

## Was the French Revolution first and foremost a Class Struggle?

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In this essay we will be analyzing the changes France underwent in its social structure during the Revolution by looking at the socio-economic dynamics of pre-Revolutionary France, its consequences, and the course of the Revolution itself focusing on key periods. An obvious caveat is that what follows is not and cannot be definitive, because of the vast body of existing literature and continuing lively academic debate on the subject.

The classic Marxist argument holds that an emerging bourgeois class, its wealth based on commerce, industry and capital accumulation, was constrained and frustrated in its political ambitions by the nobility. France was divided into Three Estates, the Third Estate which bore the *taille* (the main direct tax), the nobility (subject only to the *capitation* poll tax and *viengtième*) and the clergy (only required to donate a pre-negotiated *don gratuit*). The 'privileged' orders maintained monopolies, held the right to collect the tithe or seigniorial dues and enjoyed many exemptions, e.g. on military service, the *corvée* and most taxes. L.S. Mercier in his *Tableau de Paris* succinctly summed up the many grievances against the aristocracy – “The castles...possess misused rights of hunting, fishing and cutting wood... [and] conceal those haughty gentlemen who separate themselves effectively from the human race...who add their own taxes...beg eternally for pensions and places...[and] will not allow the common people to have either promotion or reward”. The last point was expounded on by the Abbé Sieyès, in the heady atmosphere of 1789, when he wrote, “All the branches of the executive have been taken over by the caste that monopolizes the Church, the judiciary and the army. A spirit of fellowship leads the nobles to favor one another over the rest of the nation”. These illustrated the main complaints of the Third Estate against the nobility – they were perceived as venal, reactionary and parasitic, a foreign blot on the French nation.

Yet the above view that 18<sup>th</sup> century France saw the bourgeoisie superseding the old nobility economically but being frustrated in their social ambitions by them is a flawed and simplistic narrative. The arguments of the revisionist school, which challenged the French Marxist interpretation of the Revolution as the replacement of the nobility by the bourgeoisie as the dominant class, are many and covering all major revisionist historians (Cobban, Taylor, Doyle, etc) is futile in an essay of such length. However, Schama's *Citizens* encompasses their arguments in one book, albeit one we have to treat with caution due to its constant and unwarranted bias against the revolutionaries, harkening back to historical dramatizers like Carlyle, Dickens and Baroness Orkzy.

In a nutshell, *Citizens* considers the old regime to have been surprisingly modern – progressive, prospering, addicted to science and change. Old-style feudalism was supposedly already pretty much vanished from the countryside – most dues were equivalent to money rents. French state-funded pure science was the equal of any in Europe and was translated into many useful applications, particularly in military technology. Economic growth proceeded at 1.9% per annum in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, a rate only matched during the era of the Empire and its artificial Continental System. Transport (from 1760 to 1780 travel times by coach from Paris to Bordeaux fell from fourteen to five days), communications and

trade) were developing rapidly, unifying the French market. Industry burgeoned, growing at an impressive average of 3.8% per annum from the 1760's to the Revolution) and was the most developed in Europe outside Britain. Growing literacy and the rise of a public opinion fueled an explosion in newspapers, pamphlets and encyclopedias.

Also incorporated is Doyle's insight that by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, nobility could be easily bought (France had 120,000 nobles in 1789, an order of magnitude greater than in Britain) and that the late *ancien régime* underwent fusion between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. While officially engagement in commercial activities was to be punished by derogation, in practice France's leading industrialists were also nobles – for instance, the Duc d'Orléans, the King's own brother, owned glass-works at Cotteret and textile plants at Montargis and Orléans. Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely. Moreover, the biggest frictions were not between the commercial bourgeoisie and nobles, but between different sections of the nobility – the usually successful urban nobles of Paris and the booming peripheral cities like Lyons, Marseilles, Bordeaux and Nantes, and the rural gentry, which comprised 40% of the noble population and frequently had nothing to distinguish themselves from the commoners around them than by their titles, and thus had the most to fear from a loss of privileges. This was the main reason behind the 1781 Ségur Law, which limited sales of military ranks to the old nobility and was primarily aimed against the recently ennobled *nouveau riche*. Furthermore, there is evidence that even the more ordinary bourgeoisie (which number some 2.3mn souls on the eve of the Revolution) admired and aspired to nobility – for instance, in December 1788 the lawyers of Nuits declared, “The privileges of the nobility are truly their property. We will respect them all the more because we are not excluded from them...why, then, suppose that we think of destroying the source of emulation which guides our labors?” For every corrupt and unpopular *intendant* there would be a progressive like Saint-Sauveur in Languedoc, who applied science to solve economic and public health problems in his province. To quote Schama *in extenso*, assuming modernity to be a “world in which capital replaces customs as arbiter of social values, where professionals rather than amateurs run the institutions of law and government, and where commerce and industry rather than land lead economic growth”, the “great period of change was not the Revolution but the late eighteenth century”.

So instead of being a class war between bourgeoisie and nobility, there is evidence that it was ideas, a reaction against this brave new world of 'money and death', that generated the Revolution. This new social phenomenon was based on several sources – foremost, philosophy and reviving interest in antiquity, all reinforced by the decline of absolutism throughout the eighteenth century and the rapid spread of literacy. Louis-Philippe, the Comte de Ségur, recalled in 1826 – “We were inclined to surrender whole-heartedly to the philosophical doctrines put forwards by men of letters...we took secret pleasure in the fact that these men attacked the old edifice that seemed to us to be so Gothic and ridiculous. Censorship in the last decades of the *ancien régime* was relatively light and forbidden books and pamphlets could be bought even near the entrance to the Palace of Versailles, where they found willing customers amongst the aristocrats and courtiers who as often as not were the subjects of their vitriol and ridicule. Rousseau captivated people with his aspiration to candidness, simplicity and Virtue; Voltaire criticized the bloated upper hierarchy of the Church; Montesquieu proposed the division of government into the legislative, executive and judicial branch, replacing the old feudal system of the Estates. In general invective was directed against the system of monarchical rule – writing the *Rights of Man* in 1791, Tom Paine summarized these sentiments by stating that “what is called the splendor of a throne is no other than the corruption of the state, which “indiscriminately admits every species of character to the same authority”.

A renewed interest in the ancient world stirred ascetic Roman ideals of asperity, simplicity and readiness to sacrifice, as exemplified by the tale of the Horatii (which inspired the famous David painting, *Oath of the Horatii*). Modern manifestations of the Roman ideal were seized upon, as illustrated by the emergence of patriot citizen heroes during the French involvement in the American Revolutionary War (against a monarchy!) - e.g. du Couëdic, a ship commander who became a patriot hero after his Pyrrhic victory over a British frigate in which he was mortally wounded and his sloop practically destroyed. And finally there was the reflection of these ideas in the popular culture of the time – plays caricaturing the privileged orders (e.g. *The Marriage of Figaro*), David's paintings and the polemics of folks like Mercier and Linguet. Thus as we can there was more to the background of the Revolution than social and economic turbulence – also playing a great role were new ideas like equality of opportunity, the virtues of simplicity and patriotism, and a return to an imagined past while being propelled forwards technologically – as gushingly envisioned in Condorcet's futurist writings.

The other side of the Marxist argument is that, in Albert Soboul's words, “The French Revolution was the crowning achievement of a long economic and social evolution that made the bourgeoisie the master of the world”. He has a point regarding his evaluation of the Revolution's lasting legacy – in particular, that of its Constituent Assembly. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (1789) was the foundation for civil equality – Clause 2 states, “These [natural and inalienable] are liberty, *property*, security and resistance to oppression”. Guilds and price controls were abolished and the Le Chapelier Law (1791) prohibited workers' associations. That said, many of the liberal reforms of that era were simply a continuation of previous royal policies. The main Revolution-inspired tax, a common one on land and movables, had precedents in Calonne's reform proposals of 1786 and free trade was in favor from Turgot to the Eden Treaty. The removal of internal customs barriers and the emancipation of Protestants both happened in 1786 under the *ancien régime*.

The Revolution opened up careers to talent, which could only favor the bourgeoisie since urban workers and peasants did not have the educational opportunities to exploit this. However, in the short term, because of the Revolution's distrust of professional associations (links to old regime corporatism and privilege), medicine and law were “thrown open to the market, with minimal qualifications required”, resulting in “revolutionary France being a happy hunting ground for quacks and charlatans”. Afterwards, the militarized bureaucracy that was the Napoleonic state employed 250,000 officials, five times more than the old regime and about 10% of the entire bourgeoisie, who even enjoyed the rudiments of a contributory pension system. The army was very successful in adapting to the new society, as Napoleon could testify. So the bourgeoisie, as in middle class, gained authority – but what about the other meaning of bourgeois, as in capitalist?

The Revolution affirmed property rights and produced aforementioned pro-capitalist legislation. However, in the short term it was a catastrophe – war and British naval superiority, coupled with revolts in the provinces led to the eclipse of France's most dynamic economic sector in 1789, overseas trade, as well as the cities that sustained it (Bordeaux, Marseilles, Nantes, etc). Emigration and persecution of the old noble elites caused the collapse of Lyon's silk industry. Granted, military campaigns and the Continental System created artificial demand for cotton and metallurgy, but these also collapsed following the defeats after 1812. From a long term perspective, the ruling class remained confined to land-owning nobles and bourgeoisie as before, who invested in land rather than industry, especially because of the mass sale of the *biens nationaux* – for instance, one asked what kind of Frenchman is

mad enough “to risk his fortune in a business enterprise...[and not]...one of the confiscated estates”. France had to wait for the railways to really 'take-off' into its industrial revolution and its main impact, meanwhile, was in its ideas – nationalism, civil equality, sovereignty and meritocracy, which were born in the last decades of the *ancien régime* and propagated through Europe by French armies. “The people thought kings were gods upon earth...[now] it's more difficult to rule the people”, according to Kolokotronis, a Greek brigand and patriot.

Following our analysis of the origins and results of the Revolution – in which we say that although its repercussions did impact somewhat on the social structure, the main motivations seem to have been based on ideas, not class – it's time to look at course of the Revolution itself. The first and most famous French Revolution was, according to Lefebvre, actually four revolutions. The first was the 'aristocratic revolt', which, due to circumstances and Louis XVI's indecisiveness and assorted gaffes, succeeded in calling up the Estates-General to approve new taxes. However, the privileged Estates' insistence on the 'forms of 1614' transformed the debate – “King, despotism and constitution have become only secondary questions. Now it is war between the Third Estate and the two others”, according to the Abbé Sieyès. Eventually though, faced with deadlock and ominous signs from the government, they joined in common with a doubled Third and took the Tennis Court Oath. The popular revolution stormed the Bastille, took control of Paris and destroyed the capital's hated customs wall on hearing rumors of a royalist plot to dissolve the National Assembly by force. Meanwhile the peasant revolution destroyed feudalism from below via the widespread burning of seigniorial obligations. The King was forced to back down. With its newfound power, the bourgeoisie used the National Assembly to enact Enlightenment-influenced civil equality reforms.

The above account is not as simply as it might appear. The composition of the Third Estate in the Estates-General of 1789 was actually mostly composed of venal office holders (43%) and lawyers (25%), while only 13% were involved in commercial activities. Furthermore, the Third was actually more conservative than the Second on the vast majority of economic and social issues! Also the Estates were prepared to fuse together into a National Assembly to demand a constitution and afterwards, all (former) orders overwhelmingly supported measures to eradicate privileges (e.g. the August Decrees).

The other major period as regards social interpretations is from the purge of the Girondins in June 1793 to the Thermidorian reaction in July 1794. Now the legacy of this period – the Maxima, forced loans, laws against hoarding, the Vendôme Laws – is certainly not pro-bourgeois under any understanding of the term. According to a variant of the Marxist interpretation, the bourgeois bent over backwards to appease the sans-culottes by implementing economic Terror. In this way war pressures (the *levée en masse* and its associated release of democratic sentiments), food shortages and radicalization of the clubs (e.g. Cordeliers) was to be sublimated and redirected against the Republic's foreign enemies.

The problem with this interpretation is the assumption that the sans-culottes had a powerful political identity and goals of their own. They were in fact politically passive. They did not lash out when their champions were destroyed (e.g. Roux imprisoned under the Law of Suspects in September 1793, the Hébertists guillotined for their excessive zeal in March 1794, etc). All their journées during the period – the overthrow of the King, the purge of the Girondins, demands for the Maxima – were in any case supported by a large number of Assembly deputies. Finally, they faded as a political force after Thermidor once the war started going much better, despite the winter of 1794-95 being one of the harshest on record and rampant inflation following the abandonment of the Maxima. This is illustrated

by the failed uprisings of Germinal and Prairial. One cause of this is that the “popular societies of the sections rarely numbered more than 400 members”, meaning that only 5% to 10% of Parisians actively participated (and were mainly drawn from artisans and shopkeepers), in contrast to the sectional battalions which numbered around 100,000 men. Thus they were too weak without the support of bourgeois Jacobinism. They defined themselves culturally (not politically) as favoring fraternity, liberty and candidness, and in opposition to the corrupt, superficial 'aristos'. It wasn't really a class with common social backgrounds, but rather an intellectual and cultural fad which predated the worker movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. in its politicized social goals and partial tolerance of a feminist movement.

Although in general the Jacobins shared moderately well-off bourgeois backgrounds, what defined them were their ideas. Robespierre dreamed of a Rousseau Republic, a Romantic vision of Virtue as absolute end. But “virtue without which terror is harmful and terror which without virtue is impotent” - political Terror was necessary for the preservation of the Republic from its internal enemies and to inculcate virtue. Rationality, incorruptibility, candidness, the Supreme Being were virtue – and those who dared stand against it (Hébertists, dechristianizers, feminists, Enragés, etc) were to be smitten down by the guillotine. Even as the Convention passed Saint-Just's Vendôme Laws (the transferal of the lands of émigrés to landless French patriots), the deportation of French vagrants to Madagascar was being seriously discussed. Furthermore, it was more about “punishing political crime and rewarding political virtue” than any social consideration, especially considering it “[only appeared] as an appendage to a prolonged denunciation of disloyalty”. The Thermidorian reaction was a grouping of republican moderates intent on ending the Terror, and consequent reprisals against the Terrorists were a matter of vengeance, not class war, since they were almost all bourgeois themselves.

While the Marxist view of the Revolution as a social struggle (transition from feudalism to capitalism) is useful in analyzing social changes between 1789 and 1799, it is bankrupt as an explanation for why tendencies already embedded in *ancien régime* France erupted so suddenly and violently. It was an unqualified boon only for landed middle-class bourgeoisie who were focused on a career of state service, but was disastrous for those in commerce (at least in the short-term). In general the bigwigs of the nobility retained their positions, and social conditions worsened for the urban poor because of the much reduced influence of the Church, which had been the main system of social support in the old regime. Amazingly, despite population increase, the number of hospitals in 1847 was 42% less than in 1789. However this was in a sense just an acceleration of late 18<sup>th</sup> century trends, when worker incomes plunged, economic inequality soared and the system was increasingly decried by polemicists like the doom-mongering Mercier. French reality fermented with the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment to produce a social and above all an intellectual one. It was a revolution primarily inspired and fueled by ideas – not by class conflict.