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A Consensus and Its Collapse: Writings on Revolutionary Origins since 1939

The year 1939, which saw the outbreak of the Second World War, is also remembered among students of the French Revolution as the 150th anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. In France the occasion was marked by extensive celebrations and a spate of new writings on the Revolution and its significance. Undoubtedly the most distinguished product of this activity was Georges Lefebvre's concise account of the origins of the Revolution and its outbreak, *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf*. Unashamedly exulting in the achievements of 1789, Lefebvre's book itself had an eventful history in the years following its publication. Much of the edition was destroyed, as subversive literature, on the orders of the Vichy government. In 1947, however, it was translated into English by the American scholar Robert R. Palmer; and under the title of *The Coming of the French Revolution* it rapidly became essential reading wherever the French Revolution was studied throughout the English-speaking world. By the time of Lefebvre's death in 1959 it had sold over 40,000 copies in English. It remains, and will remain, a classic: a model of historical writing by a master of his subject. For many years its analysis of the death throes of the old order in France, and the diseases which killed it, remained definitive.

The ultimate cause of the French Revolution, Lefebvre believed, was the rise of the bourgeoisie.¹ He was a Marxist, and Marxism is a theory of history which assigns a central role to the bourgeoisie as the representatives and beneficiaries of capitalism.² According to Lefebvre, 1789 was the moment when this class took power in France, after several centuries of growing numbers and wealth. Medieval society had been dominated and ruled by a landed aristocracy, for land was

the only form of wealth. By the eighteenth century, however, 'economic power, personal abilities and confidence in the future had passed largely to the bourgeoisie', who were buttressed by 'a new form of wealth, mobile or commercial' and a 'new ideology which the "philosophers" and "economists" of the time had simply put into definite form'. In 1789, the bourgeoisie overthrew the remnants of the aristocratic, landed order which had till then retained social predominance despite its economic eclipse, and established a regime which more closely reflected the new distribution of economic power. Yet there was nothing automatic in this development, at least in the short run. The bourgeoisie were able to overthrow the aristocracy because the political authority of the monarchy had collapsed. It had collapsed because the monarchy was unable to pay its way. And it was unable to pay its way because the aristocracy, the 'privileged orders' of nobility and clergy, clung to their exemptions and privileges, and used their political power to prevent the king from making the necessary reforms.

Between 1787 and 1789, however, Lefebvre discerned not one revolutionary movement but four. First came the revolt of the aristocracy, which destroyed the monarchy, and was the climax of a century-long aristocratic resurgence or reaction, in which the nobility had sought to regain the pre-eminence in the state of which Louis XIV had deprived them. In order to effect their revolution, the nobility had recruited the support of the bourgeoisie, but the very success of the movement gave the bourgeoisie ideas of their own. When in September 1788, the parlement of Paris, the very spearhead of the aristocratic reaction, declared that the Estates-General promised by the government for 1789 should be constituted as they had been in 1614 (their last meeting), the bourgeoisie exploded with fury; for the 'forms of 1614' guaranteed aristocratic predominance. Thus began the revolution of the bourgeoisie, a class struggle against the aristocracy which lasted until the creation of the bourgeois-dominated National Assembly in June 1789. The bourgeois aim was civil equality; they wished to destroy the privileges of the nobility and the clergy and establish a regime where all men obeyed the same laws, paid taxes on the same basis, enjoyed the same career

opportunities, and owned property on the same terms. These ideals stemmed from the Enlightenment, the intellectual product of the rise of the bourgeoisie. The collapse of the monarchy in 1788 gave the bourgeoisie an opportunity of which they had long been dreaming to put them into practice. But, just as the aristocracy had marshalled bourgeois support to defeat the monarchy, so the bourgeoisie needed other elements in order to consolidate their own success. In July 1789, their precarious victory was threatened by a noble-inspired royal attempt to dissolve the National Assembly. The *coup* was only defeated by an uprising of the Parisian populace, whose most spectacular achievement was the storming of the Bastille. This third revolution, the popular revolution, was a movement which sprang from hope that the new order would resolve the growing economic problems of urban workers. These same workers intervened decisively again in October 1789, when the Estates-General once more seemed threatened by a royal-aristocratic counter-*coup*. Before that happened, however, the economic crisis of 1788-9 had produced a fourth revolution, the peasant revolution—a nation-wide uprising, fired by panic fears for the safety of ripening crops—against the exaction of seignorial dues and labour services by aristocratic landlords. This movement was only stilled by the abolition, on the night of 4 August 1789, of the whole apparatus of this 'feudalism', the last bastion of the old aristocratic order.

Such a brief summary inevitably distorts a work as subtle and skilfully written as *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf*. To appreciate its full flavour there is no substitute for reading the book itself. In addition, Lefebvre's argument can be sampled in the general survey of the 1790s which he wrote twelve years later.³ The interesting problem is why his interpretation of the origins of the Revolution was able to command such widespread support. After all, in the 150 years since it had occurred, few historical events had aroused more sustained and impassioned controversy.

One reason was that, by 1939, Lefebvre was the undisputed master of the subject. Professor of the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne, he had built up a formidable scholarly reputation through a series of monographs which

had transformed understanding of the agrarian history of the Revolution.⁴ His exact contemporary, and only possible rival, Albert Mathiez, had died prematurely in 1932. With him died a bitter, polemical tradition in revolutionary historiography which Lefebvre, for all his commitment to many of the ideals and interpretations of Mathiez, avoided. Another strength of Lefebvre's interpretation was that it took full account of the researches of Ernest Labrousse into the economic origins of the Revolution.⁵

Labrousse's analysis of price movements down to 1789 gave economic substance to the discontent expressed by all classes in 1789, and lent impressive strength to the argument of Lefebvre. The publication of Labrousse's next study in 1944, which described in particular detail the crisis in wine production between 1778 and 1789, reinforced rather than modified Lefebvre's explanation of peasant discontents.

The most bitter debates about the Revolution in the earlier part of the century had had strong political overtones. Historians of the left, like Jean Jaurès and Mathiez, believed that the Revolution was both desirable and inevitable. Those of the right, like Pierre Gaxotte, Bernard Fay, and Frédéric Braesch, saw it as abominable and something which, if the proper steps had only been taken, might, and should have been avoided.⁶ The basic disagreement was about democracy, democratic principles, and public order; and nobody could doubt where Lefebvre stood on this. He was a man of the left, a believer in popular power, and he thought that the Revolution of 1789 could not have been effected without violence. The Vichy regime which suppressed his book was well aware of the fact. And yet he propounded a view of what caused the Revolution that even the most conservative of French historians could broadly accept. For the quarrel between left- and right-wing historians was largely about the Revolution's consequences. On the question of its origins, the two sides did not fundamentally disagree at all. Both acknowledged that the rise of the bourgeoisie was the fundamental cause. Both agreed that the monarchy tried to reform itself, and that it was prevented from doing so by the selfish obstruction of the aristocracy. Both believed that the Enlightenment had sapped faith in traditional values (irrespective of

whether they welcomed or deplored the fact). In these circumstances Lefebvre's interpretation passed largely unassailed by what might have seemed potentially its most vehement critics.

In fact, *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* passed unassailed by almost anyone, thanks largely to the Second World War. Not only were most copies destroyed; scholarly activity in general came to a halt, and very few reviews appeared before that happened.⁷ Even more important, hardly any new research was done during the war or for several years after it ended. Most work published in the 1940s was based upon research done during the previous decades.⁸ All these circumstances combined to leave Lefebvre's account of the Revolution's origins unchallenged for the best part of twenty years after it appeared. The first major post-war history, a subtle, brilliant, and concise account by the Englishman Albert Goodwin, contained an analysis of the movement's origins that differed hardly at all from Lefebvre's, and plainly owed a good deal to him.⁹ Almost a decade later, the first general work on the Revolution from a new generation of French historians,¹⁰ by Albert Soboul, added nothing to Lefebvre's account except applause, and a more explicit bias towards Marxism than the latter had ever shown. Only in 1965 did François Furet and Denis Richet presume to challenge what had become a rigid orthodoxy in France; and even then their dissent was over the course of the Revolution rather than its origins.¹¹

Outside the narrow, largely monolingual world of French scholarship, however, doubts had begun to arise much earlier—and fundamental doubts, too. Alfred Cobban, newly appointed Professor of French History at the University of London, chose the occasion of his inaugural lecture in 1954 to attack what he called the 'Myth of the French Revolution'.¹² This myth, which he contended had dominated serious research on the history of the Revolution during the twentieth century, was that the Revolution was 'the substitution of a capitalist bourgeois order for feudalism'.¹³ Cobban argued that anything that could conceivably be called feudal had passed away long before 1789, and that to use the term for the complex of rights and dues that were

swept away on the night of 4 August 1789 (as had Lefebvre and other writers before him) was to confuse rather than clarify matters. Gleefully, Cobban picked out Lefebvre's own admission that many bourgeois in the National Assembly owned such rights and dues and were reluctant to relinquish them. This would have been awkward to explain if the revolutionary bourgeoisie had been, as Lefebvre contended, the representatives of mobile, industrial, and commercial wealth—capitalists, in a word. But Cobban argued that they were not. By analysing the social and professional background of the bourgeois elected to the Estates-General in 1789, he showed that only 13 per cent of them came from the world of commerce, whereas about two-thirds were lawyers of one sort or another. Goodwin had already dwelt on this,¹⁴ but Cobban carried the analysis much further. Forty-three per cent of the bourgeois deputies were not only lawyers, he pointed out, but petty office-holders and government servants. And he went on to argue that it was the frustrations of such people, doing the work of government but receiving none of the credit, and seeing the value of the venal offices in which they had invested their money declining, which provided the reforming impetus of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, and its commitment to careers open to the talents. From this major conclusions followed: the Revolution was not the work of a rising bourgeoisie at all, but rather of a declining one. The revolutionaries of 1789 were not hostile to 'feudalism', which the peasants, not they, destroyed; nor were they the standard-bearers of capitalism. Cobban incorporated these views into his own general survey of eighteenth-century France, published two years later.¹⁵

At first they did not make the impression they deserved. Inaugural lectures are seldom widely read, and to bury new ideas in a general survey is to risk many readers overlooking their importance. Besides, Cobban's revisionism was very rapidly dismissed by Lefebvre himself. Writing in the one journal read by all serious students of the Revolution, the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, which he himself edited, he declared that Cobban was trying to deprive the Revolution of its fundamental significance.¹⁶ Cobban's strictures on the use of the term feudalism were a quibble

about terminology, and although his analysis of the membership of the revolutionary assemblies was of value and interest, the conclusions he drew missed the point. Even if the men of 1789 were not capitalists, their actions favoured capitalism's future development, and that was the most significant thing. To suggest anything else was to denigrate the Revolution, and Lefebvre suggested that this was Cobban's true aim. As a representative of the twentieth century's ruling orders, the Englishman was frightened of revolutions, and sought to minimize the inspiring precedent and example of 1789. The 'myth', if myth it was, was a necessary one.

But Cobban was not so easily disposed of, nor were the problems he raised. As so often in historical research, he had merely been the first to express views towards which other scholars were also working quite independently. As early as 1951, an American doctoral student, George V. Taylor, had argued in an unpublished thesis that those members of the bourgeoisie who were capitalists were largely uninterested in politics both before and during the Revolution, except as a possible vehicle for protecting their own commercial and industrial privileges.¹⁷ The implication was that they did not share the aspirations of the reformers in the Assembly, and that therefore the bourgeoisie was far from the united, self-conscious and self-confident class that had often been assumed. The only important French historian besides Lefebvre to deign to notice Cobban's arguments in the late 1950s, Marcel Reinhard, also noted that commercial and professional members of the bourgeoisie were often deeply suspicious of one another; he called for more research into such matters.¹⁸ The few pieces of archival research into the bourgeoisie that now began to appear also concluded with the need for more research; but in their own limited fields of enquiry they emphasized the diversity of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie, and the wide range and varied composition of its fortunes.¹⁹ Only works based on literary sources rather than archival research continued to be more pre-occupied with what bound the bourgeoisie together than with its inner divisions and contradictions.²⁰ In 1964, therefore, when Cobban returned to the attack, the atmosphere was more receptive—and Lefebvre, who had died in 1959,

was no longer there to concert a defence of the accepted wisdom.

In *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*,²¹ the published version of a series of lectures delivered in 1962, Cobban argued his case of 1955 in more detail. He now defined 'feudalism' as seignorial rights and dues, but continued to argue that it was the peasants rather than the bourgeoisie who really opposed the system and overthrew it. Above all, he returned to his theme that 'the revolutionary bourgeoisie was primarily the declining class of *officiers* and the lawyers and other professional men, and not the businessmen of commerce and industry.'²² Far from promoting capitalism, the Revolution was to retard it; and that was, indeed, the fundamental aim of the various revolutionary groups in 1789. 'In so far as capitalist economic developments were at issue, it was a revolution not for, but against, capitalism. This would, I believe, have been recognised long ago if it had not been for the influence of an un-historical sociological theory. The misunderstanding was facilitated by the ambiguities implicit in the idea of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois of the theory are a class of capitalists, industrial entrepreneurs and financiers of big business; those of the French Revolution were landowners, *rentiers*, and officials.'²³ He added that the latter group were bitterly at odds with the former during the closing decades of the old order. And what gave special piquancy to Cobban's onslaught on orthodoxy was the way he used the arguments and researches of its greatest champions, such as Lefebvre himself and Soboul, to support his own case and undermine theirs. How could Soboul, he asked, declare dogmatically that the triumph of the bourgeoisie was the essential fact of the Revolution, when in the same breath he admitted that the history of the bourgeoisie during the Revolution remained unwritten?²⁴ The final chapter of Cobban's book was an analysis of Lefebvre's last work,²⁵ which had just been posthumously published, in which he showed that Lefebvre's findings on the social structure of the pre-revolutionary Orléanais lent less support to the general views of their French author than to those of his English critic.

This time Cobban's opinion made some impact in France, if only to invite indignant refutation from the established

academic authorities. A totally hostile review by Jacques Godechot—then, in terms of volume of published work at least, the leading French authority on the Revolution—provoked a series of spirited and entertaining replies from Cobban.²⁶ Even English-speaking reviewers had their breath taken away by the scale and range of Cobban's attack. Unlike the French, most of them seemed inclined to accept the destructive side of his argument, but they were deeply sceptical of what he proposed to put in place of the orthodoxies he had undermined. Most reviewers seemed to agree (for a wide range of reasons) that Cobban's arguments raised far more questions than they answered. The appearance of his book, in fact, signalled the beginning of a period of acute controversy in the historiography of the Revolution, not unlike the 'storm over the gentry' which had already been raging for almost two decades among historians of the English revolution of the seventeenth century.²⁷

The credit (or blame) for this did not lie with Cobban alone. By the mid-1960s it was evident that old views were crumbling in every direction. Norman Hampson, for example, who stigmatized Cobban for having produced nothing more than a 'non-Marxist economic interpretation of the revolution',²⁸ had already laid stress, in a new general survey published in 1963, on the ambiguities of the term bourgeoisie. He emphasized that social and economic motivations were not the same thing, and he stressed the importance of intellectual convictions in bourgeois hostility to the old order.²⁹ Cobban had, by contrast, always tended to belittle the role of the Enlightenment in the origins of the Revolution—another way in which he differed from Lefebvre.³⁰ Hampson still, however, saw a fundamental opposition between the 'privileged orders' and their interests on one side, and the bourgeoisie and its interests on the other. Neither Cobban nor his French opponents would have disagreed. But the great development of the late 1960s was to call even this into doubt.

Nothing contributed more to a reappraisal of the revolutionary bourgeoisie than new work on its supposed antithesis, the nobility. Yet this was a subject on which Cobban

was completely orthodox. He hardly ever expressed a view about the nobility with which Lefebvre would have wished to disagree. He believed that the nobility was a selfish, increasingly exclusive caste which used its political power, wielded through the parlements, to prevent the crown from attacking its privileges. Eventually noble obstruction brought the old order down.³¹ Unlike the traditional picture of the bourgeoisie, that of the nobility was to be slowly eroded rather than shattered by frontal attack.

The drift of two future decades of scholarly opinion was, indeed, foreshadowed in 1953 by John McManners. In an impressionistic essay buried in a collection devoted to European nobilities in the eighteenth century, he argued that money, not privilege, was the key to pre-revolutionary society in France. Wealth transcended all social barriers and bound great nobles and upper bourgeois together into 'an upper class unified by money.'³² This essay was not a work of original research, but the previous year Jean Egret had used new French material to argue that the exclusivism of the parlements, the supposed spearhead of the 'aristocratic reaction' which preceded the Revolution, had been much exaggerated.³³ Such work suggested that the rigidity of the pre-revolutionary social structure had been overdrawn, and deserved further research; but as yet this was not forthcoming. The most influential work of the early 1950s, in fact, merely lent new arguments to established opinions. This was Franklin Ford's *Robe and Sword*,³⁴ which re-examined the customary division of the nobility into nobles of the sword and nobles of the robe. The former, according to tradition, were of old stock; they looked down upon the latter's recent ennoblement by judicial office. Ford now argued that by the early eighteenth century many of the robe nobility no longer owed their ennoblement to their offices, and that by 1748 they had captured the leadership of the nobility as a whole. The old antagonism between sword and robe was largely forgotten as nobles united against commoners on one side and the crown on the other. Ford's book was widely acclaimed as a brilliant contribution to the understanding of eighteenth-century France, for it offered a convincing explanation of why the aristocratic reaction—which most

authorities agreed took place in the later eighteenth century—occurred, and why it was such a powerful movement.

The first widely noticed blows to the traditional picture of the nobility did not fall until the early 1960s. In 1960, Robert Forster published a social and economic study of the nobility of Toulouse which showed that they were neither impoverished rustics nor debt-laden prodigals, but shrewd and careful managers of their estates. The key to their social and economic position was to be found in 'adherence to the so-called bourgeois virtues of thrift, discipline and strict management of the family fortune.'³⁵ A series of articles by the same author over the next few years³⁶ emphasized the lesson for other areas of France. They suggested that in economic outlook the nobility and the bourgeoisie had much in common. Meanwhile, Betty Behrens had argued that the fiscal privileges of the nobility were not as great as the revolutionaries, and historians following them, had claimed. The French nobility, in fact, was perhaps the most highly taxed in Europe; and the really important tax-exemptions were those enjoyed by the commercial bourgeoisie of the great mercantile cities.³⁷ Five years later, she expanded on these views to argue that no social group in pre-revolutionary France had a monopoly of privilege. Most of society was privileged in some way or other, and among the most valuable privileges were those belonging to the bourgeoisie.³⁸ By this time, too, George V. Taylor was beginning to publish his long-awaited findings. In 1964, he produced a careful analysis of the types of capitalism that existed in France before the Revolution, concluding that they bore little resemblance to the industrial capitalism of the future. Above all, eighteenth-century capitalism was far from a bourgeois monopoly. One of its basic features was the heavy involvement of nobles.³⁹

The effect of all this work, in demolishing, or at least challenging, the traditional picture of the pre-revolutionary nobility, was to reveal them as more and more like the bourgeoisie; and Taylor did not fail to see the implication. In 1967, he suggested, in an article second only to Cobban's book in its impact, that the wealth of all social groups in pre-revolutionary France was overwhelmingly non-capitalist

in nature. 'Proprietary', he suggested, would be a better word.⁴⁰ Capitalism had not, therefore, become the dominant mode of production in the French economy before 1789. Moreover, 'even in the well-to-do Third Estate proprietary wealth substantially outweighed commercial and industrial capital. . . there was, between most of the nobility and the proprietary sectors of the middle classes, a continuity of investment forms and socio-economic values that made them, economically, a single group.'⁴¹

Discussion in France, meanwhile, was proceeding on parallel lines. Roland Mousnier, a historian of the seventeenth century, had been provoked by Marxist analyses of popular uprisings during that century into formulating a new model of old regime society. Mousnier believed that before the eighteenth century society could not be separated as Marxists analysed it, into classes.⁴² A society of classes, he argued, was one where supreme social value was placed upon the production of material goods; class was determined by productive role. But there were also societies of orders or estates, in which social position was determined by social function rather than by relationship to material production.⁴³ France in the seventeenth century was a society of orders. The highest order was the nobility, whose function was the supreme one of defending the state. The social position of lower orders was determined by their contribution towards supporting the state in lesser ways; thus administrators and magistrates, for example, enjoyed more power and prestige than merchants or tradesmen. Mousnier's explanation of the French Revolution was that, in the course of the eighteenth century, the consensus about social values that underlay the old society of orders began to break down. By the 1750s, production was coming to seem more important than the service of the state, and with the Revolution the new outlook triumphed. A class society replaced the old society of orders.⁴⁴

Whatever we may think of this bold attempt to redirect thinking on social history, it made its mark in France—if only because the power of professors like Mousnier made it advisable for ambitious young academics to pay lip-service to his doctrines. Assertions that pre-revolutionary society

was a society of orders began to appear in textbooks and even in works of popularization.⁴⁵ By the late 1960s, historians beyond the reach of Mousnier's patronage were also beginning to emphasize what bound the nobility and upper bourgeoisie together into a single plutocratic élite.⁴⁶

The guardians of the old orthodoxies were dismayed to see that denouncing or ignoring sceptical 'Anglo-Saxons' was not enough to preserve their purity, and that their own compatriots were beginning to have doubts.⁴⁷ They took refuge in repetition. Soboul, elevated to Lefebvre's chair at the Sorbonne and to the editorship of the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, regularly produced surveys of various aspects of the Revolution which dogmatically reiterated the old line. And in 1970, Claude Mazauric roundly attacked the revisionism of Furet and Richet's survey, which had sold well since its publication five years before.⁴⁸ Furet and Richet, however, were no longer the isolated young iconoclasts of 1965; they were now among the leaders of an equally well-armed and well-entrenched scholarly phalanx, the *Annales* school of historians. The attention of this group had mainly been engaged by quantitative explorations of early modern history. They had largely left the Revolution alone. Now, however, Furet used the prestigious pages of *Annales* to defend his and Richet's approach, and to revise their account of the Revolution's origins in the light of recent work. In a witty and devastating attack on what he called the 'revolutionary catechism',⁴⁹ he denounced Soboul, Mazauric, and their ideological ancestors. Soboul's picture of eighteenth-century society, Furet argued, was a 'neo-Jacobin' one: it accepted the revolutionaries' own myths about the order they had destroyed. In emphasizing antagonisms between the nobility and the bourgeoisie, the 'catechism' ignored all that bound them together, the manifold interests that they had in common but which were increasingly threatened by the demands of a government over which neither had control. Richet had already used the pages of *Annales*, too, to elaborate on a long-term alienation of all property owners from the state.⁵⁰ Now at last Cobban received some praise in France for showing how few links the bourgeois revolutionaries of 1789 had with capitalism. Like Taylor, Furet

concluded that nobles and bourgeois were economically members of the same class, and that the essence of their wealth was proprietary.

But all such analyses ran into a serious problem. If the nobility and the bourgeoisie had so much in common, why did they become such implacable enemies in 1789? The most radical solution to this problem was suggested by Taylor. His analysis of the nature and distribution of wealth before 1789 implied that the Revolution could not be explained in economic terms, as a clash of opposed interests. Taylor declared himself unconvinced by Cobban's attempt to provide a new economic explanation through the declining bourgeoisie. It was time, he concluded, to revert to a purely political explanation of the Revolution's outbreak. The radical reforms of 1789 were products of a political crisis, and not the outcome of long-maturing social and economic trends. 'It was essentially a political revolution with social consequences and not a social revolution with political consequences.'⁵¹ In a further article, five years later, Taylor underlined this point by demonstrating from the *cahiers* of 1789, the grievance lists drawn up by the electoral assemblies which chose the deputies for the Estates-General, that the mood of France in 1789 was deeply conservative. There was no demand from the grass roots for most of the reforms that were soon to take place—which again emphasized that revolutionary radicalism was a result rather than a cause of the political crisis.⁵²

To deny the Revolution any social origins at all, however, has proved too daring a step for most historians. They continue to seek, and to find, trends in the pre-revolutionary social structure that help to explain what happened later. From the mass of important new material that has appeared since the debate on the Revolution's social origins really got under way in the early 1960s, two particularly important conclusions suggest themselves. The first is the impossibility of drawing any clear contrast between the nobility and the bourgeoisie. Nobody has challenged Taylor's contention that the wealth of the bourgeoisie was as overwhelmingly proprietary as was that of the nobility. And whereas nobody denies that the bulk of commercial and industrial wealth was in bourgeois hands, it has been shown that there was extensive

noble investment in these fields, too.⁵³ It has even been argued that if any social group represented a restless, aggressive, innovatory capitalism before 1789, it was the nobility rather than the timid and conservative bourgeoisie.⁵⁴ There is equally little sign of the bourgeoisie's outstripping the nobles in wealth, whether in the countryside, in stagnant towns like Bayeux or Toulouse, or in major industrial centres like Lyons.⁵⁵ Only in booming seaports like Bordeaux had bourgeois fortunes equalled or surpassed those of the local nobility.⁵⁶ And even there, as everywhere else, there was a constant passage of the richest into the ranks of the nobility. This pattern of behaviour had long been noticed, and is constantly emphasized by new research. For instance, between 1726 and 1791, 90 per cent of the Farmers General of taxes, often considered the supreme example of bourgeois men of wealth, were noble.⁵⁷ Less noticed until recently was the logical implication of the bourgeoisie's abandoning of their status in order to become noble: the nobility cannot have been a closed caste. And so far from that, one recent estimate suggests that at least a quarter of all noble families in 1789 had been ennobled since the beginning of the century.⁵⁸ The basis of these calculations has indeed not gone unchallenged,⁵⁹ but the general conclusion remains: the nobility was an open élite, not a hereditary caste apart. Nor is it now possible to maintain that this élite grew less open as the eighteenth century went on, thanks to some exclusivist 'aristocratic reaction'. Most recent evidence suggests that institutions that were largely noble in composition in the 1780s had been so a century earlier, and that apparent attempts to discriminate against non-nobles were really signs of antagonism between different sorts of nobles.⁶⁰

The second major theme to emerge from recent research follows from this. If what divided nobles from bourgeois once received too much attention, what divided bourgeois from bourgeois and noble from noble did not receive enough. Research on various aspects of the bourgeoisie continues to confirm the suggestions of Cobban and Taylor about the lack of contact or sense of common interest between the bourgeoisie of the professions and that of trade.⁶¹ It is also becoming increasingly clear that even among the lawyers and

officiers there was far from universal agreement about what reforms were desirable in 1789.⁶² As to the nobility, earlier historians were always anxious to show how much it deserved its fate after 1789; accordingly, they were happy to repeat the old scornful dismissal of the noble order as a 'cascade of disdain', in which every member despised the next. Yet they were equally willing to portray the nobility in 1788-9 as united and determined in pursuit of power. How, if this were the case, the nobility was so easily overthrown was not a question these historians chose to ask, let alone answer. If, however, attention is concentrated on divisions within the nobility, this problem becomes far less difficult, and new research is increasingly emphasizing such divisions. A massive study of the Breton nobility in the eighteenth century has revealed, for example, what deep antagonism there was in this noble-swamped province between rich and poor nobles, and how hostile were the resident nobility to the gilded absentees of Versailles.⁶³ The famous Ségur ordinance of 1781 has been convincingly shown to be directed not against bourgeois aspirants to military commissions, but against new nobles and their offspring.⁶⁴ Despite Franklin Ford's famous argument, robe and sword nobles were still attacking each other in the 1780s.⁶⁵ Most striking of all, a recent analysis of the *cahiers* of the nobility in 1789 has shown them to be deeply divided ideologically, with large numbers of them won over to the political liberalism hitherto assumed to have been the monopoly of the bourgeoisie.⁶⁶

How such findings affect the interpretation of the origins of the Revolution is not easy to assess, but attempts have been made to incorporate them into new explanations. The most ambitious to appear in the English-speaking world was that of Colin Lucas, published in 1973.⁶⁷ All recent work, Lucas argued, suggested that, 'The middle class of the later Ancien Régime displayed no significant difference in accepted values and above all no consciousness of belonging to a class whose economic and social characteristics were antithetical to the nobility.'⁶⁸ Bourgeoisie and nobles were all part of a single propertied élite. But this did not mean that there were no tensions within the élite, no 'stress zones' where tensions were explosive. Lucas

took up Cobban's suggestion (largely ignored since it had been made) that the venal office-holders might occupy one such stress zone. Bypassed by the economic prosperity of the century, they found themselves unable to realize their social ambitions, and elbowed off the ladder of social ascent by richer mercantile newcomers. Their circumstances were strikingly parallel to those of the petty nobility, equally prevented by poverty from aspiring to what they considered their rightful share of public office and perquisites. These two groups together provided the driving force of hostility to the government in 1787-8. Why then did they not unite? Lucas found the answer in the declaration by the parlement of Paris in September 1788 that the Estates-General should meet according to the forms of 1614. For Lefebvre, too, this had been the crucial turning point, the moment when the bourgeoisie had seen that its interests were profoundly at odds with those of the nobility, the trigger which detonated the bourgeois campaign to capture control of the Estates.⁶⁹ This interpretation had been criticized in 1965 by Elizabeth A. Eisenstein on the grounds that the mysterious 'Committee of Thirty' which largely orchestrated the outburst of denunciatory pamphleteering which followed the parlement's ruling, had many noble members and therefore could hardly be considered the voice of the bourgeoisie alone.⁷⁰ Despite rejoinders from American defenders of Lefebvre that in objective terms the Committee of Thirty was still doing the bourgeoisie's work, Eisenstein's arguments lent strength to the tendency, culminating with Lucas, towards regarding nobles and bourgeoisie as part of the same social élite. But for Lucas the essential point about the parlement's ruling was not that it represented the unwillingness of a noble élite to share power with the bourgeoisie; it was rather that the distinction between nobles and non-nobles, obsolete now for several generations, was arbitrarily resurrected by the electoral requirements of the Estates-General, and at a moment when the lower echelons of the propertied élite were already suffering from economic and social frustration. Now they were faced with political frustration, too; so that 'The revolt of the Third Estate was a revolt against a loss of status by the central and lower sections of the élite with the approval of

those elements of the trading groups which were on the threshold of the *élite*. It was this social group that became the "revolutionary bourgeoisie".⁷¹ Lucas, in other words, accepted Taylor's social and economic analysis but did not follow him into concluding that the Revolution was a purely political event without social causes. Nor did most others dare follow Taylor in this respect.⁷² Yet even Lucas's 'stress zones' are looking increasingly unconvincing. By demonstrating that the price of most offices before the Revolution was rising, not declining, the present author believes he has finally reduced Cobban's 'declining bourgeoisie' to the status of a fruitful error.⁷³ That can only do severe damage to any interpretation, such as that of Lucas, which attempts to incorporate it. The effect is further to reinforce Taylor's position.

Even so, most historians continue to believe that the Revolution had significant social origins, although not necessarily the ones advanced by Lefebvre. Only isolated scholars now invoke the capitalist bourgeoisie as a revolutionary force. Yet many still share with Lefebvre the view that the essential achievement of 1789 was to remove the last obstacles to a recognition of what had happened in French society during the prosperity of the eighteenth century. The abolition of privilege and noble status was the destruction of the last hollow relics of a vanished social order: but it was not the replacement of feudalism by capitalism, or of the aristocracy by the bourgeoisie. Rather it meant that France was now to be ruled not by men of birth but by men of property, not by nobles but by 'notables'. Under this umbrella both former nobles and former bourgeois found a common shelter. The Revolution did not bring about this situation, it merely clarified it. This argument is not confined to the English-speaking world; it has also been persuasively advanced in France by Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret,⁷⁴ and is implicit in the work of Furet and Richet. A new international consensus appears to be emerging.

The oldest theory of the origins of the French Revolution is that it was some sort of intellectual conspiracy; the result, in some sense, of the Enlightenment. Bewildered contemporaries, alarmed at the unprecedented course of events, and

unable to conceive of complex explanations, found comfort in the idea that the Revolution resulted from a philosophic or masonic plot. This became all the easier to believe when the revolutionaries quarrelled with the church, as the philosophers of the Enlightenment had done before them.⁷⁵ Nor have the sophisticated social and economic analyses of more recent historians entirely superseded such an interpretation. Occasional writers, mostly, it is true, not from among the ranks of professional historians, still see the Enlightenment as the Revolution's prime cause.⁷⁶ Even those who would deny it any such primacy feel obliged to admit that the climate of ideas must have played some part in the Revolution's origins. But there is little agreement on what precisely this role was.

The starting point of all modern discussion on this question is a monumental survey published by Daniel Mornet in 1933.⁷⁷ Though a professor of literature, Mornet tried resolutely to avoid the facile attribution of events to the influence of a few famous writers on a vague but unspecified audience. He believed that only a statistical approach to the diffusion of books and the ideas which they contained could yield reliable conclusions, and his research was based on such methods. His pioneering work has inspired most of the worthwhile research done in this field since then.⁷⁸ His conclusions were moderate. According to Mornet, the climate of ideas did not bring about the Revolution in any direct sense: that was the work of political factors. But the political events were influenced by a climate of opinion deeply dissatisfied with most aspects of the old order, and eager to demand wholesale reform as soon as the opportunity presented itself. This climate of opinion had evolved slowly, originating in attacks on organized religion during the first half of the century. In the years between 1748 and 1770, the society and the state which upheld the established church also came under comprehensive criticism, and by the latter date criticism had triumphed in polite society. Nothing was any longer sacred, nothing beyond discussion or criticism, and for the last twenty years of its existence the old order, while making little effort to respond to criticism, did little, either, to suppress it. As a result, disillusion with existing institutions and the way they worked spread down through

society from the narrow, highly educated circles where it had originated, and out from Paris into the provinces, so that by the late 1780s much of France, at all social levels, was prepared for far-reaching changes and indeed eager to bring them about. There was, then, no philosophic plot; the great writers of the period were popular, and articulated discontents superbly, but they planned no revolution, and they were certainly no more influential than hosts of less memorable but just as prolific scribblers—among whom, incidentally, much the boldest and outrageous opinions were to be found. Nor was there a masonic plot: Freemasonry was a characteristic product of Enlightenment society, but most French masons, as masons, concerned themselves almost exclusively with masonic affairs. Those who played a more public role were scattered and unusual, and their efforts were quite uncoordinated. On closing Mornet the reader is left with the impression that events in France down to 1789 would have been very different if there had been no Enlightenment, for obviously the intellectual atmosphere would have been different, too. But that said, there was nothing uniquely dangerous or malignant about the thought of the eighteenth century, and it posed no serious threat to the old order until that order had begun to collapse for other reasons.

No new synthesis of this question has been attempted since Mornet, but most historians writing generally on the Revolution and its origins have felt obliged to take a view about it. Lefebvre's contention was that the Enlightenment was the ideology of the bourgeoisie; it spread as the bourgeoisie rose over the eighteenth century, and it triumphed with the bourgeoisie in the Revolution.⁷⁹ The enlightened emphasis on utility, rationality, individualism, and merit seemed to him to be the obvious product of the bourgeois mentality. The role of the *philosophes* had merely been to clarify these ideals and translate them into elevated language so that the bourgeoisie, in pursuing its own ends, could claim to be furthering the good of humanity as a whole. The Enlightenment did not cause the Revolution, but it was the programme of the social groups that did. This interpretation, however, at once tells us everything and nothing by implying that there is no real problem. Predictably, it failed to satisfy

Cobban, who saw the influence of the Enlightenment on the Revolution as far too sporadic and often too contradictory to represent a coherent programme, and he argued that in many ways the Revolution represented a reaction against what eighteenth-century thinkers had stood for.⁸⁰ Its political influence was far more evident in an 'age of reform' beginning around 1770, than it was in the Revolution;⁸¹ and in *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, Cobban ignored intellectual matters almost entirely. The revolutionaries, it seemed, acted almost exclusively from material motives. As if to emphasize this view with a case in point, in 1965 a pupil of Cobban's, Joan McDonald, produced a study of Rousseau's *Social Contract* which argued that it 'did not play an important part in shaping the views of those who participated in the events of 1789. It was only after 1789 that interest in the *Social Contract* began to develop.'⁸²

Many English-speaking historians accepted such demonstrations with relief. They removed the need to set sail on the treacherous waters of the history of ideas, and left the historian free to give all his attention to more concrete phenomena, such as social and economic conditions.⁸³ Those who, like Norman Hampson, continued to emphasize the importance of autonomous intellectual convictions not directly related to the social circumstances of those holding them, remained isolated.⁸⁴ And although McDonald's arguments about Rousseau were shown in 1969 to be based upon insufficient evidence,⁸⁵ most recent research in English has tended to stress how limited was the impact of the latest ideas on the bourgeoisie.⁸⁶

The final proof of the reforming desires of educated Frenchmen on the eve of the Revolution has usually been the evidence of the *cahiers* of 1789; Mornet concluded his great work with a chapter on them.⁸⁷ Many historians have been happy to echo the nineteenth-century judgement of de Tocqueville on the *cahiers*: 'When I come to assemble together all these particular wishes, I perceive with a sort of terror that what is claimed is the simultaneous and systematic abolition of all the laws and of all the customs obtaining throughout the kingdom.'⁸⁸ This was the harvest of speculative philosophy. Mornet was more cautious; most of

the calls for reform, he believed, were of strictly practical inspiration, with no more than an overlay of philosophy derived from the isolated men of education who wrote out the *cahiers*. With George V. Taylor, however, caution had now turned to downright scepticism. The Revolution's initial manifesto, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, might have been cobbled together from a number of notions made familiar by the Enlightenment, but in no sense was the document as a whole the Enlightenment's product. It was, argued Taylor, the product of the political crisis in France. Nor was it in any sense a reflection of the general tenor of the *cahiers*. In his view, the most salient feature to emerge from a systematic survey of the *cahiers* of the Third Estate is their deep conservatism, and 'The only possible conclusion is that the revolutionary programme and its ideology were produced and perfected after the voters had deliberated in the Spring and that the great majority of them neither foresaw nor intended what was about to be done.'⁸⁹ A further obvious conclusion from Taylor's argument is that the *cahiers* contained even less of the Enlightenment than Mornet was prepared to concede, and that therefore its role in the origins of the Revolution was minimal.

Taylor's evidence, however, was drawn exclusively from the *cahiers* of the Third Estate. And no sooner had he argued that they showed little evidence of Enlightenment influence, than in France Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret concluded that the *cahiers* of the nobility were steeped in it.⁹⁰ Accepting Lefebvre's contention that the Enlightenment was fundamentally a bourgeois ideology, he argued that in the course of the eighteenth century large segments of the nobility were nevertheless won over by it. By the 1780s, they had abandoned traditional defences of their position and saw themselves as the natural leaders of a regenerated nation in which the way would be open to all on their merits. An analysis of their *cahiers* showed them to be deeply hostile to the old regime and anxious to create a state that was liberal, representative, and that protected and promoted the enterprising individual. Their reputed exclusivism in 1789 was a myth; in fact, what most nobles wanted was something strikingly similar to the aspirations of the bourgeoisie. This fits in well

enough with Chaussinand-Nogaret's view that nobility and upper bourgeoisie had by this time in any case merged into one greater-propertyed élite of 'notables'; but put beside Taylor's analysis (which Chaussinand-Nogaret did not appear to have read), it provokes interesting reflections. If the bourgeois programme took shape only after the elections, the nobility had elaborated it first; they must, therefore, have been more readily inclined towards radicalism than were the supposedly 'revolutionary' bourgeoisie. Nor did they learn their radicalism, as the bourgeoisie seemingly did, in the crucible of everyday politics between March and August 1789. They appear, in fact, to have got it from the Enlightenment, which was perhaps an influential movement after all. And this would certainly be the contention of Denis Richet, who argues that over the eighteenth century men of property, noble and bourgeois alike, found in the political theory of the Enlightenment powerful arguments to direct against a government that seemed both intent on overwhelming them with taxes, and too strong to be restrained from doing so by existing machinery.⁹¹ Sales figures for the various editions of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* show that it sold well among both military nobles and professional bourgeois, precisely the most active and radical groups of 1789.⁹² The movement of that year, in fact, is beginning to look like the work of a socially transcendent intelligentsia, homogenized by their education.⁹³ Accordingly, the ideas they had are beginning to be studied once more for their intrinsic importance rather than as mere rationalizations of social interests.⁹⁴

To speak of a consensus on this issue would, certainly, still be premature. Nevertheless, only one aspect of the problem studied by Mornet still remains where he left it, with no serious historian inclined to dispute his conclusions. This is the issue of Freemasonry. Much important new work on eighteenth-century Freemasonry has been done in recent years,⁹⁵ which has emphasized its importance in the diffusion of certain 'enlightened' attitudes and in providing new, non-religious forms of 'sociability'. Isolated instances of political activity continue to be found, too, but nobody has resurrected the idea that Freemasonry played a conspicuous role in originating the Revolution. The 'pre-romantic' mysticism of

which Freemasonry was one obvious symptom, however, has been shown to have a political importance all the same. In a study of the unpromising pseudo-scientific phenomenon of Mesmerism, a craze which swept fashionable circles in the 1780s, the American scholar Robert Darnton has shown that it was espoused by many ambitious intellectuals anxious to use it in order to make their names. When the Academy of Sciences, with the full approval of the government, pronounced the whole thing a hoax, its protagonists were outraged, and began to turn their thoughts towards criticism of the established authorities who had so blighted their hopes.⁹⁶ Subsequently, Darnton expanded his argument in a brilliant article.⁹⁷ He followed Mornet in arguing that by the last two decades of the old regime the 'heroic' Enlightenment had triumphed in France. Its doctrines were widely accepted in polite society, and its leaders had conquered the established institutions of knowledge and the intellect, such as the academies and the salons. But those who succeeded the Voltaires, the d'Alemberts, and the Diderots at the head of the movement when these giants died, and who inherited their social acclaim, had little new to say. And this provoked deep resentment among the 'literary rabble' of Paris who thought they did have something worth saying, whether about Mesmerism, institutional reform, or anything else. These swarming hacks hoped, like the great heroes of the Enlightenment before them, to write their way to fame and fortune. They found fame and fortune already monopolized by second-rate socialites who did not even put pen to paper most of the time, and yet who had the power and prestige to censor and condemn their works out of hand. Not unnaturally the *libellistes* of 'Grub Street' felt deeply hostile to an order which did such things to them, and although their resentment lacked a coherent programme, it found one when the Revolution replaced the old order and brought them, in the persons of men like Brissot, Marat, and Billaud-Varenne, to power. In short, the cut-throat competition within the literary world created an army of potential revolutionaries. The heroic Enlightenment had challenged a whole range of accepted values in its day, and played an important role in sapping the confidence in the established

order of educated circles. But by the 1780s it no longer threatened anything. The danger now came from those who, regarding themselves as the continuators of the Enlightenment, were in fact being driven increasingly to reject what it had become.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historians were deeply divided about the economic origins of the Revolution. Few doubted that economic conditions were of fundamental importance in moulding the character of the events which reached their climax in 1789; but some claimed that these conditions were poor and miserable and getting worse, while others saw the pre-revolutionary years as a time of unprecedented prosperity. These disagreements, at least, have been resolved for the late-twentieth-century student by the work of Ernest Labrousse.⁹⁸ Labrousse's enormous statistical labours showed that between the 1730s and around 1770 the French economy made rapid and sustained advances, with good harvests, rising population, rising prices, and expanding overseas trade. But between 1770 and 1778, these prosperous times came to an end under the impact of a series of bad harvests, and there was no recovery over the next decade. On the contrary, difficulties continued, with wild, short-term fluctuations, and this period of uncertainty culminated with the truly catastrophic harvest of 1788. The most spectacular result was a swift and steady rise in the price of grain over subsequent months, a rise which reached its highest point on 14 July 1789. Wages, which already throughout the century had risen far more slowly than prices, did not follow this sudden jump in the cost of living; accordingly, there was a dramatic fall in the amount of money which wage earners were able to spend on items other than basic foodstuffs. Demand for manufactures fell, therefore, and the crisis spread to industry. Industrial production may have fallen by as much as a half between 1787 and 1789, and employers economized on labour costs by cutting wages or dismissing their workers. The political crisis of 1789, therefore, came at a time of high prices, falling wages, and mass unemployment; and this did much to explain the scale and intensity of popular violence, both in town and

countryside, in the spring and summer of that fateful year. The Revolution broke out at a moment of severe economic crisis, and the popular intervention was the product of misery rather than prosperity. But it was not a long-endured misery, finally become intolerable; it was made more acute precisely by the sudden contrast with relatively recent prosperity.

No historian has seriously disputed Labrousse's analysis. It remains as definitive as Lefebvre predicted it would in 1937.⁹⁹ Whether, however, the economic crisis and the downfall of the old order were causally linked, or whether they merely coincided, is a matter on which disagreement remains possible. 'Whoever says economic crisis', declared Labrousse, 'at the same time says budgetary crisis, whether latent or overt. In an economic crisis, tax revenues fall off, receipts are reduced, public credit is weakened. By contrast, expenses rise with the cost of public assistance. So much so that in times of financial crisis governments experience a sort of instability, a particular vulnerability.'¹⁰⁰ More recently, the links between difficulties in the economy and the financial crises of the monarchy have been explored by J.F. Bosher,¹⁰¹ and on this issue the last word has surely not been said. But there is also a broader perspective to this question. The crisis described by Labrousse illustrates some of the classic weaknesses of an economy of the type we have come to call under-developed. In such an economy, the agricultural sector is of overwhelming importance, and difficulties there have profound ramifications in all other sectors. Equally, agricultural inefficiencies prevent improvement on other fronts. If the economic crisis was of fundamental importance to what happened in 1789, it follows that France's political revolution largely resulted from the absence—in striking contrast with England—of an agricultural revolution.

Ever since the hostile observations of the English agrome Arthur Young on French agriculture in the late 1780s, the majority of historians have held that French agriculture was indeed backward. There was certainly much theorizing on agricultural topics between the 1750s and the 1770s, but it had few practical results. Nevertheless, in 1961, J.C. Toutain argued that the eighteenth century saw a rise in agricultural productivity so marked that it could have

resulted only from revolutionary technical improvements. The yield would have been even greater had it not been for the constraints, such as internal customs barriers, which the Revolution swept away.¹⁰² The unspoken implication was that the Revolution was an essential and necessary prerequisite of further agricultural growth; that it occurred because there *had* been an agricultural revolution rather than because there had not. Toutain's argument was based upon a formidable statistical apparatus, but in 1970 Michel Morineau produced an even more monumental reply, which argued that the traditional view was right after all.¹⁰³ Mistrusting Toutain's sources, he argued that the levels of productivity revealed in an official national survey of 1840 were no higher than those which could be demonstrated for a century beforehand. By 1740, northern and western areas of the country were relatively advanced in their agricultural techniques, while the south and centre lagged far behind; but no change of any significance occurred in either area over the century studied, and so there had been no agricultural revolution. Morineau even anticipated the first line of defence of those who believed there had been one. They would ask, he foresaw, how the population of France could have risen so dramatically over the century—from around 19 millions in 1700 to around 25 millions in the 1790s—if agriculture had not revolutionized its techniques to feed so many more mouths. His reply was that the population level of the beginning of the century was well below the capacity of an unrevolutionized French agriculture to sustain, and that the rise over the century was far from dramatic in comparison with that of other countries. Not only was there no agricultural revolution; there was no 'demographic revolution' either. The growth in population over the eighteenth century was a mere restoration of the losses of the seventeenth, to levels which might well have already been attained in the sixteenth.¹⁰⁴

Since Morineau's intervention the figures for France's population growth over the century have been authoritatively revised. The population in 1700 now appears to have been around 21 millions and that in 1789 more like 28.¹⁰⁵ But the order of rise remains the same, and Morineau's con-

clusions about how it was sustained have serious implications for our view about the economic significance of the Revolution. Lefebvre's generation, and Labrousse's, too, never doubted that the Revolution was an event of major economic significance. It was the point at which France, economically as well as socially, changed course towards the modern world. In this sense it was unique and unprecedented. Morineau, however, emphasizes the continuity of French economic history; he implies that nothing really new was happening in the eighteenth century, and that only much later did decisive structural modernization begin to occur. The existence of Labrousse's crisis is not in doubt, but it was not so much the final breakdown of an economic structure riddled with fatal contradictions: it was simply the result of a series of meteorological accidents, the sort of crisis that had often occurred before. It passed, and the basic economic structure of the country remained much the same as before. More recently, the implications of these ideas have been clearly spelled out by Roger Price.¹⁰⁶ What came to an end in 1789, he argues, was the *political* old regime. The *economic* old regime went on until the 1840s, when the advent of the railways at last began to break down the regionalism and lack of available markets that had always held back French agriculture in the past.

New perspectives of this sort only become possible by taking a long-term view of French history. Too often economic and social trends apparent in the years immediately before 1789 have been accepted by historians of the Revolution as new and peculiarly significant, when a longer perspective reveals them to be phenomena that had occurred before, or were indeed built into the very structure of the old order. Thus it has now been argued that the so-called 'feudal' or 'seignorial reaction', by which lords were reputed to have increased the burden of seignorial dues payable by their peasants in the pre-revolutionary decades, may well be an illusion.¹⁰⁷ None of this is to deprecate the sense of hardship or injustice that the peasantry may have felt towards the old order on the Revolution's eve, or to suggest that they had nothing serious to feel aggrieved about. It merely implies that there was nothing new in kind about the difficulties against

which, in the summer of 1789, popular anger exploded. But undoubtedly such conclusions do rob the Revolution of much of the general significance which early twentieth-century historians attributed to it. No longer is it the cataclysm in which one economic order came to an end and a new one dawned. It is merely the last great crisis of a type to which the old economic order was peculiarly prone, but one which that order survived, to die finally, not with a bang but a whimper, half a century later.

Against those who take this view, of course, there is an obvious criticism. If the upheavals of 1789 were merely the result of the type of economic crisis that had been seen in 1693/4, in 1708/9, in 1740/1, or in 1770/1, why were subsequent events so very different this time, and why did previous crises not result in events comparable to those of the 1790s? Such a challenge is understandable, but it springs from the debatable assumption, which ran deep in the writings of early twentieth-century historians from Jaurès to Soboul, that a political event on the scale of the French Revolution must have had profound social and economic causes. And this assumption went even further: the social and economic causes were the important ones, the ones to do research on. The political origins of the Revolution, in contrast, were of marginal interest or importance; they were the foam on the great waves of history, little more than the 'histoire événementielle' dismissed so scornfully by the father of modern French economic history, François Simiand.¹⁰⁸

In some ways the rejection of political history by early twentieth-century students of the Revolution was entirely healthy. The exhaustive and minute concentration by nineteenth-century scholars on the narrative of political events often contributed little towards understanding the deeper forces which moulded and sometimes determined their course. The social and economic research into the Revolution and its origins which resulted from this great reorientation of interest has immeasurably enriched our understanding of these things—even if it has not always clarified matters in the way that its more optimistic advocates perhaps hoped. But if the assumption, that only the social and economic struc-

tures of pre-revolutionary France are worth the historian's attention, is not accepted, then the neglect of political history by the early-twentieth-century masters (and their pupils) appears little less than lamentable. If, as George V. Taylor argues, the origins of the Revolution were after all primarily political, the politics of the old order cease to be the trivial and superficial squabbles of a worthless ruling class inexorably doomed by the relentless march of History. They become, after all, fundamental to an understanding of the Revolution's origins.

Interest in the politics of pre-revolutionary France has been slow to reawaken from the oblivion into which it fell in the early twentieth century. In the absence of new research, or of any awareness of the need to rethink established notions, historians were content to repeat a view of the Revolution's political origins first formulated far back in the nineteenth century in monarchist circles. Understandably, post-revolutionary monarchists were mainly concerned to see whether the upheavals of the 1790s might somehow have been prevented.¹⁰⁹ The best prospects for this, they believed, had lain in a reforming monarchy, and they thought they saw plenty of evidence between the 1760s and the 1780s that the monarchy was indeed eager to introduce reforms. But these reforming instincts, which might have brought about most of the salutary changes later wrought by the Revolution, without its violent excesses, were thwarted by the same enemy that the Revolution itself had more success in overcoming—the nobility. The old regime was destroyed by reactionary aristocratic opposition to a benevolent reforming monarchy. And the spearhead of this aristocratic obstructionism was the *noblesse de robe* of the sovereign courts of justice, the *parlements*.

Throughout the first sixty years of this century this interpretation went largely unchallenged. The work of Marcel Marion, the last great institutional historian in the nineteenth-century tradition to write on the pre-revolutionary years, is drenched in hatred for the *parlements* and uncritical applause for any change proposed by the crown.¹¹⁰ The very popular writings of right-wing admirers of strong government, like Pierre Gaxotte or François Piétri, also propound such a

view,¹¹¹ and Lefebvre, from a very different political stand point, found nothing to disagree with in it.¹¹² After the war it was given renewed popularity in France in works of popularization,¹¹³ in new celebrations of the virtues of authoritarian ministries,¹¹⁴ and even in monuments of profound scholarship on monarchical institutions.¹¹⁵ English-speaking readers were introduced to it through the writings of Alfred Cobban, who accepted it completely.¹¹⁶ These writers, and others like them, were not unanimous about when the old order reached the point of no return. Some believed it came with the fall of the 'enlightened' minister Turgot in 1776;¹¹⁷ while others, perhaps most, saw the fatal moment as the dismissal of Chancellor Maupeou, and the restoration of the parlements he had muzzled and remodelled, in 1774. 'Maupeou' wrote Cobban, 'had. . .dramatically and successfully restored royal authority after a generation of weakness. Given a few more years for the country to appreciate the benefits of the new system, and there could hardly have been any question of a restoration of the parlements. Freed from their incubus. . .reforms. . .could be brought about and applied. The tragedy was that the few years that were needed were not given.'¹¹⁸

Nothing in the first modern piece of research on the parlements appeared to contradict this view. This was a massive study by Jean Egret of the political role of the parlement of Grenoble in the latter half of the eighteenth century; it was published in 1942.¹¹⁹ But twenty-eight years later, towards the end of a lifetime devoted to their study, Egret produced a general survey of the parlements' activities under Louis XV which struck a note of sympathy not heard for generations.¹²⁰ So far from being the selfish and reactionary oligarchy conventionally portrayed, the magistrates of the sovereign courts played an important part in the political education of the pre-revolutionary nation, and they articulated many genuine grievances. Maupeou had indeed silenced them, but his reforms were limited in scope and brought the government into disrepute; in any case, after their restoration the parlements never caused the government the same trouble as they had before 1771. By this time doubts about the accepted view had also begun to be heard from across the Channel. In 1968,

for instance, in a general history of the parlement of Paris, J.H. Shennan stressed the role of the parlements as defenders of the law and the rights of the subject against the authoritarian tendencies of the crown.¹²¹ Then in 1970, unaware that Egret was about to produce similar views, I argued that Maupeou was not a serious reformer, but that his importance in French history was to demonstrate the weakness rather than the strength of the parlements. The parlements did not prevent the government from making reforms; the government had neither the will to make them nor the perception to see that they were necessary. The old order was brought down by a collapse of confidence among the financial community in its ability to manage its affairs, and not by the strength of noble opposition.¹²² These ideas, however, appear to have made no impact in France, while outside they have either been rejected¹²³ or received with little more than polite but cautious interest.

The most successful challenge to traditional historical judgements on the political origins of the Revolution since 1939 has been the recovery of the reputation of Calonne. Lefebvre, in 1939, clearly thought there was more to be said for his reform plan of 1787 than previous generations had allowed,¹²⁴ and that year also saw an American attempt to rehabilitate the economic policies that Calonne had pursued since coming to power in 1783.¹²⁵ In 1946, Albert Goodwin produced a detailed analysis of his reform plan and the way it was shipwrecked in the Assembly of Notables.¹²⁶ With his fall, Goodwin concluded, 'there had now been removed from French politics the one man who might conceivably have healed the financial disorders which were shortly to ensure the collapse of the *ancien régime*.'¹²⁷ The plan was also favourably treated by Jean Egret in 1962, in perhaps the most important work on pre-revolutionary politics to appear this century,¹²⁸ but Egret did not see Calonne's fall as reform's last chance. His successor, Loménie de Brienne, for long depicted as an ambitious, unprincipled cleric who flitted ineffectually through the twilight of the old order, was now seen to be a thoughtful and serious reformer who failed more through bad luck and bad timing than because of the strength of opposition.

Much of Calonne's recently recovered prestige rests upon the willingness of historians to take the copious self-justifications which he wrote after his fall at their face value. To do this, they are obliged to reject the no-less-plausible apologies of Necker, since most of these writings were the product of controversy between the two men about their respective conduct of financial affairs. Low as Calonne's reputation has sometimes sunk, it has never sunk as far as that of Necker. If several figures—whether Maupeou, Turgot, Calonne, even Brienne—have been pushed forward for the rather dubious accolade of 'the one man who might have saved the old regime', Necker has always been almost the only contender for the title of the one man who destroyed it. Necker was the minister who, in financing France's part in the American War of Independence entirely through loans, left the monarchy with a crippling burden of debt. Worse, he compounded this crime by claiming, in his *Compte rendu* of 1781, that the royal finances were in modest surplus. Back in office in 1788, it was he who opened the floodgates to Revolution by conceding double representation for the Third Estate in the Estates-General; and in June 1789, it was he who torpedoed the belated royal reform proposals by conspicuously absenting himself when they were presented. The fact that he was a Swiss banker—a foreigner and a profiteer—did nothing to make chauvinistic French historians any more sympathetic towards him,¹²⁹ and even his biographers felt constrained to admit that his influence on the course of pre-revolutionary events was unfortunate.¹³⁰

Yet no historical judgement is beyond dispute, and in recent years Necker's reputation has begun to recover quite dramatically. It has been argued that during his first ministry he introduced radical reforms in financial administration, which, had they not been abandoned by Calonne, might have given the system the strength to ride out the storms of the later 1780s.¹³¹ His more general ideas on politics and the reform of the state have begun to be recognized as at least as worthy of attention as the much more celebrated views of Turgot.¹³² It has now been plausibly argued, too, that his *Compte rendu* of 1781 was not a false picture of the financial situation, and that the loans he raised during the American

War were neither as large nor as catastrophic in their legacy as has usually been claimed.¹³³ Since much of these writings reflect their authors' readiness to believe Necker's version of affairs rather than Calonne's, they appear to signify that the latter's star is about to wane once more. Necker, meanwhile, the foreigner who had so little sympathy with the ways of the old order, seems ready to enter for the first time that select company in which he, at least, would have been quite unsurprised to find himself, of potential saviours of the old regime.

No survey of this length could possibly mention, much less analyse, all the changes in historical judgement about the origins of the French Revolution that have occurred since the 1930s. It has, for instance, ignored controversies over the idea, first propounded in the 1950s, that the Revolution was the result of trends found not only in France but throughout the whole west European or 'Atlantic' world.¹³⁴ No mention has been made, either, of new views about the intelligence and intellectual attainments of one of the central figures of the period, Louis XVI himself.¹³⁵ But enough should have been said to demonstrate that all the apparent certainties of forty years ago have dissolved. Disagreement, controversy, and iconoclasm are to be found in all corners of the field.

If these disagreements were about the same material, there would be grounds for despair that we should ever again feel sure why the French Revolution occurred. But happily this is not the case. The fruitful thing about historical controversy is that it suggests new questions and stimulates fresh research in order to answer them. Thus the present-day historian has incomparably more material upon which to formulate his judgements about the Revolution's origins than Lefebvre or his contemporaries had access to, material that largely owes its existence to the stimulus of the debates that have been chronicled here. This does not necessarily make the task of synthesis any easier; quite the reverse. But it does suggest that a new synthesis, however difficult, however imperfect, however tentative, is urgently required.