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1 The crisis of the class concept in historical research

A NEW KIND OF SOCIETY emerged in Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. On this there is widespread agreement; agreement also extends to characterizations of the kind of society that emerged: that it was an individualistic society, based on laissez-faire economic policies and on liberal political institutions, and that it made possible a pace of economic expansion never known before, ensuring Europe a century of unchallenged world domination. Argument has persisted, however, over three mutually interconnected issues: (1) the origins or causes of this transformation, (2) the extent to which its economic and political elements necessarily entailed one another, and (3) how broadly the benefits of this social transformation extended themselves through the social hierarchy. The peculiarities of national history have ensured that each of these points of contention has exercised a different set of national historians. The question of origins has stimulated a long and spirited debate among historians in France seeking to account for the outbreak and course of the Revolution of 1789–99. The problem of the relation between the political and economic elements of the transformation has been most keenly felt among historians of Germany in particular and of Central Europe in general, because in that region certain political institutions and entrenched power elites were able to put off liberal political reform and in the end to dilute its effects even as society around them moved toward a free-trade economy and rapid industrialization.

The question of the distribution of benefits from this transformation has been most intensely debated in England. There the old political regime survived intact because it was, in effect, already liberal in form; the onset of industrial revolution and its attendant dislocations and protests represent the events to be explained. These events have been viewed variously as the creation of a great general good attended by a few necessary evils or as an exploitative politico-economic coup carried out against the traditional way of life of the laboring poor.

Despite this rough division of labor in practice, the issues are in reality so closely connected that it is impossible to discuss one without touching on the others. Each of these issues has arisen because historians have had in the backs of their minds a single scenario that they wished either to attack or to defend, to refine or to revise. This scenario is the Marxist one, although it is in several respects not very different from non-

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Marxist scenarios formulated both before and after Marx. (Theda Skocpol has ably demonstrated the similarities between Marxist and non-Marxist theories of bourgeois or "modernizing" social transformation.)[1] In its simplest form the scenario explains the emergence of the new society as follows: Gradual commercial development created a new social class, the bourgeoisie; this class seized power and then reformed law and society in its own interest, that is, to promote capitalist development; liberal institutions limited political power, freed the individual, and ensured the businesslike administration of government; and laissez-faire economic reform provided the individual with a competitive marketplace in which to flourish.

The problem of the origins of the French Revolution has focused on the question who. Who initiated the Revolution? Who prolonged it? Were the initiators members of a new commercial class? And it has focused on the validity of the term "class" for prerevolutionary society. Was there in fact such a thing as a bourgeoisie in the sense of a commercial class that had enough coherence in its way of life or its outlook to play a consistent political role?

The problem of Germany's "special way" through the transformation has likewise focused on the failure there of revolution from below. At first glance the scenario does not seem to apply at all. The old elites held onto power, but was this because of a peculiar weakness of the bourgeoisie – either numerical or spiritual? Or was it because of an astute compromise forced on the bourgeois class by the old elite, which ceded to the bourgeois class the economic policies it wished if not the political institutions it preferred?

And the controversy in England has tended to revolve around the question of class versus general interest. Were the interests of the commercial class sufficiently similar to those of the general populace to legitimate their energetic, laissez-faire expansionism? Or did they in fact go counter to the interest the poor had in maintaining an established way of life that expansion swept away?

All of these controversies have been going on for some time now, although not always in perfect coordination with each other. The lack of coordination is understandable, given the vast territory and lengthy time period implicated in the emergence of the new society. In view of the size of the subject and the scale of the research effort under way, no attempt at a general summing up can be anything more than tentative. Nonetheless, many recent attempts at review have signaled the necessity of significant alterations in our whole approach to the problem.[2]

In fact, the material now seems to be available for a frontal attack on the old scenario at every point where questions have previously been raised and for every country involved, even if a particular question has previously not stimulated much controversy in a given country. In other words, it now seems possible to argue that there was no such thing as a coherent commercial class acting politically to defend its interests, neither in France nor in England nor in Central Europe. Likewise, there was no necessary connection between liberal political institutions and unregulated, competitive industrialization in any of these countries. And, finally, the transformation that occurred was not in anyone's interest. In the sense in which the term "interest" has

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been understood by the whole historical guild, one could easily argue that this transformation violated the interests of all parties, everywhere. In other words, the notion of interest as it is normally used is nonsensical.

Challenging the old scenario in this way is not the same thing as challenging Marxism as a whole. The breadth of Marx's thinking, especially as it worked itself out late in his career, and the distance that Marxist thought has come recently in dealing with the relation between consciousness and material conditions mean that the old scenario outlined here can be jettisoned without serious threat to a great deal of the theoretical edifice that has been built up. That scenario stems from an essay written in 1848, the *Communist Manifesto;* it provided a macrohistorical framework for the further elaboration of Marx's thought. But it is also true that the detailed application of the insights of the *Grundrisse* and of *Capital* to real historical situations has been one of the continual sources of difficulty for that macrohistorical framework. (Recent investigations of specific groups' relations to the means of production, for example, have raised serious question about those groups' class identity. Examples of this are discussed later.) At the same time, Marxists have hardly been the only ones to believe in the efficacy of the idea of class interest as the underlying motive force in politics. But it is just this widely shared idea that is proving increasingly unworkable in the practice of research.

Further on in this essay (in Chapter 3) the question of the whole of Marx's theory will be dealt with at least in passing. The argument presented there will be not so much that his larger theory is wrong as that in borrowing so many of his key terms from political economy Marx also borrowed some enduring conceptual weaknesses. Not Marx's fundamental insights but his choice of technical terms and his style of using them create the constant danger of a certain kind of oversimplification. It is just this kind of oversimplification that has bedeviled the Marxist scenario of bourgeois revolution.

At the same time, this challenge to the old scenario brings liberalism into question just as much as it does Marxism. It is a well-known difficulty in the study of liberal political thought that it contained certain ambiguities from the beginning and that, thanks to its tremendous success and prestige, it was subsequently developed in numerous directions, becoming by 1850 a great tree with many branches. But it will be the contention here that all forms of political liberalism gained part of their appeal from an erroneous view of the nature of monetary exchange (and therefore of the nature of property). This critique of liberalism will shed at least some light on the strange consequences that followed from roughly 1780 on as liberal ideas were applied to the real world of social practice. And it will also suggest ways to salvage for the future what was best about liberalism, its forthright defense of freedom and equality. Too often in the past, critiques of liberalism, both from the left and from the right, have ended by throwing out the baby with the bath water. The consequences in our century have been chilling. But it is necessary to recognize that these critiques have always had a just foundation and that the horrors of the twentieth century have resulted most prominently from the fact that opponents of liberalism, whether fascist

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or Communist, have had difficulty distinguishing aright between its faults and its virtues. Usually they were right that desperate measures were necessary to stop the evils liberalism legitimated, however true it is that their efforts misfired grotesquely.

Fundamentally this is an argument about language. Too often, in recent years, those who have come to a new understanding of language have demonstrated their discovery by creating new, private languages of their own. They have launched immediately into a heady kind of poetry that has divided their readers into the elect who understand and the frustrated, scoffing majority. But the real advantages of such an understanding of language can only come from communicating it, that is, from using the language at hand, the one that people understand and with which they have made their history and written their histories. In the following discussion, the language of a long-standing historical debate is scrutinized in order to show that the importance of language in history has not been recognized in that debate. As a consequence, the debate has been built up uncritically out of the same terms or, what is more telling, the same *kinds* of terms, as those that shaped the history under debate.

The new society of the nineteenth century was not so new after all. A very ancient form of authority and social deference was given a new set of clothes. This in itself was quite a cataclysmic occurrence, one that left no individual fate untouched. But the individual was never liberated in the way that the apostles of the new age claimed (or later its critics believed). Bourgeois freedom is slavery for the vast majority, Marx declared in 1848; in reality bourgeois freedom never came into existence. This is not to say that one should try to make it now. It was, and is, a social impossibility. But that fact demands a total reorientation of the critique of modern society.

The first step in the argument is to examine how research in social history in recent decades has led inevitably in country after country to dissatisfaction with the idea of class and class interest.

REVISIONISM IN FRANCE

In the debate over the origins of the French Revolution, the revisionists have clearly carried the day. As recently as the 1950s the bold rebellion of the delegates of the Third Estate, backed by the Paris crowd, against royal absolutism in the summer of 1789 was still seen as a class conflict in which a vigorous capitalist bourgeoisie, allied with the peasants and artisans, had overthrown the declining feudal aristocracy. Called to approve new taxes, the delegates of the Third Estate arrogated sovereignty to themselves, declaring that they constituted a National Assembly, and passed a revolutionary Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen. This document swept away at a stroke the vestiges of the seigneurial system, noble privileges and tax exemptions, all the restrictions on trade that underpinned urban guilds, and all claims of the king to absolute power. Private property was made the cornerstone of both social and political order; absolute freedom in the enjoyment and disposal of property was made into an imprescriptible right. The result, in law at least, was to give unlimited scope in both town and country to commercial competition and capital accumula-

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tion. For a long time it seemed perfectly reasonable to suppose that this revolution was brought about by and for a class that depended on commercial and industrial wealth and stood to benefit from its free development. While it was recognized early on that the actual delegates who made the Revolution were not themselves capitalists, this was not perceived as a problem, so long as the politicians could be seen as imbued with an outlook that represented the interests of a capitalist class.[3]

But now it has become clear that such a class not only had no representatives in the revolutionary assemblies but in effect did not exist. There was no revolutionary bourgeoisie. Members of the upper strata of eighteenth-century French society were more or less homogeneous in their values and based their status on "proprietary" rather than profit-maximizing investments.[4] What few merchants or capitalists there were, insofar as they played a political role, do not appear to have favored radical solutions in 1789. They wanted the guilds reorganized; they had no desire to end the seigneurial system. Proprietary wealth was the support both of those who made the Revolution and of those who resisted it. Proprietary wealth had a rank order of prestige that had nothing to do with profitability. Land was more prestigious than commercial stocks; land with feudal rights attached was better still; property in public office gave one an elevated function, and above a certain rank, such office brought actual ennoblement to its possessor and his family. The whole of the elite, noble and commoner alike, were united, it has been repeatedly shown, in their admiration for and pursuit of such highly unproductive forms of property. They were, so the refrain now goes, a single class, a wealthy notability.[5]

But in documenting this thesis and in combating what they have seen as the blind dogmatism of their Marxist opponents, the revisionists have done more than just tear down the old Marxist scenario of bourgeois revolution for France. Inadvertently they have also undermined the whole modern notion of social class and its use in historical explanation. This becomes evident not in the work of destruction itself, as it has been brilliantly carried out by a host of researchers over the last twenty-five years, so much as in their feeble attempts to propose a plausible alternative explanation of the outbreak of the French Revolution. When it has come time to say what really did, after all, happen to bring about such a staggering crisis, there has been little agreement and even less effort expended among the revisionists, who are united only in being critical of the old view. The problem with their alternative proposals has been that they lack the great virtue of the Marxist original while sharing its great weakness.

The virtue of the idea of a revolutionary bourgeoisie was that it was at least on a scale commensurate with the events to be explained. To replace the stirring image of a proud and prosperous new capitalist class victoriously leading the attack on the feudal order, critics have proposed that the Revolution resulted merely from the frustrations of lower royal *officiers* (Alfred Cobban) or from the royal government's gradual alienation of the propertied class (Denis Richet).[6] The real seeds of revolution are now said to be found in obscure rifts and provincial hostilities between rich and poor nobles (Jean Meyer, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret), or between the magistrates of the sovereign courts and their lesser colleagues (Lenard R. Berlanstein), or between the

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intellectual establishment and a "literary rabble" of ambitious but unsuccessful authors and journalists (Robert Darnton). Finally, as it were in desperation, recourse has been made to the idea of "stress zones" in the hierarchy of elite status (Colin Lucas). And some have even concluded that the Revolution had no social causes at all, only social consequences (George V. Taylor).[7] The French Revolution was an unprecedented cataclysm, marking an extraordinary break in human history, bringing a decade of bitter civil violence to France. That such a stupendous social transformation should be attributed to the stymied hopes of a few lower-level government officials or the paltry jealousy that old nobles felt for nouveau-riche *anoblis,* or to no social causes at all, is highly unsatisfying. Granted, few of the revisionists have claimed to explain the whole crisis with their discoveries. Still, there surely must be some more profound origin for the Revolution, anchored in the very course that social development had taken over the previous centuries.

The great weakness of the Marxist scenario was that it tried to attribute the Revolution to the intentional and purposive action of a specific group. This weakness has been fully exploited by its critics. They have shown that no revolutionary bourgeoisie distinct from the rest of the elite can be discerned. The critics should have known better, therefore, than to propose alternatives that were open to the same kind of attack, but that is exactly what they have done. They have broken the elite as a whole down into numerous smaller groups, each less than a distinct class but sufficiently large to be a plausible political actor. This procedure has been based on detailed empirical research into the petty details of estate management, provincial politics, professional advancement, preferment, protocol, and prestige. But obviously one can always go further with this kind of research. The documents have proved far more informative than anyone could have imagined in the beginning; there is no reason to suppose that they will not continue to yield even more. Hence there is nothing to stop further efforts to challenge the distinctness, coherence, and self-consciousness of each new, smaller social group that is proposed as a political actor. Surely lesser royal officials, provincial nobles, lawyers, magistrates, pamphleteers, and merchants can be broken down into even smaller groups with distinct attitudes and grievances. Chaussinand-Nogaret, for example, insists that "the traditional nobility, often engaged side by side with the young *noblesse commensale,* was involved in all the most important mining and metallurgical enterprises, those which broke through the traditional forms of family exploitation." At the same time he admits that only a tiny minority of old nobles were connected with such novel ventures.[8] But how is it that a large subgroup, the traditional nobility, can be said to be involved in something merely by virtue of the fact that a few of its members are involved? To talk this way merely replicates the worst conceptual sins of the Marxists who are under attack.

The revisionists have put French society under a microscope and shown that no group can be found that fits the old stereotype of revolutionary bourgeoisie. But what is to stop later revisionists from raising the microscope to a higher level of magnification, to reveal that the currently proposed alternative groups have in their turn only a spurious unity? Eventually one gets down to the individual, whose unity is at

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least ensured by the existence of his body. But, then, why stop here? Individuals are often utterly incoherent, after all. Why be taken in by the illusion that the individual actor was necessarily coherent and consistent, especially in the midst of a political and economic crisis that must have shaken the roots of every man's and woman's identity? As Darnton's deft portraits have shown, many major actors in the drama did not act consistently.[9] Why should the faces in the crowds be any different? They are anonymous to us but were not so to themselves.

This is the knotty problem that the attack on the revolutionary bourgeoisie has brought to the fore. The enchanting coherence of the old approach is gone. How simple it was for Georges Lefebvre, the grand practitioner of Marxist revolutionary history in our century. In 1957 it was still possible to write sentences like the following: ". . . News that an Estates-General was to be convened sent a tremor of excitement through the bourgeoisie."[10] Or, speaking of the aftermath of the October Days:

> Along with the aristocracy a group of bourgeois were indignant that violence had been done to the king. . . . The nobility was now struck in its material possessions and not only in its pride by suppression of orders and privileges. . . . At the same time the Third Estate split: the petty bourgeoisie, if not the proletariat, would be excluded from political life only with strong protest. . . . As Mirabeau told the bourgeois, they needed an energetic government to consolidate their accession.[11]

A story of phantoms, or so it would appear now. But the only replacements so far offered with which to rewrite the story have been equally suspect phantom groups, as well as new cleavages and rivalries whose only advantage has been that they are too small and too numerous to be worth attacking singly.

Aware of the problem but unable to come up with a solution, revisionists have taken to talking about social groupings in a most confusing way, as in the conclusion to Chaussinand-Nogaret's work on the nobility, where he remarks, "Introducing class struggle into a society of orders simply distorts one's whole perspective. The orders themselves were nothing more than the transparent envelope of a multitude of *corps* which crumble on contact; from one order to another *corps* were united by a community of interests but isolated by juridical frontiers."[12] Even defenders of the old Marxist scenario have been reduced to this kind of confusing language, as in the following comment from Michel Vovelle:

> Second order behind the clergy in law, the nobility was the first in fact, and perhaps the only order that had a real homogeneity. It corresponded to an economico-social definition without genuine ambiguity, forming the *core* of the rentier class and being the *major* beneficiary of feudal appropriation. A whole assemblage of privileges – political, fiscal, juridical – sanctioned their de facto preeminence; class and order, here, reveal a real *convergence* [emphasis added].[13]

One may legitimately object that the italicized words in this passage do, after all, introduce an element of genuine ambiguity, especially the concluding term, "convergence" (*complicité* in the original). Vovelle goes on to explain that the bourgeoisie was

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dominated by a "mixed" group, not really capitalist, not really feudal, and that France was, as a result, a society in transition.[14] But if the bourgeoisie is basically mixed, with most of its wealth taking on the same form as that of the nobility, then how can the nobility be characterized as a genuinely distinct class? And if it is not, then against whom was the Revolution waged?

The question that is raised is whether it is possible to continue to speak of socially distinct sets of individuals, united by some identifiable trait or traits, as having shared intentions. But without this convention, the social origins of political conflict and change will have to be totally reconceived. To judge from the most recent research, the ruling elite of France, formerly as homogeneous and unified as one could desire, suddenly and inexplicably divided into two hostile groups in the fall of 1788 along a previously invisible fissure that cut down through the elite from top to bottom following no reasonable line of demarcation.[15] Hence Lucas's desire to speak of "stress zones"; but even the inventor of this term hesitated to attribute to these minor stresses the whole force of the split. As a result, there is currently no acceptable theory of the social origins of the French Revolution.

But how significant is this dilemma? Can the conclusions of the revisionists about the irrelevance of class to the outbreak of the French Revolution be exported to other countries on the eve of their respective transformations at the end of the eighteenth century?

At first glance, it would seem not. None of the disturbing ambiguities of French wealth and rank seem relevant to the situation in either of two other key countries, England and Prussia. Here are some of the reasons why. In England property in land had already been stripped of many of its seigneurial and judicial elements. Titles of nobility were restricted to such a tiny minority of the population that they were not a realistic target of ambition. Government offices were therefore bought and sold more with a cold eye on what income they would bring than with a concern for the honorifics and exemptions associated with them. Profit-maximizing investment seems to have been the rule in every realm of society. Nothing could be more dramatic than the process of enclosure in agriculture carried out on a vast scale with the aid of Parliament and with the sole aim of simplifying the production of cash crops. The eighteenth century was the golden age in England of the gentleman agronomist, draining fens and fencing wastes, introducing new crop rotations and new breeds of cattle, not averse to investing in a canal or a turnpike road if it might add to his net worth. The landowning aristocracy was itself a capitalist class. At the same time the burgeoning manufactures of the towns were under the control of an apparently quite distinct group, outsiders, religious dissenters who had no hope of political influence or acceptance in polite society, who ran their businesses not in order to retire as soon as possible to the countryside (as was the rule in France) but as ends in themselves, family patrimonies to be nourished and passed on. A readily identifiable manufacturing class was taking shape with its own distinct interests and outlook, prepared to mount sizable political movements when it seemed to be necessary for the good of business, as the successes of the Great Reform Bill (1832) and of Corn Law Repeal

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(1846) demonstrate. Not only was English government already liberal in form, but English society was already capitalist. The dramatic transformation of the period was more an economic one, a reorganization of commercial relationships that followed on the discovery of dramatic new means of production.[16]

Prussia, at first glance, lay at the opposite extreme. There an exclusive and self-conscious aristocracy, the Junkers, totally dominated society. Service in the officer corps and the upper bureaucracy was reserved to them and provided the legitimation of their preeminent rank. They operated their landholdings with the aid of direct labor services from bound serfs over whom they exercised extensive police and judicial power. Ownership of these lands, like government office and military rank, was reserved to those of noble birth exclusively. Heavy dependence on an export economy had stunted the growth of towns, so that persons of intermediate rank were numerically few and politically powerless. Only destruction of the Prussian army by Napoleon in 1806 forced upon this society a recognition of the need for change. Even then reforms were haphazard and piecemeal because so strongly resisted by certain factions among the Junkers, and their application in the end did not really challenge the powerful hold of this class on state and society.[17]

It is not surprising, therefore, that the issue of class has stimulated far less debate in the historiography of these two countries than it has for France. But closer inspection raises problems: As in France, once the microscope is brought into focus, neat class boundaries dissolve; larger homogeneity becomes apparent; and smaller groupings suggest themselves as the important factors in political struggle. The whole notion of class as an explanatory principle in history is again brought into question.

In England the characters of classes have too often been extrapolated from the biographies of famous men in a misleading way. It is true that improving landlords, for example, were far more common in England in the eighteenth century than they were in France, but it may be that they remained exceptional even so. G. E. Mingay concluded from his study of eighteenth-century estate records that "although large owners did much to improve estate administration, to consolidate holdings, and bring waste land into cultivation, they did not, in general, do very much towards new discoveries; nor it appears did they greatly extend the use of improved techniques by means of progressive leases or home farms, long supposed to be the great instruments of technical advance." Elsewhere Mingay estimates that the borrowings of the gentry for dowries and for refurnishings and redecorations of their country homes and parks were far larger than their productive commercial investments.[18] Profit was shunned in favor of a form of prestige far less tangible but apparently quite desirable. There can be no doubt that enclosure ran its course, virtually wiping out the open-field village and reducing common land to a negligible residue over a great portion of the English countryside. But how frequently such enclosures resulted in higher yields of marketable produce per acre of arable land – as opposed to the mere exploitation of short-term market scarcities or the formation of convenient country seats for the enhancement of status – is no longer clear. Cases have been found of old open-field villages adopting the new crop rotations and breeding techniques of the agricul-

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tural revolution with great success.[19] On the whole, yields per acre may have increased more rapidly in France than in England in the eighteenth century.[20] In England some of the more prestigious forms of wealth were every bit as unprofitable and therefore "noncapitalist" as in France, with the difference that they were not so intimately connected with state functions and exemptions. Even this difference is only one of degree, when one recalls the role of landownership in the control of parliamentary seats through rotten boroughs and electoral bribery.

Moreover, the manufacturing and landowning classes were not so distinct as was once supposed. For every Richard Arkwright or Robert Owen who worked himself up from obscurity to ownership of a great enterprise there were two others whose connections or background lay with the established gentry. This became even more true as time went on, and it meant that the attitudes and outlook of many English industrialists were deeply influenced by the old landed elite.[21] Still others resisted utilitarian doctrines on religious grounds.[22] It is no longer possible to attribute the appeal of parliamentary reform or of the Anti-Corn-Law League to the existence of a manufacturing class with interests distinct from those of the old elite, utterly committed to a Ricardian outlook.[23] The neat, one-to-one correspondence between ideology and class interest that was once believed to account for the French Revolution turns out in England, as well, to be fraught with problems.

As for Prussia, it must be remembered that Junker domination of this society was founded on grain exports through the Baltic to the Netherlands, England, and beyond. The recrudescence of serfdom in this region was made possible by the same developing commercial links as are deemed to have broken down feudal relations elsewhere.[24] The irony of this has by now been repeatedly underscored. Grain was for Prussia what cotton was for the American South or sugar for the West Indies, a commodity produced for world trade by bound labor under the control of a harsh landowning elite.[25] All three regions directly benefited from the quickening of international trade associated with the onset of industrial revolution in England in the second half of the eighteenth century. England's new factories needed raw material and their work force needed food; after 1765 England no longer supplied enough grain for its own consumption.[26] "Noncapitalist" because utterly backward technically, Prussian agriculture shared in the boom begun in Lancashire, and the impact of the resulting prosperity in the final decades of the century was already blurring old social distinctions, and pushing the state toward reform, well before Napoleon arrived on the scene.

The heavy demand and continually rising prices for grain stimulated a speculative real estate boom in Prussia after 1786 that resulted in the doubling, tripling, and even quintupling of land prices. Since 1769 state credit and mortgage guarantees had been available to protect nobles from foreclosure, and now these financed the feverish price rise. The pressure to keep the boom going forced the king to issue numerous dispensations for the purchase of noble land by commoners, so that by 1800, roughly 10 percent of *Rittergütter* (noble estates) were held by commoners with peasant or urban backgrounds. Rapid turnover favored concentration of holdings in the hands of great

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