

# Reinterpreting the French Revolution

A global-historical perspective



BAILEY STONE

*University of Houston*



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Stempel Garamond 10/12 pt. System L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Stone, Bailey, 1946–

Reinterpreting the French Revolution: a global-historical perspective / Bailey Stone.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0–521–81147–3 – ISBN 0–521–00999–5 (pbk.)

1. France – History – Revolution, 1789–1799 – Causes. 2. France – History – Revolution, 1789–1799 – Historiography. 3. World politics – To 1900. I. Title.

DC138 .S77 2002 2002071509

ISBN 0 521 81147 3 hardback

ISBN 0 521 00999 5 paperback

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## *Introduction*



The Bicentennial of the French Revolution may have given rise to a flood of commemorative activities, but it has not left in its wake any scholarly consensus on the causation, development, and implications of that vast upheaval. To the contrary, historians barely finished with the pleasurable work of interring a Marxist view of the Revolution regnant in the first half of the twentieth century have turned their spades upon each other, all the while trying to establish their own explanations of cataclysmic events in the France of 1789–99. This book certainly does not expect to restore consensus in a field beset by such controversy, but it can at least hope to put forth some distinctive ideas on the subject. More specifically, it will contend that the Revolution broke out, and unfolded in the way it did, primarily because of competing international and domestic pressures on French governance in the late eighteenth century. By placing the revolutionary experience in such a broad spatial setting, as well as in the broadest possible temporal setting of modern world history, this book aims to present its case in genuinely “global-historical” terms.

Since this study is heavily indebted to the enormous historical and sociological literature on the revolutionary era, a few observations about the debate arising from that literature are first of all in order. We can then outline the argument that is to follow and spell out some of the capital assumptions undergirding that argument.

As intimated above, research and writing on the revolutionary period in France has long mirrored suppositions that were more or less Marxist in nature. Historians laboring in the long shadows cast by Jean Jaurès, Albert Mathiez, and Georges Lefebvre comfortably assumed that behind the collapse of the Bourbons’ rule in the late eighteenth century loomed a struggle between an economically retrograde, “feudal” aristocracy and a progressive, “capitalist” bourgeoisie. The entrepreneurial interests, backed at critical junctures by urban artisans and shopkeepers and rural peasantry,

“won” the resultant contest for power in the tempestuous 1790s and would proceed to create nineteenth-century France in their own dynamic image. Thus, the dramatic seizure of political power in this revolutionary situation by profit-oriented bourgeois pointed to the even more fundamental phenomenon of structural *economic* change in French society.<sup>1</sup>

Paradoxically, the very success of this venerable thesis in provoking debate and innovative research has proven its undoing. Today there are few scholars on the various “cutting edges” of French Revolutionary studies who still subscribe to the socioeconomic orthodoxy of old.<sup>2</sup> They can report all too easily that there was no demonstrable correlation between economic and social roles in the *ancien régime*: noncapitalist “bourgeois” outnumbered capitalist bourgeois, and there were entrepreneurial as well as economically conservative nobles. They can point up the oversimplicity of the notion of sequential “class” insurgencies precipitating revolutionary change in France in 1788 and 1789. They can also show that the assemblies and committees of the decade of upheaval drew their personnel primarily from the staid worlds of bureaucracy and the law rather than from the adventurous marches of capitalism. And, perhaps most decisively, these revisionists can assure us that the economic *ancien régime* in France actually *outlasted* the sociopolitical old regime by a good half-century or more. In summation, there probably can be no cogent demonstration for France of systemic sociopolitical change grounded in transformative *economic* change.

So far, so good. Yet (predictably, perhaps) those who reject the old paradigm have found that it is one thing to participate in the demolition of an obsolete edifice and quite another to raise a durable structure in its place.

At this point, a broader question may first interpose itself: whether there is really any way to explain the Revolution convincingly *as one unified phenomenon*, from causes to consequences. Did Lefebvre and historians of similar persuasion err, not only in the specific sense of positing the centrality to the French Revolution of socioeconomics, but also in the more general sense of supposing that the gestation, process, and ultimate import of the Revolution are all explicable in the same terms? We will have to deal with this broader issue in due time. For the moment, however, we need to confine ourselves to asking what, specifically, the revisionist critics of the Marxist explanation of the events running from 1789 to the Bonapartist coup d'état of 1799 have been able to insert in its place.

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

2 For a very competent review of the literature on the specific question of the *causes* of the French Revolution, refer to the initial, historiographical section of William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

The answer to this latter query seems to be: nothing fully adequate. Some contributors to the debate, while discarding the concept of an upheaval consecrating the triumph of capitalism, have tried to retain something of the social emphasis inevitably associated with that concept. Hence, Alfred Cobban, writing in 1964 and essentially turning the Marxist theory upon its head by accentuating the anticapitalist biases of the Revolution, held that “the revolutionary bourgeoisie was primarily the declining class of *officiers* and . . . lawyers and other professional men.”<sup>3</sup> Such individuals, rather than commercial and industrial figures, dominated the bureaucracy and legislatures of the revolutionary years. Other authors – and here, revisionists like Denis Richet and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret come most readily to mind – have contended that a vanguard of educated, landowning “notables” issuing from clergy, nobility, and Third Estate seized the helm of public affairs in 1789. Theirs was a *révolution des lumières*, a “revolution of enlightened notables,” helped along, admittedly, by atrocious short-term economic conditions that furnished these respectable Frenchmen with daunting allies from society’s plebeian ranks. Once the hurricane was over, these propertied notables would come fully and safely into their own.<sup>4</sup>

These arguments may have refined our understanding of social developments in the revolutionary era, but they have also proven problematic in their turn. Cobban’s *officiers* seem upon closer examination to have been prospering for the most part, or at the very least holding their own, rather than “declining” on the eve of 1789. Moreover, they apparently made up a steadily *diminishing* proportion of active revolutionaries as the 1790s unfolded.<sup>5</sup> More seriously, perhaps, scholars have come increasingly to question the whole notion of elite solidarity in the advent and process of the Revolution. Richet himself had to allow that in the crucible of events defining 1789 the propertied *lumières* abruptly fell out over what he called the “problem of privilege” – that is, over what economic and social prerogatives to preserve, curtail, or abrogate altogether.<sup>6</sup> Other specialists, investigating the tumultuous years that followed, have conceded – ironically – that there are still good reasons to stress the continuing importance of social tensions

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

4 Refer to Denis Richet, “Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française: Elites et despotisme,” *Annales: E. S. C.* 24 (1969): 1–23; and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La Noblesse au XVIIIe siècle. De la féodalité aux lumières* (Paris: Hachette, 1976).

5 On the former point, see William Doyle, “The Price of Offices in Pre-Revolutionary France,” *Historical Journal* 27 (1984): 831–60. He has recently returned to this and some related issues in *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). The latter point is made repeatedly by, among others, Lynn Hunt, in her provocative study *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

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

and conflict among the notables.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a kind of “rediscovery” of conflictual social dynamics in the revolutionary era has figured prominently in the historiography of the last ten years.<sup>8</sup>

However, the most influential tendency among those historians who reject the socioeconomic orthodoxy of earlier days has been to develop and employ an explanatory perspective that concentrates on politics or (more accurately) “political culture” in revolutionary France.

The “rediscovery of politics” in this contentious field was foreshadowed as far back as 1967, when George V. Taylor declared roundly that what France had experienced during the years 1789–99 had in fact been “a political revolution with social consequences and not a social revolution with political consequences.”<sup>9</sup> Before long, a number of historians were giving a truly novel twist to the meaning of “politics” in the French Revolution. In the late 1970s François Furet, probably the most influential of these scholars, emerged from a long-running vendetta with Marxists like Albert Soboul and Claude Mazauric to offer a political-ideological explanation of the maelstrom of 1789–99.<sup>10</sup> Furet asserted that new discourses of political legitimacy vied to fill the unforeseen and unprecedented vacuum left in public life by the collapse of the absolute monarchy. From 1789 through the climacteric of the Terror of 1793–94, this increasingly murderous competition of discourses, all proclaiming fealty to the newly sovereign “people,” drove the Revolution leftward. For this brief, unforgettable period, ideology was independent of – and, indeed, constitutive of – sociopolitical reality; only after the overthrow of the Robespierist dictatorship in Thermidor of Year II (July 1794) would “society” reassume its ordinary role as the primary determinant of historical evolution.

Furet’s conceptualization of the unfolding of revolution in France has proven very influential – and, by the same token, very controversial. Specialists including Lynn Hunt, Keith Baker, and Emmet Kennedy have contributed enthusiastically to this endeavor to substitute political-cultural forces for the socioeconomic processes of the earlier historiographical school.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the Bicentennial gave rise to a number of scholarly

7 As examples in point, consult Patrice Higonnet, *Class, Ideology, and the Rights of Nobles during the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); and David Andress, *French Society in Revolution, 1789–1799* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

8 A point discussed in detail by (among others) Jack Censer, in “Social Twists and Linguistic Turns: Revolutionary Historiography a Decade after the Bicentennial,” *French Historical Studies* 22 (Spring 1999): 139–67.

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

10 François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978). Translated into English by Elborg Forster as *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

11 See Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class*, and, more recently, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Keith M. Baker,

consortia and collaborative editorial projects through which Furet and like-minded colleagues reiterated their call for a cultural exegesis of revolutionary change in France.<sup>12</sup> True, not all proponents of the new approach endorse Furet's more extreme claims: for instance, they may balk at his contention that the Terror was fully implicit in the ideological "breakthrough" of 1789, and regard with some skepticism his postulation of ideology as an autonomous and constituting historical force up to 1794.<sup>13</sup> Still, they share with Furet the fundamental conviction that the Revolution was, as Lynn Hunt has put it, quintessentially "the moment in which politics was discovered as an enormously potent activity, as an agent for conscious change, as the mold for character, culture, and social relations."<sup>14</sup> And few would deny that they have a compelling and portentous story to tell: the story of how ordinary Frenchmen – and Frenchwomen – fashioned through rhetoric and ritual and raw human action a new identity for themselves in a world briefly and challengingly turned upside down.

We might go so far as to wonder whether we have here the makings of a new explanatory paradigm for the French Revolution. Such speculation, however, is probably premature. Indeed, quite apart from the schism in post-Marxist scholars' ranks over the issue of elite solidarity or discord in revolutionary France – an issue *not* resolved by forays into political-cultural analysis – there exists a potentially even more troublesome question. An institutional historian, Isser Woloch, broached this question in the midst of the Bicentennial euphoria. Woloch took Furet (and a number of his associates) to task for denying that circumstances shaped the revolution and, indeed, for maintaining that revolutionary exigencies could never "justify acts that were inexcusable by ordinary standards of liberal principle or morality."<sup>15</sup> At about the same time, another specialist, David Bien, raised much the same issue in an exchange with Furet himself.<sup>16</sup>

It was perfectly natural for Woloch and Bien to respond to Furet's ideologically driven schema of revolution by emphasizing the pressures of

*Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Emmet Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).

12 See, for example, François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), and Keith Baker et al., eds., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987–94).

13 On this point, see, most recently, Michael Scott Christofferson, "An Antitotalitarian History of the French Revolution: François Furet's *Penser la Révolution française* in the Intellectual Politics of the Late 1970s," *French Historical Studies* 22 (Fall 1999): 557–611.

14 Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class*, p. 236.

15 See Woloch's review article: "On the Latent Illiberalism of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 1452–70.

16 Refer to the remarks by Woloch and Bien in "François Furet's Interpretation of the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 16 (1990): 777–802.



day-to-day circumstances on the revolutionary politicians. Both historians, after all, had been involved for some time in research on the armies of old regime and/or revolutionary France, and both had been sensitized by their research to the influence exerted upon French affairs by those uniquely urgent “circumstances” preceding and attending renewed European warfare in the 1790s.<sup>17</sup>

Then again, both Woloch and Bien could have easily enough cited the concern of earlier historians with larger geopolitical issues too often neglected in recent arguments between Marxists and their detractors. Indeed, a full century ago and more Albert Sorel was surveying the course of events in the 1789–99 period from a European diplomatic-military viewpoint.<sup>18</sup> True, those dominating the landscape of revolutionary historiography for the next half-century, while never losing sight of the great mobilization of French resources against foreign invasion in the 1790s, attributed the drastic sociopolitical changes of those years, in the most basic sense, to the progress of capitalism rather than to geopolitical exigency. Still, Sorel’s notion of international affairs as being central to the Revolution has never disappeared entirely from the pertinent scholarly literature. The works of Robert R. Palmer signaled this in the years during and following World War II,<sup>19</sup> and so have syntheses authored in more recent times by Donald Sutherland and William Doyle.<sup>20</sup>

But perhaps the most forthright challenge to historians of both Marxist and post-Marxist vintage has come from the pen of a political sociologist, Theda Skocpol.<sup>21</sup> Writing ten years before the Bicentennial, Skocpol presented a comparative analysis of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions that eschewed all “voluntarist” discussion of systemic changes in society, of “purposive, mass-based movements,” of ideological trends, or of aspirations of those outside the conclaves of government. For Skocpol, analysis of the causes, process, and consequences of such great upheavals required a “structuralist” focus on the state, viewed as “a set of

17 See, for example: David Bien, “La Réaction aristocratique avant 1789: L’Exemple de l’armée,” *Annales: E. S. C.* 29 (1974): 23–48 and 505–34, and “The Army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction, and Revolution,” *Past and Present* 85 (1979): 68–98; and Isser Woloch, *The French Veteran from the Revolution to the Restoration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

18 Albert Sorel, *L’Europe et la Révolution française*, 8 vols. (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et Cie, 1885–1904).

19 Robert R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941); and *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America*, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959–64).

20 See D. M. G. Sutherland, *France, 1789–1815: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

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

administrative, policing, and military organizations headed, and more or less well coordinated by, an executive authority." The state, Skocpol maintained, is "potentially autonomous from (though of course conditioned by) socioeconomic interests and structures," and at base is "geared to maintain control of home territories and populations and to undertake actual or potential military competition with other states in the international system." As applied to France, Skocpol's argument turned upon the efforts of the policymakers and administrators of 1789–99 to uphold their country's competitive status abroad through an unprecedentedly thorough utilization of human and material assets on the home front. For this analyst, accordingly, the cardinal bequest of the Revolution to future generations of French citizens was not (as it had always been for the Marxists) a modernized, more capitalist economy nor (as it was soon to become for the political-cultural school) a novel tradition of democratic republicanism, but rather a reconstructed state power equipped for the European and (increasingly) global struggles to come.

This attempt by a political sociologist to account for the cataclysm of 1789–99 within a context of international politics – though with reference as well to domestic forces of socioeconomic change in the countryside – has provoked a legion of criticisms in learned circles. The cultural historian William H. Sewell, Jr., has probably spoken for a very large number of his colleagues in faulting Skocpol for so rigorously shunning any consideration of cultural and ideological forces in the revolutionary process.<sup>22</sup> Lynn Hunt has commented upon the tautological, lock-step nature of Skocpol's model, in which the causes, process, and outcome of revolution are allegedly conflated in such a manner as to make it virtually impossible to appraise the events and personalities of this dramatic period in their own right.<sup>23</sup> Jack Goldstone, like Skocpol a sociologist, has argued for less of a focus upon the wages of (unsuccessful) military competition and more of a stress upon the destabilization of state and society supposedly induced by "the mounting population and inflationary pressures of the eighteenth century."<sup>24</sup> Critics have in addition complained that Skocpol's comparative schema, encompassing as it does revolutionary change in Russia and China as well as in France, overstates in the French case the revolutionary role of the peasantry and underestimates that of bourgeois and humble townspeople.

22 See William H. Sewell, Jr., "Ideologies and Social Revolutions: Reflections on the French Case," *Journal of Modern History* 57 (1985): 66–67, 84. But see, in the same issue, Skocpol's reply: "Cultural Idioms and Political Ideologies in the Revolutionary Reconstruction of State Power: A Rejoinder to Sewell," pp. 86–96.

23 See Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class*, esp. pp. 221–24.

24 Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 208, 211, and 250. Goldstone's stress upon demographic and derivative economic factors is certainly original and stimulating; nonetheless, I think that he vastly overrates their significance.

What such strictures tell us at the very least is that this explanation of major social revolutions, like any similarly ambitious argument, can be challenged from many perspectives. But it is Hunt's and Sewell's reactions that have struck a particularly resonant chord among those toiling in the trenches of French Revolutionary research, since they raise two especially fundamental questions. First, can we unreservedly endorse Theda Skocpol's thesis that the origins, development, and results of this upheaval were essentially cut from the same cloth, and are therefore to be comprehended today in one set of explanatory terms? If this be true, the historian need not worry about playing up the discontinuities in the revolutionary experience, for they turn out to be less deserving of note than underlying historical continuities. Second, there is Skocpol's premise that a "structuralist" account of the maelstrom of 1789–99 hinging upon the interacting realities of statist competition abroad and statist "semiautonomy" at home has to prove more satisfactory than a "voluntarist" perspective keying upon the revolutionary roles of individual actors and/or social groups and/or ideologies. If this is accurate, the historian must concede that it was the French state, pursuing as a bureaucratic entity geostrategic and impersonal objectives, that instigated, carried out, and benefited from the Revolution, and not previously unempowered individuals or groups of individuals inspired by revolutionary ideology.

This latter assumption – that, for analytical purposes, the state can be reified as a historical "actor" imposing its "will" more or less independently upon society – has been especially challenged in the light of recent work in the field. Scholars usually departing from Furetian analyses of political culture have been blazing new paths in hitherto unexplored hinterlands of gender, linguistic analysis, and all that is currently subsumed under the rubric of the "new cultural history." In doing so, they have usefully suggested novel ways of conceptualizing the (French) state. It may yield rich dividends, Suzanne Desan has written, to view the state "more flexibly as a site of structured negotiation over power, resources, and relationships, rather than simply as a coercive entity separate from society." Such an approach, Desan and other sociocultural historians have maintained, would facilitate inquiries into the exceedingly complex relationships between revolutionary institutions and individuals, relationships mediated by the political culture of the period. The considerable ability of the state to structure social behavior and expectations would continue to be recognized even as governmental norms and procedures are portrayed as being themselves conditioned in part by developments within the revolutionary society at large.<sup>25</sup>

25 See Suzanne Desan, "What's after Political Culture? Recent French Revolutionary Historiography," *French Historical Studies* 23 (Winter 2000): 163–96.

Such theorizing may indeed provide a needed corrective to the Skocpolian tendency to reify the state – in this case, the French Revolutionary state. In a larger, historiographical sense, of course, observations like these also remind us that no explanatory paradigm currently dominates the field of revolutionary studies. What we seem to have, in the wake of the demise of the old socioeconomic argument, is a somewhat decentralized but no less fruitful dialogue between advocates of one or another brand of “social revisionism,” on the one hand, and ever-multiplying proponents of “political-cultural” and “new-cultural” analysis, on the other.

Yet, at the risk of exposing myself to the slings and arrows of informed criticism in this contentious field, I would maintain that there is a way to enlist insights from both the “social revisionists” and the “political-cultural” analysts in the service of an explanation of the French Revolution hinging upon the roles of a carefully redefined French state. For it is certainly arguable that, if subtly conceived, that state can in fact still be seen as crucial to the onset, process, and various outcomes of the Revolution.

On the one hand, no reasonable specialist in this period can deny that the single most pressing reality that those governing or aspiring to govern France had to confront throughout this period was their country’s centrality in the evolving European and extra-European struggle for survival, power, and prestige. This was as inescapable a reality for politicians in the radiant dawn of revolution as it had been for their most cynical predecessors in the *ancien régime*. We need not revert to Albert Sorel’s excessively one-sided preoccupation with the international aspects of the Revolution to make this point. We can, however, note with some interest that the recent inquiries of T. C. W. Blanning into the historical forces and diplomatic calculations behind the French Revolutionary wars point in much the same direction.<sup>26</sup> In addition, we can join Blanning in avowing that the international concerns of France’s leaders were a thread tying the entire revolutionary era to the years preceding it and the years following it. To a certain limited extent, then, the origins, process, and aftermath of the Revolution *were* cut from the same cloth.

On the other hand, just as no fair-minded observer can deny that the revolutionary leaders from start to finish were burdened with the legacies of past wars, the current needs of national defense, and anticipations of possible conflicts to come, so must that same hypothetical observer view the revolutionaries as caught up also in their own interests and expectations of domestic reform and as responding to every imaginable kind of pressure in French politics and society. Hence, it might be particularly advisable,

26 T. C. W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London: Longman, 1986), and, more recently, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787–1802* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

in reassessing the important foreign and domestic policies of the period and retracing the twists and turns of domestic politics, to underscore the complex ways in which those policies and politics, mediated continually by the political culture of the day, mirrored both European *and* uniquely French realities. This is, of course, another way of saying that the French state can only be an effective locus of analysis and vehicle of explanation if it is conceived simultaneously as an initiator of policy and events and as a focal point for political, ideological, and social struggle.

Essentially, what I am proposing to do in this study is to extend to the French Revolution a modified version of the perspective I employed in an earlier book to explain the anterior development, decline, and demise of the old regime.<sup>27</sup> The interpretation, as before, will be synthetic in nature, drawing from the best work in many fields of historiography. Yet it will also be “modified” along the lines indicated above: acknowledging the complexity of revolutionary politics and of state–citizen relationships in this period, it will continually revisit issues of political culture without abandoning a central concern with the roles of governance in France’s public affairs. A brief exposition of the argument would seem at this point to be in order.

Chapter 1 will summarize developments in the old regime. It will first review the increasingly global outreach of French foreign policy after 1715 and suggest how, given changes in the European state system, that outreach was probably destined to fail. Next, it will examine the many ways in which the absolute Bourbon monarchy, insufficiently responsive to strategic realities abroad, also proved in the end to be insufficiently responsive to ever-evolving sociopolitical and ideological realities at home. Finally, it will maintain that the convergence of these statist failures lay behind the unprecedented politicization of the citizenry in the “prerevolution” of 1787–88 and ultimately brought about the government’s financial collapse in the summer of 1788.

Chapter 2 will reexamine the process of France’s descent into full-fledged revolution, from the government’s definitive admission of bankruptcy in August 1788 to the removal of both king and self-proclaimed National Assembly from Versailles to Paris in the wake of the October Days of 1789. The argument will require an initial concentration upon the dangers faced by a paralyzed France in a Europe seemingly primed (as usual) for interstate warfare. The chapter will then turn to the domestic crisis of a government shaken by its revelation of bankruptcy and besieged by polarized social “notables” and popular insurgents. It will reappraise

27 Bailey Stone, *The Genesis of the French Revolution: A Global-Historical Interpretation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

the differing prescriptions for reform offered by Finance Minister Jacques Necker and Louis XVI and then explain how the political initiative during these transitional months gradually shifted from the crown to the most progressive deputies in the National (Constituent) Assembly.

Chapter 3 will reassess the first attempt to stabilize the Revolution – at this juncture, upon the basis of a constitutional Bourbon monarchy – which lasted from October 1789 through the summer of 1791. Our general thesis will again call for an initial concentration upon the challenges confronting the French government in Europe and overseas. The focus then will shift to the domestic front. Chapter 3 at this point will discuss a number of the most significant institutional and social measures enacted by the Constituent Assembly. It will also query to what extent these reforms reflected the state’s multifarious needs and to what extent they resulted from a “domestic” calculus of both “middle-class” interests and more broadly conceived humanitarian concerns. The concluding section of the chapter will deal with the continuing shift of political initiative from the crown and its conservative adherents to the most progressive constituent assemblymen.

Chapter 4 will reassess the “revolutionizing of the Revolution,” an especially dramatic phase in the upheaval that commenced more or less with the first Legislative Assembly sessions in October 1791 and ended abruptly with the fall of the emergency Robespierriest dictatorship in Thermidor, Year II (July 1794). It will be even more imperative now to start with a reappraisal of the international situation, for the evolution of French policy and politics during this entire period took place against the constant backdrop of mounting European challenge to the revolutionary experiment. The next section of Chapter 4, like the analogous section in Chapter 3, will not only review the key domestic measures implemented by the revolutionaries but also reevaluate the roles played in the enactment of those policies by statist calculations on the one hand and by class-oriented and/or genuinely altruistic considerations on the other. The closing section of the chapter will revisit the theme of political radicalization, which during this stage of the Revolution played itself out in the factional struggles of the Legislative Assembly and National Convention, and in the horrific political and ideological climax of the Terror.

Chapter 5 will reexamine the second attempt by the French to achieve some degree of revolutionary stability, this time under the republican auspices of the Thermidorian Convention (1794–95) and Directory (1795–99). Analysis will have to bear first of all upon the gradual but momentous shift in French foreign policy from national defense to national aggrandizement, and upon the European reaction to this development. Chapter 5 will then reinterpret the institutional and social policies of the 1794–99 period in terms of the revolutionaries’ commingled diplomatic and domestic concerns. It will conclude by returning one last time to the question of political

evolution, which in this closing phase of the Revolution expressed itself primarily as a polarization and “militarization” of politics leading directly to the Bonapartist coup of November 1799.

A Conclusion, after briefly restating the central thesis of the study and summarizing the conclusions to be derived from it, will situate the entire revolutionary experience in a broader historical context, with reference to the *longue durée* of early modern, modern, and “contemporary” French (and world) history.

The argument, as outlined above, will “play” the French Revolution as tragedy – but tragedy with a certain ironic twist. At one level, it is easy to view the whole revolutionary experience as demonstrating the relentless durability of *expedience* – the expedience of “bourgeois” class interests, to be sure, but, equally, of French anxieties about and aspirations in Europe – and the ultimate fragility of more altruistic concerns. Whatever some historians may have written, the Revolution was *not* suddenly and fortuitously blown off course as the French turned to massive warfare during the 1790s.<sup>28</sup> In one fashion or another, war inhered in the Revolution from the start, and even before the start: in its causation as well as in its course and its aftermath. The sanguinary Terror of 1793–94 was, in hindsight, implicit not so much in the rhetoric and ideology of the times as in the paramount need of this proud nation to prevail, by whatever desperate means, in the sullied, scarred European world of the late eighteenth century. No faction of politicians could escape from this compelling reality, a reality that from one year to the next came to acquire precedence over all other realities. Whatever the revolutionaries might strive to do for their constituents (and, as we have already noted, our analytical approach obliges us to take account of those ameliorative efforts), they were forced in the end to tailor their dreams and their reforms to statist exigencies even more, perhaps, than to their sense of immediate “class” interest.

At a deeper level of perception, however, the sense of tragedy yields to irony – the irony in the fact that, to one extent or another, *all* persons in the new polity struggling to establish itself had a stake in the restoration of France’s stature in the world, whether or not they were aware of this. It may be true that those on the fringes, or beyond the pale, of “civilized” and domiciled society were in fact as indifferent to the Revolution in general as their chronicler Richard Cobb has suggested in many studies.<sup>29</sup> Moreover,

28 An argument put forth by, among others, François Furet and Denis Richet in *The French Revolution*, trans. Stephen Hardman (New York: Macmillan, 1970), esp. chap. 5.

29 See, for example: Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789–1820* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); *Reactions to the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); and *Paris and Its Provinces, 1792–1802* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

the Revolution insofar as it was a Parisian phenomenon undeniably violated at times the sensibilities (and the material interests) of those in the provinces.<sup>30</sup> Yet again, it is all too obvious that it categorically withheld its most meaningful opportunities, and many of its benefits, from women.<sup>31</sup> Still, even these unfortunates were shielded by the Revolution's military successes from the worst depredations of Europe's other armies (though, on occasion, they were harassed and oppressed by their own troops), and in some instances they genuinely profited from social and economic reforms enacted in this era. As for those adult males definitely sporting the new citizenship, they certainly stood to gain in more concrete ways from innovations that afforded them new civic options while associating them with an eventually triumphant patriotic "cause." The feuding revolutionary leaders, then, if compelled all too often to rob the Peter of socially beneficent expenditure to pay the Paul of military defense and aggrandizement, nevertheless were directly or indirectly serving the interests of Frenchmen (and, yes, politically unenfranchised Frenchwomen too) in *all* walks of life.

We might sound one final cautionary note in this connection. No matter how necessary it may be for our analytical purposes to separate the revolutionary leaders' governmental priorities from all the political and ideological and social issues they had constantly to engage, in the daily affairs of the Revolution these innumerable and conflicting matters could not be so easily sorted out. Still, we can assert in general terms that France's guiding spirits were striving to fashion and control critical foreign and domestic policies even as they themselves were borne upon the tide of clamorous events. And in this, as in much else, the years of upheaval testified both to the dogged continuities of French history and to the exhilarating novelties of revolutionary hopes and actions.

30 This has been pointed out in numerous excellent monographs on the Revolution in the provinces. For one of the most recent of these works, see Alan Forrest, *The Revolution in Provincial France: Aquitaine, 1789–1799* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Our study will have to deal recurrently with the tensions between the capital and the provinces during the revolutionary era.

31 There is a steadily growing corpus of works on the roles of women in the revolutionary era. See, as examples in point: Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Sara Melzer and Leslie Rabine, eds., *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Shirley E. Roessler, *Out of the Shadows: Women and Politics in the French Revolution, 1789–1795* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996); and Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and the French Revolution*, trans. Katherine Streip (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Many other titles could be added to the list.