Alfred Cobban's *Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* is one of the acknowledged classics of post-war historiography. This 'revisionist' analysis of the French Revolution caused a furore on first publication in 1964, challenging as it did established orthodoxies during the crucial period of the Cold War. Cobban saw the French Revolution as central to the 'grand narrative of modern history', but provided a salutary corrective to many celebrated social explanations, determinist and otherwise, of its origins and development. A generation later this concise but powerful intervention is now reissued with a new introduction by Gwynne Lewis, providing students with both a context for Cobban's own arguments and an assessment of the course of Revolutionary studies in the wake of *The Social Interpretation*. This book remains a handbook of revisionism for Anglo-Saxon scholars, and is essential reading for all students of French history at undergraduate level and above.

The late ALFRED COBBAN was Professor of French History at University College, London. His many books include *Aspects of the French Revolution* (Jonathan Cape, 1968) and *A History of Modern France* (Penguin, 1957).

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BY
ALFRED COBBAN

Second edition

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
GWYNNE LEWIS

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PREFACE

It is only fitting that this book should begin with an expression of the author's gratitude to the founder of the Wiles Lectures, to the Vice-Chancellor of The Queen's University, Belfast, and to Professor Michael Roberts and his colleagues, both for the invitation to deliver the lectures and for everything that makes them such an enjoyable occasion for the lecturer. I must also thank my friends and fellow-students of the history of the French Revolution, who honoured me by attending the lectures and discussing them with me afterwards.

The intention of the founder of the Wiles Lectures, as I understand it, was not to endow detailed research, but to promote reflection about historical problems. In my lectures, and in the book which is based on them, I have tried to meet this requirement while recognising the risks it brings with it. In the first place, this is bound to be in some respects a critical activity. Historical research can be, and perhaps usually is, done within the limits of an accepted pattern. Reflection about history brings with it the possibility of wanting to change the pattern. When, as in the case of the French Revolution, it is a well-established pattern, consolidated by a series of great historians, with long accepted theoretical implications, any attempt to question it is likely to meet with automatic and authoritative resistance. The resistance will be all the stronger if it seems that a formula which appeared

to explain the revolution satisfactorily is being discarded, without another being provided to take its place. This, I fear, is what I am doing. Indeed, it would be self-defeating if I were merely to try to replace one dogma with another.

The positive views I have expressed are tentative throughout. They represent what the evidence—or rather such part of it as I have been able to examine—seems to indicate. I am acutely aware that I am far from having exhausted even the printed sources available. There are also a host of local studies, in the admirable local historical journals of France, which can throw important light on general problems, but which historians, perhaps under the illusion that any unprinted document, however insignificant, is a more valuable historical source than anything printed, however important, have been apt to neglect. I have not attempted to make an exhaustive study of any single aspect of the revolution. I am quite prepared to discover that on more than one point the samples I have been able to take are not representative and have misled me. My object has been to examine the broad bases of revolutionary history and on these to adduce only sufficient evidence to suggest the need for a new approach. I have confined myself to social problems because these are the ones which, it seems to me, have most relevance to the present state of historiography.

Finally, one cannot criticise an historical interpretation without appearing to criticise the historians who have held it. If I have been led to disagree sometimes with the interpretation of a great historian like Georges Lefebvre, or with that of historians, such—to name only two—as

M. Bouloiseau and M. Soboul, for whose work I have great respect, this in no way represents a failure to recognize its value. In particular, it should be obvious to any reader that without the work of Lefebvre this book would be greatly impoverished. If I have disagreed with some of his interpretations, it has often been on the ground of evidence supplied by himself. This, I fear, might not have given him pleasure, but it is testimony to him none the less.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
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A.C.

KEY TO REFERENCES

The full title of books and articles is given the first time each one appears in the notes. For the first references to titles subsequently abridged see as follows—

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INTRODUCTION

Gwynne Lewis

I Cobbanism

On 6 May 1954, Professor Alfred Cobban gave his inaugural lecture at University College London before an invited audience that included M. Massigli, the French Ambassador to Britain. The lecture, entitled provocatively, 'The Myth of the French Revolution' cast doubt, if not on the actual occurrence of '1789' as a major *political* event, then certainly on the *social and class* interpretation placed upon it by those legendary French socialist historians of the Third Republic, Jean Jaurès, Albert Mathiez, and Georges Lefebvre. Cobban had delivered his first broadside against Marxisant (interpretations of history inspired by Marxist theories), or 'orthodox', interpretations of the Revolution. For supporters of this tradition, '1789' was an event of world-historical significance, representing, more or less in line with Marxist theory, the collapse of feudalism and the 'triumph of the bourgeoisie'. Cobban's refusal to fall in line would eventually earn him the title of 'the father of revisionism'. The immediate reaction was a stern lecture from Georges Lefebvre himself, who reminded Cobban that, 'for the first time in Europe, [the Revolution] proclaimed the virtues of free enterprise without any restriction other than that relating to public order. In so doing, the road to capitalism had been well and truly

opened; this was no myth.'[1] The battle-lines had been well and truly drawn.

A decade later, Cobban published *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, a work which was to become the handbook of revisionism for a new generation of Anglo-Saxon scholars.[2] In France, those who were becoming intellectually and ideologically disenchanted with the orthodox historiographical tradition would find their inspiration in the work of ex-communists such as François Furet, who were determined 'to break the vicious circle of that commemorative historiography'.[3] In 1965, Furet, along with his fellow revisionist colleague, Denis Richet, published *La Révolution française,* a glossy, two-volume work, impregnated with the academic *patois* of the rising Annalist school of history (a linguistic style which Richard Cobb memorably dismissed as 'how to state a silly idea, sillily'!).[4] Its main thesis was not that dissimilar from the line that Alfred Cobban had adopted—the French Revolution, at least during its more pacific and more productive phases, was the product of the liberal political and intellectual ideas of the Enlightenment: the Jacobin Terror was to be dismissed as a *dérapage,* a bloody detour on the highway of evolutionary, capitalist change.[5] This tune was to be replayed by many an historical troubadour of the Anglo-Saxon conservative, empirical tradition,

[1] A. Cobban, 'The Myth of the French Revolution' (London: University College, 1955), p. 25. Georges Lefebvre, 'Le Myth de la Révolution française', *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, 145 (1956), pp. 337–45.

[2] *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

[3] François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 10.

[4] Richard Cobb, 'Nous des Annales', in *Second Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 77.

[5] François Furet and Denis Richet, *La Révolution française*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1965).

most successfully by Simon Schama in his best-seller, *Citizens,* in which the author pays due homage to Cobban.[6]

But why should Alfred Cobban's book have exerted an influence (over 30,000 copies sold) which is in indirect proportion to its length (178 pages)? Because, in the flourishing groves of academe, the first serious assault on the entrenched and influential forces of the orthodox, Marxisant tradition was being launched by a number of revisionist scholars. During the 1960s, the massive expansion of higher education meant that a new generation was being introduced to the study of history, as viewed through the lenses of Marxist or fellow-travelling historians. Cobban's work would never have exerted the influence it did had it not stated, succinctly and provocatively, what many critics of the orthodox tradition had been thinking for years, often afraid to voice these thoughts in face of the hegemonic influence of Marxist historiography after the war, especially during the late 1950s and early 1960s. One only has to recall the publication, in 1958, of Albert Soboul's *Les Sansculottes de l'An II,* followed by George Rudé's *The Crowd in the French Revolution* in 1959, Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Revolution* in 1962, Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963, and, in 1964, Christopher Hill's *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, to register the domination of French and English history by the Left in this period. In a very real sense, the battle between 'orthodox' historians and 'revisionists' was a battle for the hearts and minds of this new generation of students. Those teachers, in schools and universities, who disliked viewing the past through pink-tinted spectacles, applauded the arrival of an alternative interpretation of the Revolution; sympathisers with the orthodox interpretation

[6] Simon Schama, *Citizens: a Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

also welcomed the prospect of injecting some controversy into their seminars. It was not research depth or intellectual breadth that established the academic street-credibility of Cobban's book —for this, one could have turned to his impressive, three-volume *History of Modern France*—[7] it was its challenge to established orthodoxy during the crucial period of the Cold War. We shall return to this important point in the second part of this essay.

One of the principal virtues (and vices?) of *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* is its dismissal of abstruse arguments and heavy sociological theorising in favour of a direct attack on the key controversial issues. The central chapters are entitled 'The Meaning of Feudalism', 'The Attack on Seigniorial Rights', and 'Who were the Revolutionary Bourgeois?'. Cobban takes us by the hand to the heart of the matter.

On feudalism

For Marxisant historians and sociologists, from the days of Maurice Dobb and Paul Sweezy to Perry Anderson and Robert Brenner, the key to early modern European history was 'the transition from feudalism to capitalism'. It was a central concern for the *Communist Party Historians' Group*, including Edward Thompson, Christopher Hill, and Eric Hobsbawm, who met periodically to pool ideas after the Second World War.[8] For Alfred Cobban, on the other hand, 'feudalism' did not exist: it was one of those idealist concepts, devoid of hard reality, invented by Marxists to sustain ideological theories rather than to substantiate

[7] Alfred Cobban, *A History of Modern France*, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1957–63).

[8] See the introduction to Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), pp. 1–22.

historical facts. He agreed with Ganshof that, by 1789, feudalism was 'a mere bogey, a term of abuse like "fanaticism"'. However, Cobban conceded that 'There can be no doubt that there was a widespread attack on something that was called feudalism, and that this attack was the expression of deeply-felt grievances.'[9] This 'something' was, for Cobban, little more than the seigniorial dues and rents that property-owners levied on their estates: 'If "feudalism" in 1789 did not mean seigniorial rights, it meant nothing', he wrote, in typical iconoclastic vein.[10] It is central to Cobban's argument that Marxist historians (as well as the legislators of 1789–90) were wrong to try and separate feudal and non-feudal payments, since 'The attempt to draw a distinction between payments and services which were feudal and those which were non-feudal and so susceptible of being adjudged strictly as property rights was unrealistic at a time when for centuries they had been subject to sale and purchase.'[11] The passage of time, the purchase and sale of thousands of noble estates, had turned feudalism into a mere shadow of its former, medieval self.

On seigniorial rights and a feudal aristocracy

So, for feudalism read 'seigniorial rights'. Having exorcised the Marxist ghost haunting this particular battlement, Cobban went on to argue that seigniorial rights (feudal or non-feudal) were not to be associated, exclusively, with a 'feudal aristocracy'. Admittedly, the majority of seigneurs were nobles, but, once again, like a precocious post-modernist, Cobban asked us to deconstruct such 'omnibus' terms (is this the 'missing link' between revisionism and post-modernism?). There were, surely, all kinds of 'nobles' in eighteenth-century France: the *noblesse de*

[9] *The Social Interpretation*, p. 26. [10] Ibid., p. 35. [11] Ibid., p. 41.

l'épée, the *noblesse de robe,* court nobles, provincial nobles, rich nobles and poor nobles. Cobban concluded, therefore, that, given its heterogeneity, 'to attack nobility as a personal state was partly to attack a phantom . . . the attack on feudalism cannot be equated with a simple attack on the nobles as such'.[12] This cavalier reasoning is typical of Cobban's methodology: load 'omnibus' terms like 'feudalism' 'nobility', or 'bourgeoisie', with so much baggage that the bags split apart at the seams!

On the conservative bourgeoisie

Given that there was, in reality, no socio-economic or political system worthy of the term feudalism, and, therefore, no cohesive class of nobles associated with it, all that was left for Cobban was to finish the task of demolishing the central tenet of the orthodox interpretation—that the French Revolution represented the overthrow of feudalism by the bourgeoisie. Pursuing the same tactics that he had employed with regard to feudalism and the nobility, Cobban stated that a Marxist, industrial capitalist, 'bourgeoisie' simply did not exist. All that was needed to prove this was to 'round up the usual suspects'; in other words, argue that there was no single, cohesive bourgeois class, but several types of 'bourgeois' in eighteenth-century France. The message is now clear: Marxisant history invents class cohesion to bolster theory; empirical history (ordered facts plus some cautious hypothesising) deconstructs 'omnibus', class terminology in the pursuit of historical truth.

For Cobban, the first, and most important, type of bourgeois—'the bourgeois proper'—were those who lived off their *rentes* and their profits from financial and property investments. The idea

[12] Ibid., pp. 32–3.

that this powerful and numerous social group nurtured revolutionary thoughts in their breasts is dismissed out of hand: 'By their wealth and manner of life', Cobban states, 'they belonged with the moderately prosperous noblesse', adding that whether, as a fictional class, 'they were rising or not, they were part of the conservative and not the revolutionary section of society'.[13] What of the merchants and industrialists, the harbingers of our modern, industrial, capitalist society? Well, we need to separate the former (*commercial* capitalists) from the latter (*industrial* capitalists involved in the *direct* exploitation of workers). Undoubtedly, those involved in trade and commerce were becoming much wealthier during the eighteenth century but, once again, the former were so divided—the *négociant* (wholesale merchant) lived in a different world from the small-town trader etc.—that they could not possibly have provided a common front. In any case, wealthy merchants frequently led the resistance to the liberal, free-trade, anti-corporatist policies that the Revolutionary Assemblies sought to promote; so, one should not include them in something called a 'revolutionary bourgeoisie'. As for the latter, the industrialists, Cobban is even more uncompromising: 'They were few and uninfluential, and they played little part in the history of the Revolution.'[14] In his opposition to the vulgar, Marxist notion that modern industrial capitalism, with its factories and mines, was widespread in France before 1789, Alfred Cobban received weighty support from an influential, American fellow revisionist, George V. Taylor, who argued that court, commercial, and proprietary forms of capitalism were dominant in the eighteenth century.[15]

[13] Ibid., p. 58. [14] Ibid.
[15] George V. Taylor, 'Types of Capitalism in Eighteenth Century France', *English Historical Review*, 79 (1964), pp. 478–97.

What of the wealthier sections of rural society, the social groups which Lefebvre referred to as 'the rural bourgeoisie'? Did they spearhead the attack on feudalism? Not according to Cobban. In the first place, of course, there was no such thing as a 'rural bourgeoisie': 'With the best will in the world it is impossible to reduce the varying definitions or descriptions of the rural bourgeoisie to sense or consistency. One can only conclude that the idea was invented to fit the requirements of a theory.'[16] The wealthier *fermier* (tenant farmers and, frequently, seigniorial agents and stewards) and *laboureur* (well-to-do farmers, able to hire labour) were, for Cobban, conservative not revolutionary. They were intent on maintaining, or increasing, their socio-economic and political control over the countryside, often by collecting dues and acting as agents for seigneurs. They were not the allies but the enemies of the poorer peasantry. Whilst the latter sought to increase their small-holdings by dividing up common lands, the 'rural bourgeoisie' were keen to keep the commons to pasture their animals. It is true, argues Cobban, that the Revolution brought this social group greater political and socio-economic power, by seizing municipal and departmental offices and by benefiting from the sale of church and *émigré* lands, but one should not deduce from this that they were 'revolutionaries' in 1789. All this reminds us of Colin Lucas's argument (discussed below) that the bourgeoisie, whether urban or rural, did not make the Revolution; they were made by it. Essentially, this is Cobban's point: if one has to talk about a 'revolutionary bourgeoisie' at all then one should talk about that social group which was to benefit most from the Revolution by 1815, 'a ruling class of landowners': 'It was, of course, to some extent a different class and type of land-

[16] *The Social Interpretation*, p. 109.

owner from that of the *ancien régime*, and one which possessed more political power than its predecessor', but, 'if such a class can be called a bourgeoisie, then this was the revolutionary bourgeoisie'. Once we accept this, he concludes, then 'we shall not vainly search for a non-existent industrial revolution, in a country dominated by a landed aristocracy.'[17]

On the revolutionary bourgeoisie

For Cobban, then, the real beneficiaries of the Revolution by 1815 were landowners, bourgeois *and noble*. However, as an allegedly conservative social group *before* the Revolution, this 'elite' could not have spearheaded the Revolution during the crisis of 1788–9. Who, then, were the architects of revolution in the towns in 1789? Cobban concluded that it must have been the relatively small, but influential, group of liberal, professional bourgeois. For Cobban, it is always the divisions *within* classes, not *between* them that hold the key to an understanding of the entire Revolution. In the towns, Cobban detected 'a general struggle for precedence and influence . . . between the business world and the liberal professions'. Unlike the financial and commercial bourgeoisie, who were 'rising', this sub-group—venal office-holders, lower government officials, lawyers, and members of the liberal professions—was 'declining'. Cobban argued that the value of the offices that they had purchased from the Crown, offices they could hand on to their chosen successors, had fallen during the course of the century. This fall was particularly noticeable amongst offices in the '*présidiaux*, *élections*, *maréchaussées* and other local courts'. The hypothesis that urban revolutionaries in 1789 should be sought among the liberal bourgeoisie is substantiated by analysing the

[17] Ibid., p. 89.

composition of the revolutionary assemblies, which reveals 'the overwhelming preponderance of *bailliage* officers and members of the liberal professions . . . This was the revolutionary bourgeoisie' Cobban concluded.[18]

On the revolutionary peasantry

If venal office-holders were the praetorian guard of revolution in the towns, and the rural bourgeoisie, at the beginning of the Revolution, was a conservative not a revolutionary force, who, then, led the revolution in the countryside, since Cobban had admitted that there had been an assault on 'something that was called feudalism'? Answer: 'There is really no alternative to accepting what every historian who had looked at the evidence would have been bound to have accepted if it had not been for intellectual enslavement to a theory. The abolition of seigniorial dues was the work of the peasantry, unwillingly accepted by the men who drew up the town and *bailliage cahiers*, and forced on the National Assembly through the fear inspired by a peasant revolt.'[19] But, do not these urban *cahiers,* heavily influenced by the professional bourgeoisie, reveal any serious resentment about this 'something that was called feudalism'? Not really, according to Cobban. Furthermore, on the famous night of 4 August 1789, which had begun the work of dismantling what remained of the feudal regime (as well as the destruction of French provincialism and privilege, as William Doyle has argued,[20]), it was the fear of the massive rural rebellion in the countryside, the *Grande Peur,* which forced the bourgeois National Assembly to abolish feudalism, since, 'unless concessions were made to the peasantry the whole

[18] Ibid., p. 60–1. [19] Ibid., p. 53.
[20] William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 117.

of rural France would remain in a state of rebellion'. In addition, during the next nine months, the work of the Feudal Committee, created to unravel the complex issue of distinguishing between feudal customary rights and bourgeois contractual rights, would do its level best to save what it could 'from the wreck of seigniorial fortunes. Once again, it was the peasantry, not the bourgeoisie, that made this impossible by continuing to fight for its own interests against those of the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy.'[21] This appears to be vulgar Marxism stood, vulgarly, on its head: the bourgeoisie emerge as the true conservatives, the peasantry the true revolutionaries! None the less, Cobban's thesis—one he says he borrowed from Georges Lefebvre when he was writing with his peasant beret on and not his Marxist hat—is very interesting indeed. We shall see that the issue of peasant participation in the French Revolution, which Georges Lefebvre had indeed highlighted, would be placed at the top of the agenda by revisionists and their Marxisant opponents. Neither group, after all, could ignore the importance of peasant revolutions in the Third World after the Chinese Revolution of Chairman Mao in 1949.

II The debate on Cobbanism

In 1987, the Marxist historian, George Rudé, provided a foreword to a book by George C. Comninel in which he wrote this: 'it is for being the first to expose . . . [the] fallacy of the "social interpreters", or school of "orthodox" Marxist historians, that Alfred Cobban has earned the author's praise, yet he [Comninel] goes on to argue that neither he nor the French and American "revisionists" that

[21] *The Social Interpretation*, pp. 39–41.

followed him have offered an acceptable alternative explanation of what the French Revolution was really about'. Comninel's book was called *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge,* a title which underlines the importance of Cobban's initial challenge to the 'orthodox' interpretation of the Revolution.[22] In 1994, Bailey Stone published *The Genesis of the French Revolution: a Global-Historical Interpretation*, in which he pays tribute to the revisionists who, according to Stone, 'shattered the edifice of the old socio-economic theory of revolutionary causation'. Stone also goes on to stress, however, that revisionism 'has yet to raise a durable structure in its place'.[23] We live in a post-revisionist age! For his own 'durable structure' Stone turns to two other schools of history whose work, when assessed alongside that of orthodox and revisionist historians, promises to provide a more comprehensive and intellectually—if not ideologically—satisfying solution to the problems raised by the French Revolution. In the second part of this introduction, I shall employ Comninel and Stone as our friendly guides through the tortuous paths of post-revisionism, or 'post-Cobbanism'.

On feudalism

Despite Cobban's insistence that feudalism was little more than a fantasy indulged in by Marxists who preferred ideology to common sense, his prime target, Albert Soboul, along with his fellow Marxist, or Marxist-Leninist comrades (the distinction is important, as we shall see), continued to insist not only on its reality as a fact in the social life of the peasantry but also on its central position in

[22] George C. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London: Verso, 1987), p. x.

[23] Bailey Stone, *The Genesis of the French Revolution: a Global-Historical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 5.

the Marxisant theory of the 'bourgeois French Revolution'. In a direct reference to Cobban, Soboul had written in 1962: 'It is true that feudalism, in the medieval meaning of the word, had no real significance in 1789; however, for the men of the time, the bourgeoisie and particularly the peasants, the abstract term embodied a reality—feudal rights, the lord's authority—which they knew only too well; and it was that reality which was finally swept away'.[24] Soboul never really shifted from this position. In 1976, he published his *Problèmes paysans* in which he pointed out that in some regions, like the Haute-Auvergne, feudal dues, strictly interpreted, amounted to 30 per cent of a seigneur's income.[25] Recently, non-Marxist historians have substantiated Soboul's claims concerning the social and economic reality of feudal forms of exploitation in the French countryside, whilst not subscribing to Soboul's general thesis concerning the *necessity* of social revolution. My own research into the estates of the maréchal de Castries, situated in south-eastern France, provides a figure of around 25 per cent for 'les droits féodaux' on the eve of the Revolution.[26] Alan Forrest, commenting on the weight of feudal dues in south-western France, refers to 'the searing sense of grievance which many (peasants) felt towards both the state and seigniorial authority'.[27] For a general account of feudalism, read chapter two of Peter Jones's textbook on the peasantry which provides a critical, empirically based account of the

[24] Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution, 1787–1799* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), trans. Alan Forrest and Colin Jones, 2 vols., vol. I: *From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon*, p. 9.

[25] Albert Soboul, *Problèmes paysans de la Révolution, 1789–1848* (Paris: Maspero, 1976), pp. 100–14.

[26] Gwynne Lewis, *The Advent of Modern Capitalism in France; the Case of Pierre-François Tubeuf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 141–4.

[27] Alan Forrest, *The Revolution in Provincial France: Aquitaine, 1789–1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 30–1.

reality and importance of feudal dues, as well as an assessment of the 'feudal reaction' in the later eighteenth century.[28]

During the last decade or so, however, Marxists and non-Marxists alike, influenced by the much-quoted 'linguistic turn' and the shift to socio-cultural history, have sought a broader definition of eighteenth-century feudalism (one way, at least, of escaping the opprobrium of being dubbed 'economic determinists'!). *Marxisant* historians such as Guy Lemarchand and Jean Duma have insisted on its social, juridical, and cultural aspects.[29] Non-Marxists, such as Patrice Higonnet, have given us sophisticated interpretations which seek to explain how 'bourgeois universalism', culled from the intellectual inheritance of the eighteenth century, drove the reluctant bourgeois away from the noble and into the arms, temporarily, of the popular classes. However, Higonnet concluded that, although flawed, there is still much to be said for the orthodox interpretation: 'It was obvious also that many aristocrats had a lively and insolent sense of their distinct identity, as became evident when anoblis were excluded from the drafting of noble cahiers in 1789. A feudal spirit did survive as did also a longing for feudal utopias.'[30] Norman Hampson, another historian who takes a socio-cultural not a socialist tack, suggested as early as 1963 that 'before the Revolution the most important social division in France was that between noble and commoner'.[31]

[28] Peter Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 30–59.

[29] Guy Lemarchand, *La fin de féodalisme dans le pays de Caux, 1640–1795* (Paris: Editions du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, 1989). Jean Duma, 'Place de l'élément féodal et seigniorial dans la fortune d'un Grand: l'exemple des Bourbon-Penthièvre', in *La Révolution et le monde rural* (Paris: ECTHS, 1987), pp. 55–66.

[30] Patrice Higonnet, *Class, Ideology, and the Rights of Nobles during the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 52.

[31] Norman Hampson, *A Social History of the French Revolution* (London: Routledge, [1963], 1965), p. 5.

George Comninel's radical reappraisal of the Marxist interpretation points to the existence of a group of wealthy aristocrats who were 'at once the greatest property owners and the pre-eminent beneficiaries of the surplus extractive powers of the state'.[32] The radicalism at the heart of Comninel's reappraisal, however, concerns the introduction of the State as a major player in the unfolding drama of eighteenth-century France; indeed, he goes on to assert that 'The central struggle of the French Revolution was *about* the state precisely because the state itself was so central to the interests of the antagonists [nobles and bourgeois]'.[33] Bailey Stone is less sympathetic than Comninel to the Marxisant camp, but he also integrates part of the orthodox thesis into his overview of the period, one that rests heavily upon the influential, but controversial, work of Theda Skocpol, for whom the French Revolution is less about class than about the failure of the French State to pursue a successful global foreign policy and to convince its noble and bourgeois elites to pay for it.[34] The importance of the State, of war and diplomacy, is, of course, hardly a new idea: it has always figured prominently in Tim Blanning's work, not just in his explanation of the origins of 1789 but also on the origins of the Terror of 1793.[35] The key point to note is the way in which recent Marxisant historians have integrated diplomatic, military, and cultural history into their revision of the old, orthodox thesis. For example, David Parker's recent book weaves the importance of both cultural identity and the extractive power of the State into his account of French history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Parker (like Comninel in this respect) sees the French

[32] *Rethinking the French Revolution*, p. 198. [33] Ibid., p. 200.
[34] *The Genesis of the French Revolution*, pp. 12–14.
[35] See, for example, Tim Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London: Longman, 1986). See also Jeremy Black, *The Rise of the European Powers, 1679–1793* (London: Arnold, 1990).

State as the creature of a ruling class, one that 'fulfilled its class function with devastating effect, draining the countryside of its not inconsiderable wealth to the benefit of a privileged minority who accumulated colossal fortunes'.[36]

The debate over eighteenth-century feudalism, its relationship to the State and the outbreak of the Revolution, obviously remains as controversial and lively as ever. However, readers not interested or versed in the arcane delights of structuralist or empiricist theory, or of 'post-structuralism' and 'post-empiricism', might seek comfort from the reassuring conclusion of two of France's leading historians: 'Many lively discussions have taken place between historians and theorists of history concerning the expression "feudal regime". One should ignore them, since it is clear that the members of the Constituent Assembly always used the term, that they were perfectly aware of its significance, and that in abolishing it, as an integral part of a dying regime, they demonstrated that this feudal regime constituted one of the essential bases of the Ancien Regime.'[37]

On the feudal aristocracy

We have seen that Alfred Cobban dismissed the idea of a distinct class of 'feudal aristocrats'; after all, if feudalism did not exist, the notion of a feudal aristocracy obviously made no sense. In any case, Cobban's main objective was to destroy the Marxist notion of interpreting the French Revolution as the outcome of a class struggle between nobles and bourgeois. Essentially, revisionist

[36] David Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France: the Road to Modernity?* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 266.

[37] Pierre Goubert and Daniel Roche, *Les français et l'ancien régime*, 2 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1984, 1991), vol. 1, *La société et l'Etat*, p. 15 (my translation).

historians have pursued the same objective: to undermine the idea of class struggle, they have argued for the existence of a single, wealthy 'elite' *composed of nobles and bourgeois,* the antecedents of the nineteenth-century 'notable'. In France, Denis Richet provided the clearest exposition of this hypothesis in 1969, arguing that, long before the Revolution, nobles, higher clerics, and bourgeois were 'fusing' in the intellectual heat produced by the Enlightenment.[38] In Britain, Colin Lucas produced his own influential version that explained the outbreak of the Revolution by the existence of 'stress zones' within this pre-revolutionary elite.[39] For the past thirty years, the notion of a wealthy, cultured, cross-class elite has dominated the historical agenda, whether for revisionist or Marxisant historians. Among the former, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret made his bid for the high ground in 1976 with his hypothesis that, far from being anti-capitalist, many nobles participated in, even led, capitalist ventures, including those associated with heavy industry. Adopting the now fashionable intellectual and cultural approach, he concluded that, by the end of the eighteenth century, 'The nobility no longer reacted to problems with the reflexes of an entrenched, inward looking, aloof group, but in the same way as all elites affected by the movement of the Enlightenment.'[40] My own study of the coal industry in the south-east suggests that whilst there were bourgeois, entrepreneurial, capitalist mine-owners, nobles, such as the maréchal de Castries, were content to work within *ancien régime* social and

[38] Denis Richet, 'Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française: élites et despotisme', *Annales: ESC,* 24 (1969), pp. 1–23.
[39] Colin Lucas, 'Nobles, Bourgeois, and the Origins of the French Revolution', *Past and Present,* 60 (1973), pp. 84–126.
[40] Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: from Feudalism to Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 143.

economic structures, whatever his views on Montesquieu.[41] Keith Baker, many of whose works on eighteenth-century French history have followed the Cobbanite agenda on the importance of intellectual and political history, wrote in his contribution to *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 'the frontier between the privileged and the unprivileged [or 'rich against the poor' as Cobban would have phrased it]' would become, in 1788–89 'for reasons more political than social . . . the issue upon which the constitution of social and political order was seen to hinge'. For Baker, the rhetoric of Revolution must be sought in the emerging elite political culture of the *ancien régime*.[42]

However, on matters of class and caste, the anti-Marxist camp has, once again, hardly been united or consistent. There have been anti-Marxist historians who have rejected the noble-bourgeois, elite theory, whilst laying particular emphasis on cultural factors. For example, Richard M. Andrews has argued that the high magistracy (*noblesse de robe*), particularly in the *parlements* and the upper judiciary, was a very distinct 'caste', a 'themistocracy', distinguished not only by wealth but by their kinship, culture, and professional integrity. They should not, according to Andrews, be lumped together with the real aristocracy, the *noblesse de l'épée*. Although he accepts the idea of 'stress zones' within eighteenth-century French society, Andrews concludes that 'The most blatant "aristocratic reaction" in late Old Regime France was that of the sword against the robe and administrative pen.'[43] There is clearly some truth in this: the Ségur ordinance of 1781 was directed

[41] *The Advent of Modern Capitalism*, chap. 2.

[42] Keith Baker, 'Sieyès', in François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1989), pp. 313–24.

[43] Richard Andrews, *Law, Magistracy, and Crime in Old Regime Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 193.

against recently ennobled aspirants to officer status, not the bourgeoisie. Comninel also believes in the existence of an emerging elite, albeit one which existed alongside a distinct, very wealthy, aristocratic sub-group (have we moved all that far from Hampson's idea of the gulf separating *the aristocrat* from the commoner?). Bailey Stone accepts the 'fusion thesis', but stresses the destructive consequences of France's expensive, global foreign policy: 'And so the government of Louis XVI, driven by the necessity inherent in its self-imposed international mission, continued to encourage the formation of a novel elite in France, and thereby consolidated the social base of the public opinion that challenged its administrative operations and undermined its constitutional and social philosophy.'[44] In other words, with their schizophrenic foreign and domestic policy, and with nobles and bourgeois quarrelling over the spoils, the Bourbons were cutting their own throats, in the case of Louis XIV, almost literally! This is a good example of the post-revisionist line—an amalgam of the old socio-economic and the new (or re-discovered) political and cultural interpretation. Inject 'class struggle' (admittedly not an easy task) and you have, grosso modo, David Parker's modernised Marxist thesis.

The post-revisionist consensus that has emerged over recent years, however, has been an uneasy one. On the one hand, the notion of an emerging 'elite' of nobles and bourgeois has found favour with many supporters in both the orthodox and the revisionist camps. Among the former, a new generation of Marxisant historians have rewritten the script of the classic 'transition from feudalism to capitalism' play in order to introduce new characters and variations on old themes—out go 'the bourgeois revolution'

[44] *The Genesis of the French Revolution*, p. 188.

and the 'class struggle of bourgeois versus noble'; in comes the State as the dispenser of 'surplus value' together with the notion of a hybrid, transitional 'feudal-capitalist' society. On the other hand, although some revisionists welcome the news that 'class struggle' and 'social revolution' are being abandoned, or re-interpreted, by many Marxisant historians, others are still wary of moving too far in the direction of 'economic determinism', finding it difficult to countenance the emergence of a separate bourgeois identity, founded upon a distinctive socio-cultural *and socio-economic* contribution to society (see Sieyès' famous pamphlet *What is the Third Estate*), one that enabled many bourgeois to reject the opportunity of climbing the social ladder by seeking to join the nobility.

The conservative bourgeoisie

We have seen that Cobban rejected the notion that 'the bourgeois proper', those well-heeled, well-educated, property-owning rentiers, were in any way revolutionary (the probability is that most were not, but a good minority were—after all, one should not use 'omnibus' terms incautiously!), and that merchants and industrialists were either too socially divided or too few to constitute a revolutionary class. Having scratched these groups off the starter's list, rather hastily, Cobban devoted more space to Georges Lefebvre's 'rural bourgeoisie', pointing out that Lefebvre himself had stressed the conservative nature of the wealthy *fermiers* and *laboureurs*. The purpose of this, of course, was to further undermine the notion of a 'revolutionary bourgeois class', urban or rural. What has research on the upper crust of French rural society in the eighteenth century produced in recent years? The answer is, a great deal; and it should be noted that several excellent regional monographs have complemented, and, in some instances, confirmed the line taken

by Cobban, as well as by Georges Lefebvre (in his early, 'pink period'!).

The theoretical underpinning of much of this research on rural elites (Lefebvre's 'coqs du village') provides a rural analogy to the idea of urban nobles and bourgeois 'fusing' to form a pre-revolutionary elite. In 1970, Régine Robin's much debated work *La société française en 1789: Semur-en-Auxois,* argued for the *co-existence of feudalism and capitalism* by the eighteenth century; they should not, it is argued, be seen as separate, antagonistic socio-economic and cultural systems.[45] Robin's original and sophisticated research was clearly an attempt to provide a more substantial, theoretical support for the rather rickety 'post-revisionist' bridge erected by the more flexible revisionist and Marxist historian. Insisting that her work rested upon Marx's original theoretical propositions—as opposed to what some Marxist historians had made of them for politico-ideological reasons—Robin drew a distinction, as did Cobban, between the Marxist idea of a capitalist, 'revolutionary' bourgeoisie and the actual 'bourgeoisie d'ancien régime' (Cobban's 'proper bourgeois'). Furthermore, Robin insisted *one should not define class formation simply in economic terms;* one should pay due attention to extra-economic forces—the State, the judiciary etc. As we have seen above, this emphasis on the importance of what Marxists termed 'the superstructure' was now beginning to distinguish the new generation of Marxisant scholars from the old, 'orthodox' Marxists. Suddenly, the Left were re-discovering the importance of *power,* State power, political power, the power of 'elites'. Robin went on to insist that it was the power of *merchant capital* that was undermining the old feudal modes of production. Now, stripped

[45] Régine Robin, *La société française en 1789: Semur-en-Auxois* (Paris: 1970).