Historiography of the French Revolution: The continuation of politics and ideology by other means

Lecture

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> "Historical memory in popular culture and politics often has more to do with the present than with the past. It is the task of the historian to question such memory."

Introduction

The statement of the American historian R.R. Palmer, well-known as author of the textbook *A History of the Modern World*, that the French Revolution was a crucial turning point in modern Western history has been endorsed by many historians. Nevertheless, from the early nineteenth century onwards they have also disagreed widely about many aspects of the Revolution, such as its causes and consequences, or its violence. The French Revolution has been variously depicted as a people's rebellion, as a bourgeois revolution, and as a conspiracy of a small group of radical thinkers and hotheads. Some historians have emphasised the ideas of the Enlightenment, which had to lead to a liberal revolution; others pointed to the political dissatisfaction and discord among privileged aristocratic and bourgeois elites; and still others considered socioeconomic changes and class struggle to be the decisive factor. Yet others saw the Revolution as a rather accidental succession of separate events and developments as well as of personal factors, such as failing harvests, the bankruptcy of the French state, and the fickleness of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette's frivolity. At times historians even failed to agree on facts. As British historian Alfred Cobban remarked, there seemed to be three certain facts about the French Revolution: the outbreak was in 1789, it took place predominantly in Paris, and it was the uprising of the French people against the King and the nobility. These three 'facts' were incorrect: in his view, the revolution started in 1787 in a number of French provinces with aristocrats rebelling against absolutist rule.

History, ideology and politics

The historiography of the French Revolution illustrates that writing history is not just about the past, but partly also about the times in which historians live and look back at the past, about their nationality and their ideological and political preoccupations. The very diverse ways in which historians have understood the Revolution is related to political ideologies, changing political regimes and relations in France, and French public memory and national identity.

The French road to a more or less stable democracy was far from a smooth one; it was marked by a series of revolutions and a succession of different political regimes as well as political struggles between various political groups: conservative monarchists and Catholics, republicans, nationalists, moderate and radical liberals, socialists and communists. Each of

the three revolutions in the nineteenth century, those in 1830, 1848, and 1871, referred back to and took up the revolutionary project started by the revolution of 1789. Each revolution seemed to promise again the realisation of revolutionary ideals as they were ideologically defined in different ways. Thus, histories of the French Revolution continued to be relevant for French politics and national memory. Various political movements derived their inspiration from the (selective) adoption of revolutionary ideals or from the rejection of these ideals. At the same time their ideological tenets were again and again projected onto the Revolution. In that way it stayed alive as the origin and benchmark of modern French politics, the more so because some historians were involved in politics, while politicians used history for their own ends. The historiography of the French Revolution was intertwined with the continuous discussion about the French collective identity and in that way, it was intrinsically connected to French nationalism.

The relevant political ideologies, which to a large extent originated in the French Revolution and which unfolded in the nineteenth century, are conservatism, liberalism, nationalism, republicanism, and socialism and communism. All of these ideological views on society, the state and citizenship were defined in relation to the key principles of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity (brotherhood). Let me briefly summarize the contents of these ideologies.

Conservatism

- Holds a holistic view of society as an integrated organic whole which takes priority over its parts, the individuals.
- Considers man as essentially irrational and inclined to evil. Therefore, people cannot be free and equal; man has to be restrained by authority, collective bonds and ties of moral obligation.
- Advocates community spirit, tradition, authority, religion, shared norms and values, and engrained habits and customs for providing social stability. Religion is valued for its cohesive function: moral integration on the basis of shared beliefs and attachments. Associations and communities between the central state and the individual should safeguard social cohesion and avert an intrusive centralized state as well as unbridled individualism.
- Emphasizes the continuity between past, present and future, and values tradition, including social and cultural diversity, heritage and localism, and emotional attachments as they have evolved in history. Rejects the rational abstractions and universal principles of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution as well as social planning. Social change should take place in a gradual, evolutionary way with respect for the past.

Conservatism was articulated by the Savoyard politician and philosopher Joseph de Maistre and the English Whig-politician Edmund Burke in his response to the French Revolution: *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Christian-Democracy as it evolved from the late nineteenth century on, to a large extend bears the stamp of conservatism, although it also adopted liberal and social-democratic features, depending on whether it leans to the right or left.

Liberalism:

- Assumes that man is basically rational and endorses Enlightened principles and the belief in progress.
- Views society not as an integrated organic whole, but as the total of all social relations between autonomous and self-responsible individuals, who should be able pursue their own ends unhampered and freely develop themselves.
- Stresses individual self-determination, civil rights and liberties against the power of the state and institutions like the Church and traditional corporative organizations.
- Prioritizes individual liberty and self-determination over equality and fraternity.
- Advocates the rule of law and some degree of political equality, but a limited role of the constitutional state: the definition of the good life should be an individual and private matter and should not be a prescribed by the state (negative freedom).
- Favours a free market economy (within legal boundaries) and meritocracy: individuals should be able to compete with each other on the basis of merit and achievement.

The French Revolution was not only the breakthrough of liberal politics, but also marked the emergence of the nation-state and nationalism, which was often mixed with elements of other ideologies.

Nationalism:

- Assumes that there is or should be a mutual identification of the unified state and its rulers on the one hand and an ethnically homogeneous population sharing a common culture, language, history, mentality, traditions and customs.
- Prioritizes the collective identity of the people over the state as an institution (which should serve the common interests of the nation), particular group-interests and individual interests.
- Stresses collective solidarity: equality and fraternity prioritized over individual liberties.
- Cherishes romantic rather than enlightened values: feelings and emotions, although they may be irrational, considered to be more real than abstract rational ideas.

Republicanism (which has been important in France in opposition to the monarchy and the Church, and which could overlap with liberalism, socialism as well as nationalism):

- Advocates popular sovereignty and active citizenship: as citizens men are political agents, who should participate in the public sphere, the *res publica*.
- Stresses the importance of political equality and civic virtues, of serving the common good on the basis of loyalty to the state.
- Values a strong state as the embodiment and guardian of democracy and civic virtues.
- Holds that individual liberties have to be geared to the need for equality and fraternity. (Moderate liberal republicanism, seeking a balance between liberty and the public good, was different from the radical republicanism of the Jacobin revolutionaries, who prioritized equality and public virtue over individual freedom.)

Socialism[1] and communism:

[1] Apart from Marxism and social-democracy there is a utopian and technocratic brand of socialism based on the ideas of Henri Saint-Simon and Robert Owen among others: they rejected a politicized class struggle, and their

- Consider social-economic conditions and relations, and not politics in itself as crucial for the organisation of society.
- Emphasize that society is divided into socioeconomic classes and that the antagonism between those classes is the driving force in history.
- Prioritize socioeconomic equality and solidarity over individual political rights.
- Attribute to the state a crucial role for bringing about social solidarity and justice or even a complete new classless social order.

The distinctions between ideologies are not absolute; they may overlap in various ways. There was, for example, a similarity between the conservative and socialist antiliberal criticism of modern industrial and capitalist society. Both conservatives and socialists criticized capitalism for its de-personalizing and de-humanizing effects in the sense that on the free market social relationships were merely mediated through the exchange of things and services that could be bought and sold for money. Social relations had lost their basis in strong communal bonds, sympathy, trust and moral obligation and had come to depend on naked economic self-interest, thus undermining a basic sense of social embeddedness and security. With their emphasis on socioeconomic equality and collective social rights, socialism and communism were the very opposite of liberalism, but these ideologies shared an optimistic belief in enlightened principles: a rational organisation of society and the ideal of progress. And both assumed that economic relations were fundamental for politics, although they had very different ideas about the best organisation of the economy. While liberals advocated a capitalist free market free from direct political intervention, Marxists and socialists propagated a state-controlled, either fully collectivized or regulated economy.

Conservative and liberal interpretations of the French Revolution

I'm now coming back to the political history of France in the nineteenth century and its impact on historiography of the French Revolution. After the final defeat of Napoleon in the battle of Waterloo (1815), the Bourbon dynasty was restored, although royal power was somewhat curtailed by a constitution and a parliament. Louis XVIII and Charles X, who reigned France until 1830, were supported by conservative and reactionary forces, whereas liberal politicians opposed their authoritarian regime. The historiography of the French Revolution in the Restoration period reflected this political division: on the one hand there was a conservative or even reactionary catholic interpretation of the Revolution, on the other hand a liberal one.

Conservative historians rejected the French Revolution as the catastrophic manifestation of evil instigated by radical Enlightenment thinkers in order to destroy cherished traditions, holy religion and an age-old stable social order. Radical agitators had unleashed the violent passions of the uncivilised and uneducated masses, which resulted in destruction and anarchy. The conservative historiography was a fundamental criticism of the politics of modernity, the idea that the course of history can be wilfully steered, and that society can

basic idea of socialism was rational social planning and management of industrial society on the basis of science, expertise and professionalism, which would guarantee a more efficient and more humane economy than the free market.

be rationally reorganized and renewed through politics. The conservative message was that efforts to reform and reconstruct society on the basis of abstract enlightened thinking about universal human rights and equality inevitably resulted in damage and terror rather than a better society.

Whereas conservative historians pictured the French Revolution as a man-made disaster, liberal historians such as Adolphe Thiers, Francois Mignet and Francois Guizot viewed it as an inevitable and necessary historical event. The Revolution resulted from the rise of the bourgeoisie, made possible by a growing commercial and proto-industrial economy as well as the spread of education. The middle class, embracing enlightened ideals, promoted social and economic progress and therefore it was only natural that it had not accepted any longer the absolutist monarchy and traditional aristocratic and clerical privileges. In the liberal view, the bourgeoisie rightfully demanded equality before the law and the opening of careers on the basis, not of birth or patronage, but of talent and achievement. Liberal historians, some of whom were also involved in politics, applauded the French Revolution as an essentially beneficial and progressive historical event, which was brought about by enlightened middle class leaders with the support of the majority of the people.

At the same time, however, liberal historians acknowledged that something had gone wrong in the course of the Revolution. In its first phase, before radical Jacobins carried the day, the popular masses were still where they ought to be in liberal eyes – that is under the control of responsible leaders. In the early 1790s, however, the revolution got out of hand as a consequence of Jacobin extremism and popular agitation. The first revolution of 1789, which established a constitutional monarchy, was all right, but the second, republican one in 1792 was hijacked by radicals. The outcome was violence and terror, which had not been intended by moderate liberals. The Jacobin Terror was an accidental and unfortunate aberration, caused by exceptional conditions and emergencies. Moderate liberals lost out against ruthless fanatics such as Robespierre, who manipulated the lower orders for their own ends. This interpretation absolved moderate liberals of failure; they could be presented as the rightful heirs of the true liberal aspirations: human rights, equality before the law, political liberties and the free market.

Despite their fundamental different interpretations of the French Revolution, conservative and liberal historians had something in common: their elitist mistrust of the popular masses. They agreed that any responsible sense of liberty and justice was simply beyond the capacity of uneducated people because they lacked reasonableness and self-control. They were inclined to either anarchy or submission to tyranny. Both the conservative and liberal views of the Revolution implied that the lower classes were not fit for active political participation. (In the nineteenth century, bourgeois liberals typically would oppose universal suffrage.)

In the liberal view, the Revolution had started promisingly, but it had accidentally gone off the rails: after resulting in chaos and terror it had ended in the military dictatorship of Napoleon. The Revolution was unfinished, because the liberal ideals of 1789 had been betrayed by radicals as well as Napoleon. In the Restoration period liberals wished to repeat

the Revolution, but now without violence, terror and dictatorship. Their goal was to fulfil the promise of a moderate liberal democracy. In this way liberal historiography was also a political program, which liberal politicians used in their opposition against the authoritarian regimes of Louis XVIII and Charles X.

The rather peaceful and moderate revolution which liberals had hoped for, indeed occurred in July 1830. The government of the reactionary Charles X was overthrown and replaced by a constitutional monarchy under the so-called bourgeois-king Louis Philippe d'Orlèans. In the 1840s, however, this regime resulted in dissatisfaction and resentment among several social groups, because it brought to power the upper echelon of the bourgeoisie leaving the rest of the middle classes without political influence, not to mention the lower classes at all. In 1848 the political and social discontent exploded in a new revolution, in which the labour class and socialist activists played a prominent role. The monarchy was overthrown, and again France became a republic. However, middle class fears of chaos and a socialist undermining of their social position and property, resulted in a violent suppression of the social revolution. The middle classes opted for security and social stability: they voted for a strong leader as the president of the new republic. This was Louis Bonaparte, a cousin of Napoleon, who soon seized dictatorial powers and became emperor Napoleon III.

Against the background of all this political upheaval new, nationalist as well as socialist histories of the French Revolution appeared. The authors, who were inspired by the revolution of 1848, suggested that the still unfinished revolution of 1789 should be completed in order to fulfil its initial democratic promise. These historians highlighted the revolutionary role of the popular masses, which conservative and liberal historians had downplayed and condemned.

The nationalist interpretation

The nationalist interpretation of the French Revolution, which was articulated most forcefully by the famous French historian Jules Michelet, was rooted in Romantic ideas about the fundamental goodness of the supposedly authentic and unspoilt people. In Michelet's history of the French Revolution (1847), *le peuple*, the French people, was the principal actor and hero. He appealed to the bourgeoisie not to fear and dismiss the popular masses. Yes, said Michelet, the people is emotional rather than rational, but revolutionary passion is not by definition destructive, but can also be creative. During the revolution, the amorphous masses, which until that moment had only been passive subjects of the Ancien Régime, had, out of some sort of collective emotional attachment, spontaneously organized themselves as a revolutionary force, which was the moment of their self-transformation into a unified nation. Michelet and other nationalist historians described the people, including the middle classes as well as the lower orders, as the major historical actor embodying social justice and harmony, and realizing collective freedom as defined by Rousseau. In this way the Revolution was glorified as the climax of French history and of human progress. This image of the revolutionary French nation, marching to victory under the tricolour and chanting the Marseillaise, was propagated in French schools from the late nineteenth century on as part of the shared national heritage, as the collective memory that

should be the basis of national identity and French citizenship. More in general, nationalism, often mixed with republicanism or socialism and Marxism, has been an important element in many histories of the French Revolution written by French historians,

The early socialist interpretation

Aligned to the nationalist interpretation, a socialist understanding of the French Revolution was articulated, notably by Louis Blanc in his *Histoire de la Révolution francaise* (1847-1862). Again, the popular masses were assigned the main role, but not so much as a unified nation including the middle class, like in the nationalist story. The socialist focus was on the oppressed working class. Its socioeconomic position and interests differed from those of the bourgeoisie. The socialist interpretation suggested that peasants and labourers had been neglected and betrayed by the middle class, which refused to give them full political and social rights. In this view the Revolution had not gone too far, as the liberal historians believed, but it had not gone far enough. The revolutions of 1789 and 1792 had not fulfilled the promise of full equality and social justice, and neither had the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. From a socialist perspective all these revolutions were half-hearted, incomplete and therefore failed projects, because the bourgeoisie refused to share its rights and liberties with the oppressed and exploited lower classes.

The republican interpretation

As a consequence of the Franco-Prussian war (1870-71), the authoritarian regime of Napoleon III came to an end. Another popular revolution, the Commune in Paris, was crushed in bloodshed by the new government. At the same time France once again became a republic, which it has been ever since. The Third Republic was a parliamentary democracy with universal suffrage and based on secular values. The middle class set the tone, but the labour class would also increasingly assert itself. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, the republic was still confronted with conservative, royalist and catholic opposition. Republicans responded by claiming that they were the true heirs of the French Revolution because they had now realised its original objectives: a secular republic, equality before the law, universal suffrage, parliamentary democracy, and national solidarity in the form of a shared republican citizenship for all, irrespective of class. In order to promote these ideals and to legitimise republican democracy against its conservative and reactionary opponents, French governments now actively supported the historiography of the Revolution in order to teach its citizens about its historical significance and to integrate all citizens in the nation on the basis of republican values. The memory of the Revolution served the purpose of forging national republican identity.

The histories of the French Revolution written in de late nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example by Alphonse Aulard (*Histoire politique de la Revolution francaise*, 1910), reflected this republican and at the same time patriotic goal. The Revolution was defined as the cradle of the republican nation. Republican historians sanctioned the radical phase of the revolution, picturing Robespierre as the embodiment of civic virtues and justifying the Terror as a necessary means for national regeneration and fighting spirit

against the enemies of revolutionary France. The republican interpretation was patriotic as it was also anti-clerical, anti-monarchist, *and* anti-socialist. Anti-socialist, because in the republican perspective socialism was a divisive force splitting up the nation in classes. From the late nineteenth century on, however, this republican-nationalist interpretation was challenged by the rise of Marxist histories of the French Revolution.

The Marxist interpretation

The socialist or Marxist interpretation gained ground from around 1900 onwards against the background of the social and political emancipation of the labour class, the formation of socialist parties and the Russian Revolution of 1917. This perspective drew on Karl Marx's theory of historical materialism. In contrast to the conservative, liberal, nationalist and republican views, which all considered the French Revolution mainly as a political event, the Marxist interpretation focused on socioeconomic structures. Underneath the political struggle during the Revolution, Marxist and socialist historians such as Jean Jaurès (*Histoire socialiste de la Révolution francaise*, 1900-1903) argued, there was a more fundamental class struggle, which was rooted in socioeconomic relations. Political power relations were not more than reflections of this more basic class struggle.

The socialist-Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution holds that it was an inevitable bourgeois revolution. The explanation of its causes shows some similarity with the liberal interpretation. In the pre-revolutionary period the rise of a commercial and capitalist middle class had resulted in a fundamental transformation of the economic and social structure of traditional agrarian society. At the same time the authoritarian political regime and feudal legal system with its fixed status hierarchies, had not changed. The contradiction and tension between the new secular bourgeois world of capitalist commerce and industry on the one hand and the outdated political, legal and religious institutions on the other, had to come to an outburst. In the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie, inspired by progressive enlightened ideals and supported by the rural and urban popular masses, took over the political and legal power of king, nobility and Church. In the Marxist (and largely also liberal) interpretation this was a necessary and inevitable historical event, because political power relations and legal frameworks, which in Marxist theory belong to the superstructure of society, sooner or later had to be adapted to the substructure of society, that is the means of economic production and the related socioeconomic relations.

Marxist historians argued that the French Revolution was the unavoidable outcome of a class struggle between aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and that the successful overthrow of the *Ancien Régime* in 1789 marked a decisive historical turning-point from agrarian feudalism to commercial and industrial capitalism. This bourgeois revolution, however, was in Marxist eyes not a completed revolution, because it did not end class struggle. After the bourgeoisie had replaced the aristocracy as the dominant social class, in the course of the nineteenth century a new class struggle would emerge. Liberal constitutional democracy provided formal civil rights, but these only served the interests of the bourgeoisie, and they were meaningless for the labour class as long as there was no social justice. As industrial capitalism came to full development, the growing contradiction between the bourgeoisie

and the proletarian workers came to the fore. Although in modern industry the workers were in fact those who produced riches, they were not able to profit from it and they were even exploited. This would lead to a new class struggle between the capitalist bourgeoisie and the labour class, and it would inevitably result in a new revolution, a proletarian one. This revolution would establish a collectivist and classless society, in which everybody would contribute to economic production according to one's capacity and be entitled to a fair share of its revenues.

Therefore, Marxist historians viewed the French Revolution as an unfinished revolution, but also as a necessary transition from a feudalistic aristocratic to capitalist bourgeois social order, which prepared the ground for the next and final revolution, the socialist one. For them the Russian Revolution was the ultimate fulfilment of what the French Revolution had started. The Jacobin Regime of Terror was compared to the proletarian dictatorship of the communist party under Lenin and Stalin: both were seen as necessary to defend the revolution against its adversaries, who tried to undo the progress of history.

Marxist historiography of the French Revolution was prominent in France from around the 1930s. Socialist and communist parties drew popular support as well as backing of intellectuals, the more so because of their opposition to fascism and Nazism. With his *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf*, which appeared in 1939 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the French Revolution, the historian Georges Lefebvre set the tone. In his interpretative scheme the Revolution originated in the diverse interests and objectives of four social groups (aristocracy, middle class, urban working class and peasants), but the decisive antagonism was that between the aristocracy and the middle class, whereby the last was supported by the urban and agrarian lower orders.

Revisionism

Whereas the Marxist (and partly also nationalist) interpretation of the French Revolution was echoed until into the 1970s by renowned French historians such as Jacques Godechot, Claude Mauzirac and Albert Soboul, from the mid-1950s on their view was increasingly criticised by so-called revisionist historians (French as well as British and American) entailing a lively debate about the socioeconomic and political causes of the Revolution and its historical significance for the present. The London professor in French history Alfred Cobban was a leading revisionist. After having made critical comments about the Marxist approach in his oration of 1954 (*The Myth of the French Revolution*), ten years later, in his *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (1964), he questioned the Marxist explanation that the fundamental cause of the French Revolution was of a socioeconomic nature and that it was the definitive breakthrough of the capitalist middle class. His investigation of socioeconomic and legal-political relations in pre-revolutionary France led him to conclude that they simply don't match the Marxist scheme of a feudal aristocracy versus a capitalist bourgeoisie, and that these relations were much more multifarious and complex. There were remnants of feudalism and there were capitalist practices, but that did not imply that there were two antagonistic classes. Marxist historians had made two mistakes, Cobban argued. Firstly, they wrongly equated and thereby confused two dimensions of the pre-revolutionary social order: economic inequalities and (legal) status

hierarchies, which did not correspond. Secondly, they used Marxist social categories such as 'bourgeoisie' and 'aristocracy' in a schematic and presentist way, resulting a distorted picture of the social order of the Ancien Régime. The aristocracy and bourgeoisie were divided among themselves as far as their socioeconomic position and interests were concerned.

Cobban showed that a united capitalist bourgeoisie or middle class as defined by Marxists in economic terms, simply did not exist under the Ancien Régime. What did exist was a well-to-do upper echelon of the Third Estate consisting not only of capitalist entrepreneurs and merchants, but also of landowners, officials, civil servants, lawyers and other professionals. The latter groups and not so much a capitalist bourgeoisie would represent the Third Estate in the Estates-General and later in the *Assemblée Nationale*. This elite was not only concerned about its economic interests but also about social rank: for them making money was often not a goal in itself, but a way to climb the status ladder and attain the same prestige as nobles. After making their fortune in trade or industries, the ambition of merchants and entrepreneurs would be to buy a landed estate, seigneurial rights or even a noble title in order to become a landlord and gain revenue from feudal dues and rents paid by peasants. Or they would buy an administrative office (a common practice in the Ancien Régime) or the right to levy taxes (tax-farming) which would give them income as well as notability.

The upper strata of the Third Estate were not only involved in commercial activities, but they were also immersed in the status hierarchy of the Ancien Régime. There was not a unified capitalist bourgeoisie on the basis of a shared socioeconomic position. Apart from certain social and legal privileges, the aristocracy was also a divided caste with regard to wealth and power as well as their involvement in finance, landowning and commercial pursuits. Cobban emphasized that there was not a fundamental tension between nobles and 'bourgeoisie'; both groups were rather divided among themselves as far as their economic and sociopolitical ambitions and fortunes were concerned.

The widespread social dissatisfaction in pre-revolutionary France, according to Cobban, should not be associated with a class struggle of a rising bourgeoisie against an established aristocracy, but it was related to other antagonisms:

- between rich and poor, in particular the peasants who felt that they were exploited by noble as well as bourgeois landlords on the basis of old feudal privileges and obligations as well as capitalist practices;
- among and between noble and middle-class elites about status-positions and political influence within the complex and fragmented administrative and legal institutional framework of the Ancien Régime;
- between urban and rural populations.

Although Cobban mainly dealt with the socioeconomic background of pre-revolutionary France, in his view the Revolution itself was principally about politics and did not fundamentally change socioeconomic relations and inequalities. Common people hardly profited from the Revolution; it rather reinforced the dominance of an elite of 'notables' (either noble or not), a basically socially conservative class of property-owners and officeholders.

The Marxist historians Jacques Godechot and Claude Mazauric responded to Cobban's criticism with the argument that it was based on poor and fragmentary evidence, and that it did not invalidate the core of their interpretation of the French Revolution as a class struggle and the decisive transformation from hierarchical feudalism to meritocratic capitalism. They also accused Cobban of a return to nineteenth-century historiography in which the French Revolution was understood exclusively in political terms. Moreover, they suggested that Cobban's refusal to see the Revolution as the necessary transition from the feudal social order to bourgeois-capitalist society, betrayed his reluctance to accept the equally necessary transition from capitalism to socialism, thereby implying that Cobban was motivated by conservative leanings.

Cobban's interpretation, however, was largely affirmed by the American historian Elisabeth Eisenstein and her British colleague Colin Lucas. They emphasized that political disagreements did not correspond with socioeconomic divisions and that the French Revolution did not break out as the result of the unified action by a social group which can be identified as the 'bourgeoisie'; such a class did not exist. The three estates were divided among themselves with regard to political, legal and fiscal issues, and the need for change. The Revolution was instigated by a coalition of groups which did not so much share socioeconomic interests, but similar political grievances and a more or less liberal civic mindset, in particular among enlightened nobles and clergymen as well as educated representatives of the Third Estate. (Education, and not so much belonging to the 'bourgeoisie' as a distinct socioeconomic class was what distinguished the majority of the representatives of the Third Estate in the Estates General. The crucial socioeconomic division was situated *within* the Third Estate: that between a wealthy and educated elite and the urban and rural masses which depended on manual labour.)

Eisenstein and Lucas stressed that in the course of the eighteenth century, the nobility and the upper echelons of the Third Estate more or less merged in a rather homogeneous elite, sharing wealth, social ambitions, values and lifestyle. Their economic interests and behavior were remarkable similar: making money did not so much serve the aim of reinvestment in order to increase productivity and profits in trade and industry, but to improve one's social status and prestige through buying landed property, often including seigneurial rights, or lucrative administrative offices so that they could live comfortably on rents and other revenues. All of this did not take away that tensions within this elite about status positions increased. As more and more wealthy commoners bought themselves into the privileged elite, this implied a relative loss of status of nobles, whereas aristocratic attempts to maintain their exclusive rights caused anxiety among ambitious members of the Third Estate about their options for status-improvement. The decision of the Parliament of Paris in early 1789 that the Estates General should vote by social order instead of by majority of individual deputies, was a crucial moment because it revived the old distinction between aristocracy and the upper strata of the Third Estate, which in society itself had in fact faded. Well-educated office holders and professionals in particular felt pushed back to the inferior level of the rest of the Third Estate. It was this group, whose aspirations were voiced by Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès in his *What is the Third Estate?*, that would become a driving force of the fight against aristocratic privileges. What separated the aristocratic deputies and those of the Third Estate in the Estates General from each other was not so much their ideas about political and legal reform as their access to

political influence and power.

Depoliticizing the historiography of the French Revolution

The revisionists were by and large supported by the French historian François Furet. He was a former communist who distanced himself from Marxism and who, in the 1970s and 1980s, became a leading expert on the French Revolution. His sharp criticism of his Marxist colleagues did not only involve the quality of their scholarship, but also their political motivation.[2] According to Furet the Revolution had little to do with a class struggle between aristocracy and bourgeoisie. It originated in political conflicts between and among aristocratic and bourgeois elites about the organisation of government and their political influence. The initiators of the Revolution of 1789 were nobles as well as educated members of the Third Estate who were motivated by political aspirations. Their aim was to gain more political participation and to reform the state and the legal system; their economic interests came second. In addition, according to Furet, the growing social and cultural division between urban and rural people was more relevant than class struggle. The Marxist claim that the peasant masses supported the educated 'bourgeois' elite of the Third Estate, could not be sustained.

Furet also found fault with the Marxist understanding of the French Revolution as a total and unavoidable rupture in French as well as in Western history, as a comprehensive socioeconomic, political and cultural transition from a rigid feudal and religious social order to a dynamic middle class-capitalist and secular society. The Marxist historians simplified a multiform, fragmented, fluctuating and chaotic historical reality with all of its coincidences, improvisations, unintended consequences, contradictions, and discontinuities. Whereas the Marxists historians claimed that the French Revolution was characterized by a unified resistance against the Ancien Régime under the leadership of a liberal bourgeoisie and supported by the rest of the common people, Furet and Richet distinguished three waves of rebellion: of a mixed middle class and aristocratic intellectual elite; of the Paris masses, and of peasants. The Revolution was a series of parallel and successive events with chance playing a prominent part, and it did not only show a drive towards reform, but at the same time also considerable resistance to change.

Furet and his colleague Denis Richet, who co-authored the revisionist *La Révolution Francaise* (1965) were, on their turn, accused by the Marxist historians of undermining the modern-day political significance of the Revolution and its crucial importance for French national identity. They suggested that Furet and Richet failed to fulfil their basic responsibility as historians. French historians should be 'guides for the nation' and keep the memory of the Revolution alive as the cradle of the modern nation, as a benchmark for French politics, as a defence against conservatism, and as an encouragement for the continuing struggle for a classless socialist society. Furet and Richet were not only accused of anti-communist prejudice, but also of an anti-patriotic aversion to the people. Comparing the Jacobin Regime of Terror with totalitarian Stalinism, they would put a heroic period in French history on trial and they would talk the French people into guilt about the cherished republican foundation of their nation. Here we see clearly that history became politics with other means.

[2] Destalinisation, the Soviet interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), and Solzhenitsyn's work about the *Gulag* had opened Furet's eyes for the dangers of communism.

Furet's counterattack, published in two essays, 'The catechism of the French Revolution' (1971) and 'The French Revolution is over' (1981) focused on the political motives which he detected in Marxist historiography. Distancing himself from Soviet communism, the radical left and the Jacobin heritage, Furet accused them of presentist or Whiggish history and mythmaking. He blamed them in particular for adopting the idealistic rhetoric of the revolutionaries (a new fresh beginning, a fundamental break, a victory over the old and the promise of a better future) at face value as factual historical truths, while ignoring all the contradictions and incongruities during the Revolution. Marxist historiography was inspired by political objectives and utopian dreams instead of solid scholarship and real insight in the past. It was a commemoration or catechism in order to celebrate French national pride and the Marxist utopia of a socialist or communist society, as if the Revolution was still in need of defence against the enemies of both the workers' class and the French nation, which they imagined to be in the vanguard of history, like Russia was with regard to the communism revolution. Such a perspective implied that the violent radicalism of the Revolution and Robespierre's regime of Terror tended to be justified.

Next to the causes of the French Revolution, the Jacobin Terror has been one of the most disputed issues in the historiography of the French Revolution. Marxist and other leftist historians such as Richard Cobb (1959) tended to justify it as the only and inevitable way to safeguard the Revolution under extraordinary conditions such as counter-revolutionary violence, civil and foreign wars and the uncontrollable eruptions of the irrational masses. Historians such as Crane Brinton (1930), J.L. Talmon (1952), Furet (1981/2006) and Keith Baker (1989/2006), on the other hand, viewed the Revolution in the light of twentieth-century totalitarianism and pointed out that political violence was inherent in the revolutionary process. The Terror was the consequence of the revolutionary adoption of a democratic model which was inspired by Rousseau's notion of collective freedom embodied in the General Will. From Sieyès up to Robespierre, popular sovereignty was understood in a monolithic way as indivisible and absolute, and the centralized unitary state took the role of its omnipotent executive, without checks and balances and without any counterbalancing forces in society. The revolutionary governments wielded unprecedented authority and ruthless power in the name of the people, and tried to push through large-scale political programs, while violating civil and property rights of citizens. The Terror did not only serve the fight against counter-revolution but also the purpose of realizing revolutionary principles and a completely new and purified society. The idealistic political culture of utopianism, messianism, and total social design on the basis abstract universal principles and blueprints did not allow compromise and pragmatism, and boosted fanaticism and radicalization. Talmon characterized this as a totalitarian form of democracy which was the opposite of restricted liberal 'empirical' democracy on the basis of negative freedom, trial and error, pragmatism, and respect for pluralism.

In his article 'The French Revolution is over' Furet explained that not only Marxist historians, but also many other French historians had, again and again, pictured the Revolution in the light of contemporary politics, as if the Revolution was still going on. Firstly, its historiography had become a reference point for controversies between conservatives, liberals, republicans, socialists and Marxists, and their self-justification by emphasizing and embracing or rejecting particular aspects of the Revolution. And, apart from reactionary and some conservative

historians who had denounced the Revolution, all of them had associated it with the French self-definition as a modern, pioneering, progressive, democratic and republican nation. The collective memory of the Revolution had become the ultra-sensitive core of French national identity. Such identification hampered genuine historical understanding, was Furet's message. It was not the task of professional historians to present the past as an anchor of security and re-assurance, of a fixed identity, but rather to question taken for granted truths in which people would like to believe. It was time, according to Furet, to question the relevance of the Revolution for the present. The real struggle for the basic democratic and republican values of the Revolution was since long accomplished and it that sense it was over and done with.

Now it was time for a more detached approach of the French Revolution, which in fact had already been initiated in the early nineteenth century by Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville had not been misled by the idealistic revolutionary rhetoric about the Revolution as a totally new and bright beginning; he argued that it was a continuation of the centralising and equalising tendencies of the Ancien Régime. It was the very same centralized and therefore already modernized state of the French monarchy that created the national political playing field for reformist and revolutionary forces, whereas the royal government itself was unable to disentangle itself completely from the traditional corporative interests and personalized patronage networks, which were dysfunctional for the rational and efficient operation of a modern state. Enlightened nobles and the educated representatives of the Third Estate favoured a constitutional monarchy and a more fair, transparent and efficient fiscal system and administration of justice. The way they expressed their views showed that they had developed a new language of politics in terms of universal principles and the national interest, which replaced the usual discourse about particularistic and hierarchically differentiated rights and privileges.