

CHAPTER ONE

Rethinking the Origins of the French Revolution

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The origins of the Revolution have been a subject of debate and conjecture since the first year of the Revolution itself. After more than two centuries no one now believes it was primarily a “révolte de la misère,” as Michelet suggested, the very spirit of justice a long time coming, nor a philosophic plot, as the abbé Barruel argued, nor a Jansenist conspiracy (Michelet 1847). It would appear that millions of savages were not in fact launched into revolt and revolution by the babblings of the *philosophes*, as Hippolyte Taine argued after the Paris Commune of 1871, not least because illiteracy was widespread, education limited, and books very expensive. Nor was it predominantly caused by the rise of a democratic republican ideology that neatly prepared the way for the Third Republic in France, as in Alphonse Aulard’s interpretation a generation later (1910). Echoes of these can still be heard of course, for poor arguments never die, they just get recycled into novels and television. But one major early line of interpretation had a long posterity: the idea that the Revolution was caused by a rising bourgeoisie, harbingers of capitalism, eager for the political power from which the privileged *ancien régime* society excluded them. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards the notion of a bourgeois revolution was widely accepted; it was given an explicitly capitalist sense by Marx, then a socialist inflection by Jean Jaurès. For Albert Mathiez (1922), the Russian Revolution of 1917 seemed to confirm the diagnosis. The idea came to dominate scholarly work to such an extent that it could be called an orthodox view by the 1950s. As such, it was about to come under a sustained attack. This essay will consider what this view was and how it was undermined by two generations of work in social, cultural, economic, intellectual, and, finally political history.

Can We Explain the Origins?

Before moving ahead with this agenda let us pause for a moment to consider what it means to study the origins of something as shatteringly transformative of state and society as the French Revolution. Most historical arguments about the origins of the Revolution depend on a process of defining the Revolution first – itself a hugely controversial topic – and then reading back into the causes or origins of 1789 the elements that seemed to triumph later. Secondly, the occurrence of the Revolution is often assumed to have been an act of will by particular groups. This too is problematic, because if the notion of deliberate revolutionaries does fit some later revolutions and suits the process of constructing a new state and society by the various assemblies in and after 1789, it is much less clear that the process of the collapse of the *ancien régime* into revolution shows the same intentionality. The *ancien régime* collapsed and out of its crisis a revolution developed, but the origins of the collapse and the origins of the Revolution are not the same (Campbell 2006). The collapse should also be seen as a process in itself that fractured society (Cubells 1987), brought more groups into the public sphere, and, as interests became endangered, produced moments of choice for those involved. Even those who chose revolution did so rather late in the day in the early or mid-summer of 1789, for the most part. It is hard to discern bourgeois involvement in 1787 and before the autumn of 1788, while few would deny that the collapse of the state in 1789 opened the door to bourgeois participation in a new politics. Most historians have found a way around this problem of choice or intentionality by assuming that the collapse of state authority and local institutions was merely the occasion for a more intentional revolution, the precipitant of a revolution whose origins lay in impersonal factors like rising social tensions, economic transition, or cultural change. In short, they stress the long-term processes that go beyond the individual and the contingent.

In this way, the participants are seen to be in the grip of historical forces they were not aware of, but were nevertheless furthering. A classic example of this is Alexis de Tocqueville's *Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856), in which the Revolution is defined as a further stage in a process of centralization going back to Louis XIV (though it would be a grave injustice to imply that his study argued no more than this). The same could be said about the role of the bourgeois or artisanal "actors" in a revolution that was thought to be essentially about class struggle. It is unsurprising that this approach should continue to dominate historical analysis, because History has long been about meaningful generalization, about finding *patterns*, and about making sense of the past for the present. The very essence of History is a dialectic of challenge and debate. But caution is required, especially when we are dealing with the problem of motivation. On the one hand we have a revolution that can be conceived as being about what the people at the time thought it was about – and remember they themselves differed in their views – and on the other hand we have a rather different set of revolutions postulated by historians that embodied wider processes of which the participants were partly or largely unaware. The latter approach today looks for example at economic trends and conjunctures, cultural developments, at shifts in the way society and politics

were conceptualized in the decades preceding the Revolution and during the Revolution itself. But there is also a return to the role of individuals, to their politics, their strategies, and their emotions. How might we bring the broader conditions together with the role of individuals? Explaining the origins was never going to be easy.

Any attempt to make sense of something as complex as the first major world-changing revolution must encounter major difficulties. Today there is no agreed interpretation of the “causes” (or indeed “origins”) of the Revolution, just as there is no agreed definition of the Revolution itself. The various aspects of the Revolution discussed in this very volume all have different sets of origins. It was a phenomenon of such breadth, reach, and variety that attempts to make sense of it often fall prey to a tendency to oversimplification, or teleology (especially in the case of intellectual history), while any attempt to take into account all the variables would surely be immensely long and confusing. A short essay such as this one can never do justice to all the fine work produced by recent historians, nor can it be more than one scholar’s view, with all the shortcomings that implies.

The Orthodox View

The divisive nature of the Revolution meant that the first generation of memoirists and early historians adopted a range of very different views. From about the 1840s, History was developing as a discipline based on archival sources, but in the nineteenth century the rigorous treatment of documents that we expect today was usually confined to such sources as memoirs, correspondence, pamphlets, and newspapers, which led to a very political and intellectual vision of events. Nevertheless, because the Revolution was so divisive, there was a vehement debate in the sense that different views were put forward, often highly politicized, which were then criticized and evaluated by other scholars. However, with few exceptions the question of the origins has taken second place to the debate over the nature of the Revolution as a whole. In fact, right up until the 1980s relatively few books dealt with just the origins, and most views were expressed in a chapter at the start of a larger book on the Revolution. Instead of there being an explicit field of study known as “the origins debate,” the process seems to have been much more one of setting out positions about the nature of the Revolution, and inferring causes from its nature. For example, in this way Jules Michelet, Louis Blanc, Aulard, and Jaurès put forward influential views. In the century before the 1950s only Marx, Tocqueville, Taine, and Georges Lefebvre really focused on the problem of the origins of the Revolution. From the 1920s to the 1950s the prevailing view was that the Revolution was the product of class struggle.

This socialist viewpoint was expressed in a classic book published in 1939, *Quatre-vingt-neuf*, translated as *The Coming of the French Revolution*. In this popular book, Lefebvre, a towering scholar and a socialist, had the great merit of making sense of the complexities. Moreover, he integrated his own research on the peasantry into the more classic Marxist schema. Peasants were restored to conscious and proactive actors, not masters of their own fate but developing strategies in the face of pressures. The field has grown since then with classic studies by Pierre de

Saint-Jacob (1960) and John Markoff (1996). Thus the causes of the French Revolution lay in the development of capitalism, which had slowly been generating a rising bourgeois class and its concomitant, a declining nobility, which by its cultural values was less well adapted to capitalism. Nonetheless, the aristocratic opposition to royal reform in 1787 had to be fitted into the schema. Hence the appeal of the notion of a century-long aristocratic reaction by a nobility presumed to have been cut out of power by Louis XIV (which we no longer believe: Campbell 1993; Beik 2005; Chaline 2005). So a sort of last-gasp aristocratic reaction was postulated for the Assembly of Notables in 1787, during which the nobility not only blocked vital royal reforms but also revealed its hand by suggesting a greater role for the nobility in government, with the monitoring of royal policy through the dominance of the estates. The opposition of the noble magistrates in the *parlements* was interpreted as a part of the same aristocratic reaction (Ford 1953), along with increased exploitation of the vestiges of the feudal system in the countryside to extract more revenue from estates and seigneurial dues. However, the establishment of new representative provincial assemblies in 1788 and then the elections to the Estates-General in 1789 gave the bourgeoisie its opportunity. This rising class of commercial and liberal professions tried to seize the initiative (Kaplow 1965). The intransigence of the nobility in the Estates-General led to a clash with the determined bourgeoisie of the Third Estate, whose ideology was enlightened, liberal, and egalitarian. (And here we must note that the world of ideas, what Marxists call the ideological superstructure of society, was regarded as a product of the economic infrastructure.) The liberal revolution itself was made by the bourgeoisie, in a situation in which the artisans lent their support in a time of great economic distress. For Lefebvre, alongside this bourgeois revolution an autonomous peasant revolution took place; it destroyed feudalism in an act of will and as a consequence of the Great Fear. The bourgeoisie, henceforth in power, soon enacted the principles of liberty and equality that ultimately advanced the cause of capitalism. With the abolition of seigneurialism or “feudalism” the peasantry would have a partially successful revolution; the artisans would play a crucial role in the revolution but would not benefit in the long term. Thus the French Revolution in its origins and nature was a bourgeois revolution against feudalism in favor of capitalism.

This was a neat and elegantly put argument repeated in many a textbook and in standard works. But would it stand up to further research and critical analysis? In France it held sway until the 1970s partly because of the domination of French Revolution studies by historians on the left; many were members of the Communist Party, like Lefebvre’s successor as Professor of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne, Albert Soboul. The attack was launched by British and American historians. For twenty years from the mid-1950s onwards this challenge took the form of the critical redefinition of a series of key terms. Instead of taking the reader through a blow-by-blow account of the evolution of this historiography, I will summarize the conclusions of the research by topic as seen from the perspective of today – at the risk of compressing into a single set of conclusions on each topic much longer processes of research that often took a generation. The word “revisionism” is often used to describe this historiography, but it has nothing to do

with its original sense of a left-wing internal critique of Marxism; quite the contrary. Its heyday was the 1970s, and since then different perspectives on causality and history – as well as new research into new areas like political culture and cultural history – have led to a new phase of interpretation.

A Revolutionary Bourgeoisie?

If the Revolution was a bourgeois revolution, then who actually did participate in it, who were the deputies of the Third Estate? In a lecture of 1954 and a book a decade later, Alfred Cobban criticized the concept of the bourgeoisie as being far too elastic and imprecise, an unsuitable category of analysis. He showed that the deputies were in fact overwhelmingly representatives of the non-noble office-holders and legal professions. Such men were often on the way to acquiring nobility, and they were not involved in the commercial and industrial capitalism that the Revolution was supposed to have benefited. Their long-term patterns of investment were the purchase of land and office, and many richer members of the Third Estate held seigneuries just like nobles. Much other research on social mobility under the *ancien régime* since then has tended to confirm the assessment of these notables of local society as belonging to families that had initially risen through larger-scale commerce but then abandoned trade in favor of investments in land and office (especially in the judiciary and royal finances) that brought them closer to the noble lifestyle. From Cobban's tables, it is clear that hardly any representatives of manufacturing or capitalism were elected to the Third Estate in the Estates-General (Cobban 1971). Nearly one-third of the "bourgeois" deputies in 1789 were bailiwick judges well versed in local politics (Dawson 1972). This view was more recently confirmed by a more extensive analysis of the Third Estate: most had some political experience and many had published pamphlets (Tackett 1996). Cobban had postulated that such an office-holding class was struggling against a decline in office values during the eighteenth century, but this has since been disproved (Doyle 1995). Overall the "revolutionary bourgeoisie" has come to look not so much a class as a group of ambitious local notables without a particular class identity but with a fair amount of local or regional administrative and judicial experience.

Their aspirations tended toward the noble lifestyle, and if they were frustrated by the *ancien régime* it was argued that it was more because their social mobility was jeopardized by greater competition for access to the noble order (Lucas 1973). Such men were hardly candidates for the label "capitalists" in Marx's sense, and Cobban actually thought them anti-capitalist. However, we should note that they were also representatives of a "proprietary capitalism" and so did benefit enormously from the recycling of their investment in office into the purchase of church and *émigré* property whose sale was decreed by the early Revolution. The argument has turned on the characteristics of the deputies to the Third Estate (and who but the existing *ancien régime* elites would have been elected to the Estates-General?), and not on the members of the Third Estate in France as a whole, who did indeed play a much greater role in government once the Revolution had begun: as municipal officers, local government officials, and members of the Jacobin clubs. These new officials came from a more commercial or professional set of social

groups in society, and some of these were even represented in the later national assemblies. It is highly likely that to understand this “middle-class” involvement we have to look not only at the economic conditions and practices in the context of which such groups thrived and expanded, but also at the rising notion of active and participatory citizenship that spread through the middling and upper reaches of society from mid-century onwards (Mornet 1933; Jones 1991). So the debate over the bourgeoisie was never conclusively concluded.

Eighteenth-Century Capitalism in Question

Further exploration of eighteenth-century capitalism was clearly necessary. Was the capitalism that the “bourgeois revolution” was supposed to have promoted actually around in the eighteenth century? For it to have constituted some kind of motivation for the Third Estate revolutionaries, it was implied that this capitalism ought logically to have comprised the commercial and entrepreneurial practices that we associate with the nineteenth-century styles of capitalism. In fact, as George Taylor showed in some key articles (1962, 1967), late *ancien régime* capitalism was a long way from conforming to such a model. He identified four types – merchant, court, industrial, proprietary – none of which was organized much like the forms later associated with a nineteenth-century definition of capitalism. The research would seem to complement Cobban’s argument that, if the bourgeoisie made the Revolution, then this bourgeoisie was not progressively capitalist but a *rentier* class of lawyers and office-holders. (Here we have an example of the way debate progresses unsystematically in History. A crucial issue is whether any kind of capitalism, even proprietary, in practice generated a desire to remove remaining impediments to wealth accumulation as the Revolution did indeed do – but such a question has not been debated.) Moreover the pre-revolutionary noble involvement in manufacturing and investment in production did not survive the attack on the nobility in the Revolution, while the triumph of proprietary capitalism slowed later growth.

The reassessment of feudalism that Cobban had drawn upon had already shown that what the eighteenth century called “feudalism” was merely the vestiges of the practices of the Middle Ages that now served a very different purpose. In fact, the whole system of seigneurial dues and services had long been converted into property rights that could be traded and were certainly exploited for profit by estate owners – be they nobles, rising “bourgeois” *rentiers*, or even richer peasants – in a system that was becoming slowly more capitalist (though much depended on the region). Perhaps there was increased exploitation of such revenues (a “feudal reaction”) but it hit not the bourgeoisie but the poorer peasantry, and explains their vehement and growing hostility to seigneurialism in all its forms. Evidence of this is to be found in increasing rural violence but was probably masked in the parish *cabiers* of 1789 by the dominance of the views of the richer peasants (Markoff 1996; Nicolas 2002). Pierre de Saint-Jacob (1960) showed exactly how the process worked in rural Burgundy. However, one of the major problems for systematic argument is that rural France was regionally very varied with different conditions prevailing, making generalizations hard to sustain.

The Nature of the Nobility

Alongside the redefinition of the bourgeoisie and capitalism came a re-evaluation of the nature and role of the nobility. The prevailing view had been that the nobility was a fairly closed caste, split between itself into robe and sword, which had been cut out of power by Louis XIV. It was supposed to have been making a comeback during the eighteenth century, with the parliamentary robe magistrates (for whom Montesquieu was the ideologue) taking the lead (Ford 1953). But this took place in the context of an economy more favorable to a growing number of “bourgeois” entrepreneurs. It was time for a reassessment. The pioneer was Robert Forster, who initially studied the estate management practices of the nobility of Toulouse, then went on to consider other regions and a ducal family as well, the Sault-Tavannes (Forster 1960, 1963). He found the provincial nobles of Toulouse and other regions to be displaying attitudes to thrifty estate management and to the maximizing of landed revenue that Marxists claimed was a particular characteristic of the bourgeoisie rather than the nobility.

Suddenly the categories seemed blurred, for our bourgeois were looking very noble and the nobles were looking quite bourgeois! Further research in economic history, on the origins of nineteenth-century heavy industry, showed that in so far as it existed it owed a lot to the investment of some leading courtly families (though many remained traditionally aloof). And why not, for this could be considered the exploitation of landed estates for their resources, and it was done on a grand scale (Taylor 1962)? Half the forges in France belonged to nobles, as landed estates were the main source of wood for power and shipbuilding. Colonial trade attracted noble investment, as did the wine estates of the Bordelais for example (Poussou 1983). So the nobility was involved with many aspects of eighteenth-century-style capitalism. Even so, the prevailing values of this order were far from being modern capitalist. Court nobles could afford to flout the anti-trade conventions that many families still adhered to, but the newly ennobled or rural nobles were still afraid of *dérogance*. Seigneurialism was not their main source of revenue, though it was in some regions an important one, and it mixed honorific rights that were held vital to the social distinction of the elite, with “useful” rights that brought in revenue. Mixed values or not, studies of social mobility and venality of office showed that this elite was far from being a beleaguered, closed caste destined for destruction (Figeac 2002). Half the nobility of perhaps 120,000 individuals could trace their titles back no further than the reign of Louis XIV.

On the other hand, let us not exaggerate the modernity of the nobility. Many provincial and courtly families remained wedded to traditional values and sources of income and there was a cleavage between more conservative provincial nobility and a more fashionable court and Parisian nobility (Chaussinand-Nogaret 1985). But everyone was associated with an increasingly consumerist society. Tea, coffee, sugar, spices, *pâtisserie*, mirrors, porcelain, and *toiles peintes* were all avidly consumed by the social elites, and distribution networks developed. So the nobility was more progressive than previously thought in terms of rural and industrial wealth creation, and more enlightened too. It also paid more in direct taxation as

its privileges were eroded. But it still benefited from enormous social privileges that formed part of the very structure of the regime, and to which it was very attached.

The Enlightenment and the Revolution

The new research on the richer members of the Third Estate and the nobility tends to show that a relatively simple model of economic or social determinism was becoming harder to sustain. So, if economic and social motives were now decidedly blurred, and motivation therefore more complex, what did cause the elites of magistrates and notables in 1787–88 to oppose royal reforms; what precise concerns led the intervention of bourgeois militants in the crisis over the provincial estates in mid- to late 1788; what did motivate the deputies to the Estates-General of May 1789? Does the answer lie in the values of the Enlightenment? The progressive discrediting of a clear social and economic model of revolution returned the debate to the intellectual sphere. A key epistemological development also took place even among Marxists with the argument that ideologies or mentalities should not be regarded as simply a product of social and economic circumstances, but as a relatively autonomous sphere of human activity (Vovelle 1990). Clearly the Revolution, with its Declaration of the Rights of Man, constitutional representative government, civic liberty, religious toleration, educational reform, reform of the judicial system, and liberty of commerce, drew profoundly upon the movement of ideas in the eighteenth century. (Much less in view was the extent to which it also drew upon the classical world for key notions like patriotism and virtue.) In fact, a major redefinition of the Enlightenment in its various guises was taking place. There was a growing consensus among historians that the Enlightenment was not as radical as had sometimes been argued, that this “Party of Humanity” was not in favor of revolution but of reform led from above by enlightened rulers. The issue was broadened out by recasting questions about the role of the Enlightenment as questions about “intellectual origins.” This concept is more open to the inclusion of religious motivations, classical republicanism, economic (largely physiocrat) thought, and key notions like virtue and citizenship, none of which was exclusively the product of “Enlightenment” (Linton 2001; Smith 2005a).

This kind of argument has something in common with another major new strand of Enlightenment studies, which stressed discourses and cultural practices rather than specific ideas. The practices of the Enlightenment transformed attitudes and values as much as did a set of specific social or political doctrines. The availability of periodicals, the spread of reading rooms, libraries, *sociétés de pensée*, and provincial academies helped sustain what has been termed a “reading revolution”; the famous art exhibitions in the Louvre from 1737 onwards, the parterre of the theatre, the critical subtexts to paintings and plays, the promenades with newsmongers, the clandestine pamphleteering – all were helping to create a public sphere in which critical discussion took place (Habermas 1989; Kaiser 2011). Religious controversies over Jansenism also led to a more politically aware Parisian bourgeoisie, and famous trials became a vehicle for public discussion of government and social injustice (Garrioch 1996; Maza 1993). Even Parisian artisans would have become familiar with the language of virtue and natural rights via their lawyers, employed to defend

their *compagnon* clients against masters (Sonenscher 1989). When combined with notions of patriotism and citizenship, these cultural practices prepared sections of the population to make new choices when the opportunity arose in 1789. Thus living the Enlightenment prepared the way for a triumph of democratic sociability and a desire for participation and transparency that characterized the revolutionaries. A sense of virtuous citizenship promoted opposition to any government action that could be called “despotic.”

Alongside this research a field sketched out in the 1930s returned to prominence. Daniel Mornet’s pioneering study of the intellectual origins of the French Revolution, a masterpiece never translated, was later buttressed by major studies of the notion of happiness, of progress, of equality. But from the mid-1960s Robert Darnton took up the challenge and made a major contribution with several new works on the diffusion of ideas. He was addressing a significant issue for historians: how far did enlightened ideas remain those of a narrow elite and how far did they percolate down the social scale to artisans and peasants (as Taine had thought)? The work on diffusion complemented work on the practices of the Enlightenment to answer this question. Who indeed was affected by the new ideas, methods, discourses, and practices of the Enlightenment? Even for Mornet the answer to the question could not be limited to the diffusion of texts like the *Social Contract*, the *Spirit of the Laws*, or the *Encyclopedia*, in other words to the corpus of major enlightened texts by its principal exponents, such as Locke, Fénelon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Diderot, d’Holbach, the marquis de Mirabeau, and Buffon, to name but a few. Such texts were costly and were mainly available to the social elite who engaged in polite discussion in Academies (Roche 1998). The composition of private libraries could be analyzed from sale catalogues and inventories, the volume of publications of different sorts quantified (Chartier 1990). But it was found that the educated but less well-off readers also had access through the new reading rooms and might discuss ideas in bookshops and cafés. So the Enlightenment did resonate quite widely in educated society. Nevertheless, the “bourgeois ideology” of the Enlightenment soon came to look almost as noble as it was bourgeois. Both in terms of the contents of its libraries and the *cahiers* of 1789, the nobility as a social order was in many ways profoundly enlightened. The civility of the leading salons, and of the drawing rooms, required a familiarity with this world of ideas; and they were readily adopted, especially after the beginning of the American War of Independence, and even the higher clergy drew upon them (Lilti 2012). There was an anti-Enlightenment, and a Catholic Enlightenment, and these movements did create tensions in the elite, but in the main one has the impression that the elite, because it also profited from the *ancien régime* state, seemed to live in a state of ambiguity or a double-think in which the implications of the new ideas were not followed through (Burson 2010; McMahan 2001). It helped that the major ideas were reformist rather than revolutionary – and the reformist state itself began to embody them in its policies in some spheres, notably in economics, finance, and public works. There was even ministerial and courtly protection for the *Encyclopedia*, and for networks of economic thinkers (Skornicki 2011). But another problematic is the influence of ideas that do not strictly fit the definition of the Enlightenment. The civic humanism of the Renaissance,

that is Pocock's "Machiavellian Moment," should obviously be extended to eighteenth-century France. Sixteenth-century ideas of the public good seem to have undergone a revival and transmutation in the eighteenth century, and classical republicanism had a great influence. Everyone read Cicero, Plutarch, and Tacitus quite as much as they read Sidney, Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. The quarrels over Jansenism also fed into the pre-revolutionary mix in a potent way; so not all motivation was "enlightened" (Van Kley 1996). The two key discourses on virtue and *patrie* are typical of this range of influences (Bell 2001; Campbell 2007; Linton 2001, 2006).

But Darnton argued that a literary underground of writers excluded from the institutions of the high Enlightenment (membership of academies, posts as librarians) purveyed a much more radical form of enlightenment in pamphlets, minor works, and an especially desacralizing form of political pornography (Darnton 1982). These writings reached a much wider market than the 25,000 copies of the *Encyclopaedia*. Darnton (1995, 1996) identified a whole new corpus of popular texts from clandestine literature that, for all their ephemeral nature and strange mixture of pornography and politics, were widely read and which were a vehicle for some enlightened notions as well as being massively subversive of the established order. For all the importance of this research, it is hard to agree that the culture of calumny and desacralization had a causal connection to the outbreak of revolution.

The fertile ground of Enlightenment studies also produced a major new perspective that combined philosophy with intellectual history. Its fundamental inspiration was the intellectual revolution produced by Michel Foucault. Both a historian and a linguistic philosopher, Foucault was interested in language and power. To vastly oversimplify his complex thought, he explored the way "discourses," that is historical streams of language and concepts, assembled and reassembled by succeeding generations (and which, in a major intellectual achievement, he identified or defined into existence), created and represented the environment and the issues. Discourses not only provide a conceptual toolbox, one used by actors to conceptualize what is going on, but they also actually mold or create the actors themselves. We are a bundle of discourses. Thus a certain idea of madness or criminality, or sexuality, once internalized, profoundly affects our historical choices and is often a function of power relations. Discourses are unstable, improvised, and can serve to marginalize or exclude "the other." So people that historians had been accustomed to interpret as individuals in groups were now transformed into vehicles for discourses – as Foucault showed in a key essay, "What Is an Author?" (1991). Such a perspective was brilliantly adapted by Keith Baker, who argued that the historical conjuncture that gave rise to the Revolution was the product of the competition between three discourses within the new public sphere. These he dubbed the discourses of justice, reason, and will. For a generation before the Revolution the operation of these discourses gave rise to a new politics of contestation, and may be presumed to have defined for the actors the possible and varied significances of the events of 1787–89 (Baker 1990). The argument broke the mold of causality or socio-economic determinism used by historians, and gave a great impetus to new research. François Furet (1981) also argued that the inherent contradictions in the – for him, *new* – discourses of 1789 were the very motor of the Revolution,

leading almost inevitably to the Terror of 1793–94. (He was a major historian of the Revolution whose work dealt principally with its nature as a radical break and so his work is not discussed here.) Many empiricist historians, especially in England, rejected such a philosophical and intellectual approach out of hand, but the debate moved on without them, because the issues today are conceptual not empirical.

The rise of a Foucauldian approach opened the door for studies on broader notions like virtue, citizenship, nobility, sociability, natural law, republicanism, and patriotism – and on the way these discourses were employed in practice. These studies, however, show the actors actually manipulating the discourses more self-consciously and strategically than ought to have been possible had they merely been mouthpieces or actors speaking a script. This poses a problem for the Foucauldian approach, what is known as the problem of “agency.” How can the actors be speaking a script already in existence and at the same time skillfully improvising one? How far do they exist as individuals, or must all individuals be “emblematic”? Moreover, there is a problem of the type of sources used, for is the discourse on politics seen through theoretical texts really the same as politics as studied through the texts generated by its practice, and what of context (Campbell 1989)?

“Enlightenment” has now become so capacious a concept that it is in danger of losing its role as an explanatory model for the birth of the French Revolution. The Enlightenment has merged into the new cultural history. In my opinion, like the Enlightenment, the cultural developments can be more easily linked to the choices revolutionaries made once the state had failed than to the process that brought about its failure. That is not to say there are no links, just that they still need exploring more precisely in their political context to isolate them from the general mass of cultural phenomena currently evoked. The notion of cultural origins is too vague; instead of saying that the Revolution was the product of the many cultural changes that were taking place, we need to know which cultural elements were important for precisely which choices. Roger Chartier (1990), having summarized in magisterial fashion much of the new cultural and intellectual history of the period, argued rather broadly that the Revolution was possible because it was thinkable. Even that view has been challenged.

Rethinking the Models of Revolution

George Taylor (1967) said that the Revolution was “essentially a political revolution with social consequences and not a social revolution with political consequences.” This perspective raises the question of what model could replace the orthodox view. At this point in the debate, sociologists were doing much comparative work on the nature of revolution. But thanks to the influence of Marxism in this relatively new academic field, the Revolution was still assumed to be essentially social in origins. The first major attempt at reconceptualizing the origins and nature of the French Revolution was by the historians Robert Palmer and Jacques Godechot (Palmer 1959–64). Looking at the apparent wave of revolutions in Europe and America from the 1770s to 1800, they argued that a common denominator was the notion of democracy, starting in America and influencing subsequent revolutions. The theory was virtually ignored in France,

but made an impact elsewhere and has become a renewed subject of discussion today (Jourdan 2008). To the extent that there was a common ideology, in my view it was surely patriotism, in its eighteenth-century civic guise, and not democracy that was the key idea. Attempts to re-put this kind of argument today in an age of globalization are problematic as far as origins are concerned. It is not that there are not influences, and a similar general context, but the whole educated culture of western Europe and the colonies already read the same books and had the same sort of classical education, so the notion of contagion or influence does not work as it is almost impossible to isolate and trace specific influences. It is a big step from the useful and necessary task of exploring these to showing, through the existence of rigorously traced networks, that the ideas and connections played a vital role in generating a revolution in France; and the argument presupposes “revolutionaries” before the revolution. In the present state of studies it is of course too early to know, but then, as with the Enlightenment, it may be that the ideas played a more significant role in the choices made and policies adopted to remodel France *after* the state had collapsed and a power and civic vacuum had to be filled than they did in the collapse of the *ancien régime*. In that process the internal contradictions of the regime, the nature of the crisis, failures of political management, and long-term fiscal and institutional problems played by far the greater role. In that sense the origins of the Revolution were specifically French. But what does it mean to say specifically French in an age of international commerce of goods and ideas? The “Atlantic revolution” theory is another unresolved area for debate.

A generation after Palmer wrote, sociologists, influenced by the rise of a notion of political culture and a comparative methodology, finally moved away from their essentially social view of revolution. In 1979 and 1991 two influential models were put forward. The first, by Theda Skocpol (1979), argued that three major revolutions, the French, the Russian, and the Chinese, were cases of state failure produced by international involvement that produced stresses of modernization (though for historians modernization, like globalization, is a very imprecise concept) for an agrarian bureaucracy. Her model (which few historians today, in a new stage of studies on the state, would recognize as valid) was also criticized for leaving out the intellectual sphere. Jack Goldstone (1991), in contrast, put the accent on the multiple pressures induced by demographic growth and the failure of the fiscal systems to gather resources from new types of wealth. What they lacked in understanding the specific complexities of France and its political culture – which historians were in the process of redefining at that time – they made up for in impressive and stimulating breadth of vision. They broke the mold of the old sociological model of revolution or “internal civil war,” and have fed into the comparative analysis of the French Revolution. A lasting merit is the attempt to analyze “state failure.” More recently there has been a renewal of sociological interest in the early modern states, particularly as multinational structures (Smith 2005b). More conceptual work needs to be done on the responses of states ill adapted to facing the costs of defending an international empire; and on the centrifugal strains in multinational states (as in 1848 in Austria-Hungary).

Redefining the State and Power

The most recent redefinition to be taking place is of the state and politics. If the Revolution was to be viewed as political (as it was for Taylor, Furet, and Doyle), what then was “politics”? For *ancien régime* politics was a world away from the modern politics that the Revolution was to invent. And how should we define the state in which this *ancien régime* style of politics took place? William Doyle (1981) put together the case against Lefebvre and substituted a political narrative of the fall of the *ancien régime*. Since then, with the rise of the notion of political culture and a great deal more work on the nature of the state, there has been a major shift in our view of the state (Collins 2009). But the whole question of political or state origins still needs reconceptualizing.

The orthodox view of the state was that the absolute monarchy was a centralized bureaucratic or administrative state by the eighteenth century (Tocqueville 1856; Antoine 1986). The central institutions and power of the more collaborative Renaissance monarchy were supposed to have been extended and transformed under Richelieu and Louis XIV, with the eighteenth century creating an “administrative monarchy.” The argument had been adopted by Tocqueville and became the core of a belief in the development of “absolutism,” a word to be avoided today for its anachronism and centralizing agenda. The rise of the state to pre-eminence over society (which did indeed take place) was thought to have led to the decline of provincial estates, the exclusion of the nobility from power, their domestication at a largely ornamental court, and the crushing of the *parlements* – hence their counter-offensive after the death of Louis XIV. Even by 1988 enough research had been done to show this was unconvincing in all respects (Campbell 1988). In so far as the origins of the Revolution were concerned, it should have been apparent that a powerful, centralized state should not have collapsed under the strains of war finance; if it was strong it should have been able to solve its fiscal problem by imposing fiscal reform. (The history of fiscal reform is actually one of erosion and compromise.) No one seemed to notice this paradox, perhaps because the origins of the Revolution were seen as essentially social. The crisis of the state was viewed as merely a precipitant. The Revolution was not viewed as a progressive process in which its crisis played a dynamic transformative role. Perhaps the metaphors of revolution as volcanic eruption, as an explosion of social change, as a tsunami, diverted historians from a more searching analysis.

Much of the empirical work for a reconceptualization of the nature of both the state and the regime focused on the seventeenth century, because it was the period that was supposed to have witnessed a profound transformation (Cossandey and Descimon 2002; Mettam 1988). My own work on defining power and politics, at court and in the Parlement of Paris, in the thirty years after Louis XIV, convinced me that if the system functioned as it did under Cardinal Fleury, then the supposed transformation under Louis XIV had not lasted – or even taken place (Campbell 1996). So the continuities with the more makeshift seventeenth century predominate. Institutional historians have tended to stress the official administrative structures and royal claims, but we should be skeptical of the image the state was careful to project. Much other work on the eighteenth century has since shed a

different light on two more key aspects: *parlements* and estates. Beneath the official pronouncements, there lay a world of practical politics that characterized a regime with many tensions that needed to preserve delicate equilibriums. (One might almost view the monarchy as the apex of a corporative balancing act.) The *parlements* have emerged as more a part of government, a troublesome but vital set of judicial and administrative institutions (Campbell 2006; Chaline 1996; Swann 1995). They did use ideology to defend their corporate position and could be dragged into other controversies by appeals to or attacks on their interests, but as judges they were not spearheading an ideological opposition on behalf of the nobility (Stone 1986). Moreover their interrelationship with the courtly and ministerial environment meant that through patronage they could nevertheless be managed by the central government – if it remained cautious and united. Of course the ministry often failed to display unity, and crises arose, notably in 1770, which as in 1788 led to radical reform that looked despotic. Work on some of the provincial estates has added to older studies on Brittany and Languedoc in stressing their important and indeed increasing role in the government of their regions rather than an outright decline (Legay 2001). It also confirms the continued role of the higher nobility based at court, but vital for governance through compromise, the dominance of the provincial nobility within the institutions, and their importance for the system of royal credit (Potter and Rosenthal 1997; Swann 2009). It is true that many areas had no estates, but their existence in the frontier provinces limited and profoundly conditioned the development of the monarchy. Meanwhile, the *intendants* are now perceived to have been rather less the agents of centralization they were portrayed as, and more as authoritative intermediaries working with the local elites (Emmanuelli 1981).

Research on royal finances has revealed the taxation strategies, the complex credit mechanisms, and the money circuits involved (Bonney 1998; Félix 1999, 2006; Legay 2011). The finances of the absolute monarchy were always precarious back to the sixteenth century, and nearly catastrophically so under Louis XIV, who in 1715 left France twenty years of revenue in debt. All wars were paid for mostly by credit, with taxes increased during and immediately after wars. In the short term, funds would be raised from the Farmers General, whose profits from the indirect tax farms gave them wealth and credit. The French monarchy's fundamental problem was how to tax the rich, who tended to acquire exemptions. It partially solved this problem with new direct taxation (the *capitation*, the *dixièmes*, the *vingtièmes*) that targeted the nobility and, less successfully, the church, but the whole system was skewed toward landed wealth rather than the fast-increasing commercial wealth from, for example, the colonial trade. So with ever more expensive wars, and maritime wars at that, the system was under huge pressure (Riley 1986). The cost of credit rose, and during the American War Necker took out too many loans instead of tackling the difficult job of forcing the *parlements* and privileged to consent to higher taxes. And yet most European states, including Britain, were in a similar position, but although France was the most populous power for geopolitical reasons it had both land and maritime military commitments. The fundamental reason for the French failure to reform its finances was its political culture based on a court system with vested interests that made drastic reform too

hazardous for ministers to undertake if they were to remain in power. A finance minister did not even have control of the expenditure by his ministerial colleagues. But if the problems were long term, and crises frequent, perhaps historians should ask not so much why royal finances failed, but how it was that the socio-political-fiscal system of the absolute monarchy lasted so long. How did power work in the *ancien régime*?

Of course the answer is not that the state power simply worked through a centralized bureaucracy. Such a structure existed, with a council of state, *intendants*, *parlements*, tax authorities, provincial estates, and governors, but their coherence was limited and the whole structure's action was subject to many historically founded constraints. It was a pre-modern administration, a hybrid in terms of Weberian models, so the state was a particular early modern formation that has not really been recognized in historical models. This state formation developed a certain *habitus* and coherence in the later sixteenth century and survived the challenges of war and empire into the later eighteenth century (Campbell 2011). The General Farms were the most bureaucratic, and administrative change did begin to take some effect in the last two or three decades of the regime. But fundamentally the ethic was not of a modern bureaucracy, and the office-holders had a patrimonial conception of their functions. Social privilege, hierarchy, and a strong sense of the legitimacy of limits to royal interference remained so important that a proactive royal administration generated tensions. So rhetoric, representation, patronage and clientage, bluff, negotiation, and compromise remained fundamentally important, as in the seventeenth century. The more so as the theoretically absolute monarchy was based on a working compromise with the elites (Beik 2005). The *intendants* worked with the provinces, and the centralization was often more apparent than real as initiatives often stemmed from the localities and were confirmed by the royal council (Emmanuelli 1981). It could even be argued that the provincial elites were playing an ever greater role in government which only increased their resentment of attempts at centralization or, as they saw it, "royal despotism" (Legay and Baurly 2009).

With an essentially bureaucratic conception of state power, historians and sociologists of the absolute monarchy long failed to consider three areas now regarded as fundamental for understanding the regime; the royal court, the royal decision-making structures, and the role of patronage and clientage in the political system (Fantoni 2012; Kettering 1986; Mettam 1988). Research has shown that the court was in fact the nerve center of the realm, the place from which the administration was run, but also the center of networks of patronage and clientage that were vital to effective government through their potential to manage conflict and prevent the potentially dangerous escalation of crises. Thus the exercise of royal authority was about political management of the constantly disruptive social and political tensions, and patronage networks were the key to this technique (Campbell 1996). Perhaps the key element for the survival – and potentially the failure – of the regime in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was indeed good political management by king and ministers. But if the court facilitated this as a theater of power and a space for negotiation, the dominance of the leading families (who defined politics as remaining influential at court) created coterie and

factions without which ministers could not survive (Hardman 1995; Horowski 2003). Anything but very gradual reform was thus almost structurally impossible, doomed to failure as it became too risky. Decision-making required a proactive, experienced monarch who kept a firm grip on ministerial rivalries and court faction, but even then it took place in context of huge structural limitations on the exercise of royal power (Wick 1980). Faction was rife at the center, as several empirical studies have shown, and it could be described as a constant in the political culture (Gruder 2007; Hardman 1995, 2010; Price 1995). If we change our definition of the state and rethink its power processes and techniques of control, then new questions arise about the origins of the Revolution. We might for example develop a typology of crisis under the *ancien régime* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and compare that with the 1780s to understand the similarities and differences (Campbell 2012).

Crisis and Revolution

So we come back to our initial questions about the origins of the Revolution, but in a very different state of studies. What is a revolution? What stages does it go through in order to take place? Are revolutions produced by social, economic, ideological, or political (including fiscal) tensions? What is the relationship of crisis to revolution? Historians are always trying to take into account new research, without so far having produced a complete reconceptualization of the problem in the French case. Sociologists have various models, but my preferred inspiration is one of “state failure” applied in a more historically grounded fashion. Various elements lead to a crisis that is dynamic, transformative by its very nature. The crisis is far more than a precipitant of a revolution ready made in the minds of men. This crisis brings forth in response attempts at reform that then invite into politics new groups who find their interests threatened or advanced, but who at first are traditionally, not revolutionarily, motivated, because they do not expect the regime to fail. Most political systems are rather good at dealing with traditional problems, and a degree of tension is normal, but when the issues are new, or politics is under pressure conceptually, or simply the scale of the problems is too vast, existing strategies and techniques of government become over-stretched, ineffective. Thus it was with the baroque state in an age of international competition. So the crisis snowballs, as ineffectual attempts to resolve it (political mismanagement) bring in wider groups, like ripples made by a stone in a pool. The role of the public sphere is crucial in facilitating widening debate. (In the 1780s this is a major difference with previous crises.) Gradually, in some cases quite suddenly, and usually quite late in the day, people realize that something is changing, and begin to make new choices in defense of their interests. From the growing competition the crisis spreads, until governance becomes nearly impossible, and political collapse occurs. Into the vacuum step new contending groups, alarmed and empowered, having to decide how to replace the discredited regime. Some are more militantly and idealistically determined to remodel the system to serve their interests better. So, in this view of revolution as process, what needs to be explained is “state failure.”

This means first investigating the nature of the state, its resources and political management, its inherent tensions and contradictions, its governing elite's ability to deal with crises. Then we must ask how the crisis develops to undermine confidence and pose virtually insurmountable problems for the regime. Finally, we must consider how and why new groups become involved, and try to understand their choices in 1788–89. Here intellectual and cultural history have a particularly important role to play, for their choices had complex motivations and were far from being mere political, social, or economic reflexes (Campbell forthcoming). So a state-centered perspective as the basis of an analytical narrative, actually restore the political (in a new, wider, definition) and bring in the other approaches. It does so not in general terms, but rather in terms of more specific questions about motives in the particular and ever-changing succession of situations as the crisis develops. Motives and perceptions change during a crisis, they evolve, and they must be studied in their precise context. The Revolution was not produced by cultural or social or economic change in general; it was produced by a developing crisis that involved various aspects of all of these elements, for politics broadly defined incorporates the defense of group interests and their perceptions of the nature of the issues. Not all social or cultural concerns or traits will be important at a given moment – and many of those that are important are not new ones but older attitudes and quarrels, sometimes expressed in a new language (Blaufarb 2006; Cubells 1987; Wick 1980). So the notion of strategy becomes important for the historian, and the actors regain the power of speech that Foucault took away. We do however need to work with an expanded definition of politics that is less related to state policy and more about how people get what they want. The challenge is to find new ways of talking about the motivation of individuals and groups in political situations, and then to situate these within the structures at all levels.

Currently there are only two collections dealing explicitly with the origins of the Revolution (Campbell 2006; Kaiser and Van Kley 2011). Both throw a good deal of new light on the problem of the origins, but neither even attempts to offer more than a provisional explanation any more than does the best survey article (Bossenga 2007). We must accept that in the current fragmented state of studies a convincing new model would be unlikely. On the other hand, it is extremely useful to take stock of an established view or a debate, to question where we have got to, in order to ask valid new questions in the light of new work. The journey may be unending, but that is no reason to ignore the changing scenery along the way.

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