Introduction

The entity we know as France is the product of a centuries-long evolution, during which a complex of regional societies was welded together by political action, by the desire for territorial aggrandisement of a succession of monarchs, ministers and soldiers. There was nothing inevitable about the outcome. It was far from being a linear development, and we must try to avoid a teleological approach to explaining its course. The central feature was the emergence of a relatively strong state in the Ile-de-France and the expansion of its authority. Our task is to explain how and why this occurred.

The invitation to write a book covering such an extensive chronological period raises prospects both attractive and daunting. It represents an opportunity to set the normally more restricted concerns of the professional historian within a broad historical context, but also creates major problems of perspective and of approach. Questions will always be asked concerning 'the extent to which it is possible to reconstruct the past from the remains it has left behind' (R. J. Evans). The evidence historians have to deal with is made up of fragments, often chance survivals, which need to be contextualised in an effort to reconstruct their meaning. Every history is selective, but none more so than a work covering so many centuries. The problem is what to select, how best to make sense of the chaos of events, of the succession of generations that is at the heart of history, and how to define historical time and the shifting boundaries between continuity and change. A descriptive, chronologically organised political history would be possible, but would run the risk of turning into a meaningless catalogue of great men and their acts.

The emergence of social history from the 1920s, often associated with Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, founders of the so-called *Annales* school, required even the political historian to set great men and the evolving institutions of the state within the context of changing social systems. As historians continued their self-critical dialogue with the past and debated the relative importance of economic, cultural and ideological factors in the process of social formation and change, a proliferation of approaches developed. The appealing simplicities of a structuralist, class-based and neo-Marxist approach, associated in the 1960s and 1970s with Fernand Braudel and Ernest Labrousse, were rejected as over-deterministic and leading to a reductionist neglect of the 'historical actors', of 'culture' and of community. A determination to integrate the 'poor' into the historical record was followed by a desire to recognise the significance of gender and ethnicity as keys to the explanation of choice and behaviour. The insights of social anthropology have also been deployed to create an awareness of the importance of language, images and symbolic action in the construction of social identity and of a 'cultural' history that assumes that ideology, rather than society and the economy, is central to the human experience.

In the absence of general laws of historical development and as a result of a greater awareness of the sheer complexity of human interaction, a crisis of confidence developed amongst historians. This deepened in the face of a challenge from a 'post-structuralist' and 'postmodernist' philosophy associated with Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others, which, at its most extreme, emphasises that every perception of 'reality' is mediated by language, that every text has a range of possible meanings and that historical research itself is nothing more than a reflection on discourse. If the past has no reality outside the historians' representation of it, it follows that 'reality' cannot be distinguished from its representation. History thus becomes merely one literary genre amongst others, little different from the novel.

Valuable in encouraging historians to question their assumptions, a post-structuralism that challenges the bases on which the social sciences have been constructed, including the belief in a verifiable knowledge and the value of empirical research, has ultimately to be dismissed as an intellectual dead end: as little more than the

rehashing of ancient philosophical arguments concerning the nature of reality. Jargon-ridden and increasingly self-referential, postmodernism became a caricature of itself, an arrogant and élitist linguistic game. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the need to develop more complex and inclusive models of causation, it is also vital to approach 'culture and identity, . . .language and consciousness, as changing phenomena to be explained rather than as the ultimate explanation of all other social phenomena' (Tilly). Individuals develop a social awareness within the multiplicity of complex situations experienced in daily life. Identity is not a constant. The construction of a meaningful explanatory context by the historian requires acknowledgement of the large- as well as the small-scale structures that impinge on the individual and provide the bases for social interaction.

The real crisis facing history is probably its fragmentation. Typically the professional historian engages in research leading to the publication of monographs designed to advance knowledge and analysis, in teaching intended to develop critical and questioning attitudes amongst students and in what the French refer to as 'vulgarisation' – a most unfortunate term to describe the essential task of communicating with the widest possible audience. The challenge this imposes is to reconcile professional credibility with the commercial demands of the media. Both in print and on television, demands for accessibility threaten to result in simplifying distortions of complex historical situations and a return to the worst kind of descriptive history, together with accounts of the deeds of the great that, by downplaying context, ignore the revolution in historical method inaugurated almost a century ago by Bloch and Febvre.

The central theme of this book is thus the continuing process of interaction between state and society. The state has been defined by the historical sociologist Theda Skocpol (in *States and Social Revolution*, 1979) as 'a set of administrative, policing and military organisations headed, and more or less well coordinated, by an executive authority'. The maintenance of these administrative and coercive organisations of course requires the extraction of resources from society – demands that are magnified in the case of war, which has in consequence served as a major stimulus to the evolution of state institutions. At least since John Locke, liberal writers have

tended to concentrate on the state as a morally neutral force, enforcing law and order and defending its citizens against external threats. This ignores the question of the social origins of legislators and law enforcers, the ways in which they perceived their roles, and their attitudes towards those over whom they ruled. The alternative tradition is represented by Karl Marx and the Italian sociologists Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, who saw the state as the instrument of a ruling minority, and by Antonio Gramsci, who insisted upon the significance not only of coercive state institutions but of the cultural predominance achieved by social élites as means of maintaining social control and limiting the impact of otherwise competing value systems.

This is not to argue that the state somehow automatically represents the interests of a socially dominant class. It is certainly not to argue that the state is ever a unified entity. Its capacity for intervention in society varies over time and between places. The state's engagement in institutional, political and military competition and efforts to strengthen its own institutions might well lead to conflict over the appropriation of resources. Nevertheless, the recruitment of senior state officials overwhelmingly from amongst members of social élites, and the superior capacity of these to influence the representatives of the state, strongly suggest a predominating influence. Even if this is accepted, however, competition *within* the élites to influence or control state activities remains a potent source of conflict.

The central questions posed are about political power. Why is it so important? Who possesses it? How is it used? In whose interests, and with what consequences? How do *subjects* react to the activities of *rulers*? The likelihood of collective resistance appears to have been determined by established perceptions of rights and justice, capacity for organisation, opportunities for protest, and perceptions of the likelihood of success or the prospects of repression, and thus to have been influenced by changes both in social structures and relationships and in institutional arrangements. Why does political change occur?

It should be evident that these are questions about social systems as well as political structures and behaviour. Indeed, it should be obvious that social order is maintained not simply, or even primarily, through state activity but by means of a wide range of social

institutions, including the family and local community, religious, educational and charitable bodies, and tenurial and workplace relationships – not according to some carefully conceived overall plan but because the processes of socialisation, and day-to-day contacts, serve to legitimise and enforce a wide range of dependencies. The forms of control exercised are largely determined by the attitudes created in daily life – in short, by the rationale of the age, and of the group – as well as by the social structure and resources employed by both the state and social élites. The sense of powerlessness so common amongst the poor and their need to be prudent suggest that the absence of overt conflict does not necessarily mean the non-existence of social and political tension.

Some social groups have been privileged as subjects for historical study, others marginalised. Fashions change, however, as the development of 'history from below' and of less condescending attitudes towards the urban and rural populations has made clear. Predominantly male historians, employing documentary sources largely produced by men, have also been accused – and with reason – of gender blindness. This is not the place to argue the merits of community or class as opposed to gender as analytical categories, nor to consider the practical difficulties of introducing gender as a concept into a history of France. Suffice it to say what has become and always should have been obvious, namely that men and women have unique as well as shared experiences and that gendered perceptions affect the formation of social identity and the whole range of economic, social and political discourse and activity. The historian's objective ought to be 'to integrate any experience that was defined by gender into the wider social and economic framework' (Hufton), whilst acknowledging that gender too is culturally and historically conditioned.

Another dimension that we would ignore at our peril is the spatial – a theme that Fernand Braudel, reflecting the French tradition of close association between history and geography, made so much his own. The crucial importance of communications networks in limiting or facilitating the scope of both economic and political activity, and the diffusion of ideas, will become obvious in the course of this book. The main purpose of this brief introduction, however, is to set the scene by considering some of the continuities in French history.

An obvious feature of France (within its modern boundaries) is its geographical diversity. The geographer Philippe Pinchemel distinguishes five natural regions: an oceanic and temperate zone in the *north-west*, extending from the Vendée to Champagne, which is a lowland region, covered with a thick layer of fertile soil with abundant rainfall; the *north-east*, an area of plateaux and limestone cuestas with, apart from isolated fertile areas, poor soils, and suffering from severe continental climatic conditions; the *south-west*, with its plains, hills and plateaux, is greener, more fertile and less rock-strewn than the *south-east*, which is a region stretching from the Limousin to the plains of Provence, from Roussillon to the plains of the Saône, which he describes as a 'mosaic. . .full of natural contrasts', with infertile limestone plateaux, and steep hillsides interspersed with small, discontinuous, and fertile areas of plain and valley enjoying a Mediterranean climate; and, finally, the *mountains* – the Massif Central, Jura, Alps and Pyrenees – which are inhospitable to settlement because of their thin soils and short growing season, and obstacles to the movement of people and goods. If in general terms the north belongs to the temperate climatic zone, and the south with its dry summers and high temperatures to the Mediterranean, the mountains complicate the picture, in particular pushing northern climatic traits towards the south. Furthermore, as one moves inland, oceanic climatic traits give way to continental tendencies. In climatic terms, then, France is characterised by important local variations, by a high degree of irregularity and seasonal anomalies in temperature and rainfall. Since time immemorial, and well into the nineteenth century – for as long as low-productivity agricultural systems and isolation persisted – the menace posed to staple cereal harvests by adverse climatic conditions, most notably in the north by wet summers and in the south by drought, represented the threat of malnutrition or worse for the poor. At no other time was the pivotal question of the control of scarce resources, of access to land and food supplies, presented with such acuity. By intensifying social tension, poor harvests created major political problems.

Nevertheless, societies subjected to climatic stress were capable of adaptation. The development of the French landscape is indeed evidence of continuous human adjustment, not only to geographical imperatives but also to changing population densities and to

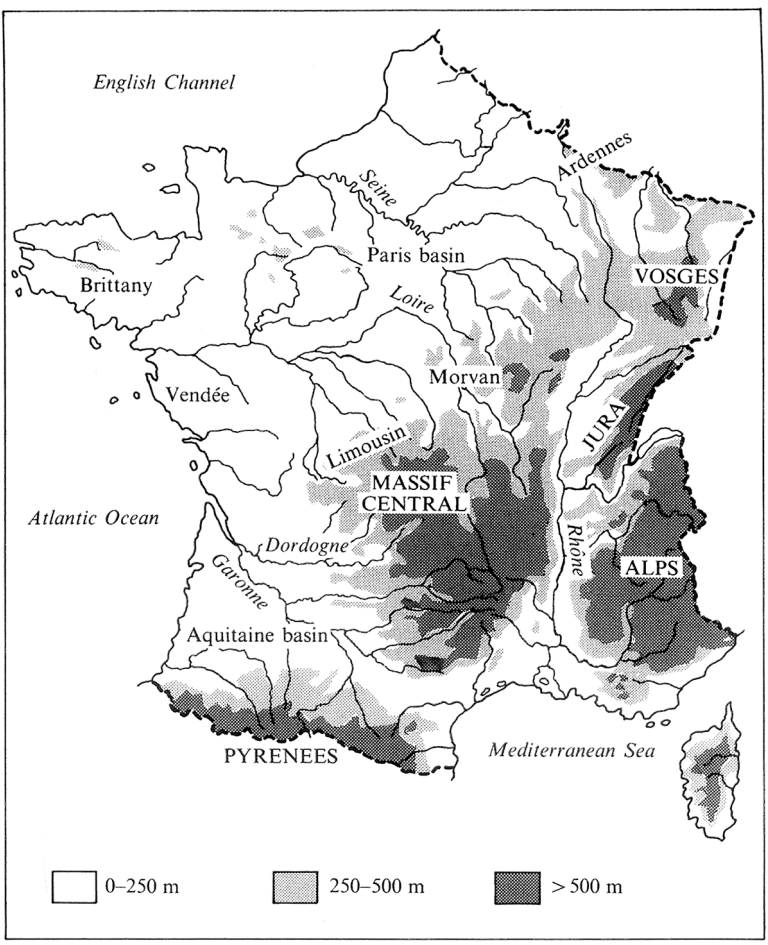

Figure I.1 Relief map of France

socio-political pressures. Rural and urban landscapes alike are the product of a complex interaction between natural conditions and technological and demographic change, and of the complicated overlap between phases of development. The twentieth century, and especially the post-Second-World-War years with mechanisation, the use of chemical weedkillers and fertilisers and the amalgamation of farms, saw more thoroughgoing changes than any other, but the contrasts between areas of enclosed and open field, often created in

the Middle Ages as settlement spread along the river valleys and plains and lower slopes, still affect the landscape. In Picardy, the Ile-de-France, Nord and Champagne, and much of eastern France in particular, wide open spaces with few trees are associated with nucleated villages and the concentration of population, although the customary practices associated with the communal grazing and collective rotation of the three-field system began to disappear from the early nineteenth century. The Mediterranean region, even though the transport revolution transformed the agriculture of its plains by giving access to mass markets for wine, also remains marked by earlier structures, with its concentrated habitat and the remains of terraces cut into the hillsides, signifying the continuing struggle for subsistence. Only from the late nineteenth century, as population densities in the countryside declined, as autarky became unnecessary with access to reliable external supplies, did the long extension of cereal cultivation come to an end. Throughout the west, the landscape is still marked by enclosure and dispersed settlement patterns, indicating a gradual process of colonisation of the land in the Middle Ages. Although changes in scale have obviously occurred, the basic structure of settlement has remained remarkably permanent since the end of the Middle Ages. Thick hedges or granite walls mark boundaries and provide shelter for animals, whilst complex networks of often sunken lanes provide access to the fields. Lower Normandy and Brittany, Anjou, Maine and the Vendée provide other distinctive types, where arable farming in the valley bottoms was combined with the exploitation of forest resources and upland pastures. Soil structures and natural resources rather than farming methods affected the capacity of local economies to sustain population. Densities therefore varied considerably as did living standards. Traditional building styles, often disguised by modern additions, provide further reminders of past regional distinctiveness. The railway, motor transport and declines in transport costs have led to the mass production of building materials and greater uniformity in construction in both town and country as brick, and later concrete, replaced worked stone or wood.

In the traditional social system prevailing until the nineteenth century – overwhelmingly rural – the major stimulus to increased agricultural production was population growth, and the means

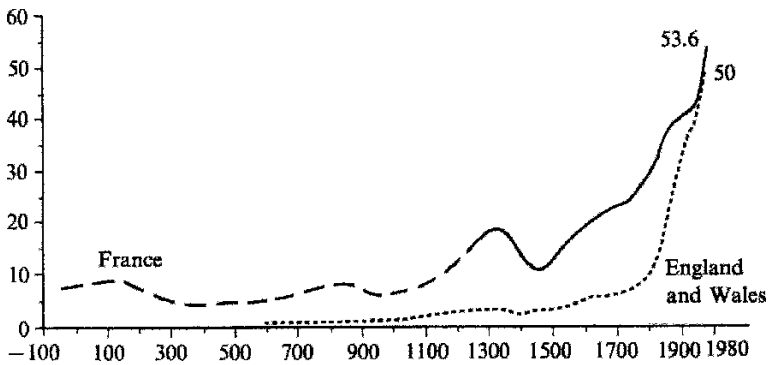

Figure I.2 Comparative evolution of population (in millions). France, and England and Wales.

employed to secure more food involved primarily the cultivation of previously unused land, and the more frequent cropping of the existing arable land, with slow improvements in crop rotation. Overuse and the farming of marginal land reduced productivity and increased the likelihood of harvest failure, undernourishment, the spread of disease, and the high mortality associated with a generally impoverished environment. This largely explains the obsessive popular concern with subsistence. In modern society the main stimulus to increasing agricultural production is urbanisation, and the changes in diet made possible by industrialisation and greater prosperity. Food supplies are secure because of the possibility of importation, and productivity increased by means primarily of technical change – fodder crops, increased specialisation and, most recently, motorisation, fertilisers, weedkillers, artificial insemination, and selective animal and plant breeding accompanied by the amalgamation of farms. Capital has increasingly replaced land and labour as the major factor of production. Cheap bulk transport and the more rapid diffusion of information have brought new opportunities for farmers, but within far more competitive markets.

The evolution of the population also had a major impact on the environment, promoting successive waves of land clearance and the cutting down of forests until the later nineteenth century, and then, through urbanisation, the extension of towns and cities into the surrounding rural areas, and the reconstruction of the cities themselves, as

railway lines and broad boulevards permitted the easier penetration of goods and people, and eliminated the picturesque confusion of the late medieval to early modern structures, which survived until the middle of the nineteenth century. Again, the post-1945 years have seen far more extensive destruction and building than ever before. The centuries-long creation of an urban network has been of crucial significance for the overall development of French society. In so many respects, market villages and towns of varying sizes were the essential dynamic element within society. Growing as they did on crossroads in the communications systems, their demands served to stimulate the rural production of foodstuffs and manufactures, whilst additionally they exercised growing administrative and political control over their hinterlands.

Constructing a typology is difficult. Slow and expensive communications promoted the development of a network of often small market centres. Most small towns achieved only local or regional significance. The larger centres were, even before the coming of the railway, served by high-capacity water- or seaborne links and by the circulation of thousands of little barges or ships. Paris, benefiting from the Seine and its tributaries, which brought food, fuel and timber for construction, played a central historical role, as did major regional centres such as Lyon, and ports such as Marseille, Bordeaux and Rouen. Their location and activities and those of their hinterlands clearly affected the regional distribution of wealth. They exercised considerable administrative and cultural influence and served as residential centres for local élites and a complex mixture of professional and craftsmen. They also attracted large numbers of the poor and destitute in hope of work or charity. Industrialisation promoted a process of selective and accelerated growth within this essentially medieval urban network. In order to meet the needs of growing populations for housing, work, services, education and hygiene, and to ease the movement of goods and people, the fabric of towns underwent a drastic transformation. Here again, it was population growth, improved communications and market integration that encouraged technological innovation. The structure and technology of manufacturing activity had remained fundamentally unchanged since the Middle Ages. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the application of mechanical power in