberal-republican aspirations, and it was not to be superseded before the Third Republic was well established.²⁵ It is unsurprising that Marx's description of bourgeois revolution as an essentially selfish expression of class interest, the founding act of brutal and exploitive capitalist society, found no place among the non-communist thinkers of the time.

During the early days of the Third Republic, right-wing opposition to the Revolution's liberal-radical legacy found its pre-eminent historiographical expression in the work of Hippolyte Taine.²⁶ Taine held that it had been heedless adherence to the abstract ideology of democracy that had been responsible for rejection of the royal proposals of June 1789 by the National Assembly, fatally opening the floodgates to mob anarchy and Terror. With fears of popular uprising still fresh from the Paris Commune – only heightened by the bloodiness with which it was suppressed – Taine's history had unmistakable political signifi-

cance. Until the Republic had weathered the crises of its first decades, this interpretation hung over it like a pall. Then, as republicanism asserted itself, while still facing considerable opposition, a response to Taine appeared in the form of a new interpretation of the Revolution.

Alphonse Aulard, first historian to hold a chair in the Revolution at the Sorbonne, established the tradition of official Republican interpretation of the Revolution by putting forward a version of the theory of bourgeois revolution that was imbued with a radical-socialist political perspective. Aulard embraced a radical republicanism that was 'social' without being socialist; fundamentally liberal, his perspective was far removed from Marxism.²⁷ His 'socialism' called only for a more just distribution of wealth and greater equality of opportunity, and it really constituted an expression of that left republicanism which had emerged between the increasingly 'centrist' politics of the leading conservative liberals and the growing socialist movement.

Despite their profound differences, these groups were all together on the side of the Republic, and hence the Revolution.²⁸ Faced with counter-revolutionary claims that any attempt to implement the principles of the Revolution in real government policy would inevitably lead to mob rule, this Republican alliance could not afford – and did not now need – to hold to those apologetic interpretations that had previously separated the politics of 1789 from Jacobin Republicanism, and the Terror. The establishment of the Republic and introduction of universal suffrage now had to be portrayed as integral and necessary advances upon the initial gains of 1789 – and not as loss of social control to the mob. Republicans such as Aulard could disdain Robespierre as an individual, but the Terror itself had to be upheld as essential to the defense of the Revolution and achievement of its goals.

In order to portray the Revolution in this light, an opening was made towards the socialist analysis of bourgeois revolution which followed Marx. In Aulard's history – the 'official' history – the year 1789 became the limited product of a no doubt progressive, but also self-serving, even 'privileged', bourgeoisie.²⁹ This bourgeoisie promulgated the principles of the Revolution in the Declaration of Rights; but in their own interests they blocked the actual implementation of these principles – especially by dividing the nation into the categories of 'active' and 'passive' citizens for purposes of the franchise. It was thus *necessary* for the Revolution to be continued. Subsequently, it was not the bourgeoisie

but the *French* who formed themselves into a Democracy and a Republic.³⁰ For Aulard, it was the men of 1789 who could better be called renegades than those of 1793; but he held that, in truth, *all* were 'worthy Frenchmen who acted for the best'.³¹

From the socialist perspective, this was history that borrowed only timidly from Marx, and it was soon followed by the avowedly *socialist* history of Jean Jaurès.³² This study, which Aulard praised, systematically subjected the history of the Revolution to the terms of Marxist analysis, as understood by Jaurès. (In recent years, Marxists have generally judged the work not to have been distorted by its simultaneous appreciation of the work of Michelet.³³) This influential but 'unofficial' history, squarely situated in the *Manifesto's* economic determinism and its description of bourgeois revolution, was superseded without being refuted when Albert Mathiez succeeded to Aulard's chair.

Mathiez pulled official Republican historiography farther to the left by taking up the cause of Robespierre against Aulard, and particularly by examining the *social* content of political conflicts in the course of the whole Revolution.³⁴ The stages of the Revolution which Mathiez distinguished went significantly beyond Aulard's merely political periodization in their social substance: before the specifically bourgeois revolution of 1789–91, the revolt of the nobility was based upon *their* social conditions; in governing the Republic created by popular insurrection, the Girondins 'confined themselves to a narrow class policy benefiting the middle classes only'; in turn, not only was June 2nd, 1793 'more than a political revolution', but in response to the social crisis and demands of the sans-culottes, the Revolutionary Government went beyond the limited perspective of the Hébertistes to attempt to make the Terror into a genuine *social program*.³⁵

Against the continuing threat of counter-revolutionary ideology, historiographical identification of the real meaning, achievements, and potential of the Revolution shifted progressively from the merely liberal perspective of 1789 to the more radical promise of the Republic, and then to the Revolutionary Government itself. Awareness of contemporary social conflicts, and the growing influence of the socialist movement generated by capitalist society under the Third Republic, fostered in turn a sympathetic analysis of the social conflicts of the Revolution. This involved an emphasis upon the *class* character and purposes of bourgeois revolution, and increased use of the concept of class struggle. With the claims of monarchism, as such, supplanted by

a right-wing political determination to keep popular forces in line through strong government, the Revolution was no longer conceived merely in terms of a *political* struggle for republican democracy, but acquired the sense of *social revolution*. Interpretation of the Revolution from anywhere left of center increasingly corresponded, at least in general terms, with the Marxist interpretation. This was perhaps facilitated by a preoccupation with polemicism rather than theory within formal Marxism at the time: generally unconcerned with scholarly exposition, Marxists for the most part simply used history in the service of contemporary political purposes. Increasingly, therefore, the official historiography of the Revolution not only reflected, but *was taken to be* – even by Marxists – the essence of socialist history.

Among the distinguishing characteristics of this 'socialist history', three criteria may be taken as essential. The first – analysis in terms of class struggle, however construed – had already been implicit in Aulard, was further spelled out by Jaurès, and was substantially extended by Mathiez. The second – analysis of conflict in terms of actual socio-economic interests – was put forward by Jaurès through his economic determinism, but was made both more general and less mechanical by Mathiez. Under this general rubric of 'social' analysis, study of the specifically *economic* aspects of the causes and course of the Revolution proceeded from Jaurès through Mathiez, to find notable expression in the work of C. E. Labrousse.³⁶ Both class struggle and socio-economic analysis, however, still awaited the addition of a third element: *history from below*.

This found expression in the work of Georges Lefebvre, who added the social movement of the peasantry to that of the urban people, as the necessary complements to a bourgeois class revolution against aristocratic social paralysis. Succeeding Mathiez, Lefebvre helped to establish new standards for detailed historical research, while synthesizing the several strands of republican-socialist history with the social perspective of the participants in revolution.³⁷ In developing upon Mathiez's social analysis by suggesting the existence of four individual revolutionary social movements – of the nobility, bourgeoisie, peasantry, and sans-culottes – he emphasized that while each had its distinctive social origins and course, they reflected together the crisis of the ancien régime, and together formed a *single* social revolution.³⁸ This, then, became the classic conception of the social interpretation, pre-eminent both as established scholarship and as 'socialist history'.

Lefebvre's work was the definitive formulation of the social interpretation precisely because he was able to bring together so much information, based on such thorough research, and give nuance to so many aspects of the Revolution by carefully situating them in context. He won praise for the many parts of his analysis, and respect for the argument as a whole – even from those who conspicuously rejected Marx's analysis, as such. (Such as R. R. Palmer, who translated *The Coming of the French Revolution*: in his preface, he happily pointed to Lefebvre's observation that the bourgeoisie owned as much land as the nobility, a fact that was 'singularly awkward to a purely materialist theory of class conflict' – anticipating Cobban's point without bringing it to bear on Lefebvre.) The great majority of liberal historians were prepared to accept the three central aspects of socialist history, *provided* they were not explicitly presented in Marxist terms. This ambiguity, perfectly captured by Lefebvre, was the key to the continued success of the social interpretation.

Albert Soboul, Lefebvre's successor, *did*, however, squarely situate the social interpretation in the terms of the Marxist analysis to which it alluded, while at the same time extending 'history from below' to the sans-culottes and their complex relations with the Revolutionary Government.³⁹ Yet from a strictly Marxist perspective, all that really was required was a history which, as a whole, supported the historical sketch in the *Manifesto*. Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Revolution*, exceedingly rare in being a history of both the political and economic revolutions of the bourgeoisie as sketched by Marx, simply offers Lefebvre's detailed history as a full account of the immediate causes of the Revolution, contingent expressions of the underlying class conflict with which Marx was concerned.⁴⁰ The central points from the Marxist point of view remained that the bourgeoisie had been the agent of growth in commerce and industry; that the aristocratic and absolutist structure of the ancient régime had been, in various senses, a feudal hindrance to this growth; and that the bourgeoisie had led the Revolution to overthrow this system, clearing the ground for the bourgeois capitalist society whose mature form was apparent in the nineteenth century. These points were taken to corroborate the idea that the Revolution had been a bourgeois class revolution, in turn corroborating the Marxist analysis of class.

Lefebvre embraced each of those three points, and, despite Palmer's perception that his work stood as a challenge to the

Marxists, he embraced the idea of bourgeois revolution as a whole. He did so, however, by demonstrating that the conclusions reached through his own careful synthesis tended to support the Marxist interpretation, rather than by declaring at the outset that history is the study of class struggle. His analysis was, if anything, *more* dangerous to opponents of Marxism than Soboul's for this reason. It was Lefebvre who required serious attention. It is not surprising, therefore, that the revisionist challenge to the social interpretation began as an attack on the 'myth' of the Revolution's intrinsic *unity* as Lefebvre had presented it, and developed as a criticism of Lefebvre for being seduced by the Marxist 'general theory'.⁴¹

This or that author might offer reservations on one point or another of the republican-socialist interpretation; or accept much of its detail while rejecting a 'purely materialist' conception of causes; or perhaps fuss over the fact that Estates were not defined in the economic terms appropriate to *classes*. In the English-speaking world generally, a more conservative version of the interpretation did in fact prevail. Nevertheless, no critic was able to pose an alternative interpretation of comparable scope, comprehensiveness, and harmony.

One of the particularly compelling aspects of the social interpretation, even for many of the decided non-Marxists, was that it did not rest on suspiciously *moral* judgements – as the counter-revolutionary interpretations did for the most part – but instead claimed that there was a historical inevitability to social and economic progress, which entailed the changes brought about by the Revolution. This analysis claimed to rest on historical social science, and to provide the convincing detail of a society brought to the inevitable outbreak of revolution; it called on the facts of price movement, food supply, economic growth, and fiscal crisis, together with the effect of enlightenment and rationality in creating resistance to absolutism and opening the state to reform. Lefebvre and Soboul gave even further depth to this analysis by revealing the specific social manifestations and intellectual development of the common people of town and country, as they gave their impetus to the Revolution. The social interpretation was conceptually based on the theory of bourgeois revolution, but it drew upon and invited ever more detailed historical research – not only to support it, but to give it nuance. The enormous number of monographic investigations into the social circumstances of the Revolution which were undertaken as late as the mid 1960s were generally perceived to have been

carried out under the umbrella of the social interpretation.

The Revisionist Challenge

For all the inspiration and accommodating flexibility which the social interpretation for so long afforded historians of the Revolution, it is no less true that, as Cobban first contended, their researches have instead provided substantial evidence *against* the view that a capitalist bourgeoisie overthrew a feudal aristocracy in order to break the fetters of the old regime. Cobban underlined the disjuncture between the historical evidence, as it emerged, and the cardinal points of the social interpretation: that feudalism had remained a central component of the productive relations of the ancien régime; that the revolutionary bourgeoisie had been an emerging capitalist class, necessarily opposed to the feudal restrictions of aristocratic society; and that the Revolution marked the launching of significant capitalist growth in a new society. In the opinion of the great majority of historians of the ancien régime and the Revolution – including, as will be seen, many Marxists – there is now little doubt that the whole body of serious historical research stands in refutation of the idea that a capitalist bourgeois class was driven to overthrow a feudal aristocratic ruling class to which it was intrinsically opposed.

As will be argued throughout this work, no adequate synthesis of the historical evidence yet exists: the Marxists have been wrong, while the revisionists are incapable of providing a coherent alternative that *explains* the Revolution. The very point of this work is to develop a method of historical social analysis with which to interpret the Revolution on the basis of the evidence. It is not possible to present the evidence which argues against the social interpretation in any systematic or thorough fashion at the same time. William Doyle has summarized the revisionist case very ably, and the Bibliography cites most of the significant work which has been brought to bear on the subject. In the arguments that follow, and in the conclusion which stands as a 'preface' to a new interpretation, the most essential points therefore will be introduced without the substantive discussion they merit.

While Cobban unquestionably played a central role in revising the established social interpretation, his work laid the founda-

tion for the current 'revisionist' mainstream *without* actually belonging to it. Cobban's argument was that the social interpretation went astray from the start, by *beginning* with the notion of bourgeois capitalist class revolution – the idea of *social* revolution. This he saw as a 'semi-religious' tenet of Marxism, a product of 'abstract historical sociology', which was burdened by an 'anachronistic' use of the concept of *class* – which Cobban understood to be an economic category, peculiar to capitalism. He argued that though the Revolution was made by the bourgeoisie, the bourgeois revolutionaries were not capitalists; that they shared with the nobility a proclivity for agrarian property, and as *rentiers* shared in the full range of landed income – including that relatively small portion derived from feudal dues; and finally, that the Revolution did not give rise to capitalist production, but if anything hampered it, preserving the essential social characteristics of the ancien régime.

Unlike the later revisionists, however, Cobban maintained his own version of an essentially 'bourgeois' revolution, led by a non-capitalist bourgeoisie for non-capitalist social objectives against an aristocracy which was in fact *capitalist*.⁴² This idiosyncratic interpretation has never found much favor. Instead, his primary contributions were to demonstrate the gulf between the orthodox conception of bourgeois revolution and the historical evidence, and to argue that this discrepancy was a refutation of Marxism itself. The subsequent wave of revisionist historians have concurred on both of these points.

Among the English-speaking historians who first contributed to the revisionist challenge, George V. Taylor and Elizabeth Eisenstein had greater influence than Cobban on the direction of revisionist thought. Taylor argued that the bourgeoisie could not be differentiated from the nobility in their forms of wealth and income, while Eisenstein recollected that liberal members of the nobility had played a critical role in forging the political movement of the Third Estate in 1788–9.⁴³ Taken in combination with the considerable body of historical research that had exploded the idea that the nobility had been simply a hereditary, feudal aristocracy, this new direction quickly led to the emergence of the central conception of the new revisionist consensus.

The essential proposition is that, since both the nobility and the bourgeoisie had marked *internal* differentiation, and no impermeable social boundary existed between them, and the two statuses had a great deal in common in terms of their forms of wealth, professions, and general ideology, it therefore would be

more accurate to recognize a *single* 'elite' in the ancien régime – or, more precisely, a dominant social stratum comprising several different, but sometimes overlapping 'elites'.⁴⁴ On the basis of this analysis, the 'aristocratic offensive' of 1787–8 and the subsequent agitation of the Third Estate in 1788–9 can be conflated into a single movement of reform, reflecting the emerging institutional requirements of the entire elite stratum and their emerging ideological consensus. In place of class struggle, therefore, there is a movement of national renovation – which in opening society to the new reality also opened it to the potential for tumult, yet which ultimately secured expression in the Napoleonic society of the *notables*. While the English-speaking historians were originally prominent in developing this revisionist perspective, it quickly became a fixture of the *Annales* school of historians in France, leaving Marxist historians thoroughly isolated in their attempts to retain the once orthodox social interpretation.

The Conservative Liberalism of the Revisionist Challenge

The shift to the revisionist interpretation of the Revolution has been a shift to a markedly more conservative liberalism. The central task of the Revolution is now interpreted as simply the overthrow of despotism, a task which united the entire 'elite', and was perhaps even led by the *nobility*:

But the struggle between 'Aristocrates' and 'Nationaux' in no way weakened the common will to overthrow 'despotism'. And the program of the 'Aristocrates', however conservative it may have been on the terrain of privilege, was not less liberal than that of the 'Nationaux' . . . Privilege had not only been, as Jean Meuvret put it, the refuge of liberty, it had been its true ancestor, legitimate parent, authentic source. Throughout the passage from 'gothic barbarism' to the Enlightenment of reason, it was the nobility which fathered that revolutionary system of values: liberalism.⁴⁵

The growth of liberalism still appears to be as inexorable, and as much tied to economic and social progress, as in the social interpretation, but in this version the liberal protagonists are the enlightened nobility and the upper reaches of the bourgeoisie. (Precisely how classically liberal this conception is will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.) For the revisionists, the Revolution was a natural and necessary development, a just effort to

reform society; but at the same time, from this perspective, the manner in which the Revolution went 'skidding off course' into the period of the Revolutionary Government, *sans-culottisme*, and the Terror, must be seen as *unnecessary*.⁴⁶ As had previously been the case with liberal apologists prior to the Third Republic, the Revolution is no longer to be treated as a 'bloc' in this interpretation. From the revisionist perspective, the Revolution is properly bracketed by the Assembly of Notables and the society of *notables*, and the revolutionary years of 1791–4 stand out as a more or less lamentable aberration along the way.

The revisionist consensus, in fact, is in many ways a contemporary reworking of the perspective of Tocqueville, or Brinton. Tocqueville, in the wake of 1848, was the first to identify with the liberal goals of the Revolution but to characterize the Revolution itself as tragic – perhaps inevitable, but not *necessary*. It was Tocqueville's view that the monarchy under Louis XVI had been far from reactionary. The very progress made by the ancien régime in reducing the misery, irrationality, and despotism of the past was seen by Tocqueville to have simultaneously destabilized society. It facilitated the heroic work of social reorganization in 1789, but also, through the dissolution of established structures of public control and the inexperience in leadership of the 'cultured elite', set the stage for the 'mastery' of the masses in their 'lust for revenge'.⁴⁷

Brinton had a less tragic conception, for he frankly maintained that the Revolution had not even been inevitable. Instead, he argued that the Revolution had *already been won* before the taking of the Bastille, and that the court had had no intention of making a counter-coup against the National Assembly, but could have learned to live with the liberal constitutional order the bourgeois delegates were determined to have.⁴⁸ Brinton has not often been followed in this judgement. The revisionist account is further complicated by its recognition of *two* liberal currents of opposition to despotism ('Aristocrates' and 'Nationaux'). Despite their inclination to see the Revolutionary Government as a *dérapiage*, then, the revisionists see the revolution of 1789 as in some sense both inevitable and necessary. Which is to say, it was *about* something, even if it occurred within an integrated elite.

Unfortunately, precisely *what* this liberal revolution was about – what the source of this intense struggle was if *not* a conflict between bourgeois and aristocrats – is something that the revisionist account has not been able to explain. Colin Lucas,

indeed, has taken Doyle's effort at synthesis to task on just these grounds: *why*, if there was no fundamental social conflict at issue, was there 'the sustained intensity of the revolutionary will to impose a new social organization' exhibited by the Constituent?⁴⁹ Yet from the revisionist perspective, what the Revolution *was* about is less important than what it was *not* about; and there has been complete agreement with the previous conservative-liberal positions that, by whatever date the accomplishments of 1789 can be deemed to have been fulfilled, it was then both unnecessary and regrettable for the Revolution to have gone further.

By judging the course of the Revolution after 1791 to have been unnecessary, and hence a violent and even anarchic 'skidding off course', the revisionists generally endorse the longstanding conservative position on the popular movement – particularly with regard to the period of the Terror. The popular movement has played a major role in the historiography of the social interpretation ever since Lefebvre identified the sans-culotte revolution as one of the integral revolutionary movements making up the whole of the bourgeois revolution. Quite aside from the sympathy and enthusiasm which left-liberals and Marxists have felt for the *menu peuple*, the popular movement has provided the social interpretation with the necessary explanation of how the bourgeoisie were able to prevail against the aristocracy. It also has accounted for the internal political history of the Revolution, the course of which has been attributed to the complex – even dialectical – dynamic interaction of the separate but parallel bourgeois and sans-culotte revolutionary movements. By denying that there was a necessary and coherent bourgeois revolution in continuous development between the National Assembly and the Directory, the revisionist interpretation has simultaneously deprived the popular movement of its 'legitimate' role as driving force and ally.

On the one hand, in writing revisionist histories which have been less enthusiastically *for* the Revolution, there has been a tendency to lay blame for the violence of an 'unnecessary' revolutionary *dérápé* upon the people and a 'handful' of ambitious politicians. On the other hand, in arguing that the heights of revolutionary zeal were not in fact essential and worthy, the revisionists have also played down the general level of popular political consciousness and commitment, emphasizing instead the role played by a relatively few popular agitators, both bourgeois and sans-culotte. These tendencies are apparent in the

more conservatively liberal histories offered by Cobban and Furet and Richet, which in their accounts of popular revolutionary action have emphasized the persistence of *traditional* popular responses, the jealous manipulations of petty firebrands, and the significance of degradation, misery, and even alcoholic hysteria as revolutionary motivations.⁵⁰

The revisionists do not reproduce the anti-democratic fulminations of counter-revolutionary ideologues, but they offer a decidedly less generous perspective on the revolutionary process than had come to be the norm. While Doyle provides a more favorable picture of the Parisian people, his focus is on 1789, and does not require him to come to terms with the *dérápé*. Cobban, Furet and Richet, and Louis Bergeron, however, are among those who have insisted on distinguishing between a minority of sans-culotte activists and the *menu peuple* in general – who at times burst, and were at times cajoled, onto the political stage.⁵¹ This analysis makes the militants into just another example – if a rather crude and inferior one – of the several 'sub-elites' which, according to Furet, entered into political contention after the 'opening' of French society by the Revolution.⁵² This 'autonomous political and ideological dynamic' of struggle among 'elites' is the means by which Furet accounts for the *dérápé* of the Revolution.

In all this, despite the differences between conservative liberalism and genuine counter-revolution, there is an unmistakable tendency for 'the people', shorn of their solemn obligation to uphold and carry forward the Revolution through the Terror, to be reduced once again to little more than 'the mob' (which has, after all, always been alleged to be no more than a fraction of the largely passive 'good folk'). No doubt the impression of sternly self-denying, revolutionary sans-culottes could in fact be tempered by an appreciation of the role of wine shops in Parisian political life. But in the context of the revisionist challenge, the faint echoes of Taine which can be discerned in descriptions of drunken bloodlust have unmistakable political implications. If the nobility had largely been enlightened, and the real goals of the Revolution were achieved with the Constitution of 1791, then the social violence of the Terror can be cast aside as darkly mindless terrorism, a product of ambition, jealousy, and anarchy.

Although this conservative reconstruction of the relationship between the popular movement and the Revolution as a whole is quite remarkable, it is in fact only a logical consequence of

replacing the revolutionary bourgeoisie with a liberal reforming 'elite'. In the first bold attack of the *Annales* historians directly upon the Marxist conception of the Revolution (cited above), Denis Richet elaborated on the broad, liberal character of the elite's struggle. This general revisionist conception denies the bourgeoisie any precedence in the leadership of the Revolution, while also denying the existence of any fundamental social conflict between 'Aristocrates' and 'Nationaux'. Yet, in accepting the classic liberal account of the Revolution's origins, the revisionists have also reaffirmed the liberal conception of 'progress'. They still recognize a 'natural' and historically necessary correlation between the growth of commerce and industry, the development of social and economic rationalism, and the emergence of political liberalism – without, however, in any way relating this progress to class struggle. Richet argued that there was indeed a long, slow capitalist social 'revolution' between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, whose decisive stage arrived only in the second half of the nineteenth.⁵³ This whole, long process he would allow the title of 'bourgeois revolution'.

What remains is 'progress' without class revolution, stripped of all connotations of class struggle, deleting all references to the vigor and vigilance of the people in winning and preserving democracy. On these grounds:

to enclose the French Revolution of 1789 in the Marxist theory of revolution – one of the weakest and least coherent aspects of Marx's gigantic oeuvre – seems to us doubly impossible.⁵⁴

Not all revisionist historians have polemicized against the Marxists in quite the way that Furet has; but the conception of history as a product of social development is now almost entirely focused on *demographic* development, to the exclusion of considerations of class. The association of republican history with socialist history has been ruptured – probably forever – in favor of the perspectives of Tocqueville, Brinton, and Cobban.

This embrace of *conservative* liberalism – one which clearly gives political precedence and legitimacy to a 'cultured elite', while denigrating the theory and practice of popular democracy – must be taken in the context of the changed political climate in France since World War II. Serious anti-liberal political forces were soundly defeated at the Liberation, and the diminishing threat of the anti-liberal Right virtually disappeared after the

Gaullist foundation of the Fifth Republic. Without such a threat, there were no longer grounds for a tacit alliance or 'Popular Front' of understanding between conservative – or centrist – liberals and Marxists.

At one time, conservative liberals were seriously constrained by the anti-liberal political forces on their right. Left-liberals were at the same time conscious of a betrayal of the 'social' promise of Republicanism by governing conservatives, while the *socialist* left went so far as to call into question the very nature of the Republic, as a bourgeois class state. Given the necessity of making common cause against the right, both at home and abroad, these differences tended to foster a leftward drift in the 'official' interpretation of the Revolution. The political center was largely obliged to keep still – or risk open identification with the right – while the social interpretation grew steadily more emphatic in its class analysis. In the end, the conservatives were confronted with an outspoken Marxist in the Sorbonne.

Yet with real changes in the political realities, the tide of ideas began to turn. The development of profoundly conservative liberal sociological theories in the United States, to counter the more critical traditions of social theory, began to influence French social history in ways which were not at first obvious. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, for one, went in search of Marx, but found Malthus. When, at the same time, the official historiography of the Revolution was becoming ever more explicitly grounded in Marxist theory, and both Montagnard politics and the revolutionary popular movement were being sympathetically evoked by Rudé and Soboul, the appearance of a conservative, revisionist interpretation of the Revolution should not be surprising.

Notes

1. Alfred Cobban, *The Myth of the French Revolution*, London 1955, reprinted in A. Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution*, London 1968, pp. 90–112.
2. Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, London 1968.
3. *Irish Historical Studies*, xiv (1964–5), 192, cited in Doyle, *Origins*, p. 15.
4. Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, pp. 8–14.
5. Georges Lefebvre, *Etudes sur la Révolution française*, Paris 1954, p. 246, cited by Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, p. 8.
6. Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, New York n.d. p. 179, p. 5.
7. Lefebvre, *Coming*, pp. 3–4.

8. Marx's own thoughts on this topic are explored with care and intelligence by Hal Draper in *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, 2 vols, New York 1977, 1979.
9. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Marx-Engels, *Collected Works* vol. VI) 50 vols, New York 1976, pp. 486-9.
10. Marx, 'Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality', *Collected Works* vol. VI, pp. 312-40.
11. For an indication of its role, see J. Montreau [J. Bruhat], 'La Révolution française et la pensée de Marx', *La Pensée*, 3 (Dec. 1939), 24-38.
12. For the historiography of the social interpretation: George Rudé, *Interpretations of the French Revolution*, Historical Association Pamphlet 47 (General Series), London 1972; Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980; Part One', *New Left Review*, 120 (1980), 21-96; Paul Farmer, *France Reviews Its Revolutionary Origins*, New York 1963; Albert Soboul, 'L'Historiographie classique de la Révolution française', *La Pensée*, 177 (1974), 40-58. Stanley Mellon offers a masterly study of the historiography of the Restoration period in *The Political Uses of History*, Stanford 1958.
13. Farmer's book deals directly with this theme.
14. Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, revised edn, New York 1965; *A Decade of Revolution*, New York 1963.
15. Brinton, *Anatomy*, pp. 16-18.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5.
17. Brinton, *Decade of Revolution*, pp. 5, 26.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
19. A critical approach to this treatment of 'progress' in history is offered by Herbert Butterfield in *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London 1931.
20. R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, 2 vols, Princeton, NJ 1959, 1964.
21. J. M. Thompson, *The French Revolution*, Oxford 1943, cited in Frank A. Kafker and James M. Laux, eds, *The French Revolution: Conflicting Interpretations*, 2nd edn, New York 1976, p. 84.
22. Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, p. 25.
23. Besides the discussions of these connections in the works by Cobban, Brinton, Rudé, Farmer, and Mellon cited above, see A. Gerrard, *La Révolution française: mythes et interprétations*, Paris 1970.
24. Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 2 vols, Angers 1952.
25. Farmer, *Revolutionary Origins*, p. 38.
26. For a discussion of Taine, see Farmer, *Revolutionary Origins*, pp. 28-37; Rudé, *Interpretations*, pp. 9-11; Gerard, *Mythes et interprétations*, pp. 60-64.
27. Alphonse Aulard, *The French Revolution: A Political History*, 4 vols, New York 1910.
28. For an illuminating discussion of the special role which the Revolution and the Republic continued to play in left-wing ideology, see Ronald Tiersky, *French Communism, 1920-1972*, New York 1974.
29. Aulard, *French Revolution*, p. 9; p. 157; pp. 171-2.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
32. Jean Jaurès (ed. Albert Soboul), *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française*, 2 vols, Paris 1969.
33. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 29-33.
34. Albert Mathiez, *The French Revolution*, New York 1928; Rudé, *Interpretations*, pp. 19-20.
35. Mathiez, *French Revolution*, pp. 4-9, 327, 448-52.

36. C. E. Labrousse, *La crise de l'économie française à la fin de l'Ancien Régime et au début de la Révolution*, Paris 1944; *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris 1933.
37. Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, New York 1973; *Les Paysans du Nord pendant la Révolution française*, 2nd edn, Paris 1972.
38. Lefebvre, *Coming*, pp. 3-5.
39. Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution, 1787-1799*, 2 vols, London 1974; *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II: mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 2 juin-9 thermidor an II*, Paris 1958.
40. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, New York 1962.
41. Cobban, 'Myth of the French Revolution', *Social Interpretation*.
42. Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, pp. 54-67, 162-73.
43. George V. Taylor, 'Types of Capitalism in Eighteenth Century France', *English Historical Review*, lxxix (1964), 478-97; 'Noncapitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution', *American Historical Review*, lxxii (1967), 469-96; Elizabeth Eisenstein, 'Who Intervened in 1788?', *American Historical Review*, lxxi (1965), 77-103.
44. As summarized by William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, Oxford 1980. The development of this proposition can be followed in: Taylor, 'Types of Capitalism', 'Noncapitalist Wealth'; Denis Richet, 'Autours des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française: Elites et despotisme', *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, xxiv (1969), 1-23; François Furet, *Penser la Révolution*, Paris 1978 (recently translated as *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Cambridge 1981); Colin Lucas, 'Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution', *Past and Present*, 60 (1973), 84-126; 'Notable against Notable', *Times Literary Supplement*, May 8, 1981; Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, 'Aux origines de la Révolution: noblesse et bourgeoisie', *Annales: ESC*, xxx (1975), 265-78.
45. Richet, 'Origines idéologiques', p. 22. (my translation)
46. The theory of the *dérapiage* of the Revolution was first suggested, and then emphasized, by Furet and Richet in *La Révolution française*, 2nd edn, Paris 1973.
47. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, New York 1955, pp. 206-10.
48. Brinton, *Decade of Revolution*, pp. 26-7, 33-5.
49. Lucas, 'Notable against Notable'.
50. Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, pp. 126-8; *A History of Modern France*, vol. 1, Harmondsworth 1963, pp. 137-8, 226-8; Furet and Richet, *La Révolution française*, pp. 204-7, 211-13.
51. Cobban, *Social Interpretation*; Furet and Richet, *La Révolution française*; Louis Bergeron, in Furet, Mazaucic and Bergeron, 'The Sans Culottes and the French Revolution', in Jeffry Kaplow, *New Perspectives on the French Revolution*, New York 1965, pp. 226-53.
52. Furet, 'Le catéchisme révolutionnaire', in *Penser la Révolution*, pp. 145-52, 170-71.
53. Richet, 'Origines idéologiques', p. 22.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3. (my translation)

The Marxist Response

From the start, the revisionist interpretation of the French Revolution has been framed as much in terms of an attack upon Marxism itself as in terms of a new historiography. Cobban's challenge was indeed primarily an argument against incorporating Marxist theory into historical analysis, going so far as to attribute the historiography of the popular movement to the dictates of Marxism-Leninism.¹ Furet, similarly, indulged in a favorite liberal mode of criticism by discussing at length the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution in the terms of 'catechism'.² Aside from these glosses, however, it is widely felt that the revisionist debunking of bourgeois-capitalist social revolution stands as a sufficient repudiation of Marxist historical claims. From the point of view of a class analysis of historical development, then, the obvious questions must be: is there any validity to the revisionist challenge, and, if there is, does this truly repudiate Marx's contribution to class analysis?

Bourgeois Revolution in Marx's Thought

That the validity of Marxist analysis as a whole should appear to have been called into question is in some measure a reflection of the central position that the theory of bourgeois revolution has held in Marxism. The whole of Marx's early thought was oriented towards the questions raised by – and the world created by – the French Revolution.³ The conclusion that the French Revolution was indeed epochal and progressive, but only as the

achievement of the most advanced, and final stage of class society; which in turn was to be overthrown by a revolution of the proletariat, the 'universal class' of humanity, realizing true human emancipation: this was the distinctive and central conclusion of Marx's early maturity, which set him to the task of studying the bourgeois capitalist society that would produce the proletarian revolution.

That Marx's definitive statement of the concept of bourgeois revolution comes in the *Manifesto* – when he was rendering credit due to the bourgeoisie for their accomplishments, while proclaiming the time for their passing – is precisely indicative of the role the Revolution played in Marx's thought. The French Revolution appeared to be the most important expression of the epochal rise of the bourgeoisie, which, bringing in train modern industry and communications as well as the social relations of bourgeois society, had put the task of socialist revolution on the agenda. The direct fruits of bourgeois class revolution were political liberalism (which was an important asset for the proletariat as well), the sweeping away of feudal impediments to the growth of capitalist productive forces, and effective bourgeois class rule. These were the integral components of bourgeois society, aside from capitalism itself. Together with capitalism's constant revolutionizing of productive forces, they would figure in the ongoing development of class struggle and the growth of contradictions between society's creative potential and the constraints imposed by capitalist class relations of production.

One of the central problems of political theory which Marx faced between 1843 and 1848 was posed by the fact that Germany had not, like England and France, had its ancien régime transformed by bourgeois revolution. Would the proletariat and bourgeoisie *join* in making a liberal democratic revolution, as the bourgeoisie and the people had in France? Or would the proletariat instead be faced with a bourgeoisie that opted to stand with the absolutists and aristocrats – creating a very different struggle, with social implications reaching far beyond a joint program of republican democracy?

Hal Draper has examined the development of Marx's ideas on this aspect of bourgeois revolution in considerable detail.⁴ Draper points out that the *Manifesto* (written between December 1847 and January 1848) incorporated the idea that the bourgeoisie would *be compelled* to make a bourgeois democratic revolution, even if it would immediately be followed by proletarian revolution (though in previous years Marx and Engels

had thought otherwise).⁵ By 1850, however, Marx and Engels had come to the conclusion that the bourgeoisie would *not* be forced to lead a revolution merely because an aristocratic-absolutist old regime still held power. A revolutionary seizure of power by the bourgeoisie was neither actually *necessary* for the immediate development of capitalism, they decided, *nor likely* in the face of the social revolutionary demands of proletarians, petty bourgeois, and peasants.⁶ This area of Marxist revolutionary theory, particularly as it is applied outside the context of Western Europe (for instance, Russia) still raises one of the most contentious issues of early-twentieth-century Marxism: the character of revolution in societies where 'feudal' absolutism reigns, and whether or not a 'permanent revolution' can lead to socialism without an intervening stage of stable bourgeois ascendancy. It will suffice here to note the continued centrality of bourgeois revolution and its political implications, and to observe that discussion of the issue is still marked by positions staked out during the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky.⁷

Aside from this issue, however, it is important to note that while Marx continued to analyze the political situation in terms of the configuration of class struggle suggested by the concept of bourgeois revolution – the bourgeoisie struggling with the aristocracy for power and the establishment of liberal society, pushed from behind by the proletariat – after 1848 he tended to see *bourgeois-led revolution* as a thing of the past. In this regard the bourgeois of the nineteenth century were substantially different from those of the French and English Revolutions; although their overall class position was essentially the same. The bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century was not heroic, and would not risk its property and the maintenance of social order to overthrow a more or less accommodating absolutism and its feudal trappings. These goals, however, remained as part of the social ground-clearing necessary in order to realize the socialist future. The bourgeoisie might on occasion be goaded to take action in the ongoing struggle, but the real drive for bourgeois democracy would increasingly come from the proletariat, whose objectives of course went far beyond it.

In a sense, therefore, there was nothing more to be learned from bourgeois revolution as such – and Marx never returned to study the question seriously. Yet, at the same time, it has been treated by Marxists as the central point in the history of class society, because it either gives birth to, or becomes the task of, the autonomous class struggle of the proletariat. The class

analysis expressed by the theory of bourgeois revolution primarily concerns the change from a class struggle between aristocracy and bourgeoisie to the class struggle between bourgeois and proletarians. This class analysis has shaped the way Marxists have analyzed the development of capitalist society out of pre-capitalist agrarian societies, and how in turn capitalist society will develop to revolution and socialism.

The revolutionary transformation of capitalist society is the whole point of Marxism. Nothing is more indicative of its complete appropriation of the French Revolution for theoretical purposes than the use of 'bourgeois' as an exact synonym for the rigorously defined term 'capitalist', a terminology which also suggests the continuity of class relations between medieval burghers and contemporary capitalists. The importance of the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution within Marxism as a whole was further reinforced by the longstanding acceptance it enjoyed with official historiography. This confluence of Marxist and Republican interpretations marked what seemed to be the single most influential and sustained inroad of Marxist ideas upon generally accepted 'bourgeois' social and historical thought. The very reluctance of conservatives such as Brinton to recognize the Marxist account seemed a satisfying confirmation of its inherent value, and the importance of its otherwise widespread acceptance.

The concept of bourgeois revolution was referred to by Marxists with easy confidence, and it became a benchmark of class analysis, as well as a claim-stake to historical validity. These traits are nowhere more obvious than in Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Revolution*.⁸ The epochal character of the Revolution made the success of the concept of bourgeois class revolution doubly significant; for, however much the inevitability of proletarian revolution might be doubted, there would always remain this generally accepted, prior instance of class revolution.

The concept of bourgeois revolution, therefore, has been consistently treated as a central aspect of Marxist theory. Though after 1848 Marx and Engels occupied themselves with the theory of *socialist* revolution, based on developments of the nineteenth-century workers' movements, they freely and frequently referred back to the theory of bourgeois revolution. Subsequently, it has been used by Marxists as an analytical tool in approaching other issues of contemporary relevance, and it has of course figured centrally in Marxist historiography as such. For all these reasons, and given the ideological character of the

revisionist attack, it is not surprising that the general Marxist response to revisionism was to stand firm.

The Initial Marxist Response

The very first salvo of the revisionist attack came in Cobban's 1955 inaugural lecture at the University of London.⁹ Lefebvre's quick reply granted no ground to Cobban. He argued that, through a wrongheaded denial that payment of feudal dues meant the same thing as 'feudalism', and through an over-emphasis upon the occupations of the men in the Assembly, Cobban was attempting to conjure away the reality of a social revolution.¹⁰ The class interpretation of the Revolution would not yield to mere semantics or conjurers' tricks, and Cobban's arguments were not to be taken seriously.

The history of the French Revolution which François Furet and Denis Richet produced in the late 1960s, however, was recognized to be a fundamental challenge to the Marxist conception of the Revolution as a 'bloc'. The convergence of the Cobban, Taylor, Eisenstein line of criticism with the favorable reception accorded to this revisionist history prompted a more substantial Marxist response, in a collection of critical essays by Claude Mazauric.¹¹ Mazauric exhibited a more thorough understanding of the revisionist challenge than had Lefebvre (having a great deal more of it to contend with), and he both took note of the *polemical* purposes of the revisionists and laid bare the core of their argument. The key to their interpretation was the concept of *dérapiage*, and Mazauric argued that it was untenable, because the bourgeois component of the Revolution – headed by the assemblies – could not be considered to be a thing wholly apart from the popular components. The peasant and Parisian popular movements of 1789 had been both consistent with and essential to the revolution of the bourgeoisie. Despite the real independence of the four component movements of the social interpretation, their coming together in 1789 was a single revolution, and not three revolutions 'telescoped'; 1789 was a liberal bourgeois revolution supported by the people. The bourgeoisie relied upon the people against counter-revolution, and 1792 was no *dérapiage*, but was necessary to maintain this unity of the nation.¹²

Mazauric failed to take seriously enough the fact which he himself suggested – that Furet and Richet did not accept the

opposition of 'aristocratic' and 'bourgeois' as in any real sense a *fundamental* conflict. In their analysis, it was not the objectives of the Revolution which were in real contradiction with the counter-revolutionaries, but the positions of power assumed – and sought after – by the revolutionary groups. Furet made this clear in his attack on the 'neo-Jacobin' 'catechism' of the Marxists. He argued that structural crisis caused by growth had opened a social rupture which gave play to the political dynamics of ambitious 'elites', including the 'micro-elite' of the Paris sections; but that otherwise this course of political development had no social basis. Indeed, as Lucas has noted, the fervor with which some revisionists – notably Chaussinand-Nogaret and Doyle – have embraced the idea that the Revolution was the product of a single but heterogeneous elite of the propertied makes it hard to understand what the revolutionary work of the Constituent Assembly was all about. Notwithstanding this tendency, it is because the revisionists have so successfully demonstrated that no significant social frontier existed between *noblesse* and *bourgeoisie* that the bourgeois revolution against feudalism today stands challenged.

The difficulty for the French Marxists has been that, as even they have freely admitted, it is simply not true that the bourgeoisie was a well-defined capitalist class which rose up to overthrow an unproblematically feudal society and its fetters, as a straightforward reading of the *Manifesto* might suggest. The social interpretation which sought to express the underlying 'truth' of bourgeois revolution had once been attacked only by reactionaries, and as a whole; it now had to withstand an exacting liberal criticism of its constituent parts, based upon a wealth of detailed research. Since the evidence did not immediately support the simple interpretation of a capitalist bourgeois class overthrowing a feudal nobility, a major reversal of the balance between history and theory was called for. Where once the history of the Revolution stood in testimony to the strength of Marxist social theory, now it would have to be theory that buttressed and 'clarified' Marxist history. Recent years have in fact seen a significant amount of theoretical debate among French Marxist historians, debate which has been impelled and inspired by a general resurgence of Marxist theorizing in the wake of the many New Left movements.

The New Approach to Bourgeois Revolution

A new theoretical direction was announced in 1970 by Régine Robin, with her publication of *La Société française en 1789: Semur-en-Auxois*.¹³ Hardly appreciated for its ground-breaking and suggestive theoretical contributions, this book offered a historical overview of the ancien régime that *agreed* with, and added to, the evidence that the revisionists had mustered, but combined it with an extremely sophisticated, structuralist version of Marxist class analysis based upon the *articulation of modes of production*. The fundamental methodological problems of this analysis – which draws heavily on the work of Nicos Poulantzas – will be addressed in a subsequent chapter. Yet, simply as a Marxist analysis that accepted much of the revisionist case against the social interpretation, it is a significant work, and it necessarily had an effect upon the arguments of Albert Soboul and the other Marxists who rejected the revisionist claims outright. Robin's work has demonstrated that it is not only liberals who have recognized the weaknesses of the orthodox interpretation.

Robin opens her book with a chapter that outlines a methodology for the historical analysis of social relations and class structure, more rigorously than one might expect from even a Marxist historian. She acknowledges that the central issue in coming to terms with the society of the ancien régime is understanding the class character of the *noblesse* and *bourgeoisie*. This understanding must, however, be *scientific*, by which she means that the real structure of social relations – in terms of the *constitutive modes of production* of that specific 'social formation' – must be distinguished from the superficial *appearance* of social relations, the *ideological* form in which they are known by contemporaries.¹⁴ On these grounds, she insists upon a distinction between the 'bourgeoisie' as a strictly defined class of the capitalist mode of production – the capitalist class – and the '*bourgeoisie d'ancien régime*'. The latter she takes to be a much broader class peculiar to the social formation of the ancien régime, created through the *articulation* of social relations of the capitalist mode of production within the structure of social relations of the ancien régime, originally characterized by the *feudal* mode of production.¹⁵ Although the terms with which Robin makes this distinction will be rejected on methodological grounds, it does point in the direction of a distinction which ultimately must be made, in quite different terms, between a

capitalist class and the French *bourgeoisie*.

Robin's argument draws upon Poulantzas's insistent and complex elaboration of the structuralist conception of 'mode of production'.¹⁶ In these terms, it is argued that the ancien régime was a social formation *in transition* between feudalism and capitalism: a unique, dynamic, and transitory structure of social relations – predominantly characterized by the feudal mode of production, but increasingly *penetrated* by relations of the capitalist mode of production.¹⁷ This penetration involved the transformation over time of many elements of the social formation, increasingly giving a new character to its social relations, but not restructuring it in any systematic way. The structural unity of the society lay precisely in this transitional character, a dynamic unity born of the transforming penetration of the old by the new. Most importantly, the modes of production are not seen merely to coexist, in confrontation. From the point of view of the articulation of modes of production, it is essential that the modes not be taken to be merely overlapping or opposed, but fundamentally discrete, configurations of productive relations. The penetration is not a juxtaposition of modes of production, but an *interaction*.

In seriously addressing the need for a systematic and consistent correspondence between Marxist social theory and historiography, Robin raises a number of profoundly important issues which must be considered in detail in later chapters. Her own approach to these issues is informed by a structuralist conception of 'mode of production'. The difference between the capitalist and feudal modes of production does not coincide with a vulgar distinction between 'feudal' agriculture and 'capitalist' development in industrial enterprise. Nor is it to be attributed to those differences in social relations which are apparent at the 'surface' of society, differences between the *bourgeoisie* and the *noblesse* simply as they were manifested in the ancien régime. Neither, however, are the surface relations of the social 'superstructure' to be taken as mere ideological trappings, by which the underlying 'real' class relations are disguised. Instead, for Robin, the differences between the capitalist and feudal modes of production lie precisely in the fundamental differences that exist in the characteristic structural relationship between juridical, political, and ideological relations, on the one hand, and directly 'economic' relations of production, on the other, as they are specific to each.

In offering this analysis, Robin draws upon Marx's extremely

important discussion of pre-capitalist surplus extraction, as found in Volume III of *Capital*, in the chapter on 'The Genesis of Capitalist Ground-Rent'.¹⁸ Marx emphasized the profound difference between *capitalist* agriculture, in which land is – as capital – in the direct possession and control of the capitalist, and only worked by hired labor under his command, and pre-capitalist, peasant-based modes of production, in which individual peasant households or the peasant community are in possession of the land, and in control of its production.

As Robin makes clear, Marx's analysis locates the key difference in what appears to be the strictly *economic* character of capitalist surplus extraction: in capitalism, contractually purchased labor-power is employed to produce *surplus-value* – the excess of the value produced through the purchase of labor-power over the value of the wages that purchased it. The appropriation of surplus takes place *immediately*, at the point of production: all of a day's production belongs immediately to the capitalist as it is produced, by mutually agreed economic contract. Because the producer has been completely separated from the means of production, there is no need for non-economic coercion *within* capitalism's fundamental exploitive relationship of wage-labor. (Note, however, that the social context in which the preponderant wealth of one class is produced by another through 'purely' economic relations is itself predicated upon the existence of extra-economic coercion: both historically, in the 'primitive accumulation' by which the producers as a class were deprived of the means of subsistence in the first place; and in the ongoing social relations of property law and the state which are necessary for 'purely' economic relations to operate.)

It is very often assumed, as Cobban assumed, that 'class' is *in general* – in all societies – a category of 'the economy', as it appears to be in capitalism. In pre-capitalist societies, however, the extraction of surplus from peasant producers is necessarily conditioned by the fact that the peasants remain in direct possession of the means of production. Exploitation, then, must either take place through compulsory *corvée*, or take place *after* production. In either case, this necessitates an extra-economic element of coercion – juridical, political, military – *directly* in the exploitive relationship:

Under such conditions the surplus-labour for the nominal owner of the land can only be extracted from them by other than economic pressure, whatever the form assumed may be.¹⁹

Marx's observations on the relationship of labor-rent and pre-capitalist ground-rent to the structure of political relations and state power are of central methodological significance in the analysis of pre-capitalist class relations, and, as will be considered later, they offer a key to understanding his historical materialism generally.

For Robin, the conclusion to be drawn from these passages of Marx has been that the *extra-economic* character of feudal surplus extraction is manifested in the juridico-political and ideological categories of *Estates* and *orders*. In Robin's conception, 'it cannot be maintained that there is on one hand the superstructure, a simple juridical mask, and on the other the profound reality, class'.

If 'ordre' is superstructure, it is in a mode of production where the superstructural plays a fundamental role.²⁰

Therefore, in the feudal mode of production, unlike the capitalist mode, class is most definitely *not* an 'economic' category, not even in its surface appearance. In the ancien régime – understood as a social formation characterized both by the feudal mode of production and by increasing articulation of capitalist social relations – the fundamentally *contradictory* nature of 'class' in its feudal and capitalist forms made for an extremely complex articulation of their social intersection, and for a dynamic transition.²¹

This structuralist elaboration of the class relations belonging to particular modes of production, and their articulation, provided Robin with the grounds for an original reconciliation of the revisionist historical challenge with a Marxist analysis. Robin accepted that the picture of the bourgeoisie and nobility of the ancien régime that emerges from historical evidence differs greatly from the impression given by the established Marxist interpretation. Emphasizing this departure from 'orthodox' Marxism, she elaborated upon her method of analysis in a subsequent article, and brought her argument to fruition as a fully differentiated *new* Marxist analysis in a 1976 article written with Michel Grenon.²² The essence of the argument is that one must base Marxist historical analyses on a 'proper' reading of Marx's theory, not on common-sensical or vulgarly 'empiricist' distortions of it, and that only through a proper (structuralist) reading of Marx can the Revolution be situated in the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

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To summarize: Grenon and Robin agree with the revisionists that the bourgeoisie (*d'ancien régime*) and the nobility were both involved with both commerce and 'seigneurial' agriculture – with the rentier economy in general; that they intermarried and freely exchanged status; and that both were coming to share, in a variety of sometimes conflicting forms, in the ideology which corresponded to the increasing 'articulation' of capitalist social relations in the social formation.²³ The ancien régime was still primarily feudal in character; but being *in transition*, it increasingly both accommodated, and was dislocated by, the penetration of capitalist relations. Capitalism as such – the full complement of social relations of the capitalist mode of production, requiring the dissolution of corporative restrictions in production, free and general commodification of labor-power, and free and general circulation of capital – did not and could not as yet exist. Capitalism was the society *towards* which the ancien régime was in transition. On these grounds they also argue, following Engels here instead of Poulantzas, that the absolutist state was neither feudal nor capitalist, but, again, *transitional*. The state did not simply balance the nobility and the bourgeoisie – who were not in simple opposition – but corresponded to the specific, complex whole of the social formation's transitional social relations. In every sense, they emphasize, the feudal and capitalist modes of production were interactively conflated, not 'juxtaposed'.²⁴

The transition had proceeded during the course of the eighteenth century through the penetration of *merchant* capital into formerly feudal relations:

This development undermining the very foundations of feudalism meanwhile had specific effects at the level of superstructure which appeared, from the second half of the century, in an organic crisis of all ideological apparatuses, in a crisis of the state apparatus, in short, in a crisis which touched all the elements of *the superstructure*.²⁵

This, then, was the origin of the Revolution: the crisis of a superstructure in transition. Not, they argue, a contradiction between an obsolete feudal preponderance in the superstructure, on one hand, and the growth of capitalist forces of production in the base, on the other, as has been suggested in 'mechanical' Marxist theories. Rather, they insist, it is the *conflation* of the relations of feudalism and capitalism which is central to transition, and which necessitates the transformation

of the *entire* superstructure in the Revolution:

We see . . . that it is not enough to suppress feudalism to let ideological apparatuses that were *already* there but fettered burst forth and develop. The revolution suppressed or transformed radically all the ideological apparatuses of the social formation, and not solely those which were tied by nature to the feudal mode of production.²⁶

The Revolution was the specific form taken in resolution of the *superstructural crisis* of transition, according to Grenon and Robin; whereas the transition itself took the form of what Marx described as the *less revolutionary* of two possible paths to capitalism.²⁷ This path of the transition itself, which has come to be called 'Way 2', involves the ascendancy of *commercial capital* over the production process; whereas, in 'Way 1', the 'really revolutionary' path of transition, 'the producer becomes merchant and capitalist'.²⁸ While less revolutionary in its social form, Way 2 still required a resolution of the contradictions between the entrenched feudal forms of the superstructure and the needs of capitalist economic liberalism.

Yet, continue Grenon and Robin, it was not intrinsically *necessary* in the development and spread of commercial capital – Way 2 – that the superstructural crisis of the ancien régime should take the specific form that it did. Nor was it 'necessary' for resolution of this crisis to take the form of a revolutionary shift *from Way 2 to Way 1*. This shift occurred as a result of the historically *specific* process of resolution, which emerged in the form of the French Revolution, by which capitalist producers – above all, the 'rural bourgeoisie' of the *fermiers* and *laboureurs* (wealthy peasants) – became mobilized to undertake the transformation of society themselves.

Though the transition in dominant mode of production implicit in the idea of 'bourgeois revolution' is historically necessary, it is *not* necessary for that transition to take the specific form of *social revolution*:

This passage to economic liberalism . . . did it necessitate the economic or social dispossession of the nobility? Did it necessitate *a priori* the subordination of merchant capital? Put otherwise, did it necessitate the decisive intervention of the direct producers, both on the economic level and on the political level? What explains the specific role of the latter in the French Revolution is the overdetermination of the contradictions of the social formation in 1789, and

not, we hold, a necessity inscribed in the actual evolution of merchant capital in eighteenth-century France.²⁹

Though this accentuates the historical specificity of the French Revolution, it does so by making the process of transition more important than bourgeois revolution, eliminating altogether the necessity of a bourgeois social revolution. Grenon and Robin claim that it is essential to shift the terrain of research on the Revolution, to situate it in the 'problematic' of transition. The 'strategic place of *bourgeois revolution*' would be maintained in the form of 'the key political moment in the phase of transition'.³⁰

This elaborate structuralist analysis not only claims to be itself Marxist, it denies in turn that the 'orthodox' interpretation had ever been Marxist. Grenon and Robin insist that Soboul and the other 'established' Marxists have joined in an error which is precisely symmetrical to that of the revisionists – for all have failed to read Marx in terms of the structure of his analysis. The revisionists, failing to recognize the social revolution of Way 1 as being as much a part of the 'problematic' of transition as the gradual liberal reform of Way 2 (which they greatly prefer), can only conceive of the course of the Revolution as *déravage*. The established Marxists, failing to recognize the character of the transition which had already been underway through Way 2, tend to *venerate (sacraliser)* the social revolution and its Jacobinism, without acknowledging the *specificity* of its 'really revolutionary' character or recognizing that it was not intrinsically 'necessary'.

In essence, Grenon and Robin argue that both the revisionist challenge and the orthodox interpretation have misunderstood Marx, that what they have each struggled either to disprove or to maintain was in fact no more than a *mechanistic* reading of Marx's analysis. They go so far as to assert that the revisionists' empiricism confronts no more than a 'Marxism' 'inventé de toute pièce, pour la mieux disqualifier'.³¹ Yet at the same time, they realize that it is only with a 'double political risk' – both of being accused of neglecting the class struggle, and of alienating the Marxist 'establishment' – that they dare oppose this mechanistic reading. Robin's analysis of the ancien régime had already been severely criticized by Elizabeth Guibert-Sledziewski for its 'failure' to juxtapose the feudal and capitalist modes of production in contradiction to one another, in a form that necessitated a *revolutionary* transition from one to another.³² This criticism,

they agreed, was symptomatic of an insufficiently theorized Marxism which accorded 'la première place à la société capitaliste'. In their view, this error regrettably drew attention away from and minimized the importance of the actual transitional process of 'economic revolution'.

Where the revisionists have pounced upon the orthodox interpretation as an authentic expression of Marxism – and therefore as a perfect cautionary example of the supposed historical distortions produced by its 'polemical' conception of class struggle – the structuralist account denies that the orthodox interpretation is an expression of Marxism at all. The revisionists, understandably, have not accorded much attention to this new wrinkle. Furet, however, did credit Robin with 'the merit of taking Marxism seriously', and Geoffrey Ellis has recognized in Grenon and Robin's article an 'ingenious' effort to rescue a Marxist interpretation from the evidence.³³ Yet both argue that the undeniable rigor and consistency of the structuralist argument does not improve its 'operative value' in dealing with concrete historical processes; they argue that though *this* Marxism may agree with the facts, it does so only by means of an arbitrary method. Structuralist Marxism, they assert, offers an artificial means of reconciling the predetermined Marxist conception of historical development – which is said to be too global in perspective to offer concrete and short-term analyses – with the actual historical evidence; as such, it can only interpretively follow history, not engage it. Furet and Ellis both accuse the structuralist analysis of simply attempting to rescue the basic concept of bourgeois revolution by finding for it a place in the articulation of class forces in transition. This, they hold, ignores the fact that the socio-economic structures of both the Empire and the Restoration were *fundamentally the same* as that of the ancien régime.³⁴

There also remains the fact that the structuralists are ultimately trying to save Marx from himself. For – irrespective of other readings of Marx – the orthodox interpretation of the Revolution simply cannot be fairly viewed as a distortion of Marx's own analysis. There can be no doubt that Robin's structuralist argument does displace bourgeois revolution from its truly central position as the condition which made the 'economic revolution' of transition possible; nor that Marx himself *did* place it in that central position, 'bursting asunder' the feudal 'fetters' on productive forces. There is equally little doubt that Marx described the relations between aristocracy and bourgeoisie – feudalism and capitalism – in terms of confrontation, 'juxtaposi-

tion': class struggle between feudal and capitalist classes over political ascendancy.

As previously noted, Marx did come to accept that a bourgeois social revolution was less than strictly *necessary* for the emergence and development of capitalist society. Yet he never doubted that the social revolution in France had been based upon the fundamental conflict of capitalist bourgeois and feudal aristocrats, nor did he abandon this general paradigm of opposed bourgeois and feudal class interests. Certainly not in the case of Prussia, despite its default of bourgeois revolution; and though he acknowledged that a great part of the English aristocracy had gone over to bourgeois social relations, this did not change the necessary character of the struggle, in his analysis. Quite aside from the validity of its methodology, therefore, it might be asked if the structuralist analysis does not beg as many questions as it answers in claiming to oppose only a mechanistic 'distortion' of Marxism.

Reformulation of the Orthodox Account

Before 1976, Albert Soboul simply refused to credit the revisionists with having presented a serious challenge to the social interpretation. In a 1974 review of the 'classical historiography' of the Revolution and its recent criticism, Soboul dismissed the revisionist argument as no more than an ideological denial of the concept of bourgeois revolution.³⁵ He maintained that the absurd and ideological nature of this denial was revealed by the fact that the Revolution had been conceived in these terms in an unbroken line that stretched back from Lefebvre, not only to Aulard, but to the liberal historians of the Restoration, and even to Barnave in 1792. This was the line of 'classical' historical thought, from which only an ideologically motivated interpretation could dissent. Aside from Guibert-Sledziewski's cautionary rejoinder to Robin, it seemed that the established Marxist interpretation could be upheld without concern. With the growth of structuralist Marxist theorization, however, culminating in a depiction of the established conception as at best untheorized, and possibly a vulgar distortion, it became necessary for Soboul not only to reply seriously, but to demonstrate the conceptual grounding of his orthodox analysis in Marx's social theory.

The year following publication of the article by Grenon and Robin, therefore, brought a reformulation of the orthodox inter-

pretation by Soboul, wholly in terms of 'the transition'.³⁶ Soboul went to precisely the same texts as Grenon and Robin – and even took account of the substantial Marxist debate over the transition which had been based on these texts – in order to argue that it was the supposedly 'vulgar' Marxism of the theory of bourgeois revolution that offered the true Marxist theory of transition.

The key to Soboul's analysis was the way in which he addressed the question of the bourgeoisie and capitalism. Soboul had always insisted that the bourgeoisie was not a homogeneous class – a fact to which he attributed the political differences of the Feuillants, Girondins, Jacobins, etc. – and he had further taken a very broad definition of the bourgeoisie, including master artisans and shopkeepers (who constituted as much as *two-thirds* of the heterogeneous whole he described).³⁷ In restating his interpretation, Soboul now emphasized the difference between the *haute bourgeoisie* of commercial capital, closely tied to the absolutist state and always ready to compromise with the aristocracy, and the productive 'industrial' capitalists of the lesser and petty bourgeoisie.³⁸

This distinction seems to parallel that made by Robin. Soboul, however, not only carried this to a different conclusion, he immediately differed from Robin by his less restrictive conception of 'capitalist producers' (Robin's 'bourgeoisie' proper), for he included the artisans and the whole of the economically independent peasantry. In addition, despite the assimilation of the *haute bourgeoisie* to the society of the aristocracy, Soboul maintained that seigneurial feudalism was still vital, still feudal, still the dominant fact of agrarian life, and still the foundation of the aristocracy:

The problem of feudal survivals and of the seigneurial regime is at the heart of the society of the ancien régime: it remains at the heart of the French Revolution.³⁹

Within the framework of the theory of transition and the 'really revolutionary' route to capitalism, Soboul made precisely the same arguments he always had, but shifted his emphasis downwards to the petty bourgeoisie in general, and the better-off peasantry in particular.

Soboul argued that 'the transition' is precisely the historical emergence of the capitalist economic order from the feudal economic order; consequently, each nation's transition to capitalism is distinguished by the *specific* process by which its feudal

agrarian relations come to be dissolved and the means by which, in the process, its peasant producers are differentiated.

In other words, the structure of modern capitalism has been determined, in each country, by what were, in the course of the phase of transition, the internal relations between the decomposition of feudal landed property and the formation of industrial capital.⁴⁰

The focus of this analysis, drawing on the ideas put forward during the important debate sparked by publication of Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, is the actual transformation in the social relations of production, rather than abstract consideration of whether commercial or 'industrial' capital was socially predominant overall.⁴¹ In the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the feudal extra-economic extraction of surplus – and the purely commercial forms of 'capital' which are involved in the post-production redistribution of surplus through profitable trade – must give way to the very different production of *surplus-value*, which is peculiar to the 'industrial' form of capital characteristic of the capitalist mode of production, even in agriculture.

The dominance of profit-making merchant capital over actual producers, which is the central condition of 'Way 2', does not constitute by itself a transition to capitalism, however large the scale of capitals. Genuine transformation of the fundamental relations of production is required, by which *production itself*, and not merely the producers, is subordinated to capital. As the means of production are themselves transformed into capital, the definitive form of capital becomes the means of production, rather than the commercial consignment: wage-labor and 'industrial' capital are born. One of the major advances in the theory of transition, as Soboul observed, was recognition of the role of *agrarian* capital in this development – a recognition, facilitated by the fact that the English Civil War had been led by a landed gentry, that was inspired by the need to identify an *intrinsic* dynamism within the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

From this theoretical perspective, Soboul disagreed entirely with Robin's analysis of the 'articulation' of capitalist social relations in a social formation conflating the two modes of production. He argued that, while it was true that the commercial capital of the *haute bourgeoisie* was indeed allied to the feudal agrarian regime, it was not through the *gros fermiers* or *fermiers généraux* of that regime that capitalism was emerging, but from

among the 'paysans du type yeoman, *laboureur*, ou *kulak*'.⁴² Indeed, Soboul went on to argue, drawing on the work of the Russian historian A. Ado, that the later weakness of capitalist growth in France was largely due to the persistence of large-scale property, preventing a sufficient restructuring of agriculture in favor of dynamic small- and medium-scale peasant capitalism.⁴³ This is a suggestive reformulation, marking a notable departure from the usual assumptions of the classic conception of bourgeois revolution – particularly striking in its application to this archetypal bourgeois revolution. Yet its novelty has been little appreciated, or explored, because it occurs in the context of Soboul's reaffirmation of long-standing Marxist claims about bourgeois class revolution.

For Soboul, then, the coming together of *haute bourgeoisie* and *noblesse* was not an aspect of the transition by Way 2 at all, but a characteristic aspect of the original *feudal* structure of the ancien régime. The French route to capitalism lay with the direct producers, and with the fundamental restructuring of society *from below* to remove the barriers to productive growth (if, unfortunately, only incompletely), in the 'really revolutionary' way. Soboul thus insisted that the orthodox interpretation of a *necessary* bourgeois-capitalist social revolution – requiring popular radicalism and mobilization to be realized – was entirely sustained, though with a more pronounced emphasis on the petty rural bourgeoisie. The complex political struggle which arose against the ossified feudal and corporatist ancien régime was nuanced by the ambiguous position of the commercial and rentier bourgeoisie, but driven forward by the numerous proto-capitalist *laboueurs* and artisans, with their organic ties to the popular masses. Transition to capitalism by way of compromise between feudal aristocracy and capitalist bourgeoisie, Soboul held, might occur where, as in Italy, there were no grounds for the alliance between urban bourgeois and peasant masses that made possible a true bourgeois social revolution.⁴⁴ In France such a non-revolutionary compromise was not possible; the cutting edge of capitalist development – in cottage industry as well as agriculture – lay with the lesser 'rural bourgeoisie', below the plane of compromise, in contact with the masses and directly in conflict with feudalism.

Social revolution, Soboul maintained, is in fact a necessary development wherever capitalism emerges from petty bourgeois production and challenges the feudal order – which for its part is able only to tighten the screws of the seigneurial regime to

sustain itself. In his last major statement of this interpretation, Soboul emphasized that real revolution is necessarily *social* revolution; that in revolution, fundamental social relations of the old society are necessarily destroyed in the crucible of violent class struggle, to be replaced by new relations corresponding to the 'level of productive forces'.⁴⁵ Revolution is to be distinguished not only from *coup d'état*, but especially from mere *reform*:

Reform is not a revolution stretched out in time; reform and revolution are not distinguished by their duration, but by their content. Reform or revolution? It is not a question of choosing a longer or shorter route leading to the same result, but of specifying an end: to wit, either of the establishment of a new society, or of superficial modifications to the old society.⁴⁶

The very heart of *revolution* is the destruction of the old order to clear ground for the new, and the concept must not be 'diluted' by the notion of transition through gradual reform. It goes without saying that if a revolution was indeed necessary for the transition, the French Revolution must have been it. Seen in this light, the orthodox interpretation seems both Marxist and uniquely correct, while the structuralist version stands accused of failing to draw the profound distinction between revolutionary change and reform. As she and Grenon had anticipated, Robin is charged with forgetting the class struggle: Soboul asserts that her perspective approaches that of Richet, denying the essential character of the Revolution and conceiving of it only as a reformist reorganization of the superstructure, rather than as the very means and substance of social transformation.

The Balance of Challenge and Response

Important issues have been raised by this Marxist debate over interpretation of the Revolution, and both sides have made new and serious approaches to Marx's thought as well as to the historical evidence. There are still further grounds for challenge and counter-challenge between the structuralist and established Marxist positions, each making a claim for its own 'orthodoxy'. Yet it is instructive to view this sophisticated theoretical infighting from the perspective of the revisionist critics, who have successfully shattered the general approval once enjoyed by the social interpretation. The unmistakable impression is one of

Marxists desperately clinging to Marx, searching for a means to salvage Marx's historical account. Perhaps Soboul has undertaken an intellectual *restoration*, while Robin an intellectual *reclamation*; but both are more concerned with 'validating' Marxism than with testing it.

Both Robin and Soboul, as Marxists, take as *given* that the Revolution was a bourgeois revolution situated in the transition from the feudal mode of production to the capitalist mode of production. Since this has been a central element in Marxist thought, and Marx himself unquestionably held to it, they – as Marxists – have presumed the fundamental necessity of maintaining this point; they have taken for granted that it is in some sense true. Each, then, defines what they believe to be *Marxist and true*, taking first this premise and then considering the historical evidence regarding the Revolution and the emergence of capitalism. They differ in the way they propose to 'read' Marx and this evidence, but each takes for granted that whatever is 'essential' to Marx's analysis will be retained.

Two questions need to be raised here. In the first place, are either of these Marxist interpretations *historically correct*: are they consistent with the evidence, do they adequately take account of enough of the evidence, are they not merely logical constructions but also methodologically sound? In the second place, can *either* of these interpretations truly be said to be *Marxist* in conception?

With regard to the first question, there is on the one hand little doubt that, despite Soboul's defense of the established interpretation, the ample evidence and observations adduced by the revisionists as to the character of society between 1787 and 1815 pose a substantial challenge to the Marxist orthodoxy. Robin's interpretation, on the other hand, draws its strength precisely from incorporating the damaging evidence. Aside from the methodological issues that remain to be explored, however, the criticism which Colin Lucas made of the revisionist interpretation clearly applies to Robin as well: if social revolution was not fundamentally *necessary* to the transition, which was already proceeding through penetration of the social formation by merchant capital, how is the sustained revolutionary transformation carried through by the Constituent Assembly – which had no discernible connection with the 'capitalist producers' of a more revolutionary Way 1 – to be explained?

The second of these questions has of course already been asked by Soboul and Robin of each other. On the surface it

historical problems faced by the idea of bourgeois revolution have long been obvious. In terms of evidence, Cobban's challenge retains the greatest force. Its thrust has been somewhat obscured by the revisionists' insistence that there had been a single propertied 'elite', with no substantial basis for struggle between opposed social groups. Yet even if this virtually non-conflictual interpretation could be rejected out of hand, Cobban's original challenge would still stand: the Revolution was not a *capitalist* transformation of society.

The impact of the evidence, Cobban realized from the first, precisely paralleled the explosion of the 'myth' of bourgeois revolution in the case of the English Revolution. Here too, Marxist historians had sought to fill in the social history of bourgeois revolution, conforming to the description contained in the *Manifesto* and embellished upon slightly in other texts. At first, again, the analysis and class categories were seen to be unambiguous, even though English Marxists were faced with a revolution led by landed gentry, in an even more profoundly agrarian society than eighteenth-century France. These Marxists, however, were able to draw upon more of Marx's own analysis to provide nuance, because of his familiarity with English economic history. The relations of the bourgeoisie and the lesser members of the landed class, the capitalist tendencies of the latter – such issues were given a more theoretically informed treatment by Christopher Hill and other Marxists in 1948 than were comparable issues in the context of the 'classical' French bourgeois revolution.⁴⁷ Still, it was the 'new gentry' which were seen to be joining with the *bourgeoisie* – and their alliance would always be abbreviated as 'the bourgeoisie', not 'the gentry'. The assumption was always made that however rural industry might be, and however important the capitalist agriculture of the gentry, there was indeed a *bourgeoisie* behind the revolution.⁴⁸

Yet over the next two decades it came to be realized that the evidence did not clearly support this classic account. While still regarded as a bourgeois revolution, its specific class alignments increasingly were blurred over, while particular aspects were given selective emphasis. When Hill produced a major history of the era of the Civil War in the late 1960s, he avoided any clear statement on the bourgeois class character of the revolution. Instead, he suggested only that 'the civil war which began with a revolt of the nobles ended with a struggle between opposed social classes'.⁴⁹ In context, this apparently refers to the emer-

would seem to require some preliminary agreement as to what in fact constitutes a Marxist analysis. The specific character of Marx's methodology will be addressed in a later chapter. There are, however, immediate historical reasons for doubting whether either 'Marxist' interpretation, or for that matter Marx's own account of 'bourgeois revolution', is really consistent with the theoretical principles which Marx put forward.

The structuralist and 'orthodox' positions sharply disagree on how to appropriate Marx's analysis of bourgeois revolution and the transition to capitalism. Structuralist Marxism claims to be grounded in the logic of Marx's system of analysis; an elaboration upon the *fundamental* concepts of Marxism, in terms of a logically structured whole, with the purpose of 'clarifying' the analysis and allowing its application to other contexts. This structuralist approach emphasizes that experience is appropriated only through concepts – not 'directly', as empiricists presume – and that Marxism is distinguished by the rigorous and *scientific* character of its concepts. The key to Marxism, it is argued, is that its concepts critically penetrate the veils of ideological distortion, including both 'common sense' and formal bourgeois ideology. The orthodox Marxists prefer to take their account of bourgeois revolution straight, without the methodological preoccupations of the structuralists. They are, however, no less certain that Marxism represents scientific knowledge employed to counter bourgeois ideology.

Yet, it must be asked whether the ideas which both positions take to be central to a Marxist analysis of the French Revolution – bourgeois-class social revolution as part of the epochal transition from feudalism to capitalism – actually have the critical character of Marx's social theory, piercing the veils of liberal ideology. This question cuts across the issue of which camp can more correctly interpret and apply Marx's own historical assertions – assertions which in any case will be seen to conflict with his analysis of *class* – to ask whether these 'central' concepts can be said to be *Marxist* at all. There are, it will be seen, three sets of reasons for questioning the theory of bourgeois revolution put forward by Marx: it is not consistent with the methodological principles which Marx himself worked out in his studies; it is not consistent with the historical evidence in even the two major cases for which it is claimed; and it is in its origins actually a *liberal* conception – one which reflects, not criticizes, bourgeois ideology.

Putting aside the methodological issue for the moment, the

ging struggle between the propertied and the small producers. Although this may suggest a parallel with the course of the French Revolution between 1787 and 1795, and perhaps suggests the emergence of capitalist society, it is quite unrelated to the dynamics of bourgeois revolution as such. It simply was no longer possible to make a stronger claim for class struggle – as Cobban had noted, the idea of an English bourgeois class revolution had already been discredited.⁵⁰

Indeed, the evidence that there was *no* struggle between self-conscious classes, and certainly no meaningful sense in which a bourgeoisie can be said to have made a social revolution against a ruling class of feudal aristocrats, has only grown. Robbin, in fact, actually justified her novel analysis of the ancien régime by noting that the 'bourgeois revolution in England was able without paradox to be led by a part of the nobility'.⁵¹ Hill himself has even more recently argued that the concept of bourgeois revolution does *not* mean a revolution 'made by or consciously willed by the bourgeoisie', but rather one which creates the conditions necessary for the development of capitalist society.⁵² Robert Brenner has even suggested that the evidence instead indicates that the conflict of the Civil War first arose between virtually the whole of an agrarian capitalist landowning class and the vestigially feudal and parasitic monarchy, and that only through the differentiation of radical and conservative positions *within* the ruling class, associated with the growth of radical *popular* participation, did the war itself occur.⁵³

All the evidence, taken together, clearly poses a challenge to any interpretation of the two revolutions as bourgeois revolutions in the orthodox sense – although perhaps more indicatively than conclusively. There are still more substantial grounds, however, for outright rejection of the concept itself as *non-Marxist*, in both its origins and implications. For, simply stated, the concept of bourgeois revolution did not originate with Marx and Engels – as they themselves clearly acknowledged. It was earlier liberal historians and the bourgeois revolutionaries themselves who developed the concept of class revolution against feudal aristocracy, even if Marx may have put it more emphatically and in greater detail. This fact has always 'been known' – certainly by Marxists – but its implications have never been appreciated, and the point has been virtually ignored at least until recently.

Yet it is a matter of profound importance. It is not that Marx and Engels merely adopted a historical truth, rather than discovering it. It is that the theory of bourgeois revolution which

they accepted was in fact a central expression of liberal-bourgeois ideology, one which is intrinsically at odds with Marx's own concepts of historical materialism. Indeed, in the following chapters, a thorough examination of the liberal ideological character of the concept of bourgeois revolution will lead to a fundamental criticism of much of what has been taken to be Marxist historical theory.

Notes

1. Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, London 1968, pp. 129–31.
2. François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, Paris 1978.
3. Hal Draper offers a thorough and insightful discussion of Marx's thought as it developed, in *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, 2 vols, New York 1977, 1979.
4. *Ibid.*, vol. II, chs 7, 8, and 9.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 169–74, 182, 192, 219.
6. *Ibid.*, ch. 10.
7. Draper quite systematically sorts through the issue.
8. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848*, New York 1962, 'Introduction'.
9. Cobban, 'The Myth of the French Revolution', in *Aspects of the French Revolution*, London 1968.
10. Review of 'Myth of the French Revolution', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, xxviii (1956), 337–45.
11. Claude Mazauric, *Sur la Révolution française. Contributions à l'histoire de la révolution bourgeoise*, Paris 1970; for a discussion of the debates set in motion by the revisionists, see Geoffrey Ellis, 'The "Marxist Interpretation" of the French Revolution', *English Historical Review*, xciii (1978), 353–76, as well as A. Gerard, *La Révolution Française: Mythes et Interprétations*, Paris 1970.
12. Mazauric, *Sur la Révolution*, pp. 54–5.
13. Régine Robin, *La Société française en 1789: Semur-en-Auxois*, Paris 1970.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
16. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, London 1968; *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, London 1974.
17. Robin, *La Société française*, pp. 33–41.
18. Karl Marx, *Capital* (3 vols, Moscow 1954, 1956, 1959) vol. III, ch. XLVII, pp. 782–813; Robin, *La Société française*, pp. 28–32.
19. Marx, *Capital* vol. III, p. 791.
20. Robin, *La Société française*, p. 33. (my translation)
21. *Ibid.*, p. 39, p. 53.
22. Robin, 'La nature de l'état à la fin de l'ancien régime: Formation sociale, Etat et Transition', *Dialectiques*, 1–2 (1973), 31–54; Michel Grenon and Régine Robin, 'A propos de la polémique sur l'ancien régime et la Révolution: pour une problématique de la transition', *La Pensée*, 187 (1976), 5–30.
23. Grenon and Michel, 'Transition', pp. 9–12.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 21. (my translation)

26. *Ibid.*, p. 26. (my translation)
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-22; *Capital* vol. III, p. 334. See also the discussion of the two 'ways' in the original transition debate, collected in Hilton, Sweezy, Dobb, *et al.*, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, London 1976.
28. *Capital* vol. III, p. 334.
29. Grenon and Robin, 'Transition', p. 21. (my translation)
30. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
32. Elizabeth Guibert-Sledziewski, 'Du féodalisme au capitalisme: transition révolutionnaire ou système transitoire?', *La Pensée*, 173 (1974), 22-36.
33. Furet, *Penser*, p. 159; Ellis, 'Marxist Interpretation', p. 376.
34. Furet, *Penser*, p. 159; Ellis, 'Marxist Interpretation', p. 376.
35. Soboul, 'L'historiographie classique de la Révolution française', *Historical Reflectors/Reflexions historiques*, I (1974), 141-67.
36. Soboul, 'Du féodalisme au capitalisme: la Révolution française et la problématique des voies de passage', *La Pensée*, 196 (1977) 61-78.
37. Soboul, *A Short History of the French Revolution, 1789-1799*, Berkeley 1965, pp. 16-20; *The French Revolution, 1787-1799*, London 1974, pp. 44-51.
38. Soboul, 'Du féodalisme au capitalisme', p. 64.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 66. (my translation)
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-4. (my translation)
41. Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, New York 1963; Hilton, Sweezy, Dobb, *et al.*, *Transition*.
42. Soboul, 'Du féodalisme au capitalisme', p. 64.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-2.
45. Soboul, 'Qu'est-ce que la Révolution?', *La Pensée*, 217/218 (1981), 33-45.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 44. (my translation)
47. Christopher Hill, 'The English Civil War as Interpreted by Marx and Engels', *Science and Society*, xii (1948), 130-56; Historian's Group of the Communist Party, 'State and Revolution in Tudor and Stuart England', *Communist Review*, July 1948, pp. 207-14.
48. Hill, 'English Civil War', pp. 137-9; Historian's Group, pp. 210-11.
49. Christopher Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution*, Harmondsworth 1967, p. 131.
50. Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, p. 9.
51. Robin, *La Société française en 1789*, p. 42.
52. Christopher Hill, 'A Bourgeois Revolution?', in J. G. A. Pocock, *Three British Revolutions*, Princeton, NJ 1980, p. 110.
53. Robert Brenner, Colloquium at Vanier College, York University, March 10, 1982.