
Reevaluating the French Revolution

Author(s): Roland N. Stromberg

Source: *The History Teacher*, Nov., 1986, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Nov., 1986), pp. 87-107

Published by: Society for History Education

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/493178>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The History Teacher*

JSTOR

Reevaluating the French Revolution

Roland N. Stromberg
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

I

ALTHOUGH WHAT MAY WELL be described as the revolution in interpreting *the* Revolution is now a couple of decades old (the beginnings of it, at any rate), it is not clear that word of it has spread widely. The books about the French Revolution that I see on my college bookstore's shelves are still those by Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul and I rather imagine they are still used as the basis for what is taught in introductory history courses on most campuses. It would be interesting to know. (The textbook I am using in *Western Civilization* says that "French society on the eve of the French Revolution was divided into three distinct classes or Estates." I still tell the freshmen much of the old interpretation, blushing inwardly and muttering a few words about the need to qualify some of our generalizations had we time to delve more deeply.) For this traditional view, a near consensus that History seemed to have arrived at after long struggle, was deeply satisfying in many ways: simple, yet profound, dramatic, and rooted in solid analysis and substantial research. The Paradigm was broadly Marxist, yet not the possession only of ideologists on the Left; one could subscribe to its general format from almost any political position.¹

That a historiographical revolution has now all but demolished this proud old tower is not, I think, well known among non-specialist teachers of history. That at any rate is my excuse for reviewing this remarkable demolition job, which like all revolutions seems to have been better at destruction than reconstruction. We live, of course, in

an age of revisionism; it is normal for old interpretations to fall before the onslaught of the hordes of young scholars, and as never before we are aware of the arbitrary and subjective nature of the meanings we choose to bestow on the multitudinous data of the past. Almost hourly another book is launched against an "orthodox" view of some part of the past, exposing it as "myth" or consigning it to the status of "legend," until we may feel that truth in history is as personal and precarious as it is anywhere else in the century of Freud, Einstein, Wittgenstein, and Derrida.

So the fall of a "standard" interpretation is about par for the course. But this case of revisionism is an unusually significant one. For, in what we might call the general myth of Western History, invented in the nineteenth century, the French Revolution has always held a privileged place. There were great landmarks along which humanity passed on its way to the present, and of these perhaps only Luther's Reformation ranked as the equal of the French Revolution. It is not clear that this view will survive, for the new interpretations contain a drastic deflation of the event.

The interpretation that seemed so firmly established just a few years ago included some "simple yet satisfying beliefs"² among which the basic one was that a new and revolutionary class, the bourgeoisie, had risen in wealth and power during the eighteenth century, but had been denied political power and social recognition by the old ruling class of aristocrats or nobles. There had existed (in Marxian terms) a growing contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces; the French Revolution came to rectify this discordance of politics and economics by bringing the bourgeoisie to political power. The "feudal order" died at last, to be replaced by industrial capitalism or the modern liberal order. The class conflict of bourgeoisie and aristocracy was the key to understanding the origins of the Revolution; and the analysis could be extended to explain conflicts within the Revolution itself, the upper and lower bourgeoisie being reflected in the clash of Mountain and Gironde. This core of analysis was not necessarily Marxist in a strict sense. A follower of Pareto, for example, might stress the closing off of circulation of elites. The nobles, taking advantage of weak eighteenth-century monarchs, had denied access to able commoners, whereas earlier Louis XIV had not made this mistake. The now rejected theory of an "aristocratic reaction" in the eighteenth century was a part of the old consensus.

It was taken for granted, of course, that Old Regime society was sharply divided into classes or estates, and that the numerically small estates of nobility and clergy held special privileges such as exemption from taxes, monopoly of offices, and seigneurial rights on the land.

The accepted interpretation did indeed usually concede that France prior to the Revolution was largely pre-industrial, its bourgeoisie being a commercial and financial one; but the assumption was that this class aspired to evolve into an industrial one and was only prevented from doing so by the political grip of the landlords, which it was precisely the mission of the Revolution to end. Likewise, it was admitted that "feudalism," in the sense of including serfdom, had long ceased to be prevalent, but the feudal class had nonetheless retained its anachronistic privileges, which the Revolution came to sweep away. (Some of my students, who call them "surfs," always insist that practically all French people languished in this sad condition before 1789, despite all one can say.)³ The privileged orders blocked those fiscal and administrative reforms needed to prepare the scene for economic modernization, until finally pent-up forces exploded in 1789.

The foregoing is a sketch of a widely accepted interpretation of the Revolution's origin and purpose which historians will easily recognize; it was of course presented in tomes such as those of Georges Lefebvre which were far from short and simple, and which lent weight to the synthesis by their massiveness of research.⁴ It might be noted that a deconstruction of this model was concealed in the footnotes of Lefebvre's own works. Just as astronomical observations were fitted into the Ptolemaic scheme until finally in the seventeenth century the paradigm broke under their cumulating stress, so empirical data inconsistent with the going theory of the French Revolution had accumulated without being absorbed into that theory.

II

It remained for Alfred Cobban to play the role of Copernicus and point out the emperor-theory's nakedness. At least his writings of some twenty years ago constitute the most apparent landmark of the revisionist school.⁵ Cobban's main points were that the French bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century—he did not question its existence—was neither (a) capitalist or industrial, (even in intent), nor (b) revolutionary. Rather than being a class of "industrial entrepreneurs and financiers of big business," the bourgeoisie was composed of "landowners, rentiers, and officials." Itself a class deeply involved in privileges, it abhorred the thought of revolution. Moreover, this bourgeoisie was, he thought, not rising but declining. Cobban recognized the confusions in the situation and called for new, freshly directed research. He was sure that historians had imposed on the Old Regime a "sociological theory" drawn from a later age, one that did not fit that

earlier epoch. They had looked into the mirror of their own age rather than into the past, and they had seen Rockefeller and Lenin rather than the real Necker and Voltaire, thus misreading the whole code. Cobban further noted the obvious fact that so far as France was concerned, the Revolution did not usher in a triumphant capitalism but in fact had *impeded* modernization, industrialization, technological innovation for a century or more. He added that when historians construed the Parisian *sans culottes* of the Revolution as an incipient proletariat they also mistook reality by importing later ideas, a point others had already made.

Cobban, having an affinity with the structuralism fashionable in theoretical circles which tended to see radical *discontinuities* in history, seemed to suggest not only the fallacy of presentism—looking at former times in the light of present values and conditions—but, even more subversively, the fallacy of assuming *any* continuity in historical development. The pre-1789 society was nothing like the one that eventually replaced it; everything suffered a sea-change as one moral universe or *episteme* vanished to be replaced by quite a different one, altering the meaning of every term. The suggestion was that the *ancien régime* had to be understood *sui generis*, not as the father of the modern world but as its remote relation.

Be that as it may, the many historians who followed Cobban's advice to take a fresh look soon went much beyond him in undermining truisms of the old paradigm. Chief of these was a questioning of any clear distinction between nobility and bourgeoisie. One cannot identify these as separate classes. The two groups merged into each other and overlapped. Some nobles were capitalists (the most nearly "industrial," in metallurgy, ironically were the most aristocratic, being rural). Some non-nobles exercised the functions of nobles. A person could be called a "nobleman bourgeois" and a commoner might pass himself off as a count or marquis.⁶ There was a large gray area between the supposedly distinct orders of commoner and aristocrat, made up in part of those in transit from one to the other, something which always seemed to be happening and which usually took several generations. (Because of this amorphous situation, no one can tell anything like the exact number of nobles—so much for the quantifiers—since estimates range from 80,000 to 400,000.) A large category of "expectant nobles" existed, and there were many fraudulent ones, "passing," as it were, without the papers. One might see here more nearly a *plenum* without gaps, a continuous chain from top to bottom (analogous to the familiar "Great Chain of Being") rather than clearly marked-off social strata. Or one might see, as many despairingly did at the time, just a confusion of ranks, the world

fallen into disorder.

Nor was it true that nobles were exempt from taxes which non-nobles had to pay. This distinction too breaks down on examination. More important: "The pre-Revolutionary bourgeoisie had no class consciousness." The bourgeoisie "did not see themselves as a distinct social group with its own interests, its own values, and its own way of life which it found superior to those of other groups."⁷ In the overwhelming majority they wished to become nobles. They were a class in transit, defined negatively by what they wished to move away from (poverty and manual labor) and positively by what they aspired to become (members of the idle, landed aristocracy). To apply the concept of social class in a Marxian sense to the Old Regime is, in any case, a profound anachronism. A very familial society, eighteenth-century France was filled with numerous families pushing their way up the social ladder and sometimes finding room there—contrary to the "blockage" theory of an "aristocratic reaction" closing off access to the upper levels of society. It seems, in fact, to have been a remarkably open and competitive world where hordes of ambitious "Yummies," as we might call them (upwardly mobile middle class), fought their way toward the top, sometimes failing but often succeeding over a period of time because they were willing to make the ambition a family one encompassing several generations.⁸ The significant point is that they did not aspire to be businessmen, accumulators of capital ad infinitum, glorying in their abstinence and their productivity. "Accumulate! Accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets," Marx had written of the bourgeoisie; these burghers, at least, did not fit the mold. As soon as they acquired some funds from trade they quit to buy land, buy a hereditary office, thus qualifying for noble status; they would perhaps invest in government bonds to acquire an income on which the family might live graciously in idleness. Of course the family also conspired to rise by judicious marriage; the trade-off of bourgeois money for aristocratic prestige, or marriage between the "nobility of the robe" and the "nobility of the sword." The latter, another vanishing distinction of which much formerly was made in historical interpretation, was in perpetual process of contributing to the confusion of ranks (and, *pace* modern feminists with their own kind of anachronism, seldom resented by daughters of the family).

The bourgeoisie fully accepted the values of the aristocracy; and why not in this time of the most delicious *douceur de la vie*? It remained for some dour and ungracious Protestant deviants to invent the odd goal of capital as an end in itself, and of these France had few.

If capitalism is defined in terms of competitiveness and a social

order allegedly open for upward mobility, with enough success to give the myth credibility, then the aristocratic society of the pre-1789 Ancient Regime was already gloriously capitalistic—no need for any revolution to establish this rat-race of competing social climbers. Probably in this sense the world has always been capitalistic: greed, acquisitiveness belong to the species at all times and places. At any rate, by 1600 at the latest the spirit of entrepreneurial gain was quite thoroughly emancipated from whatever restraints medieval religion had been able to place on it. What brought about modern Western capitalism was something quite different, the “vocational” valuation of wealth-accumulation for its own sake.⁹ In ancient times, public service outranked wealth (a little of this still remained in eighteenth-century mores); in the Middle Ages, holiness; and in early modern times the reigning social value was, if not *gloire*, the art of living as cultivated by a post-feudal, Renaissance aristocracy. Fernand Braudel accused the early modern bourgeoisie in the Mediterranean lands of a great betrayal in deserting their own values to be seduced by the aristocratic style.¹⁰ Marxists must feel it is sneaky of the bourgeoisie not to have anticipated their categories and conformed to them; but in fact the self-conscious bourgeois class is a later phenomenon and was scarcely known before the nineteenth century. Certainly it was little present in eighteenth-century France. The provincialism of the Old Regime made any generalized class consciousness difficult; local cultures differed so much that a citizen of Bordeaux might scarcely recognize his counterpart in Grenoble.

These expectant aristocrats struggled to make a place for themselves within the established order with no thought of overthrowing it. A further piece of revisionism is the claim that some scholars have pushed of a conservative bourgeoisie and a radical nobility, the latter being more influenced by *philosophe* reformist ideas. There were some amazing cases of radical chic, e.g., Baron d’Holbach and his coterie, so well studied recently by Alan Kors.¹¹ The *arriviste* bourgeoisie loved the established system, while some jaded long-time bluebloods were able to criticize it.

We may sum up by quoting Pierre Goubert on “the impossibility of explaining the Revolution by the triumph of an unidentifiable capitalist bourgeoisie over an unidentifiable feudal aristocracy.”¹² The two estates were in fact scarcely distinguishable. François Furet listed among his five “confusions” of the old interpretation which do not stand up to scrutiny the untenable identification of nobility with feudalism and the equally untenable equation between bourgeoisie and capitalism.¹³ In this connection it must always have seemed odd that when the national assembly abolished “feudalism” in 1789, one of

the most important privileges they meant by the term was in fact a thoroughly capitalistic practice, venality of office (the purchase and hereditary handing down of public offices, in fact the purchase of nobility).

III

The mention of Braudel reminds us of another revaluation regarding the alleged rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century as background for the Revolution. The difficulty is that they had evidently been rising in the same way for centuries. "The rise of the middle classes was an unquestionable phenomenon of sixteenth century Europe," Henry Kamen writes.¹⁴ They were also at that time encroaching on the nobility, to the disgust of relatively old-line men of title who had forgotten that their own ancestors were once parvenues as well. (Few indeed, like the famous Duc de Saint-Simon in Louis XIV's time, could trace their ancestry back very far.) In 1581 the author of *Miroir des Français*, Nicolas de Montand, observed that "certain gentlemen" take the title of nobility "as soon as they emerge from their apprenticeship as shoemakers, weavers and cobblers." A 1626 report warned Richelieu of the problem posed by merchants who desert commerce as soon as they become rich. It seems that in every period these same complaints were legion. Sump-tuary laws were passed in a vain attempt to prevent people dressing and living beyond their rank. This society wished to preserve rank and order; Louis XIV's age expended a great part of its intellectual energy in formulating an ideology of perfect harmony and symmetry, with rules prescribed for everything in life, each social as well as intellectual component assigned its exact place in a changeless scheme of things.¹⁵ But the reality was totally different. There was ceaseless movement along the great chain of social being, as people rose from humble beginnings to end as aristocratic bluebloods—only perhaps to see their children lose the prize. The distinctions were necessary to measure social mobility; the game was to ascend from step to step on the ladder of status.

The always-rising bourgeoisie seems strange only if our model is a historicist one of progression through time; one like the Marxist model, in which the classes, each in turn dominating historical epochs, follow one another like acts in a play or like relay racers. If the model is a steady-state one, we can visualize an eternal bourgeoisie, a runner in the endless race along with others. The bourgeoisie "rose" over such a long period because there was a perpetual flow of successful commoners who deserted their class to join the nobility as soon as

they could, leaving openings for others to fill from below. "From the moment that a merchant in France has acquired great wealth in trade, his children, far from following him in this profession, on the contrary enter public office."¹⁶ This 1675 description stands about as well for 1575 or 1775. The action repeated itself over and over again, more like a merry-go-round than Marx's locomotive of history. Marx himself had a great deal of trouble about the advent of capitalism; at various places in his writings it began in the sixteenth century though with "sporadic anticipations" much earlier (*Das Kapital*) or perhaps as early as the eleventh century! (*German Ideology, Grundrisse*). How could such a by now ancient institution be the lusty revolutionary infant of the nineteenth century? A similar problem exists for Marxists in dating the demise of "feudalism."¹⁷

IV

This persisting pattern causes us to wonder why the rising bourgeoisie should have created a great revolution in 1789 when they had been rising just as much in 1589 or 1689. The same may be seen in the fact of revolution itself. A part of the myth of 1789 was that it was the first great revolution, or at least the central part of the first great age of revolutions. The "age of democratic revolutions" from 1776 to 1848 had the French Revolution of 1789 as its undoubted pinnacle.¹⁸ Whatever minor exceptions might be made for some desultory and meaningless rioting earlier, or for that quarrel among gentlemen, the English seventeenth century civil war, most thought that revolution had entered the world substantially for the first time in 1789, thereafter to play the leading role in history, whether or not one hailed or deplored it. This view finds its echo still in attempts to distinguish "rebellions" or "insurrections" from Revolution, reserving for the latter a greater dignity and permitting only a few privileged events to claim this title.¹⁹ But in fact much intensive recent research causes this distinction to lose its cogency. The picture revealed to us by this research is rather astonishingly one of almost incessant revolt. Small as they were, led by village Hampdens, and no doubt celebrated by mute inglorious Miltons, these revolts were violent defiances of authority that defy downgrading. Nor can they be arranged or sequenced in any tidy order.²⁰

The neophyte beginning his study of revolutions is confronted by such a profusion of them that "It is vain to seek a division between calm periods and troubled periods."²¹ Historians agree that low-level violence was almost perpetual, virtually an institutionalized form of protest in the absence of other means. But larger movements were

common, too. Henry Kamen, for example, unearthed a total of 374 insurrections in rural communities in Provence between 1596 and 1715; there were some 500 in Aquitaine during about the same period.²² Since these were local they escaped most past historians, coming to light only under recent micro-research. But, by no means, were all miniscule. The tendency has been to upgrade those revolutions previously known, such as the German "peasant war" of the 1520s and the English Leveller movement of the 1540s; they are now seen as truly vast. And really major ones, formerly all but lost from view, have been discovered, like the *ormée* of Bordeaux that grew out of the 1648-53 Fronde rebellion.²³ The year 1648 appears as a year of revolutions all over Europe, from London to Moscow, resembling quite remarkably the more famous year exactly 200 years later. If anything, it was even more extensive and protracted, reaching Poland, Lithuania, and the Ukraine as well as Spain, Italy, France, England, and Russia. So far as concerns Levellers (and Diggers) or German peasant rebels, they turn out to have been continuing phenomena, not happenings of just one season. French peasants had long-lasting revolutionary organizations such as the *croquants*.

We find, likewise, numerous anticipations of events we had thought innovative in the French Revolution: women leading the revolts (e.g., in Cordoba two centuries before October 1789), or a harassed ruler summoning the Estates-General, as the government of Moscow did in the 1650s (the Zemsky Sobor). *Cahiers* (lists of complaints) were traditional, as was sounding the tocsin, etc.

Lists can be drawn up that contain scores of revolutions in every decade. The fair, carnival or festival sometimes provided means to link local rebellions into a larger network. LeRoy Ladurie has brilliantly described just one of such cases, the carnival at Romans in 1579-80. The revolutions were both rural and urban. The most frequent precipitant was encroachment by the growing central state with its tax collectors and soldiery. Thus, the sixteenth and seventeenth century revolutions might be described as conservative ones in which the whole community stood together against a threatening alien power: the state itself was perhaps the revolution, and these revolts counter-revolutions. Social conflict within the community often emerged too, a result of complaints about local grandees being exempt from taxes, animosity toward the Church (no invention of the eighteenth century!), and resentment at seignorial monopolies. Lawyers, a numerous and ambitious class then as now, urged the claims of the lesser against the greater ("the lawyers' guerrilla war against the seigneurs"²⁴). All these appear in the background of 1789, of course, but they had appeared many times before.

Rebellions such as the one LeRoy Ladurie has described turned into confused affairs involving the contradictory interests of lords, peasants, urban artisans and merchants, the royal power, and perhaps some ambitious and charismatic bandit-guerrilla leader. Accordingly, these innumerable revolutions of the preceding several centuries look like microcosms of the more familiar one of 1789. Was the French Revolution more the end of a tradition than the beginning of one? "No longer," writes William Doyle, "is it the cataclysm in which one economic order came to an end and a new one dawned. It is merely the last great crisis of a type to which the old economic order was peculiarly prone."²⁵

V

It is significant that the origins or causes of the Revolution seem a quite different matter from the Revolution itself. Tocqueville remarked long ago that, in Furet's words, there is "an absolute incompatibility between the objective history of the Revolution—its 'meaning' or end result—and the meaning attributed to their own action by the revolutionaries."²⁶ What actually happened during nine-tenths of the dramatic and frenetic Revolution, and all that made it immortal, was not much connected to those things that the old interpretation said it was supposed to be about. If the Revolution's purpose, stemming from its intent, was to end the society of orders and establish legal equality, representative government, free enterprise, etc., then it should have stopped on or about August 4, 1789. In that case it would scarcely have been a revolution at all, certainly not the one that electrified and tormented both itself and Europe for the next quarter of a century. The Revolution became "largely independent of the situation that preceded it."

This of course was always recognized in a way. The analysis proceeded along the lines of Crane Brinton's *Anatomy of Revolution*, noting how revolutions tend to lose their way from structural factors, ending by eating up their children in reigns of terror and in dictatorship. The more recent tendency has been to note the lack of revolutionary intent at the beginning of the Revolution: the relative conservatism of the *cahiers*, for example, and the non-revolutionary character of *philosophe* thought.

In connection with the point made above about many earlier and similar revolts, some will of course wish to protest that what they lacked and the French Revolution contained, that which made it a true revolution, was some conception of an alternative society, an intellectual or ideological element not present before or present in

very rudimentary form. Agrarian rebellion, after all, as Perez Zaqrin writes, was "repetitive" because peasants "lacked either a political program or an ideological inspiration to direct their eyes beyond immediate grievances toward basic reform or institutional change."²⁷ Pre-modern mentalities did not embrace any concept of social evolution or even conceive the possibility of any different kind of social order except the vague and utopian one of an edenic or other-worldly perfection. The protests that emerged stemmed from complaints about violations of a pre-existing norm, of custom and tradition.

But it is far from clear that any revolutionary ideology existed in 1789, either. The connection between the Revolution and the obviously important and powerful "intellectual revolution" that preceded it, embodied in the *philosophes*, has been called into question. In the old view the *philosophes* had doomed the Old Regime by their "secession," their devastating criticisms undermining the foundations of Church, state and society, while at the same time they produced the vision of a new order based on reason, equality, and liberty, even if the lineaments of this reconstruction were admittedly a bit vague. But today there seems little agreement on this. The question is open: "No general, historically important account and interpretation of Enlightenment political thought, integrating the critical and constructive aspects ... has as yet been written," a distinguished student of the subject recently wrote, while another claims that "No direct connection between Enlightenment ideas and French Revolutionary events" has ever been demonstrated.²⁸ Some points that emerge are that the word "revolution" was not in the *philosophe* vocabulary; they neither expected nor welcomed the Revolution that came. An affair more of the nobility than the commoners, *philosophe* thought did not call into serious question the existing social order and preferred to work through the monarchy (Condorcet did not approve of summoning the Estates-General in 1789, the act which of course set the whole Revolution in motion). Hostile to the clergy, they wished to supplant them as a guiding clerisy. Their vision of a reformed society did not include basic social change, but, rather, infusing the old forms with a new spirit. In Arnold Toynbee's phrase, here was the Philosopher Masked by a King: new wine in old bottles. The new wine was Reason, based on Science, and was indeed an intoxicating brew, according to Keith Baker "a new source of authority in human affairs."²⁹ If so, it was not democratic, for the *philosophes* typically feared and mistrusted the populace, regarding it as ignorant, superstitious, priest-ridden. That "great divorce" between low and high culture, popular and elite, which had gone on since the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, accelerated by the rise of printing and book

publishing, intrudes itself here.³⁰ The high philosophes, with their cult of scientific reason, their close connections to elite society, their belief in Enlightened Despotism, were far from revolutionary. Their leading motif seems to have been a passion to order, regularize, standardize, make more efficient, and to centralize power for this end, though they looked to an eventual utopia of things going of themselves without government under "natural liberty." This leads to the free enterprise market economy of nineteenth-century capitalism, yet it is an anachronism to consider it in such a light. There was a special world of discourse here which did indeed suffer a Foucaultian sea-change after 1800. Looking backward from the nineteenth century one can characterize much of this ideology in a certain sense as "bourgeois," but it made little appeal to the eighteenth century "bourgeoisie" and was not devised in their interest.

The most notable fashion in ideas during the decade of the 1780s was an excitement about practical science, with Franklin's name on everyone's lips and the brothers Montgolfier dominating the headlines. ("The most characteristic feature of the present age," the British chemist James Keir wrote in 1789, "seems to be ... the diffusion ... of a taste for science over all classes of men, in every nation of Europe.") The case that first made Maximilien Robespierre well known was his defense of a villager harassed by his neighbors for putting up a lightning-rod, which gave the lawyer-orator a chance to defend the scientist-hero martyred by popular bigotry. (The people, he will later say, cannot find the truth by themselves, they must be led to it.) A considerable number of subsequent Revolutionary leaders were enthusiasts for a kind of messianic scientism in the 1780s. Jean-Paul Marat tried to sell visionary schemes of redemption via allegedly scientific nostrums to the King of Spain (and buy a title with the proceeds!). Robert Darnton, who has done so much to expose the once-ignored underground literature of the times, called attention to the appeal that Mesmerism exercised on many future revolutionaries in the early 1780s.³¹

The *philosophes* came in different sizes. Tocqueville thought that for a time these intellectuals filled a vacuum of power in Old Regime France left by the degeneration of the aristocracy while the middle class was not yet ready to govern. This seems an exaggeration when we recall the failure of the Turgot ministry in 1776. But beneath this top echelon of men somewhere close to the center of power, the Turgots and Condorcets, an irregular crowd of would-be Voltaires or Rousseaus straggled over the French landscape in the later eighteenth century hoping to gain fame and fortune from their pens as the giants had done. They sometimes resorted to scandal or pornography to get

it. These adventurous pseudo-intellectuals would supply much of the leadership during the Revolution in an atmosphere of anarchy and confusion, but they had little to do with its origins.

As the Revolution went its own way, out of control, the ideology that came to dominate it was Jacobinism. Those who would argue that nothing really changes find in the most powerful moral force unleashed during the French Revolution an only slightly disguised Christian egalitarianism. Fully equipped with saints and miracle workers, it looks almost archetypal. The faith of Thomas Münzer during the "radical Reformation," that all Christians should be equal at the impending apocalypse, did not much differ from this "new form of religion" during the radical phase of the French Revolution, when a "passion for equality" accompanied claims that a new priesthood, those who spoke for the People, were infallibly inspired and above all laws. The Church Militant became the Nation. Sermons at the Clubs nightly; the Holy Trinity of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity; apostles, oaths, ceremonies, new rites and festivals, and a new calendar marked this secularized religion. A Puritan spirit even existed strongly among the Jacobins. That a Goddess of Reason replaced the old Jehovah does not conceal the basic similarity to an older Christian left, which invariably emerged during periods of revolutionary disturbance or to "the old Utopian dream of a 'golden age'."³² The Enlightenment frame of mind is less in evidence here than millenarian Christianity.

VI

The older Marxist-influenced paradigm of the French Revolution's causes had supposed that social change was basic, the political and cultural factors being secondary and derivative. But on the showing of the new research it would seem that society scarcely changed at all. For a long time a "rising" bourgeoisie had been making money only to withdraw and invest the gains in aristocratic prestige. For a long time the abrasions of a vigorously competitive society had led to revolutionary outbursts which may be viewed less as a drive toward total transformation than as a rough means of adjustment. The same situation had existed for several centuries at least and appeared to be little different in the later eighteenth century.

More recent theorists, some neo-Marxist, have stressed ideas, language, the *episteme*. The "mode of information" is basic to culture, not the "mode of production." Power, "hegemony," is first won in the cultural realm. According to the Foucault model, the "discursive domains" have their own immanent structures, they co-exist with but are not derived from the "practical and institutional" domains. A

wholly different pattern of thought prevailed in the period before 1789: "The order on the basis of which we think today does not have the same mode of being as that of the Classical thinkers."³³ In this view some great change did occur, the rise of a new model of thought and discourse making sense of the world in a different way than heretofore. But this change surely followed, not preceded, the French Revolution, which may have had little to do with it—just as the changes that produced an industrial capitalist society in the nineteenth century came about almost despite the French Revolution, not because of it.

Clearly what changed most between 1500 and 1789 was the sheer physical factor of increased centralization with accompanying growth of a national consciousness. The State continued its relentless drive toward more and more power at the center, a kind of immanent logic of power and technology that slowly eroded the stubborn localism of the ancestral order. Greater centralization along with a diminishing of local or provincial primary loyalties (which admittedly seem still very strong right down to 1789) meant that revolution could be focused and simplified. Older revolutions like the Bordeaux of 1652 suffered from the contradiction of trying to be both an internal revolution and an external rebellion, to adopt Westrich's vocabulary. (The contradiction resembles that of the Third International communist who found revolutionary goals within his own nation complicated by the question of his loyalty to Moscow.) When nationalism made a single center of politics possible, this confusion was eliminated; a revolution against the ruling oligarchy could be the same revolution as one for a stronger, more effective and uniform state. As Tocqueville understood long ago, the French Revolution itself took a long step in the direction of centralizing power and loyalties. The one word that stands out in the first days of the Revolution, of course, is "nation." In that respect, however, it was not a rejection of the Old Regime *qua* state and monarchy, but a continuation of its goals. Power marches on regardless of regimes.³⁴ It is another unchanging feature.

We come back, then, to the curious revelation of changelessness in the newer research on Old Regime and Revolution. It may cause us to reflect on the eternal changelessness of things, *plus ça change*.... If the pushful self-made man is a constant, so is "feudalism." Patrons and retainers exist in every business office (and university department). There is a country club in many a midwestern city which requires three generations of wealth to get into and towards which families strive as the equivalent of nobility. In surviving monarchical states such as the Hapsburg, the ennobling of successful bourgeois con-

tinued down to its end in 1918. In Thackeray's "Vanity Fair" England "a title and a coach and four are toys more precious than happiness." "Fashion" became the democratic version of aristocratic values.³⁵ An intricate hierarchy of status groups, rather than economic class, is the key to dominance in modern American politics, which is also true in the Soviet Union, whose system has been described as "industrial feudalism."³⁶ Underneath it all, the folk culture perhaps stubbornly persists after two centuries of alleged modernization (it certainly lasted far into the nineteenth), while the intellectuals cling to the idea of revolution as, in the words of Raymond Aron, "the mysterious unpredictable intercessor between the real and the ideal."³⁷ Marx, who was the child of Rousseau, spawned a repetitious progeny in this century.

It may not be such a bad thing for the teacher of history to stop telling young people that history is a boat carrying us past successive, clearly marked stations along an ever more majestic (or dwindling) river toward a glorious destination (or the final fall). They know better than that anyway. We could remind them instead that nothing much ever changes. It is always now, and a law of compensation provides the moral balance—for every gain a loss, "the wings of time are black and white." The old-fashioned anecdotal style of Claude Mançeron's narrative of the pre-Revolution provides example after example of such repetitions.³⁸ Paris could drop the American Revolution and Lafayette for a good murder story, the criminal a grocer desperately in debt from trying to buy an estate and become a noble! The ensuing public spectacle of torture and execution reminds us that some things do change, something Foucault in *To Discipline and Punish* identified as a key to the *episteme* change.³⁹ If the immediate precipitant of the 1789 Revolution was a tax/budget problem that proved politically unmanageable, that too should strike a contemporary note.

In any case tuning up for the approaching bicentennial looks like a real challenge to the historical profession. For at just this moment historians have lost their bearings about the meaning of the French Revolution and thus about much of the whole modern era. "Wallowing in fragmented chaos" was Lawrence Stone's verdict on the state of this art more than a decade ago.⁴⁰ Talk about a "new synthesis" and "a reconstruction of theory" has hardly yet led to much, and we also hear mutterings about "the end of systems" and "the inadequacy of any theory to encompass reality."⁴¹ Dennis Wong has referred to "The failure of our multiple researches conducted with increasingly precise and complex methods to cumulate into a coherent overall vision of the world."⁴² Others think that a "myth of history" was invented by

the historical imagination of the nineteenth century, its special *episteme*, now vanishing, so that every interpretation must be radically recast. But, so far as the French Revolution is concerned, Tocqueville had already sensed its mystery more than a century before Cobban:

There have been violent Revolutions in the world before; but the immoderate, violent, bold, almost crazed and yet powerful and effective character of these Revolutionaries has no precedents, it seems to me, in the great social agitations of past centuries. Where did this new race come from? What produced it? What made it so effective?... Independently of all that can be explained about the French Revolution ... there is something unexplained in its spirit and in its acts. I can sense the presence of this unknown object, but despite all my efforts I cannot lift the veil that covers it.⁴³

The teacher of history may take some comfort from the fact that the breaking down of the great syntheses of the nineteenth century is itself a historical fact, something that has happened and is happening in all areas of thought (physicists, philosophers and psychologists are no better off than historians), and that if it has its drawbacks it has its rewards too.

Notes

1. "On the question of its origins, the two sides [Left and Right] did not fundamentally disagree at all," their quarrel being "largely about the Revolution's consequences." William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), 10. Part I of this book, titled "A Consensus and Its Collapse: Writings on Revolutionary Origins since 1939," is a learned and lucid summary, and the reader is referred to it, along with the essay by Colin Lucas cited below, as the best introductions to this question that I know of.

2. Colin Lucas, "Nobles, Bourgeois, and the Origins of the French Revolution," in Douglas Johnson, ed., *French Society and the Revolution* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 8. A classic statement of the classical thema according to Lucas was Albert Soboul's "Classes and Class Struggles during the French Revolution," in *Science and Society*, 17 (1953): 235-57.

3. This is the primeval modern myth of Progress, which underlies both Marxian and liberal views of the past and is found in its crudest form very strongly etched in the minds of almost all barely educated Americans. History in this view is considered to be the story of the emancipation of mankind from abysmal tyranny and servitude, a liberation located largely in the era of the English, American, and French Revolutions of 1642-1789. Its chief fallacy is an inability to understand that for most of its history humanity gladly accepted hierarchy and authority, not feeling this as oppression because the individual consciousness had not been separated from the collective.

A grasp of this would help much in American understanding of many peoples in the world today, to whom the issue of "human rights" makes little appeal.

4. Tr. Robert R. Palmer (New York: Random House, 1957). A fuller, abundantly footnoted Lefebvre synthesis was his *La Révolution française* in the impressive Peuples et Civilisations series (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951).

5. Cobban's most influential work was *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964). His earlier *The Myth of the French Revolution* (London: University College, 1955) was reprinted in *Aspects of the French Revolution* (New York: G. Braziller, 1968). An incisive essay by Gerald J. Cavanaugh, "The Present State of French Revolutionary Historiography: Alfred Cobban and Beyond," *French Historical Studies*, 7 (1972), 587-606, discusses Cobban's impact. Cobban was by no means the only or even the first scholar to suggest the need for sweeping revisions in the accepted interpretation of Revolutionary origins; among others, G. V. Taylor and, in France, François Furet and Denis Richet, *La Révolution française* (Paris: Fayard, 1973).

6. G.V. Taylor, "Types of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France," *English Historical Review*, 79 (1964), 478-97, noted cases of aristocratic entrepreneurship. Chapter 3 of Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), based on a Montpellier document of 1768, documents the merging of bourgeois and nobility in life style, dress, standard of living.

Professional note: Professors at the University of Valence, Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie reports, argued that occupying a university chair conferred nobility with consequent exemption from taxation. *Carnival in Romans* (New York: Braziller, 1980), 55.

7. Doyle, *Origins*, 130.

8. Roland Mousnier, *The Institutions of France under the Absolute Monarchy*, I, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) finds cases of five generations to rise to the nobility via the law.

Walter Arnstein and other Victorian social historians have pointed out that in England the "middle class" continued to accept aristocratic values, often leaving industry to buy land and join the squires, well into the nineteenth or even the twentieth century. See, e.g., the children of Josiah Wedgwood. So also in Russia.

9. Stanislav Andreski, ed., *Max Weber on Capitalism, Bureaucracy and Religion* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 24-25, 135-36. On the emergence of the spirit of gain by 1600 at the latest, see G. G. A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change*, vol. 2 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

10. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 725-29.

11. *D'Holbach's Coterie* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). The other great intellectual salon, slightly less radical, is delineated in Keith M. Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

12. Pierre Goubert, *The Ancien Régime* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 276-77.

13. F. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 21.

14. Kamen, *European Society 1500-1700* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 131ff.

15. A recent treatment is Gordon Pocock, *Boileau and the Nature of Neo-Classicism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

16. The usual route on the rise to nobility according to Kamen (op.cit., 129-30)

was first to buy an office, then buy land, and finally take up a noble pursuit such as military service. Cf. Goubert's chapter on "The Machinery of Ennoblement" in *The Ancien Régime*, 179-92.

17. On the persistence of feudalism and on early forms of capitalism see the essays in E. Kamenka and R. S. Neale, eds., *Feudalism, Capitalism and Beyond* (London: Arnold, 1975).

18. Another revision is the challenge to R. R. Palmer's thesis of a linkage between the "democratic revolutions" of the later eighteenth century, all part of one great revolution. For one recent questioning of this see portions of Ian R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth Century Britain: Reflections on the British Avoidance of Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

19. See for example the introduction to Jack P. Greene and Robert Forster, eds., *Preconditions of Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

20. The essay by A. Lloyd Moote in Geoffrey Parker and Lesley M. Smith, eds., *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), "The Preconditions of Revolution in Early Modern Europe: Did They Really Exist?" astutely discusses some of these issues. He cites numerous "theories of revolution" including the popular Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change*, 2nd ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982). Among other attempted typologies of revolution see Perez Zagorin, *Rebels and Rulers, 1500-1660*, vol. 1 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982), chaps. 1 and 2; Jean Baechler, *Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975). Zagorin, who finds no rigid categories, notes the fallacy of privileging the French Revolution as a paradigm.

21. Jacques Ellul, *Autopsie de la révolution* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1969), 10. "La révolution est moins la locomotive que l'un des éléments de la chaîne invisible du tissu des civilisations."

22. Kamen, op. cit., 224. Zagorin, *Rebels and Rulers*, I, 36: "A bewildering multiplicity of revolutions with an almost infinite diversity of circumstances." Chapter 10 of Kamen and all of Zagorin's magisterial survey will give the neophyte some impression of this profusion of rebellion both rural and urban. The works of Hobsbawm, Rudé, Tilly and Thompson on riots and revolts will be familiar to many. "A long tradition of anti-aristocratic and anti-gentry popular rebellion in England" in late medieval and early modern times is described by Buchanan Sharp in his *In Contempt of all Authority* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). John Bohstedt, *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales 1790-1810* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) is a recent extension of this body of research. See also among many others Roland Mousnier's *Peasant Uprisings in Seventeenth Century France, Russia and China* (New York: Harper, 1970).

23. S. A. Westrich, *The Ormée of Bordeaux: A Revolution during the Fronde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1972). Westrich describes this as "Both a rebellion and a revolution," indicative of the terminological confusion that prevails. He means it was an attack on the local oligarchy by the lesser people—artisans, small merchants, petty officials—as well as on rule from Paris by the whole Bordeaux community.

24. E. LeRoy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, 336 (this was in the 1570s).

25. *Origins of the French Revolution*, 34. Doyle is stating the revisionist case here without necessarily endorsing it; but the content of his book seems to go far toward doing so.

26. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 22.

27. Zagorin, *Rebels and Rulers*, I, 227.

28. Lester G. Crocker, "Interpreting the Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of*

Ideas, 46 (1985), 211-30. Thomas Schleich, *Aufklärung und Revolution* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981).

29. Baker, *Condorcet*, 356.

30. See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Robert Muchembled, *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France 1400-1750* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985.)

31. Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968). See also his contribution to *The Widening Circle: Essays in the Circulation of Literature in Eighteenth Century Europe*, Paul J. Korshin, ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976).

32. Roland Mousnier, *Social Hierarchies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 131-35. Cavanaugh quotes Furet and Richet: the methods of the *sans-culottes* "bear a strange resemblance to those used two hundred years earlier by the Parisians of the Catholic League" while "their ideal society was ... inspired by a nostalgia for the old Utopian dream of a Golden Age." Rousseau's enormous influence obviously looked in this direction. On the similarity of Müntzer's sixteenth century revolutionary ideology to the religious fanaticism of the Jacobin faithful, see Zagorin, op. cit., I, 163-71. See also Furet's *Interpreting the French Revolution*; but cf. Michael L. Kennedy, *The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982). R. R. Palmer, *The Improvement of Humanity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985) and Mona Ozouf, *L'Ecole de France: essais sur la révolution, utopie, et l'enseignement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985) stress the religious-like attempts at indoctrination by the Jacobin faithful. It should be noted that the Jacobins, who claimed to speak in the name of the People, were a small elite; see R. B. Rose, *The Making of the Sans-culottes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983).

33. Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xxii.

34. See Bertrand de Jouvenel, *Power: The Natural History of Its Growth* (London: Batchworth Press, 1952), esp. 185-98. Images of "tying things together," "harmony," a "universal system" dominated the first Revolutionary rhetoric; for an example see Gary Kates, *The Cercle Social, the Girondins, and the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 78.

35. See Francis Russell Hart, "The Regency Novel of Fashion," in Samuel I. Mintz, et al., *From Smollett to Henry James: Studies in the Novel and Other Essays Presented to Edgar Johnson* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1981).

36. "Industrial feudalism" has been suggested as the mode of current Soviet society: G. R. Urban, ed., *Stalinism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 229.

37. Cf. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France 1870-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1977).

38. Claude Mançeron, *The French Revolution*; vol. 1, *Twilight of the Old Order*; vol. 2, *The Wind from America*; vol. 3, *Their Gracious Pleasure*; vol. 4, *Toward the Brink* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977-1983).

The *plus ça change* argument is strengthened by a considerable body of recent research—works by Ralph Houlbrooke, Linda Pollock, Keith Wrightson, David Nicholas might be cited—which rejects the view commonly heard a few years ago that prior to modern times there was no "childhood" or familial affection. One might risk the generalization that in all areas, micro-research tends to discredit historicist notions of large differences between people of different eras.

39. See Michel Bée, "La spectacle de l'exécution dans la France d'ancien régime,"

Annales: E.S.C., 38 (1983), 843-62; John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

40. Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 26.

41. Reflective of recent rethinking of the Revolution, with stress on the purely political—a return in a sense to very old-fashioned, pre-Marxian and pre-*Annales* ways of writing history, but with the use of fashionable semiotic and structuralist theories—is Lynn Avery Hunt's *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

42. "Marx, Weber, and Contemporary Sociology," in Ronald M. Glassman and Vatro Murvar, eds., *Max Weber's Political Sociology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 69.

43. Cited by Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 163, from Tocqueville's *Oeuvres complètes*, Jardin and Lesourd, eds., 13th ed., (Paris: Gallimard), II, 337-38.

Bibliographical Note

The following is a brief list of some other recent books and articles, in addition to those cited in the footnotes, which may help the teacher wanting to keep up with this subject:

J. F. Bosher, ed. *French Government and Society 1500-1800: Essays in Honor of Alfred Cobban*. London: Athlone Press, 1973.

Marc Bouloiseau. *The Jacobin Republic 1792-1794*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret. *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Dallas L. Cloutre. "The Concept of Class in French Culture before 1789." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 45 (1984), 219-44.

Alfred Cobban, ed. *The Eighteenth Century*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969.

Joseph di Corcia. "Bourg, Bourgeois, Bourgeois de Paris from the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Century." *Journal of Modern History*, 50 (1978), 207-33.

Paul E. Corcoran. "The Bourgeois and Other Villains." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38 (1977), 477-85.

William Doyle. *The Old European Order 1600-1800*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Norbert Elias. *The Court Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985.

M. D. Feld. "Revolution and Reaction in Early Modern Europe" (review article). *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38 (1977), 175-84.

Olwen H. Hufton. *The Poor of Eighteenth Century Europe*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

V. G. Kiernan. *State and Society in Europe 1550-1650*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.

Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson, and Mary Durham Johnson, eds. *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1787-1792*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979. (It is another myth that the women's revolution stemmed from the French Revolution or that it is specifically modern. The Revolution brought a defeat for women and a setback for women's rights. See also Olwen Hufton, "Women in Revolution," in Douglas Johnson, ed., op. cit.)

J. Q. C. Mackrell. *The Attack on Feudalism in Eighteenth Century France*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973.

- W. B. Palmer. "Recent Work on the Enlightenment and Revolution in France." *Continuity: A Journal of History*, no. 8 (Spring, 1985), 87-95.
- G. V. Taylor. "Revolutionary and Non-revolutionary Content in the *Cahiers* of 1789." *French Historical Studies*, 7 (1972), 479-501.
- Michel Vovelle. *The Fall of the French Monarchy 1787-1792*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.