Who Made the French Revolution?:

An Essay on Current Historiography

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In his most approachable work, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, Georges Lefebvre, the authoritative marxist historian of the Revolution, subdivided it thus: an aristocratic revolution (the reform effort by the monarchy) which failed; a bourgeois revolution which succeeded, with the help of a popular urban revolution; and a peasant rural revolution, which was suppressed by the bourgeois state. All the players in this history are social classes, operating through political transformation or insurgency. But the overall course of history is with the bourgeoisie, who were to impose their ascendancy upon the political structure and the aristocratic status hierarchy.

The growth of commerce and industry had created ... the bourgeoisie ... it proved highly useful to the monarchical state in supplying it with money and competent officials.... It had developed a new ideology.... The role of the aristocracy had correspondingly declined; and the clergy found its authority growing weaker. These groups preserved the highest rank.... The Revolution of 1789 restored the harmony of fact and law. The transformation spread in the 19th Century throughout the West (pp. 1-2).

This is still the common understanding of the Revolution held by those on the Left who are not historians. The French Revolution was 'the arrival of the bourgeoisie':3 one of those moments when, via the rise and decline of social classes, the material world, in classical, marxist terms, imposed a new ideological order.

This view of the Revolution attributes to the social classes involved in the process a very real role as agents consciously bringing about the course that history is pre-disposed to take. As Lefebvre put it:4

'...the historical realities and economic and social ones, there is the human spirit, which must become conscious of the second in order to bring about the first. It is all the same true that the Revolution was only the crowning of a long economic and social evolution which made the bourgeoisie the mistress of the world.

Many difficulties in this 'classic' French marxist account have been exposed over the last three decades by various 'revisionist' historians. The English, with successful historical studies to their name (notably Alfred Cobban and Richard Cobb), rubbished the Marxist view some time ago; while more recently a sophisticated strand of cultural history in France (represented by François Furet) has also undermined it from a standpoint which, for all that, owes much to Marx.

These might well trouble non-historians on the Left. Two hundred years after its outbreak, the great European liberal and democratic revolution still matters politically as well as theoretically. In this essay I shall review the challenge made first by English and secondly by French opponents of the classic Marxist account. Then I shall consider what scope there is to salvage some sense that there are, within the Revolution, human agents who are free, active and progressive. The overall sense of my argument is that a shift away from socio-economic terms and towards analysing culture or ideology produces an account that is more plausible, given what we know. Yet it is perfectly amenable to a realistic version of the Revolution quite compatible with the Left's political perspective on progress.

It is as well to remember that it is a French marxist view which has structured much of the debate even outside France. The special status and destiny of France, and of the Left in France, is at stake in the 'classic' marxist view. Jaurès and Mathiez, from whom Lefebvre took much, advanced specifically socialist accounts of the Revolution. The French communist party, from its inception in the '20s had an interest in emphasising their country's seniority in the business of making effective mass revolutionary movements. All that is natural enough, perhaps. But the Revolution can easily come to be seen as France's peculiar gift to the cause of human progress. Moreover, because the political experience of the Left in France has been one of occasional incursions into a predominantly right-wing, centralist state, the model of the masses combining to invade the seat of power has possessed a peculiar symbolic force. The storming of the Bastille, the 'Great Fear' or similar mass movements have sometimes become a model of all progressive political action. Witness the extensive use of the storming of the Bastille in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason.* This historical experience may or may not properly belong in the perceptions of social change and revolution that make sense in countries other than France.

The empirical difficulties in the classic French marxist account are these. The active 'bourgeois' takeover in the provincial cities and in the 'National Assembly' was short-lived in the first place, and in any case disputable. Even in 1790,
Edmund Burke could demonstrate that the Assembly consisted first and foremost of lawyers. (It was the Assembly which, in 1789, began the Revolution by declaring itself — rather than the king — to be sovereign.) The economic outcome of the Revolution was industrial decline (partly the result of chronic warfare) and the installation of a bloc of backward-looking peasant agriculture. Politics turned rapidly to international war and ‘the Terror’ of the early 1790s. The state, ruled by power-seeking factions and pressured by the popular ‘sans-culotte’ movement, with menacing urban crowds behind them, fell into a pattern of arbitrarily arresting popular ‘sans-culotte’ movement, with menacing urban rather than the king — to be sovereign.) The economic out­

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Yet, this ‘bourgeois-peasant’ revolution can only incorporate the peasantry over their heads, as it were: emphasising their objective role in breaking up the large land-holdings to make way for the capitalisation of land.

There is, I would contend, no getting away from the theo­retical aspect of the difficulties that confronted the marxist account of the Revolution. If we look behind those difficulties, they amount to this: In what sense can it be said that the bourgeoisie, the sans-culottes, the peasantry, the people or anyone made the Revolution? The empirical difficulties challenge the role of the bourgeoisie as the primary agent of the Revolution. They suggest rival agents in other classes, whose character and capacity to act need to be determined and explained. Or they point to forces beyond social classes and even deliberate intentions altogether: political institutions independent of class, the momentum of war, the destructive driving force behind the Terror.

One classic 19th-century interpretation of the Revolution hangs over the debate. For de Tocqueville, the Revolution did not lead to outcomes intended by its so-called agents, but in due course to the mere re-assertion of the Ancien Régime’s long-term evolution towards oppressive centralisation. That view poses the question starkly: Was the Revolution at most a temporary breakdown in the historic course of the state, rather than any change in society’s direction?

**English Particularism and Its Unexpected Benefits**

The predominant long-standing English style of historical writing is staunchly empirical and suspicious of global theses, preferring to build modestly from particular research – in a word, it is ‘particularist’. Just as idolisation of the masses has roots in French historical experience, so particularism in English historical research has roots in British history. The now discredited ‘whig’ history of democracy’s gradual rise and world-wide dissemination was our equivalent of the revolutionary destiny of France. Whereas the French hankered after grand theses, it used to be said, Britain had done very nicely on gradual, small-scale evolution. In historical studies of the French Revolution, particularism has produced effective attacks upon two weak points in the classic marxist idea of the Revolution: the claim that the state changed at the bidding of classes in society at large; and the supposed role of the bourgeoisie’s lower-class rivals for power. But, at the same time, it has produced alternative accounts which, if interpreted with some theoretical awareness, may not really be incompatible with some kind of marxist account.

When he published his *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, Alfred Cobban was already known for his attacks on the ‘myth’ of the Revolution: that is, the interpretation of it as the arrival of the bourgeoisie in power. In his view, the Revolution was a financial crisis of the Ancien Régime allowing ‘officials and professional men to move up from the minor to the major posts in government'
It was a 'revolution of place-holders', then, anxious to re-establish the kind of secure state power that benefitted them. Using a contemporary terminology, we might call it a crisis of 'elite legitimisation'. In The Social Interpretation, Cobban pitches his attack at its most general level: a Popper-inspired critique of sociological concepts in historical explanation, and a Tocqueville-inspired emphasis on the long-term continuity of power in France.

The Revolution emerges as a specifically political struggle over the particular interests of opportunists and functionaries, whose greatest wish was open access to careers in a state that would provide for them and, of course, sustain its own power: 

... a struggle for the possession of power and over the conditions in which power was to be exercised. Essentially the revolution was the overthrow of the old political system of the monarchy and the creation of a new one in the shape of the Napoleonic state. The supposed social categories of our histories - bourgeois, aristocrats, sans-culottes - are all in fact political ones.

Furthermore, far from being progressive in the Marxist sense, the Revolution is 'against and not for the rising forces of capitalism' (p. 168). In Cobban, particularism is pre-disposed to dissolve social movements and make them the creature of political calculation.

Perhaps the greatest and most influential of the English particularist historians is Richard Cobb. Cobb has concentrated on the lower classes. He is quick to spot divergences between the detailed picture and the available marxist views of class struggle, in which the lower classes are active contenders for power. But his work has been so subtle, thorough and sympathetic to his subjects that he ends by suggesting - almost in spite of himself - a new complex of coherent social movements actively pursuing goals within the revolutionary process.

Cobb's first point of entry into the history of the Revolution was the most organised manifestation of the sans-culotte movement: the 'revolutionary army', recruited during the Revolutionary wars to requisition food from the countryside. His classic The People's Army examined the establishment, personnel, organisation and activities of the 'army', with a devoted attention to the details of individuals, grounded in both methodological preferences and a self-effacing, affectionate style. After countless stories of the careers of individuals, an analysis of the spatial deployment and organisation of the army, and exhaustive accounts of attitudes within and towards it, he concludes Book Two with a display of modesty vis-à-vis any big historical questions. He has, he writes (p. 512), only 'tried to let the actors speak for themselves and 'illustrate life as it was', drawing himself merely negative and imprecise conclusions.

Insofar as the actors do speak in the book, however, it is through a number of barely acknowledged categories of cultural explanation which, with a different interpretation from Cobb's own, can constitute out of the 'army' a component of the Revolution as a coherent, if complex social movement. Cobb is never afraid to use an effortless common-sense empathy to interpret his subjects: their inextinguishable enthusiasm for the cause; their naive self-importance, laced with the grandiose language of equality; their townies' boredom, suspicion and gullibility in the countryside; their fear of famine; their 'habits of real soldiers throughout the ages: those of eating and drinking without paying' (p. 130); their 'small consumers' prejudice against the dealer in foodstuffs' (p. 132). This common-sense manner of interpretation is capable of enlightening the reader and of embracing non-common-sensical categories, such as the psychological meaning of the moustache (p. 129) or the anxiety brought on by rural empty space. But Cobb's weakness is to play with genuinely illuminating categories of interpretation without admitting how he is doing so, or what their significance or limitations might be. This is anthropological history, or 'histoire des mentalités', without the name - and without the encouragement to view the material at the psycho-cultural level.

Cobb's affectionate description of the militants sounds like a pretty damning view of the autonomous agency of the urban lower classes - and a well-substantiated one, at that. So much, it seems, for the autonomous action of that proto-working class, called the 'sans-culottes' and so beloved by marxists. If, however, we consider explicitly the implications of Cobb's engagement with the culture of the lower classes in the Revolution, we can see how he is merely describing a more complex version of the struggle of the lower classes in the revolutionary process - even though his explicit statements appear to undermine it altogether. Why, indeed, should we not interpret Cobb's erudite and sympathetic account of the lower orders so as to see them as the embodiment of one, or more likely of a number of lived ideologies? These come into conflict in the historical conjuncture of the Revolution. As Cobb himself says - albeit sarcastically - 'the essence of sans-culotte "thought" was something behavioural rather than doctrinal'.

In such a re-interpretation, the first aspect to be altered would be the over-arching fear of famine. This would not be seen as an inchoate trans-historical force, but as a site of interaction between people and state, mediated by historically specific representations of reality. That would place a new emphasis on the ideological conflict, going back half a century, between the long-established practice of food management by the absolutist régime and the advocacy of a free market in subsistence goods. When the conflict is described in these terms, the participants do not break down along simple class lines, with the bourgeoisie opting for the market and the rest favouring the old dirigisme. Class conflict can be seen - but not simply as the opposition of one specifiable social group to another. Rather, class conflict takes place through ideological shifts within given groups and movements. Secondly, the sans-culottes' struggle would be seen taking place...
internally to the movement as well as externally. It took the form of trying both to obtain some power in a setting determined from outside, and to constitute themselves as a movement. This they had to do via diverse representations, some (such as new, 'bourgeois' notions of equality and representation) drawn from outside their immediate level of society. As we shall see in a moment, there is separate evidence for this.

Let us see how these re-interpretations would affect the issue. Cobb shows how sans-culotte politics was monopolised by long-drawn-out struggles for power between local leaders. Certainly, this refutes Soboull's impression of a seamless, convivial 'mass movement' (pp. 122-26); but it does not demonstrate that there was no 'movement'. It simply emerges as a movement of thousands of political beginners, who operated with the many ambiguities of their own ideology and of the symbolism of democracy; who had an utterly naive grasp of their role, ambitions and personal interests; and who suffered political pressures from the central government which they could hardly imagine. From this kind of re-assessment of Cobb's cultural analysis, the sans-culottes are not shorn of all their autonomy as agents in the Revolution. Rather, they appear in more realistic terms: trying (inadequately) to determine their own identity in a movement made up of contradictory elements, besieged by contending and contingent currents, and stumbling into temporary success only to fall back after a spell. The story is all very human, one might say.

Two other English historians who were writing at the time of Cobb are worth mentioning under this heading: they are Georges Rudé and Norman Hampson. They give undogmatic sense to social movements as agents in the Revolution, and to that extent sustain a re-assessment of English historical writing on the Revolution.

Rudé acknowledged the help of both the classic marxist historians and Richard Cobb for his 1959 study of The Crowd in the French Revolution. In it he re-constituted from police records the make-up of the crowds, which from time to time crucially intervened in the political process of the Revolution. He ingeniously combines both personnel, ideology and psychology in his picture. The crowds, made up of small traders, wage-earners, workshop masters and domestics, commonly gathered first at familiar places of assembly such as wine shops or markets. Prompted by a combination of rumour, progressive ideology filtering down from the literate sections of society, and well-founded panic-fears for their economic security or survival, they then passed to public demonstrations and, on occasion, to riot. Rudé's book is a classic because he manages to combine objective and subjective elements to show the particular and actively evolving character of the crowds. 'Without the impact of political ideas, mainly derived from the bourgeois leaders, such movements would have remained strangely purposeless,' he observes, for example (p. 209); but, on the other hand, 'had the sans-culottes not been able to absorb and adapt these ideas, they would have had far less impact. The sans-culottes emerge as convincing historical actors precisely because their identity is established in a fluid combination of conditions, action, and ideology.

Hampson's A Social History of the French Revolution is a pluralistic account of the phases of the Revolution, each with varying competition between political groupings to grasp and direct political power on behalf of various social classes. Classes emerge as agents in the Revolutionary process, therefore, but only through the articulation given their aspirations by political institutions and personnel. Links between social groups and political figures are shown in two ways. Hampson identifies the class origins of political actors. But he qualifies this by portraying their actual deeds as position-play intended to gather a coherent constituency of supporters from society at large.

Hampson himself indicates his underlying conception of agency within the Revolution with an enlightening metaphor (p. vi). In a social revolution, the 'evolution of the historical landscape' is broken by a sudden 'fault line' along which 'political action becomes more closely involved in the process of accelerated social change'. There is no crude mechanistic causation here. Social classes are agents whose aims are concentrated and translated through political in-fighting. The picture is realistic, not least because individual ambitions are included. On the other hand, as was the case with Cobban and Cobb, one can see a certain inherent statism in the conceptualisation. For the approach favours that which has been explicitly articulated, hence that which exists in the central (usually Parisian) political sphere. Hampson's work concentrates on the representative assembly as the privileged site of action in the revolutionary process.

In sum, when they confronted the previous marxist orthodoxy, what I have called English 'particularist' histories challenged the account of class struggle in the Revolution quite fundamentally. But, far from destroying the possibility, they may simply have shown how the role of classes as agents in the revolutionary process can be more subtly described in terms of interlocking groups, institutions and ideologies.

There have been a considerable number of valuable new works on the Revolution in English since those that I have examined from the 1950s and 1960s. These have opened up two new areas in particular: the long-term effect of the lower classes' resistance to the Revolution; and the growth of new political institutions. In addition, one recent, intriguing discussion from George C. Comminel has proposed a materialist account of a specifically ancien régime system of expropriation. Whilst remaining ostensibly marxist, this would spike an attack à la Cobban because its categories are not anachronistic. However, in the '70s and '80s, the debate over the classic marxist view began to open up again in France. A new style of analysis, focussing on the psycho-cultural, came to prominence there and also, to some extent, in North America. This development had the effect of recasting the issue of agency in the revolutionary process.
Classes or Representations: the French Debate

The most trenchant contribution to the French debate was François Furet’s dense essay from the early 1970s: ‘The French Revolution is over.’ This was written originally as a post-hoc defence of the book that Furet had published, with Denis Richet, in 1965. In the essay, he claims that the marxist view, in arguing that the Revolution installed bourgeois power in France, reproduces the revolutionaries’ own perception of themselves as creators ab initio of an historically necessary new political order. It has merely added the gloss of ‘bourgeois state’ to this perception. An objective history, by contrast, would distance itself further from the revolutionaries’ self-perception. In fact, it would distinguish the causal nexus that brought about the Revolution from ‘the Revolution as a mode of change, a specific dynamic of collective action’ (p. 18). In invoking a requirement to stand back from the historical subjects’ form of action (so as to identify it and theorise objectively), Furet aims a forceful barb against a marxist view, in arguing that the Revolution installed bourgeois power, and theorises objectively, Furet aims a forceful barb against a

Furet goes on to construct his own analysis at the psycho-cultural level. The Revolution’s dynamic of collective action is contained within its representations of politics and of society. It is these that steer it towards the Terror and the war, both factors which in due course played into the hands of Napoleon.

There was behind that crescendo of events something never clearly conceptualised, unrelated to the circumstances, existing apart from them, though evolving with and through them. That force, which the historian calls an increasingly ‘popular’ power, because it manifested itself in that form, had no objective existence at the social level, it was but a mental representation of the social sphere that permeated and dominated the field of politics (p. 63).

Furet undertakes explicitly to embrace representations in his explanation of the Revolution.

But there is more in this than meets the eye. Analysed as they are by Furet, the ‘mental representations’ of the Revolution are so fundamentally divorced from reality that its nature ‘can be defined as dialectic between actual power and a symbolic representation of it ... whose chief outcome ... was the establishment, with Napoleon, of a democratic royalism’ (p. 78). Furet’s startling account of the Revolution incorporates a scepticism about the ability of the discourse of democratic politics to make any contact with reality. This not only explains the drift into Bonapartism, but makes it inevitable. It is an unstated part of Furet’s acknowledged legacy from de Tocqueville (with his scepticism regarding democracy). It pre-determines that the ‘democratic’ revolution will in the end fall into the hands of autocracy.

Let us look more closely at the mechanisms operating, according to Furet, in the revolutionaries’ representations of politics. The Revolution derived from the Enlightenment an aspiration for society to be freed from institutions, mechanisms and strategies of power – in short, from what is (for Furet) the essence of politics. They believed this would leave the way clear for history to be shaped by collective human action (pp. 24–25). Their idea of ‘democratic politics as a national ideology’ (p. 28) spread rapidly with Jacobinism to occupy the vacuum created when traditional, monarchical power collapsed. But, according to Furet, its inspiration is not politics properly speaking, but a seamless unity:

a kind of spontaneous equivalence between the values of revolutionary consciousness – liberty and equality – the nation that embodied those values, and the individuals charged with implementing or defending them. Indeed, it was this equivalence that ipso facto transformed those isolated individuals into a collective entity, the people, making the people the supreme source of legitimacy and the Revolution’s sole agent (p. 29).

In other words, liberty and equality were erected as shared values. As such, they gave an illusion of active, transparent unity obligatory for all those identified as members of ‘the nation’, and shaped the revolutionaries’ xenophobic obsessions with unmasking and punishing spies and traitors. The Marxists regarded the Terror and the mass participation in the war as the ‘radicalisation’ of the Revolution. According to Furet, it was really the articulation of a dynamic inherent in the Revolution’s manner of construing political action.

Furet’s account has enormous strengths as regards those awkward aspects of the Revolution that undermined the classic marxist interpretation. It explains how there could be an outcome which no class would have aimed for, since it ran counter to the manifest interests of all of them. It explains why the state was the final beneficiary of the process: the new kind of political sociability required to ground politics in society was unsustainable. More broadly, in analysing the dynamics of the culture embodied in the Revolution, it appears to reveal something of the reality as experienced by participants.

But one can understand the offence caused to those more sympathetic to the professed spirit of the Revolution. The explanation of the Revolution’s outcome is bought at the price of pre-supposing the impossibility of its enterprise. ‘It was,’ writes Furet (p. 7), ‘a pledge that no event could fully redeem.’ Furthermore, whatever their political preferences, can historians fairly do justice to historical experience with such an explanation? From the start, it ghettoizes seemingly autonomous historical actors within the very culture through which they try to realize themselves as agents. Their representations were apparently pre-set to make no effective contact with the other levels of the reality in which they exist.

Furet’s was the first comprehensive account of the Revolution to focus so explicitly on the psycho-cultural level. However, around that time and since, others have analysed particular aspects of the Revolution on the same level. Jean Starobinski’s 1789: Les Emblèmes de la Raison (1973) discussed the efforts of high art to embody in an abstraction
the growing aspiration towards the secular unity of society. The Revolution's extraordinary public festivals attracted two classic studies: Mona Ozouf's La Fête révolutionnaire, and Les Métamorphoses de la fête en Provence de 1750 à 1820 by the marxist historian Michel Furet (both 1976). Festivals were held in the Revolution to celebrate everything from the foundation of the Republic to local heroes of the civil war. These studies demonstrated how Enlightenment and statist conceptualisations of the public arena jostled in the festivals with the culture of ordinary people. Maurice Agulhon's Marie-anne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880 (1979)27 analysed the trend to personify the Republic in the figure of a woman from its origin in the Revolution.

The trend towards psycho-cultural analysis has been evident in North America, too. In 1983, Ronald Paulson's Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)28 argued much as Starobinski had, but covered French and English romantic perceptions of revolution. In her inventive essay, Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution (1984), Lynn Hunt complemented insights from Ozouf and Agulhon. She provided a literary-psychological analysis of how the revolutionaries conceived the 'plot' of their own history, plus a political sociology about the diffusion of Jacobinism in different regions of France. Finally, Brian Singer's Society, Theory and the French Revolution (1986)30 embraced the Lefort-Castoriadis concept of the 'imaginary'31 to revive the Talmson thesis that mass democracy tends to develop into totalitarianism. Singer argued, in a post-structuralist tone, that the discourse of the Revolution must fall foul of its own concept of legitimacy - a finding that in some ways resembles Furet's.

How did French marxist historians react to this trend to undermine the role of classes from a psycho-cultural perspective? Even though the leaders of the school were perfectly capable of analysing cultural movements on this level,32 they have usually condemned it. Soboul had to reject Furet and Richet's notion of a bourgeois-liberal Revolution that went off the rails once the dynamic of national unity manifested itself in war and Terror (pp. 338-43). To his way of thinking, that contradicted the fundamental idea of the classic Marxist account: that the Revolution produced, in the final analysis, the political and social régime that the bourgeois wanted. He regarded an account suggesting determination in some other direction as no determination at all. However, we can ask whether, given the inherent strength and subtlety of Furet's psycho-cultural account, it really is necessary to set aside that type of account in order to defend a theoretically viable role for classes as agents in the Revolution.

Taking up the torch from Soboul, Claude Mazauric has strengthened the notion of the 'bourgeois' revolution, by employing a more complex view of the relations between the various levels of analysis. This yields a more scientifically articulated account of the Revolution. Specifically, Mazauric adopted from Althusser the idea of the relative autonomy of the political. From Gramsci, he took the idea that in the events of political history we see the 'social formation' integrating a new mode of production with its associated balance of class forces. Finally, he adopted Foucault's idea of discursive formation, a concept very close in spirit to Furet. Bringing all these strands together, he advocated an analysis of the content of the discursive formations of the Revolution, of their functioning in institutions, and of their 'mode of insertion' into the mode of production's gradual historical emergence in specific circumstances.34

Drawing on these ideas,35 Mazauric can arrive at the following conclusions. The Revolution is 'bourgeois' in the sense that, over a four-year period, it 'embrourgeoisified' all property. This was true even though the unstable political 'front' (p. 85) - or 'revolutionary bloc' (p. 90) - that achieved the change was based on an unworkable compromise, adopted in a period of weakness, which fudged the issue of how property held under feudal terms would be converted into bourgeois property. As they stumbled over this ambiguity, both the aristocracy and the peasantry rapidly abandoned the political front. The urban poor were driven by a food crisis to challenge it at the same time (pp. 81-84). In Mazauric's view, this account, rather than giving Enlightenment culture the predominant role (like Furet and Richet), shows how 'revolutionary politics' was a concrete and continuous creation, the realisation of a mode of government and of action in a complex situation, ... not mechanically reducible to the ideology which founded it or the principles that informed it. The development of social struggles created an objective logic into which was inserted the political action of an elite imbued with the ideology of the Enlightenment (p. 86).

Michel Vovelle adopted a different course from Soboul or Mazauric. He embraced psycho-cultural history with confidence. He followed up his early work on the revolutionary festivals, religiosity and perceptions of death36 with more comprehensive studies of the Revolution as such, which have made him the most interesting and authoritative marxist to respond to Furet and the history of mentalités. Vovelle recognised that the history of mentalités had something to offer marxist history. He brushed aside fears of mystification and idealism, arguing that history of mentalité indicates the 'complex mediations' between 'real life' and the life 'of images'.37 His account of the Revolution is gathered together in La Mentalité révolutionnaire of 1986.38 There he uses the history of mentalités without losing the reality of the Revolution in a long-term evolution or turning it into a process predestined to futility by the re-surgence of hidden, primitive strata in the popular mentality.39

Vovelle's work is an account of the revolutionary mentality rather than a deliberate explanation of the Revolution. Nonetheless, it does intersect with the explanation given by Furet. Crowd vandalism, mass violence and the Terror (manifestations of the popular revolutionary mentality that have been crucial in the polemic) are considered by Vovelle. They emerge as the product of a complex of many things: a genuine need for self-defence; cruelty learnt from the society of the
day; popular resistance to dignity and authority; subversive humour; and an urge for renewal expressed in destruction, but modified by native soft-heartedness (pp. 86–95).

At first glance, this version of the psycho-cultural forces at work in the Revolution appears to concede almost everything to Furet. However, the direction taken by the Revolution in Vovelle’s account is not, as it was in Furet’s, the product of a self-enclosed dynamic. It arises from interactions within the psycho-cultural – notably, that between ancient elements deep in the psyche and the diffusion of a new ideology.40 What is more, it arises also from interactions of the psycho-cultural with material changes in the social order outside: demographic and economic changes, for example, which dissolve the older peasant society and its forms of sociability (pp. 52–53). In fact, the conflict between ideology and the pre-existing mentalité represents the invasion of the psycho-cultural by evolving material conditions which are structuring social relations between classes. On Vovelle’s account, the political ideology of the Enlightenment would not just carry into the Revolution the contradictions of a certain conception of politics. It would manifest the difficult attempt to represent social life while adapting to a class-related economic transformation. This does not avoid the sort of contingency that marxists like Soboul criticised in the explanations of their non-marxist accounts. It only emphasises the latter’s empirical difficulties for the classic marxist account. Given the new view, none of these need any longer contradict the interpretation which takes the underlying direction of the Revolution to be the transformation of society along lines arising from the growth of the bourgeois social environment. Those empirical difficulties merely suggest that, as agents, the bourgeoisie (like other classes) interacted in a complex fashion in their specific social, political and historical context.

But this complex picture of their action is no reason to deny that classes can be agents of social change. It describes their situation in terms which we have no difficulty in understanding when it comes to individual agents. It is common enough for individual human beings to act with an indistinct sense of their own character or interests, to fail to see what they ‘really’ want. Often, they wind up with something approximating their original aim: a product of their action and their circumstances which they come to regard as acceptable. They may even believe it to be what they were aiming at in the first place. Rather than being grounds to deny that these individuals are agents, all those complexities merely help to show how agency is articulated.

To determine a social group’s efforts to grasp its own identity, the concept of a ‘social imaginary’, as developed by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort,42 can come to our aid. It denotes the total of representations that are available in a given society as means to understand society in its relationship to itself, to historical change and to reality outside of it. It is, as it were, the equivalent for social groups of the cultural, cognitive and emotional resources an individual acquires from the environment. And, like them, it does not so much invalidate the idea of the agent as flesh it out.

It is true that, on this account, the bourgeoisie must follow a particularly convoluted path to the realisation of ‘their’ aims. Yet there are grounds in Marx’s own writing on the Revolution for arguing that the relationship of the bourgeoisie to the social imaginary is bound to be peculiarly paradoxical. For Marx took over from Hegel the idea that contemporary society had adopted a deceptive notion of individuality. Independent ‘individuals’ were constituted in bourgeois society, and then had to overcome their supposed autonomy via a specious, abstract political unity. This political mechanism of illusion was called for precisely to offset the ideology of individualism in private market relationships. But in reality, it is the individual as an atom of society that is an illusion. As Marx wrote in The Holy Family, from the start social life transforms the supposed ‘absolute vacuum’ of these atoms into a social network of interests.43 According to Marx, the Revolution abstracted political life from actual, so-called ‘private’ social relations – a step that was needed to contain atomisation by uniting individuals in the political sphere. Claude Lefort has added a further consequence.44 In the social imaginary of the modern world political utterances

Intention, Action and Outcome in the Revolution

Over the last several decades, historical writing on the Revolution has substantially undermined the classic marxist account, according to which social change fundamentally beneficial to the bourgeoisie was actively pursued by that class and others. But my analysis of this trend in historical writing indicates that, though the Left has understandably relied upon the classic marxist account, it can be modified without loss. The psycho-cultural level, incorporated untheorised by Cobb, damaged Lefèvre’s and Soboul’s version of classes as agents. But, understood in different terms, it is by no means fatal to a quite convincing alternative conceptualisation of how social classes were active in the Revolution and the net outcome progressive – if not unambiguously so. That is why Vovelle can give an uncompromising, marxist account of the intertwining strands of psycho-cultural and material levels in the revolutionary process. Properly incorporated, the psycho-cultural elements make the role of groups as agents in the transformation more realistic, more understandable, and perhaps easier to emulate, too.

In fact, when they incorporated ideology into the history of the Revolution as a moment of social progress and class conflict, historians shadowed a shift in marxist thinking: namely, that which, with the growing influence of Gramsci, placed ideology centre stage. This influence is particularly evident in Mazauric.41 In this shift, ideology, as a site where political blocs form and negotiate over the transformation of the mode of production, has readily become an autonomous historical factor standing between classes and the outcomes of events. A class does not have to rise economically or socially during, or as a result of a revolution, in order to demonstrate that the revolution was either instigated by it, or congenial to it, or undertaken on its behalf. Nor does a class have to be directly involved politically: the politicians or the intelligentsia may work to bring forward the new social environment that will accommodate the class. Finally, there is no need to assume that a class rising with the mode of production will have a clear-cut victory in a revolution: rather, some more or less temporary compromise is likely.

This new emphasis upon the political and intellectual struggle over how society is to be organised can obviate many of the difficulties posed to the older marxist version of the French Revolution. It makes the realization of what is in the interests of a social class an indirect and far more hazardous business. Social classes no longer appear straightforwardly as agents re-organising society politically in their own interests. The uncertain course of political changes, the role of sub-groups such as public servants and intellectuals, and the ambiguous outcomes of the Revolution: all were cited as empirical difficulties for the classic marxist account. Given the new view, none of these need any longer contradict the interpretation which takes the underlying direction of the Revolution to be the transformation of society along lines arising from the growth of the bourgeois social environment. Those empirical difficulties merely suggest that, as agents, the bourgeoisie (like other classes) interacted in a complex fashion in their specific social, political and historical context.

But this complex picture of their action is no reason to deny that classes can be agents of social change. It describes their situation in terms which we have no difficulty in understanding when it comes to individual agents. It is common enough for individual human beings to act with an indistinct sense of their own character or interests, to fail to see what they 'really' want. Often, they wind up with something approximating their original aim: a product of their action and their circumstances which they come to regard as acceptable. They may even believe it to be what they were aiming at in the first place. Rather than being grounds to deny that these individuals are agents, all those complexities merely help to show how agency is articulated.

To determine a social group's efforts to grasp its own identity, the concept of a 'social imaginary', as developed by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort,42 can come to our aid. It denotes the total of representations that are available in a given society as means to understand society in its relationship to itself, to historical change and to reality outside of it. It is, as it were, the equivalent for social groups of the cultural, cognitive and emotional resources an individual acquires from the environment. And, like them, it does not so much invalidate the idea of the agent as flesh it out.

It is true that, on this account, the bourgeoisie must follow a particularly convoluted path to the realisation of 'their' aims. Yet there are grounds in Marx's own writing on the Revolution for arguing that the relationship of the bourgeoisie to the social imaginary is bound to be peculiarly paradoxical. For Marx took over from Hegel the idea that contemporary society had adopted a deceptive notion of individuality. Independent 'individuals' were constituted in bourgeois society, and then had to overcome their supposed autonomy via a specious, abstract political unity. This political mechanism of illusion was called for precisely to offset the ideology of individualism in private market relationships. But in reality, it is the individual as an atom of society that is an illusion. As Marx wrote in The Holy Family, from the start social life transforms the supposed 'absolute vacuum' of these atoms into a social network of interests.43 According to Marx, the Revolution abstracted political life from actual, so-called 'private' social relations - a step that was needed to contain atomisation by uniting individuals in the political sphere. Claude Lefort has added a further consequence.44 In the social imaginary of the modern world political utterances
have to be abstracted from the historical identity, power and interests of those who make them. It is more plausible to expect, then, that a political order amenable to any class at any time would have to be realized through various psycho-cultural by-ways I have discussed. The French Revolution, insofar as it was directed towards an order adapted to the bourgeois individualist society, was bound to abstract its professed objectives so as to hide their social basis.

One final point. There are general and specific reasons for adopting the psycho-cultural view as I have set it out, with various agents arriving circuitously at the outcome of the Revolution. But might we not, for political reasons, regret the choice of ordinary human agents, trying to identify themselves from the more complex view’s greater subtlety and accuracy of understanding? Confidence and success in one’s actions (not to mention tolerance of opposition) are not obtained by fear; would seem to underlie some of the attachment to classic marxist accounts of the Revolution as class conflict: to conceive of their political purposes as quite different from its origins to 1793 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

Notes
1 This essay is closely based upon sections of my Portrayals of Revolution: Images, Debates and Patterns of Thought in representing the French Revolution (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester, forthcoming). Thanks are due to Jonathan Rée, Russell Keat and Mike Sonenscher for their comments on an earlier draft.

1 Ibíd., p. 246.
5 Tony Judt argues in Marxism and the French Left (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) that the paradigm of politics as a succession of transforming ‘journées’ is definitively out-dated with the long-term decline of former communist support and its integration into mainstream political processes, as signified by the election of Mitterrand in 1981. A particularly affectionate (and for that reason misguided) account of mass movements in the Revolution and their defeat or betrayal can be found in Daniel Guérin’s Lutte des Classes sous la première république: bourgeois et ‘bras nus’ 1793–7 (Paris: Gallimard, 1946, 1968).
7 We should note that Marx himself soon became aware of the difficulties of attributing the French Revolution to the bourgeoisie. Particularly after 1852, and the further defeat of parliamentary democracy by dictatorship, he tended to accept that the state in general had an autonomous life and that the Revolution was not the passive hand-maiden of the bourgeoisie, so much as an enterprise it took on blindly and had, in due course, to entail, due to the Napoleonic coup. A fuller discussion of Marx’s view is not possible in this article, but its theoretical potential is discussed below.
11 This is derived from the role of the peasantry as interpreted in an original, but still entirely marxist way in the Russian study by A. Ado: Krest’yanke dvizhenie vo Frantsii vo vremya velikoy burghiaznoy revoliutsii konstsa XVIII veka (Moscow: 171). For commentary, see Soboul, ‘Georges Lefebvre: historien de la Révolution Française’ (Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française (1975) No. 1; reprinted in Comprendre la Révolution), and T. C. W. Blanning, The French Revolution: Aristocrats v. Bourgeois? (London: Macmillan Education, 1987), pp. 51–52. According to Ado, even though, subjectively, the peasantry conceived of their political purposes as quite different from capitalism, objectively they were contributing to the bourgeois revolution by attempting to break up the system of large aristocratic proprietors, such that a capitalist market would begin to operate.
15 Cobban’s Popperian critique does seem effective against any blinkered social science inserted into history. In The Social Interpretation, he argues that ‘the sociological historian’ corrupts ‘the criterion for the selection of relevant historical facts’ with a global theory of the nature of society which cannot be tested because it is ‘holistic’ (ch. 2, esp. p. 13). Thus, Marxist and other ‘sociological’ interpretations have failed to test their contention that specific classes are rising or falling in the Revolution. As for the social movement in the towns, the sans-culottes are too diverse to be drawn together by anything but political manipulation at the time and the enthusiasm of Leninist historians since (chapter 11). Applied more generally to history, this critique would, however, cast suspicion on any social categories that are used in historical analysis, other than ones contemporary to the period (chapter 3, esp. pp. 16–17). Hence, Cobban may be challenged, with – ironically – an almost Popperian argument: he employs an inflexible assumption which makes it inevitable that political categories and state power must be imposed from above. Because his theoretical scepticism excludes any social category without a contemporary designation, it is bound from the start to filter out from consideration any that lack an explicit identity – which is to say, in all probability, a political presence. The conscious, political arena is tautologically likely to impose upon society at large, and social conflict to disappear behind political manoeuvring.

See also Cobb's better known *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) and *The Making of the sans-culottes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983) show how the sans-culottes developed workable applications of direct democratic principles.

London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963; 1966. Hampson's subsequent studies of political leaders (Robespierre, London: Duckworth, 1974) and *Danton* (London: Duckworth, 1978) show an almost personal sensitivity to the interaction of individuals with their institutional, ideological and contingent environment, while he remains generally as hostile as ever to anti-empiricism in politics and insistent upon the autonomy of politics, ideology and the economy (see *Will and Circumstance* (London: Duckworth, 1983)).


Re-thinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge (London and New York: Verso, 1987). Comminel directs his keenest theoretical attack against the structuralist strategy which, in his view, merely aggravates with theoretical subtleties (not always correctly applied) the tendency to read back the presence of capitalism into the pre-revolutionary past.


*La Révolution Française* (Paris: Hachette). This reflects the same emphasis on the culture, with its inheritance from the Enlightenment, plus the crucial role of Terror and war in diverting the course of the Revolution. Richet himself separately argued the case for the Enlightenment roots in his 'Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française: élites et despotisme', *Annales E.S.C.* (1969).


New Haven and London: Yale University Press.


London: Macmillan.

The term has been developed theoretically by Castoriadis and Lefort. See below.


In general, Vovelle claims, history of mentalités is a 'study of the mediation and the dialectical relationship between objective conditions of human life and the way humans describe and even live it. At this level, the contradictions between ... ideology on one side and mentalité on the other dissolve. Mapping out (prospection) mentalités, far from being a mystificatory procedure, ... broadens the field of research' (*Idéologie et mentalité*, p. 17).


