


Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44570-2 - The Genesis of the French Revolution: A Global-Historical Interpretation
Bailey Stone

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction



Two hundred years have passed since the French fell into their momentous revolution. Over the intervening period the origins of that upheaval have given rise to a contentious and rich historiography. This book, drawing upon that historiography as well as other scholarship, will develop an interpretation of the French Revolution's genesis that political sociologists might see as a species of "modified structuralism" but which historians might be likelier to describe as "global-historical." However it may be characterized, this interpretation will focus primarily upon the state rather than the society of old regime France and in particular on that state's converging failures in foreign (or geopolitical) and domestic (or socio-political) affairs.

Because, however, this study relies heavily on the writings of historians (and, to a lesser degree, of political sociologists), we need first of all to situate it within its proper scholarly context. To do so can help us to define various issues whose consideration will be central to a fully developed global-historical perspective of the Revolution's causes. We can then elaborate on the organization and substance of the argument to follow and explicate the philosophical assumptions underlying that argument.

The American political sociologist Theda Skocpol has grouped explanations of major sociopolitical revolutions under the headings "voluntarism" and "structuralism." By citing under these rubrics the chief explanations advanced for the onset of revolution in France, we can establish a frame of historiographical reference and define the core elements of a global-historical perspective.

Skocpol has outlined the archetypical voluntarist rendering of revolutionary causation as follows:

First, changes in social systems or societies give rise to grievances, social disorientation, or new class or group interests and potentials for collective mobili-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44570-2 - The Genesis of the French Revolution: A Global-Historical Interpretation
Bailey Stone

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

The genesis of the French Revolution

zation. Then there develops a purposive, mass-based movement – coalescing with the aid of ideology and organization – that consciously undertakes to overthrow the existing government and perhaps the entire social order. Finally, the revolutionary movement fights it out with the authorities or dominant class and, if it wins, undertakes to establish its own . . . program.¹

This kind of interpretation, then, assumes the presence, in the “old regime” in question, of a potentially revolutionary “movement informed or guided by purpose,” the existence of “a deliberate effort – an effort tying together leaders and followers that is aimed at overthrowing the existing political or social order.”²

And what of the structuralist approach to the causes of revolution? Here, according to Skocpol, the prerevolutionary state, in its relations with competing states as well as with groups in its own domestic society, is the key actor, rather than any “purposive movement” arising out of old regime society.

The state properly conceived is no mere arena in which socioeconomic struggles are fought out. It is, rather, a set of administrative, policing, and military organizations headed, and more or less well coordinated by, an executive authority. Any state first and fundamentally extracts resources from society and deploys these to create and support coercive and administrative organizations.³

Thus, the prerevolutionary state (like its revolutionary and postrevolutionary successors) is “potentially autonomous from (though of course conditioned by) socioeconomic interests and structures.” Rather than being an instrument of “economically-dominant groups to pursue world-market oriented development at home and international economic advantages abroad,” the archetypal old regime state is at bottom “geared to maintain control of home territories and populations and to undertake actual or potential military competition with other states in the international system.”⁴ Consequently a structuralist explanation of the gestation of revolution pivots on the prerevolutionary state’s growing inability to compete successfully with other “potentially autonomous” states in the contemporaneous international state system and to harmonize its relations with prominent elements in its “home” society. The resultant collapse of that state paves the way for an unprecedented transformation of the political and social ancien régime.

Theory and terminology aside, the historian of revolution here is confronting one of the most challenging philosophical issues imaginable: the question of whether unempowered persons can and do “make” their own

1 Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 14.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 22.

Introduction

3

revolutions or whether, in the final analysis, it is bureaucratic “states,” pursuing their own impersonal goals, that make revolutions possible. This is an issue to which we shall return before concluding our inquiry into the genesis of the Revolution of 1789. At this particular juncture, however, a few words are in order concerning major voluntarist and structuralist exegeses of the coming of revolution to Bourbon France – and concerning major criticisms leveled against those perspectives.

It stands to reason that voluntarist renderings of revolutionary causation, with their stress on the roles of groups and individuals outside the secretive chambers of power, would have arisen primarily in the realms of social and intellectual history – and this has indeed been the case. Among the social theorists of revolution, for example, we should cite those of a Marxian (or, as some French revisionists would say, a Jacobin) persuasion, as well as several social historians of an anti-Marxian bent. Marxian-Jacobin scholars of illustrious reputation from Jean Jaurès, Albert Mathiez, and Georges Lefebvre to Albert Soboul and Claude Mazauric, over the years have identified as initiators and protagonists of revolution in late eighteenth-century France economically progressive or “capitalist” bourgeois. These individuals, coveting both a greater measure of social recognition and a more influential role in public affairs, and profiting from the support of humble cityfolk and peasantry, supposedly won out in the Revolution over their age-old antagonists in the economically retrograde, or feudal, nobility *and* over an absolutist monarchy bankrupt in its finances, inefficient in its bureaucratic procedures, and antiquated in its vision of society.⁵

Other specialists in the field, rejecting a Marxian approach but not a voluntarist and social orientation, have included Alfred Cobban, Denis Richet, and Colin Lucas. British historian Alfred Cobban, essentially turning the Marxian-Jacobin paradigm on its head by emphasizing the anticapitalist aspects of the Revolution, held 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.”⁶ French revisionist Denis Richet maintained that a vanguard of “notables” issuing from clergy, nobility, and Third Estate and displaying education, talent, landed wealth, and political ambition in abundance, seized power in 1789 and subsequent years. Theirs was a *révolution des lumières*, a “revolution of enlightened notables,” helped along, ad-

5 The classic statement of this thesis remains Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, trans. Robert R. Palmer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947).

6 Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 67.

mittedly, by terrible short-term economic conditions that provided these respectable Frenchmen with formidable allies from the laboring masses.⁷ Finally, Alfred Cobban's fellow Briton Colin Lucas accepted the revisionist notion of a prerevolutionary elite drawing its propertied luminaries from all three estates, but pointed also to "stress zones" within that elite characterized by rising tensions over a variety of divisive social issues, and in particular the issue of competition for advancement in elite French society. When, in 1788–89, a specific series of events threatened to split the increasingly homogeneous elite of noble and bourgeois proprietors permanently along anachronistic lines, the result, according to Lucas, was "a revolt against a loss of status by the central and lower sections of the elite with the approval of those elements of the trading groups which were on the threshold of the elite. It was this social group that became the 'revolutionary bourgeoisie.'" ⁸

What all of these analyses, Marxian and non-Marxian, reveal in common is a voluntarist stress on the role played by unenfranchised groups and individuals at the onset of revolution. Indeed, the very language they employ sometimes indicates this explicitly. Thus, Richet's *lumières* in 1789 displayed an "awareness, first, of their autonomy vis-à-vis the political order and, second, of the inevitability of their seizure of state power."⁹ And Lucas strikingly attested his voluntarist faith by speaking of social friction within elite society "eventually sparking off a revolutionary conflagration," and of "a contraction [in the channels of] social promotion leading to social conflict."¹⁰ Nor would it be very difficult to adduce examples of Lefebvre and Soboul exalting an entrepreneurial bourgeoisie carrying all (or at least much) before it in revolutionary France, and of Cobban dotting in similar fashion upon his alternative vanguard of languishing *officiers* and "lawyers and other professional men."

But the question for us has to be: Do any of these interpretations satisfactorily explain why France fell into revolution in 1789? No fair-minded person would deny that the long-regnant explanatory paradigm associated with Lefebvre, Soboul, and their successors has made an enormous contribution to our understanding of the upheaval in France. Similarly, no fair-minded individual could fail to see much of value in Cobban's assault on the orthodox school's misuse of such terms as feu-

7 Denis Richet, "Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française: Elites et despotisme," *Annales: E.S.C.* 24 (1969), pp. 1–23. See also his earlier book coauthored with François Furet, *La Révolution française*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1965).

8 Colin Lucas, "Nobles, Bourgeois, and the Origins of the French Revolution," *Past and Present* 60 (1973), esp. pp. 86, 103, and 124–25.

9 Richet, "Autour des origines idéologiques," p. 23.

10 Lucas, "Nobles, Bourgeois, and the Origins of the French Revolution," p. 103.

Introduction

5

dalism and capitalism as applied to prerevolutionary France. Again, there would seem to be a growing scholarly consensus that revisionists like Richet and Lucas have furnished us with the most impressive conceptualization to date of social dynamics in eighteenth-century France and with an unprecedentedly sophisticated portrayal of the men who emerged in the crisis of the late 1780s as full-blown revolutionaries. Nonetheless, the last thirty years or so have brought telling criticisms of all attempts by voluntarists laboring in the vineyards of social history to account for the maelstrom of 1789 in France.

Of course, many revisionists cut their teeth upon the troubling aspects of the Marxian-Jacobin thesis.¹¹ They have pointed out that there was no automatic correlation between economic and social roles in the ancien régime: There were more noncapitalist than capitalist bourgeois, and there were businessminded as well as nonentrepreneurial nobles. They have also demonstrated the oversimplicity of the notion of sequential class insurgencies inaugurating revolutionary change in France in the late 1780s. The so-called aristocratic revolution of 1787–88 involved opposition to the government in *all* ranks of society, and in 1788–89 the “revolutionary bourgeoisie” found some of its most articulate tribunes among the progressive clergy and nobility. Revisionists have shown, furthermore, that the assemblies and committees of the revolutionary era drew their members primarily from the economically conservative worlds of bureaucracy and the law rather than from the dynamic marches of capitalism. (Indeed, those circles in France that were profit oriented were actually decimated by the proscriptions of the sanguinary 1790s.) Finally, and perhaps most devastatingly, economic historians like Britain’s Roger Price and P. M. Jones have argued convincingly that the economic old regime in France actually outlasted the sociopolitical old regime by a half century or more.¹² There could be, in other words, no cogent demonstration in the French case of systemic sociopolitical change grounded in transformative *economic* change.

But if revisionism has shattered the edifice of the old socioeconomic theory of revolutionary causation, it has yet to raise a durable structure in its place. Thus, British historian William Doyle, by carefully documenting the appreciation in market value of the majority of judicial, administrative, and fiscal offices during the years leading up to the explosion of 1789, has invalidated Cobban’s hypothesis regarding “declin-

11 For the most thorough review of the critical literature on the Marxist school of thought, consult the initial, historiographical section of William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

12 See Roger Price, *The Economic Modernisation of France (1730–1880)* (London: C. Helm, 1975); and P. M. Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

ing” *officiers* as protagonists of revolution in France.¹³ Again, Richet, for all his postulation of an elite of propertied, ambitious *lumières* leading France into revolution in 1789, had to allow that in the crucible of events of that year the members of that elite abruptly fell out over what he called the “problem of privilege” – that is, what economic and social prerogatives to preserve, curtail, or abolish altogether.¹⁴ And in the very year (1973) that Lucas’s rendering of the Revolution’s social origins appeared, three prominent American sociologists published findings inimical to *his* thesis. They reported that, on the basis of a quantitative study of a huge number of Third Estate *cahiers de doléances*, or grievance lists, drawn up prior to the convening of the Estates General in 1789, they could dismiss the “common claim that the bourgeoisie in eighteenth-century France was led to revolutionary action by the frustration of being denied access to noble status.”

Indeed, insofar as there was any correlation between the denial of elite status to bourgeois in the old regime and bourgeois radicalism in the *bailliages* (electoral districts) of 1789, it was negative rather than positive: Regardless of the gauge of “radicalism” employed, these scholars concluded, “the Third Estate in those *bailliages* with any ennoblement opportunities was *more* radical than the Third Estate in *bailliages* with no such opportunities.”¹⁵ Moreover, as we noted, it appears that the majority of venal offices – purchased or inherited by bourgeois for the most part – were actually increasing rather than decreasing in value before the Revolution. Hence, the stress zones within the prerevolutionary elite so significant in Lucas’s scenario for their generation of revolutionary social discontents may not have been so very stressful after all.

Thus for the accomplishments – and limitations – of voluntarist social history. But what of the voluntarist practitioners of intellectual history? Have they been able to argue, more persuasively, that the philosophes, striving in the eighteenth century to disseminate the gospel of Enlightenment, induced cataclysmic change in France?

To do them justice, they have not as a rule tried to forge such a direct link between a great movement of ideas whose influence is for all ages and the specific events that convulsed France during 1789–99. Certainly this was the judicious message of Daniel Mornet sixty years ago. Mornet was careful not to go beyond the assertion that, in the course of the eighteenth century, the deductive reasoning that underpinned the old regime, the willingness to accept what was old for antiquity’s sake, to

13 William Doyle, “The Price of Offices in Pre-Revolutionary France,” *Historical Journal* 27 (1984), pp. 831–60.

14 Richet, “Autour des origines idéologiques,” p. 23.

15 Gilbert Shapiro, John Markoff, and Sasha R. Weitman, “Quantitative Studies of the French Revolution,” *History and Theory* 12 (1973), pp. 186–87.

Introduction

7

internalize unquestioningly the dictates of church, aristocracy, and state, was slowly replaced by a new spirit of inquiry, by an inductive way of thinking that tended to judge social and political institutions according to utilitarian criteria. The Revolution, he conceded, broke out for political reasons that only indirectly reflected intellectual change.¹⁶

In more recent times, Mornet's legatees have attempted to demonstrate significant intellectual or ideological antecedents to the Revolution while still observing his canons of caution. American scholar Robert Darnton, for example, has accentuated the role played by Grub Street publicists and would-be philosophes in preparing the way for sociopolitical upheaval in France.¹⁷ Countryman Keith Baker has posited the need "to reconstitute the political culture within which the creation of the revolutionary language of 1789 became possible."¹⁸ Yet another specialist in the United States, Patrice Higonnet, has maintained that the Revolution "was in large part the political consequence" of a cleavage in prerevolutionary France between a "communitarian" or corporate ethos and the "new rationalistic, optimistic, individuating message of the Enlightenment."¹⁹ Meanwhile, in France, Roger Chartier has been assiduously seeking out the Revolution's "cultural origins."²⁰ And various bicentennial symposia staged over the past few years have revealed that Chartier has impressive company in his continuing attempt to explain revolutionary causation from an ideological or cultural point of view.²¹

Still, however heroic and insightful these efforts to deal with the intellectual roots of the French Revolution, they have been paralleled by an historiography that has stressed the breach rather than the continuity between the old regime's elegant *soirées* and the Revolution's elemental *journées*. American scholars have led the way in this respect. George V. Taylor's analysis of bourgeois *cahiers de doléances* of 1789 yielded little indication of an Enlightenment ideology motivating commoners to anticipate and work for radical change. True, the men who drafted grievance

16 Daniel Mornet, *Les Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française 1715–1787* (Paris: Colin, 1933).

17 See especially the collected essays in Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

18 Keith Baker, "On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution," in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982).

19 Patrice Higonnet, *Sister Republics: The Origins of French and American Republicanism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 121.

20 Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

21 For the scholarship presented at one of the most notable of these symposia, see Keith M. Baker, ed., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, Vol. 1: *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987).

lists and voted for (or ran as) candidates for seats in the upcoming Estates General “were ready for a general constitutional overhaul,” but “few of them needed the ideas of the Enlightenment to tell them why that overhaul was desirable, for the doctrine of a historic constitution, the fundamental laws that were to be rediscovered and restored, met the needs of those who called for serious political change.”²² Carolyn Lougee’s review of several books treating aspects of eighteenth-century and revolutionary France led her to ruminate about “an Enlightenment which was more reformist (and even religious) than radical, accommodating rather than subverting the existing order, and a Revolution which discarded rather than embodied the intellectual compromises of the Enlightenment.”²³

William H. Sewell, Jr., in a stimulating critique of Theda Skocpol’s structuralist exegesis of revolutionary causation, contended at one point that “ideology plays a crucial role in revolutions, both as cause and as outcome” – yet, strikingly, he conceded at another point that there was “no reason to believe” that the “ideological contradiction” he perceived at the heart of the old regime French state “weakened the state or hastened its fall.” The Bourbon government, after all, “was thrown into crisis by impending bankruptcy, not by its split ideological personality.”²⁴ And Thomas E. Kaiser, in a lengthy historiographical essay upon the subject, has divined no fewer than three problems in one. First, he has observed, the sociopolitical conservatism of the preponderant majority of philosophes is undeniable; second, there remains no consensus among experts on “the extent and the nature of the impact of the Enlightenment” on government and society in the ancien régime; and third, there is not even fundamental agreement on “how to define the Enlightenment” itself!²⁵

The fact that skepticism about the linkage between the Enlightenment and the maelstrom of 1789–99 in France is hardly limited to American specialists – it is shared, for example, by a number of scholars in Germany – only underscores the problematic nature of the literature on the Revolution’s intellectual origins.²⁶

If, then, analysts employing a voluntarist approach have encountered difficulties in postulating various social “vanguards” – and have never

22 George V. Taylor, “Revolutionary and Nonrevolutionary Content in the *Cahiers* of 1789: An Interim Report,” *French Historical Studies* 7 (1972), p. 501.

23 Carolyn Lougee, “The Enlightenment and the French Revolution: Some Recent Perspectives,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 11 (1977), p. 102.

24 William H. Sewell, Jr., “Ideologies and Social Revolutions: Reflections on the French Case,” *Journal of Modern History* 57 (1985), pp. 84, 66, 66–67.

25 Thomas E. Kaiser, “This Strange Offspring of *Philosophie*: Recent Historiographical Problems in Relating the Enlightenment to the French Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 15 (1988), pp. 560–61.

26 See Jeremy Popkin, “Recent West German Work on the French Revolution,” *Journal of Modern History* 59 (1987), pp. 737–50.

Introduction

9

quite posited alienated philosophes – as purposive instigators of revolution in late eighteenth-century France, have structuralists enjoyed any greater success by focusing (more or less) on the prerevolutionary state itself, in its international and domestic contexts? We can address this question very briefly by touching on the chief arguments in this genre as well as on the interpretive problems they raise. We place special emphasis here on Theda Skocpol's work, both because we have derived from it our distinction between voluntarism and structuralism and because, as a political sociologist, Skocpol has not invariably attracted the notice of historians reviewing the literature on the Revolution's origins.²⁷

A number of authorities on the period have employed at least some elements of what we have defined here as a structuralist perspective. As far back as the late 1950s and early 1960s, the American Robert R. Palmer and the French scholar Jacques Godechot broke some important ground in this direction by placing the Revolution (and to some extent its origins as well) in an international, "trans-Atlantic" setting.²⁸ Soon thereafter, George Taylor, concentrating on domestic rather than international politics, declared roundly that France had experienced "a political revolution with social consequences and not a social revolution with political consequences." For Taylor, the drama of 1789 stemmed from a fateful but largely fortuitous conjuncture of short-term factors: state bankruptcy, the "apprehensions of the taxable groups and creditors of the state," the "hopes and ambitions of the professional classes," and the "slogans, myths, and images generated by the struggle" against the now-paralyzed crown.²⁹

At about the same time, the British historian C. B. A. Behrens was returning to the geopolitical theme. She reexamined the patterns of chronic Anglo-French conflict that loomed so large in the international affairs of Europe after 1689 (the so-called Second Hundred Years' War) and suggested that this Great Power competition more than any other single factor crippled the French government and made the 1789 Revolution possible.³⁰ In the course of the 1970s, French revisionist François

27 For instance, William Doyle does not even allude to her work in his otherwise thorough review of the relevant historiography in his *Origins of the French Revolution*. Nor does he refer to her in his even more recent *Oxford History of the French Revolution*. Other examples of this oversight in the current literature could be cited.

28 Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959–64); and Jacques Godechot, *Les Révolutions 1770–1799* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963).

29 George V. Taylor, "Noncapitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 72 (1967), esp. pp. 491–92.

30 C. B. A. Behrens, *The Ancien Régime* (London: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), esp. pp. 138–62.

Furet, following Taylor's rather than Behrens's lead, stressed domestic political antecedents to the Revolution. Holding that the "fundamental crisis of the eighteenth century" involved the dynamic but increasingly dissynchronous relationship between the "modernizing" state and the evolving elite of noble and bourgeois "notables," Furet found that neither monarch nor notables could come forward "with a policy or a set of institutions that might have integrated the State and the ruling society around a minimum of consensus." In fact, the "two antagonistic poles" of eighteenth-century France, "the State and society," had by the late 1780s become "increasingly incompatible."³¹ Finally, British specialist William Doyle, in the bicentennial decade of the 1980s developed an interpretation of revolutionary causation that pivoted on political factors both long term and immediate, both domestic and international. These factors (or "origins") included endemic royal indebtedness reflecting a surfeit of Continental and maritime warfare, irresolute royal leadership, bureaucratic infighting and confusion, the unrelenting opposition of the parlements and other vested interests to ministerial reforms, a more "enlightened" and politically sophisticated public, and critical ministerial miscalculations in the "prerevolution" of 1787–88.³²

It would be difficult to deny that these arguments, especially when taken together, contribute signally to our understanding of the Revolution's genesis. They all appropriate the revisionist school's reconceptualization of social change in the old regime, and they make substantial strides toward a structuralist explanation of the Revolution's genesis that can comprehend both political and social developments and satisfactorily describe their interaction. Yet their shortcomings are also apparent. For example, Taylor's abandonment of long-term causation may be refreshing to those who, like Canadian historian J. F. Boshier, stoutly condemn any "inclination to assume that what happened was meant to happen" and see in the Revolution "a series of events that do not seem inevitable."³³ Others, however, may not be won over by the argument that the Revolution was a phenomenon without long-term analyzable origins, was little more, in other words, than a political emergency that abruptly and unexpectedly became a full-fledged sociopolitical upheaval in the precise context of the year 1789. Again, it is arguable that Behrens's reappraisal of the old regime's geopolitical dynamics was incomplete insofar as it did not say very much about French aspirations in Europe, and, furthermore,

31 François Furet, "Le Catéchisme révolutionnaire," *Annales: E.S.C.* 26 (1971), pp. 255–89; and *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), esp. pp. 148–51. The latter translated into English by Elborg Forster as *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

32 Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, esp. pp. 41–114.

33 J. F. Boshier, *The French Revolution* (New York: Norton, 1988), p. ix.