UNDERGRADUATE JOHN LOWELL RYDJORD, JR. PAPER AWARD

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL APPROACHES TO THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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Beginning in 1789, the French Revolution can be seen as a series of revolts against the oppressive social and political conditions in France. Within a span of less than ten years, France had radically transformed itself. The French king was beheaded by the masses, while the monarchy was replaced by a republic; wars were declared between France and many of the other countries in Europe; and reforms were initiated which were to transform the lives of many. Because of its importance in modern history, historians have grappled with many different aspects of the Revolution, ranging from its causes, its influence, and how its overall significance is to be measured. While most historians do not deny the significance of the French Revolution, the adoption of different historiographical perspectives has had a major impact on how they understand it.

One well-known interpretation of the Revolution is the Marxist interpretation. Karl Marx never wrote a book specifically on the French Revolution; nonetheless, his conception of history has had a profound effect on the interpretation of the event. Leading this Marxist interpretation of the revolution is historian Albert Soboul in his book *The French Revolution of 1787-1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon*[1]. Soboul gives a straightforward, orthodox Marxist interpretation of the event, harnessing almost all of Marx's key concepts and ideas.

Most important among Marx's views on history is the claim that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."[2] This sort of a picture of history ultimately provides the framework for Soboul's analysis of the French Revolution. He not only borrows the idea of class struggles, but employs the exact same distinction Marx makes between the nobility and the bourgeoisie. According to Soboul's interpretation, the nobility enjoyed many privileges that they had inherited from their feudal ancestors. In addition to taxing the peasantry, the nobles possessed the sole right to hunt and fish, had monopolies on wine pressing and bread baking ovens, charged the peasants money for receiving justice, and maintained several other rights restricted solely for their own benefit. On the other hand, the bourgeoisie were the well-to-do middle class. Consisting primarily of artisans, merchants,

[1] Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution 1787-1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon* (New York: Random House, 1975), 7.

[2] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1893; reprint, New York: Norton, 1988), 55.

lawyers, and officials, they lacked the legal rights and high social standing of the nobility, but often managed to maintain comfortable—sometimes even very rich—lifestyles. Because of increasing economic growth in France as well as the rest of Europe, the middle class grew to a considerable size (about 2.3 million) and thus was comprised of over five times as many people as the nobility. Given the long-standing dominance of the nobility and the rise of the bourgeoisie, it is no surprise that tensions would arise between these two classes.

Soboul finds two main kinds of causes of the conflict between the nobility and the bourgeoisie: political and economic. In feudal times, there was a vast gap between the rich nobility and the poor peasants. Later this gap was greatly narrowed as a wealthy middle class emerged. Along with this shrinking gap, a new philosophy that declared equality between people as well as freedom from oppression spread through the Enlightenment, and these ideas gained much popularity with the educated bourgeoisie. Middle class individuals, despite their growing numbers and influence, found themselves being treated as inferior both legally and socially. It was such inequality, in part, that spurned the masses to revolt: "If the French Revolution was the most outstanding bourgeois revolution ever, overshadowing all preceding revolutions through the dramatic nature of its class struggle, it owes it both to the obstinacy of the aristocray, which remained firmly attached to its feudal privileges and rejected all concessions, and to the passionate opposition of the popular masses to any form of privilege or class distinction."[3]

According to Soboul, the economic forces behind the Revolution were even more dramatic. Given Soboul's Marxist leanings, there should be nothing startling in this interpretation, for it was Marx who emphasized the power of economic forces to produce social upheavals: "At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution."[4] Soboul directly applies this Marxist tenet to the French Revolution, finding the idea to be at the very root of the Revolution. He criticizes other historians for avoiding what he considers to be the "very essence of the question: that the Revolution is to be explained in the last analysis by a contradiction between the social basis of the economy and the character of the productive forces."[5] Soboul applies this notion in his depiction of the tensions between the nobility and the bourgeoisie. He claims that the means of production of bourgeois power originated in early feudal society, but as the bourgeoisie grew it became more and more hampered by what it called the "feudal" laws of the nobility. So, the "revolutionary bourgeoisie pursued the aim of destroying the old system of production and exchange, which was incompatible with the

[3] Soboul, *French Revolution*, 7.

[4] Karl Marx, "Preface to a Critique of Political Economy," *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 4.

[5] Soboul, *French Revolution*, 21.

expansion of its capitalist businesses, with quite as much relentlessness as they had employed in destroying the aristocracy."[6]

Of course, merely being an example of a class struggle is not enough to give the French Revolution its significant place in history, for, according to Marx and Soboul, all of history from ancient times to the present is fraught with class struggles. What makes the French Revolution unique for Soboul is that it represents a significant economic and political turning point at which the bourgeoisie finally became victorious over the nobility. Soboul thinks that this victory thus makes the Revolution the "classic model of bourgeois revolution,"[7] and consists of not only a shift in political power from the hands of one social class to another, but also marks a distinctive transformation in the economic structure of society. Viewed from this economic perspective, the victory of the bourgeoisie was a very important transition from feudalism to capitalism: "Carried through by the bourgeoisie, the Revolution destroyed the old system of production,"[8] ensuring "the autonomy of the capitalist mode of production and distribution: a classically revolutionary transformation."[9] Thus, for Soboul, the French Revolution was nothing less than "the culmination of a long economic and social evolution which has made the bourgeoisie the master of the world."[10]

The Marxist interpretation seems to have much explanatory force, and, indeed, had been considered the orthodox interpretation of the French Revolution up until the 1960s. However, there have been criticisms against this approach as well as other historiographical methods that shed a new light on the French Revolution. One of the forerunners of this movement is Alfred Cobban in his book *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*[11]. Cobban is a social historian, and much of his approach to interpreting the Revolution is a direct reaction against Marxist historians like Soboul. It is thus useful to attend to these criticisms as they help to show not only what aspects shape Cobban's interpretation, but also what considerations he thinks should *not* play a role in historical accounts of the Revolution.

For Cobban, the problem with Marxist historians is that they give more allegiance to the theory itself than they do to the actual historical evidence. Cobban goes as far as to say that such a theory "has now assumed some of the characteristics of a religious belief."[12] Cobban's point is that Marxist historians are entrenched in an ideology which already predetermines how the history will turn out, and this makes for nothing but bad history

[6] Ibid., 556.

[7] Ibid., 3.

[8] Ibid., 553.

[9] Ibid., 9.

[10] Soboul, *French Revolution*, 21.

[11] Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Great Britain: Cambridge Press, 1964), 10.

[12] Ibid., 10-11.

writing, in which the historians put "almost too much meaning back into it [history], when they reduce the greatest happening in modern history to the deterministic operations of an historical law."[13]Cobban sums up his critique of the supposed laws of the Marxist theory: " If they are not dogmatic assertions about the course of history, they are either platitudes, or else, to be made to fit the facts, they have to be subject to more and more qualifications until in the end they are applicable only to a single case. General sociology is thus no answer to the need for some theoretical element, other than inherited stereotypes, in our history."[14]

Given his criticisms of Marxist historians like Soboul, how does Cobban think history should be done, and how does this affect his understanding of the French Revolution? It should be clear by now that he wants to do away with theoretical apparatuses, especially Marxism, and instead look to the facts themselves. Which facts are these? Cobban does not deny that much insight can be gained from political and economic history—his objection is that Marxist historians are so predisposed to giving priority to political and economic facts that they overlook more important social factors that underlie the political and economic spheres of activity. Giving consideration to these social factors sheds new light on the French Revolution: "However, behind the political regime there is always the social structure, which is in a sense more fundamental and is certainly much more difficult to change. Once we begin to investigate this social background to the revolution, it is borne in on us how little notice ordinary political history has taken of it, and indeed how little we really know of the actual pattern of eighteenth-century French society and the impact on it of the revolution."[15]

It is interesting to note that while capitalism and the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the nobility play important explanatory roles in Soboul's Marxist interpretation, Cobban, in his entire interpretation of the Revolution, almost never appeals to such ideas or concepts—except to show their inadequacy when used by the Marxists. It is for this reason that looking at the French Revolution from Cobban's perspective makes it seem like a completely different revolution altogether. This becomes especially clear when we look at how Cobban explains the conflict that caused the Revolution. In regard to the Revolution, Cobban claims that "since the population of France in the eighteenth century was overwhelmingly rural, one might expect some of these fundamental conflicts to have their roots in rural society."[16] Indeed, rather than seeing the Revolution as a conflict between the bourgeoisie and the nobility, Cobban claims that the cause of the Revolution ultimately comes down to a conflict between poor rural societies and the urban societies that were trying to control them. Cobban reinforces this claim by drawing on several examples from the Revolution as well as events that preceded it. He points out that "in parts of France, for example Lot and Dordogne, local peasant uprisings continued into 1790 and 1791. In the

[13] Ibid., 9.

[14] Ibid., 14.

[15] Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, 162.

[16] Ibid., 91.

Lot, in April 1791, they were no longer directed against the nobles, but against the property of the bourgeios."[17]

How does Cobban explain the peasants' contempt for the bourgeoisie? First of all, the "peasantry was not unaware of the fact that the dues, rights, rents, tithes, services, payments in money and kinds, which they felt to be such a grievance, were often owned, and even more often collected, by the bourgeois."[18] In addition, the rural population was victim to unequal taxation, their needs were considered secondary to those living in the towns, and their forest and food supplies were exhausted by the demands of the urban population[19]. Furthermore, "behind all this was the fact that the towns, as the residence of the *'classe propreitaire,'* were the centers of land ownership. They drained wealth from the surrounding countryside."[20] It is for these reasons that the hostility of the rural peasantry erupted toward the urban populace.

Of course, if Cobban is right that the Revolution was, for the most part, a peasant revolt, then one cannot help but to wonder why Soboul's Marxist account seems to leave the peasants completely out of the picture and instead just describes the Revolution as a class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the nobility. Actually, Soboul is well aware that peasants had revolted; however, he sees the peasants as working with the bourgeoisie to overthrow the nobility. This is clear when he says that it is "necessary to underline clearly that the fundamental objectives of the peasant movement coincided with the ends of bourgeois revolution: the destruction of the feudal relations of production."[21]Because he sees the peasantry as working toward the same goals as the bourgeoisie, Soboul thinks of the peasants as just an extension of the bourgeoisie, calling them the "rural bourgeoisie."

This is unacceptable to Cobban. As we have already seen, Cobban goes at lengths to argue that, contrary to what Soboul says, the peasantry and the bourgeoisie did not cooperate with each other. In fact, Cobban interprets the Revolution as a conflict between the two social groups. According to Cobban's findings, the bourgeoisie had more in common with the nobility than they did with the peasantry. Both the nobility and the bourgeoisie were mostly rich urban folk. It was these two who, together, exploited the rural peasantry, making the revolution "a triumph for the conservative, propertied, land-owning classes, large and small."[22]

According to Cobban, the concept of the "rural bourgeoisie" was invented by Marxist historians just so that they would have some way to account for the peasantry in the class

[17] Ibid., 93.

[18] Ibid., 93.

[19] Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, 96, 100, 104.

[20] Ibid., 101.

[21] Soboul, *French Revolution*, 23.

[22] Ibid., 170.

struggle between the nobility and the bourgeoisie: "If the account of the rural bourgeoisie . . . seems somewhat confused, I fear this was unavoidable. With the best will in the world it is impossible to reduce the varying definitions or descriptions of the rural bourgeoisie to sense or consistency. One can only conclude that the idea was invented to fit the requirements of a theory, and to provide the counterpart in the countryside of the urban 'bourgeoisie' and so to explain how peasants also could constitute a bourgeoisie which could join in the overthrow of feudalism."[23] In other words, if the peasantry were not united with the bourgeoisie, as Cobban claims, then this would pose a serious problem for the Marxists since the idea that the Revolution was a class struggle between the nobility and the bourgeoisie would no longer be accurate. So, according to Cobban, the Marxists, to sidestep the problem, have to pretend that the peasantry (the rural bourgeoisie) was really united with the bourgeoisie. Cobban sees this as bad scholarship and considers the invention of the concept of the "rural bourgeoisie" to be a prime example of how Marxist historians like Soboul tend to distort historical actualities in order to meet the demands of their theory.

Cobban's criticisms of Soboul seem pretty devastating, but in all fairness to Soboul, Cobban's own theory is not completely purged of theory. Cobban too uses his own set of concepts to interpret the Revolution: he relies on being able to draw a sharp distinction between the rich and the poor, as well as the urban and the rural populace. In fact, to a certain extent, Cobban's analysis of the Revolution is parallel to Soboul's in that the whole idea of a class struggle is central for both of them—Cobban just sees the struggle in terms of the rich versus the poor rather than the bourgeoisie versus the nobility.

The deeper dividing issue between the two historians seems to be how to prioritize the different approaches to history. Both Soboul and Cobban agree that much insight can be gained from other historical approaches, but Soboul gives priority to economic/political history while Cobban emphasizes his own brand of social history. We have seen how each approach portrays the Revolution in a different light; perhaps both approaches can be used concurrently, in order to do develop a more comprehensive portrait of the French Revolution in all its complexity and splendor. This may be the only way to do justice to the marvel which both historians hail as the most significant event in modern history.

Cobban and Soboul were concerned mainly with the causes of the French Revolution, but another point of interest is the scope of the Revolution's influence. While some historians may view the Revolution as primarily an episode in the history of France, others perceive its importance as extending throughout the rest of Europe. One historian who opts for the latter view is Georges Lefebvre.

Lefebvre "was internationally known as the greatest authority on the French Revolution."[24] He has many similarities with both Soboul and Cobban, oftentimes combining the best of both of them. Like Soboul, he sees much of the Revolution as a revolt of the bourgeoisie against the nobility, yet he agrees with Cobban that later many peasants

[23] Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, 109.

[24] Paul Beik, Foreword to *The French Revolution from its Origins to 1793*, by Georges Lefebvre (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), ix.

had turned against the bourgeoisie. Despite his affinities with Cobban and Soboul, Lefebvre stands out because he has an especially prevalent tendency to look at the French Revolution from the perspective of world history. This tendency is so strong that he views the Revolution from what can only be considered a universalist perspective of history.

For Lefebvre, the "French Revolution denotes one step in the destiny of the Western world."[25] He illustrates this universalist perspective in many different ways. Perhaps the most obvious way is through the subjects he writes about while trying to discuss the French Revolution. Half of his history of the Revolution is devoted not directly to the French Revolution itself, or even to France, but to different aspects of European history as a whole. He thoroughly discusses topics such as European expansion, the European economy, European society, European thought, and social conflicts among the different countries all throughout Europe. It is as if he could not begin to explain the French Revolution without discussing its place in the history of Europe, showing how France is intimately connected with the course of European affairs in general. Indeed, it is natural for him to do this since he sees France in the 18th century as not being much different from other countries. After briefly decribing the French Revolution, he claims that not much "sets France apart from Europe. All European states were formed similarly, at the expense of the lords, and all were sooner or later dominated by the rising bourgeoisie."[26] This passage gives an example of Lefebvre's universalist tendencies, showing how he sees the Revolution from within the context of all of Europe and compares it to revolutions in other countries.

Lefebvre's discussion of the French Revolution is almost always in terms of its impact on other countries. This topic is given much treatment since the Revolution affected the countries of Europe in so many different ways. Lefebvre especially stresses how rulers of other countries were threatened by its influence: "in the beginning it was the international influence of the Revolution that most disturbed foreign rulers. They lost no time in denouncing the 'clubists" propaganda and blamed the French government for tolerating or even encouraging such publicity. Actually, revolutionary ferment spread spontaneously for months, much as the Enlightenment had moved across Europe earlier in the century."[27] It is obvious why the Revolution threatened foreign rulers: if people in other countries were too influenced by it, there was a chance that uprisings against the rulers would sprout up all over Europe. Indicating how the Revolution influenced rulers throughout the world, Lefebvre emphasizes the event's world-historical nature.

Lefebvre also points out that the Revolution not only influenced the fears and hopes of people across Europe, but also had a major impact on European economies: "As always, the war altered the course of international trade. It also interfered with the rise of capitalism on the Continent. Nevertheless England derived appreciable profit from the conflict, and

[25] Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution from its Origins to 1793* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), xviii.

[26] Lefebvre, *French Revolution from its Origins*, xvii.

[27] Ibid., 179.

extended her empire. European expansion, however, was hindered. The shock to the colonial system increased as Latin America moved towards emancipation, and France even abolished slavery."[28] This shows how the French Revolution impacted the West on many levels, affecting numerous aspects such as trade, expansion, and the abolition of slavery. In all these ways, the influence of this great event was so poweful that "from 1789 to 1815, the history of countries of European cultures to a large extent determined by this great event."[29]

So far, we have seen Lefebvre's account of the influence of the Revolution primarily within the 18th century on the countries of Europe; however, Lefebvre also thinks that the Revolution has had a spiritual significance which extends well beyond the 18th century: "Consequently the great majority of the earth's population lived and died without suspecting that in one corner of the world, in France, a revolution had occurred which was to leave a spiritual legacy to their descendants."[30] Lefebvre describes this legacy as the "conquest of equality of rights,"[31] and it is very important to his interpretation of the event, for "in the larger perspective of world history, this is the significant originality of the Revolution of 1789."[32]

Lefebvre, as a universalist, sees the Revolution as a truly world-historical event, discussing it in the context of Europe as a whole and stressing how its impact extends beyond the 18th century and throughout all of Europe. He does not think that this universalist perspective is a distortion of the event since even most of the French involved in the Revolution saw it from a universalist perspective as well: "The French people believed that their existence would improve, that their children, if not they themselves, would live in more favorable circumstances; they even hoped that other people would live so, and all, becoming free and equal, would be forever reconciled. Peace would then regenerate a world freed from oppression and poverty. The mythic character of the French Revolution unfolded. A cause so noble awoke an ardour that the need for sacrifice extinguished in many, but moved others to feats of heroism and spread through the world."[33] Given the universal significance of this great event, it is no wonder that Lefebvre claims that its "name is still a watchword for mankind."[34]

[28] Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution from 1793 to 1799* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 347.

[29] Lefebvre, *French Revolution from its Origins*, xviii.

[30] Ibid., 18.

[31] Ibid., 113.

[32] Ibid., 91.

[33] Ibid., 149.

[34] Lefebvre, *French Revolution from 1793*, 360.

In contrast to Lefebvre's universalist perspective, Thomas Carlyle, in his book *The French Revolution*[35], takes the opposite approach to understanding the significance of the Revolution. For Carlyle, the significance of the Revolution is not measured in terms of how it impacted the rest of the world, but comes from how it was experienced by those who actually participated in it. It is for this reason that his approach to history more like a form of psychological history.

Unlike most historians, who write detached scholarly descriptions that try to explain the French Revolution, Carlyle's purpose is to actually make the reader experience what the participants in the Revolution experienced. This means that he emphasizes the dramatic and emotional aspects of the event more than anything else. Because of this, he does not seem too interested in analyzing why the Revolution happened nor does he delve into complicated political or economic analyses. He finds the Revolution's significance in the overwhelming sense of intensity and passion that it gave to the participants in the event. This becomes clear in many passages when Carlyle attempts to define it. He describes it as "the Madness that dwells in the hearts of men"[36] which "bursts up from the infinite Deep, and rages uncontrollable, immeasurable, enveloping a world; in phasis after phasis of fever-frenzy."[37]

Carlyle's style of writing is perhaps as unique as his intention to create an emotional atmosphere for the reader. It is interesting how he adjusts the form of his book so that it is most apt to produce the desired effect. A sample passage describing the attack on the Bastille (an armory) better illustrates this point: "Blood flows; the aliment of new madness. The wounded are carried into the house of the Rue Cerisaie; the dying leave their last mandate not to yield till the accursed Stronghold fall. And yet, alas, how fall? The walls are so thick!"[38] Notice how this passage, like the rest of his book, is written in a narrative form in the present tense, which chimes perfectly with the purpose of immersing the reader into the experience, for it makes it seem as if the events are unfolding at the very same time the book is being read. Like the actual participants in the Revolution, the reader does not know what will happen next, making it easier for the reader to feel the same sense of fear and/or exhaltation: "Where will this end? In the Abyss, one may prophesy; whither all Delusions are, at all moments, traveling; where this Delusion has now arrived."[39]

Like most other narratives, Carlyle's history focuses on specific historical individuals and uses them much like characters in a story. He greatly dramatizes these characters, often portraying them either as heroes or villains. For example, one of Carlyle's "heroes" is Mirabeau, a brilliant Count who tried to halt the Revolution when it began getting too violent: "New Mirabeaus one hears not of: the wild kindred, as we said, is gone out with this

[35] Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (1837; reprint, New York: Random House, 1934).

[36] Ibid., 669.

[37] Ibid., 167.

[38] Ibid., 153.

[39] Ibid., 180.

its greatest. . . . The chosen Last of the Mirabeaus is gone; the chosen man of France is gone. It was he who shook old France from its basis; and, as if with his single hand, has held it toppling there, still unfallen. What things depended on that one man! He is as a ship suddenly shivered on sunk rocks: much swims on the waste water, far from help."[40]

The great historian von Ranke once said that history was a combination between poetry (the recreation of events) and philosophy (a science that collected facts). Carlyle obviously emphasizes the former aspect over the latter, yet one should not be deceived by his narrative style of writing into thinking that his book is a work of fiction. He rigorously studied the historical evidence and only portrays in his book actual people and events that occurred. It seems as if he does dramatize and exaggerate a bit, but, given his purpose, such a writing style is reasonable. After all, wasn't the French Revolution a very dramatic and emotional event for those who experienced it? Perhaps Carlyle's style of writing history was idiosyncratic to his contemporaries, but that is only because he was trying to explore an aspect of the Revolution which few had given serious treatment. He made the style of his writing conform to its content, making a highly readable history that is sure to keep the reader's attention.

So, we see that different historiographical perspectives guide the development of many different interpretations of the French Revolution. Soboul, with his Marxist interpretation, ultimately sees the Revolution as a class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the nobility. Its significance for him lies in the fact that it both marked a radical shift in power as a result of the class struggle within France, and that it was important economically as capitalism had finally overturned the feudal system of the nobility. Cobban, on the other hand, is a social historian who claims that Soboul's interpretation is biased in that it tries to distort historical facts to make them conform to Marxist theory. Cobban insists that historians should not give so much priority to political and economic history, but should instead pay heed to the powerful social forces in French history. Following this approach, according to Cobban, will allow historians to see that the Revolution was really a revolt of the peasants against both the bourgeiosie and the nobility, making the Revolution a struggle between the poor rural folk and the rich urban populace. Historians with different perspectives on history tend to be interested in different aspects of the Revolution. Aside from the Revolution's causes, some historians are interested in the question of whether the event is to be seen as a world-historical event or not. Lefebvre sees the event from what can only be considered a universalist perspective, tracing its significance throughout all of Europe well beyond the 18th century. Carlyle, on the other hand, emphasizes the point that to be truly understood, the Revolution must be experienced as the participants experienced it. Writing a narrative in the present tense, he tries to recreate in his readers such experiences. One may feel overwhelmed by so many different perspectives on the Revolution. Such a variety of interpretations shows the French Revolution to be an inexhaustible wellspring for a whole range of alternate visions, establishing it as a truly great historical event.

[40] Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 346.