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**ALEX CALLINICOS**

**Bourgeois Revolutions and  
Historical Materialism**



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*You never go so far as when you don't know where you are going.*

**Oliver Cromwell**

*The force of circumstances perhaps leads us to results we had not thought of.*

**Louis de Saint-Just**

### **Marxism and the French Revolution**

The world historical significance of the French Revolution is beyond dispute. As Alfred Cobban, one of its leading English historians, put it: ‘The revolution is the strategic centre of modern history. Its interpretation is crucial both for the understanding of the age of social change which preceded it and of the period – now nearly two centuries – of revolution which has followed it.’ [1] Of no form of social theory has this been more true than for Marxism, which treats revolution not merely as an object of scholarly study but as the goal of political

activity. Marx and Engels made clear the significance of the French Revolution in the **Communist Manifesto**. Like the English Revolution of 1640 and the German Revolution which they believed would break out that year, 1848, it was a bourgeois revolution through which ‘the bourgeoisie ... conquered for itself, in the modern representative state, exclusive political sway.’ [2]

Barely a year later, writing in the very thick of revolution, as editor of the **Neue Rheinische Zeitung**, Marx elaborated on this judgement:

The revolution of 1789 (at least in Europe) had as its prototype only the [English] revolution of 1648; the revolution of 1648 only the revolt of the Netherlands against Spain. Both revolutions were a century in advance of their prototypes not only in time but also in content.

In both revolutions the bourgeoisie was the class that *really* headed the movement. The *proletariat* and the *non-bourgeois strata of the middle class* had either not yet any interests separate from those of the bourgeoisie or they did not constitute independent classes or class sub-divisions. Therefore, where they opposed the bourgeoisie, as they did in France in 1793 and 1794, they fought only for the attainment of the aims of the bourgeoisie, even if not *in the manner* of the bourgeoisie. *All French terrorism* was nothing but a *plebeian way* of dealing with the *enemies of the bourgeoisie*, absolutism, feudalism and philistinism.

The revolutions of 1648 and 1789 were not *English* and *French* revolutions, they were revolutions of a *European* type. They did not represent the victory of a *particular* class of society over the *old political order*; they *proclaimed the political order of the new European society*. The bourgeoisie was victorious in these revolutions, but the *victory of the bourgeoisie* was at the same time *the victory of a new social order*, the victory of bourgeois ownership over feudal ownership, of nationality over provincialism, of competition over the guild, of the division of land over primogeniture, of the rule of the landowner over the domination of the owner

by the land, of enlightenment over superstition, of the family over the family name, of industry over heroic idleness, of bourgeois law over medieval privileges. [3]

Marx is unequivocal about both the nature of the class forces involved in the Revolution – above all, the bourgeoisie – and its results, the domination of the capitalist mode of production. His main interest, of course, lies in this outcome, since bourgeois domination for Marx ushers in the epoch of socialist revolution, in which the contradictions of capitalist society lead to the conquest of power by the working class. The significance of bourgeois revolutions for Marxists cannot, however, be restricted to their consequences. By mobilising popular violence to smash the structures of feudal society, these revolutions provided both an example and the beginnings of a tradition on which socialists could draw. Thus, in **The German Ideology** Marx defended Robespierre, Saint-Just and the other Jacobin leaders for their resort to methods of revolutionary terror, calling them ‘the real representatives of revolutionary power, ie, of the class which alone was truly revolutionary, the “innumerable” masses.’ [4]

Indeed during the 1848 Revolution, the victory of which he believed required Jacobin methods, Marx argued that ‘there is only one means by which the murderous death agonies of the old society and the bloody birth throes of the new society can be shortened, simplified and concentrated – and that is by revolutionary terror’. [5] A similar attitude towards the great bourgeois revolutions was displayed by later Marxists. Thus Trotsky, in his polemic in **Where is Britain Going?** against the cult of gradual change practised by British Tories and social democrats alike, invoked the example of the English Revolution, even calling Lenin, ‘The proletarian twentieth-century Cromwell.’ Trotsky continued:

The French bourgeoisie, having falsified the revolution, adopted it and, changing it into small coinage, put it into daily circulation. The British bourgeoisie has erased the very memory of the seventeenth-century revolution by dissolving its past in

gradualness. The advanced British workers will have to rediscover the English revolution and find within its ecclesiastical shell the mighty struggle of social forces. Cromwell was in no case a 'pioneer of labour'. But in the seventeenth-century drama, the British proletariat can find great precedents for revolutionary action. [6]

Marx was not the first thinker to have discovered at work within the French Revolution what Trotsky called 'the mighty struggle of social forces'. During the revolution itself, Barnave, a leader of the Feuillants (constitutional monarchists) in the Legislative Assembly who was guillotined under the Terror, wrote the first sketch of a materialist analysis which traced the fall of the monarchy to the expansion of trade and industry: 'Once the arts and commerce have succeeded in penetrating the people and creating a new means of wealth in support of the industrious class, a revolution in political laws is prepared: a new distribution of wealth involves a new distribution of power. Just as the possession of land gave rise to the aristocracy, industrial property increases the power of the people.' [7] Although Marx does not seem to have read Barnave, he acknowledged the influence of the great generation of bourgeois historians who studied the revolution under the restored monarchy of 1815–48 – Thiers, Mignet, Guizot. [8]

Although it was thus bourgeois writers who pioneered the materialist analysis of the French Revolution, Marx's own influence inspired what Albert Soboul called 'the classical social interpretation' of the French Revolution. [9] Founded by Jean Jaurès at the beginning of the 20th century, when his celebrated **Histoire socialiste de la Révolution Française** was published, perhaps its greatest exponent was Georges Lefebvre. Lefebvre specialised in agrarian history, but also studied the major political events, for example in his immensely influential **The Coming of the French Revolution**, published during the 150th anniversary of the revolution in 1939. His view of its nature echoed Marx's: 'The Revolution is only the crown of a long

economic and social evolution which has made the bourgeoisie the master of the world.’ [10] Not the least of Lefebvre’s achievements was to have encouraged a group of brilliant pupils to study the revolution ‘from below’: the results included Albert Soboul’s **The Parisian Sans-Culottes and the French Revolution 1793–4** (1958), George Rudé’s **The Crowd in the French Revolution** (1959) and Richard Cobb’s **The People’s Armies** (1961, 1963). [11]

Between Lefebvre’s death in 1959 and his own in 1982, Soboul was the chief advocate of the ‘classical social interpretation’. Soboul was a loyal member of the French Communist Party (PCF). The PCF had, since the days of the Popular Front in the 1930s, adopted the Revolution for its own as an anticipation of the ‘national’ road to socialism which they would open in alliance with the ‘progressive’, ‘anti-monopoly’ wing of capital. The Marxist interpretation of the revolution developed especially by Lefebvre and Soboul therefore became associated with the PCF. A somewhat similar process took place with respect to the English Revolution. Here the pioneering modern materialist studies of the revolution were made by the Christian socialist R.H. Tawney. In 1940 however, Christopher Hill, a young Communist historian, published an essay called **The English Revolution 1640**, in which he argued that ‘the English Revolution of 1640–60 was a great social movement like the French Revolution of 1789. The state power protecting an old order that was essentially feudal was violently overthrown, power passed to the hands of a new class, and so the freer development of capitalism was made possible.’ [12] Hill was one of a generation of highly talented CP historians – among the others were Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton and Victor Kiernan – who, after the Second World War under the influence of the economist Maurice Dobb, began to study the evolution of British society ‘from below’ just as Cobb, Rudé and Soboul were similarly investigating the French Revolution. [13] Hill left the CP in 1957, after the

Hungarian Revolution, but continued his explorations of the class forces at work in the English Revolution, perhaps most successfully in **The World Turned Upside Down** (1972).

Today, almost a generation after the pioneering Marxist studies of Hill, Soboul and others, not simply is their work under attack, but a denial that the English and French Revolutions were bourgeois revolutions has become the orthodoxy among academic historians. More surprisingly, this orthodoxy has proved sufficiently powerful to persuade some Marxists that the concept of bourgeois revolution should itself be rejected.

This article is a defence of the Marxist theory of bourgeois revolutions. Its aim is to restate that theory in a form that is not vulnerable to the revisionist criticisms. I argue that, first, bourgeois revolutions are transformations which create the political conditions of capitalist domination. As such, they are not necessarily the work of the bourgeoisie itself, but can be achieved by a variety of different social forces. Secondly, there is no single pattern of bourgeois revolution. Looking at the historical record we can identify two main variants: the 'classical' bourgeois revolutions (Holland 1572, England 1640, America 1776, France 1789) in which broad coalitions of small producers were mobilised to smash the old order; and the bourgeois 'revolutions from above' (German and Italian unification, the American Civil War of 1861–5, the Meiji Restoration of 1868 in Japan) in which the existing state apparatus was used to remove the obstacles to bourgeois domination.

Which kind of revolution occurred depended to a large degree on the phase of capitalist development reached by the world economy; I therefore also discuss the transition from feudalism to capitalism which forms the objective context of these great political struggles. Finally, I briefly discuss a third variant of bourgeois revolution, which Tony Cliff calls 'deflected permanent revolution', the Third World revolutions of the 20th century whose main achievement has been the establishment of

state capitalist regimes.

## The revisionist onslaught

The most important single issue in the debates over the English and French Revolutions has concerned the nature of the class which led the revolution.

Marx believed that ‘the bourgeoisie was the class that *really* headed the movement’. But where was the bourgeoisie to be found in the English Revolution? This was what was at stake in the famous ‘storm over the gentry’ which burst among historians at the end of the 1940s. [14] Tawney argued that the century before the revolution had seen the rise of the gentry, ‘the landed proprietors, above the yeomanry, and below the peerage, together with a growing body of well-to-do farmers,’ who, unlike the bulk of the aristocracy, responded to the great 16th century inflation by ‘rationalizing the administration of their estates and improving their layout’.

More specifically, they consolidated their estates into large farms, began to enclose the commons, invested in land reclamation and engaged in other forms of enterprise such as mining and property speculation. ‘The landowner living on the profits and rents of commercial farming and the merchant or banker who was also a landowner, represented not two classes, but one. Patrician and *parvenu* both owed their ascent to causes of the same order. Judged by the source of their incomes, both were equally bourgeois.’ [15] This rising gentry, then, was the English bourgeoisie, by and for whom the Great Revolution of 1640 was made.

Tawney’s thesis, and its elaboration by Lawrence Stone, was subjected to a demolition job by the Tory historian Hugh Trevor-Roper. The real division in 17th century England, he argued, was not that between a decadent feudal aristocracy and a progressive



capitalist gentry. The gentry were hit as hard by the price revolution as the nobility. Those of either group who prospered did not so much because they adopted capitalist methods on their estates, but because they had access to ‘the tenure of offices of the profits of trade’.

More particularly, the establishment of a centralised monarchy under the Tudors and early Stuarts led to an expansion of lucrative offices which were sold, generally becoming hereditary. The ‘mere gentry’ who could not afford to buy such offices found themselves under increasing economic pressure. Consequently, ‘the significant distinction of Tudor and Stuart landed society’ was that ‘between “court” and “country”, between the office-holders and the mere landlords’. The revolution was a consequence of the antagonism between court and country. The key force in the revolution was the Independents, whose chief leader was Cromwell, but they represented ‘not “rising” gentry’ but ‘the declining gentry’, long alienated from the court and at last given an opportunity to shape events by the crisis brought about by Charles I’s attempt at personal rule. [16]

Trevor-Roper extended his argument in a second essay, where he took issue with Eric Hobsbawm’s claim that the more general crisis of 17th century European society represented ‘the last phase of the general transition from a feudal to a capitalist economy’. [17] The dislocation which provoked ‘almost a general revolution’ in the mid 17th century – not just the Civil War in England but the Thirty Years’ War on the Continent – was not one, argued Trevor-Roper, between the forces and relations of production but ‘a crisis in the relations between society and the state’.

Its outcome – the execution of Charles I – was, however, avoidable: the Stuarts suffered from ‘a fatal lack of political skills’. Thus, had ‘James I or Charles I had the intelligence of Queen Elizabeth or the docility of Louis XIII, the English *ancien regime* might have adapted itself to the new circumstances as

peacefully in the seventeenth century as it would in the nineteenth.’ [18]

This slide into the cock-up theory of history should not obscure the fact that Trevor-Roper, Tory and anti-Marxist though he is, remained committed to the social explanation of historical events: ‘all revolutions, even though they may be occasioned by external causes, and expressed in intellectual form, are made real and formidable by defects of social structure’. [19] His chief difference lay in his conception of social structure, one in which the state enjoyed greater significance than it was given by Tawney or Hobsbawm.

Subsequent opponents of the Marxist interpretation of the English Revolution went much further. In the 1970s a much younger group of historians, generally known as the revisionists, emerged. They – their principal representative was Conrad (now Lord) Russell – were accurately, if disparagingly, described by Stone as ‘young antiquarian empiricists. They write detailed political narratives which implicitly deny any deep seated meaning to history except the accidental whims of fortune and personality.’ [20] In the revisionists’ hands the English Revolution became little more than a scrimmage between provincial notables of no socio-economic or ideological significance. [21]

Controversies concerning the French Revolution have followed, with some time lag, a similar course. [22] Here too the anti-Marxist onslaught was launched by a British historian, Alfred Cobban, in 1955. The central issue was, once again, the nature of the bourgeoisie. Cobban argued that by 1789 there was no clear dividing line between nobility and bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie bought themselves into land on a large scale and were in many cases the owners of the seigneurial rights which were the target of the peasant risings in the summer of 1789.

The so called ‘feudal reaction’ – the systematic use of these rights by many of their owners to squeeze more out of the

peasantry – which underlay these risings, far from being the last gasp of the aristocracy, represented an attempt by both noble and bourgeois landowners to apply modern business techniques in agriculture. The peasants were reacting *against* the penetration of capitalism into the countryside. Similarly, analysis of the composition of the revolutionary assemblies showed that ‘the revolutionary bourgeoisie was primarily the declining class of *officiers* and lawyers and other professional men, and not the businessmen of commerce and industry’. Cobban concluded that ‘the revolution was to an important extent one *against* and not *for* the rising forces of capitalism’. [23]

While Cobban dismissed the contribution of social theory in general, and Marxism in particular to historical understanding, like Trevor-Roper he remained committed to interpreting political events as consequences of more fundamental social forces. [24] Later revisionists, however, rejected any social interpretation of the French Revolution. Thus in 1965 Francois Furet and Denis Richet published a history of the revolution in which the most controversial thesis was that the radicalisation of 1791–2, from the flight to Varennes to the insurrection of 10 August 1792 which overthrew the monarchy and opened the door to the Jacobin dictatorship of 1793–4, represented ‘the skidding off-course of the revolution’ (*le dérapage de la révolution*). The collapse of the liberal compromise between the monarchy and the bourgeoisie embodied in the 1791 Constitution was not inevitable, Furet and Richet argued. [25]

The idea of *dérapage* was subjected to bitter criticism, not all of it from the left. [26] Furet responded in a series of polemical essays which did not reject the concept of bourgeois revolution, but insisted that the ‘bourgeois revolution was made, and completed, without any sort of compromise with the old society, between 1789 and 1791’. Furet drew on Tocqueville’s **The Ancien Regime and the Revolution**, which stressed the continuity between the monarchy and the post-Revolutionary state: the chief work of the Constituent Assembly, the

Convention and the Napoleonic Empire alike was to complete the project of administrative centralisation begun by Philip Augustus in the 12th century. In contrast with this long term process operating through the revolution, there was the unfolding of political events from the storming of the Bastille, through the Terror and Thermidor, to Napoleon's *coup d'état*: 'for in what it involves of permanent *déravage*, and in contradiction with its social nature, [the revolutionary process] ... is constituted by an autonomous political and ideological dynamic.' Central to this dynamic were the ideas of direct democracy motivating the revolutionary clubs and crowds: 'the Jacobin and Terrorist ideology functioned largely as an autonomous instance, independent of political and military circumstances'. It was this ideology rather than class interests or the threat of counter-revolution which explained the radicalisation after 1791. [27]

Furet's polemic reinforced the general drift among historians. Already by 1970, Cobb, whose **People's Armies** had painted a detailed collective portrait of the *sans-culottes*, and who, while never a Marxist, had earlier displayed a certain sympathy towards the Popular Front politics of the PCF, could dismiss the *sans-culotte* as 'a freak of nature, more a state of mind than a social, political or economic entity'. [28]

Historians' attention shifted away from the Year II, the focus of the great studies of the popular movement by Soboul and Rudé as well as by Cobb himself, towards the period before the revolution's *déravage* into a mass mobilisation and Terror, of the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies, and indeed of the 'aristocratic revolution' of 1787 which forced Louis XVI to convene the Estates-General. By 1980 William Doyle could announce the appearance of a 'new international consensus' such that only 'isolated scholars now invoke the capitalist bourgeoisie as a revolutionary force'. Doyle's own attempt to provide a rival account of the revolution's origins to Lefebvre's presented developments between 1787 and 1789 as a succession

of accidents in which much of the impetus for change had come from liberal nobles influenced by the Enlightenment. [29]

In his response to Cobban's first attack on the 'classic social interpretation' of the revolution, Lefebvre had commented:

I do not doubt that it reflects the ideological evolution of the ruling class under the influence of democratic pressure and above all of the Russian Revolution; feeling themselves threatened they repudiate the rebellion by their ancestors which assured them pre-eminence, because they discern in it a dangerous precedent. [30]

This judgement applies even more strongly to Furet's interventions, and especially to his essay *La Révolution Française est Terminée* (*The French Revolution is Over*). This was written in the spring of 1977 at a time when a group of disillusioned ex-Maoists, misnamed the *nouveaux philosophes* (new philosophers), had announced, to the great enthusiasm of the French media, that the Stalinist terror was a necessary consequence of Marxism. Furet explicitly aligned himself with this enterprise: 'Today, the Gulag leads to a rethinking of the Terror, in virtue of an identity of project.' [31]

The *nouveaux philosophes* were a symptom of the 'crisis of Marxism' which afflicted many of the generation of 1968 throughout Western capitalism in the late 1970s; but they also contributed to the bitter struggle between the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Socialist Party under François Mitterrand for dominance of the reformist left in France. Its success in identifying Marxism with Stalinism helped to draw much of the Parisian intelligentsia, Marxist influenced since the liberation in 1944, towards liberalism and social democracy. [32] But while the *nouveaux philosophes* helped secure Mitterrand's hegemony, the Socialist Party regime installed after the 1981 presidential elections still needs the revolution as the traditional source of legitimacy for the French Republic. The rise of the extreme right – not simply Le Pen's *Front National* but sections of the Gaullist RPR – has led to an ideological assault on the revolution itself. Heading this offensive is Pierre Chaunu, a distinguished

historian of the *ancien regime* who seems to have fallen in love with his object of study. Chaunu and his followers have focused on the bloodiest episode in the revolution, the suppression by the Jacobins of the risings by Catholic peasants in the Vendee and other western departments. According to Chaunu:

The Jacobin drift appears today as only the first act, the founding event of a long and bloody series, which goes from 1792 to our days, from the Franco-French genocide of the Catholic West to the Soviet Gulag, to the destructions of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and to the Khmer Rouge self-genocide in Cambodia.

[33]

Mitterand supporters such as Régis Debray and Max Gallo have responded by defending the revolution and even (in Debray's case) the Terror. The result is that the revolution's bicentenary – officially celebrated with great pomp and circumstance and culminating in a meeting in Paris on 14 July 1989 of the Group of Seven, among whom are to be numbered such revolutionaries as George Bush and Margaret Thatcher – is taking place amid intense ideological controversy.

Against this political background it might seem a little surprising that the lead up to the bicentenary should also have seen a Marxist attempt not simply to reject the 'classical social interpretation' of the French Revolution, but the very concept of bourgeois revolution itself. Nevertheless this is precisely what a book by the Canadian Marxist George Comninel, **Rethinking the French Revolution**, sets out to do. Comninel begins by asserting: 'It must now be accepted that the long-standing claims to historical validity of the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution have been exploded.' He largely accepts the revisionist critique: 'The French Revolution was an *intra-class* conflict over basic political relations that at the same time directly touched on relations of surplus-extraction. It was a civil war within the ruling class over the essential issues of surplus-extraction.' Moreover, the pre-revolutionary 'bourgeoisie certainly was not a capitalist class', and capitalist relations of

production existed nowhere in French society, least of all in agriculture, ‘the overwhelmingly predominant sector of social production’ but not even in the rapidly growing manufacturing sector, the profit from which ‘as no more capitalist in character than the surplus produced in Roman manufacture’. Long after the revolution the French state continued to rest on ‘the “extra-economic” modes of surplus extraction that Marx associated with non-capitalist societies in Volume III of **Capital**’. Only with the Third Republic (1871–1940) was a genuinely bourgeois regime installed, ‘by which time capitalism can at last also be said to have existed’. [34] Comninel’s acceptance of the revisionist critique of the Marxist theory of bourgeois revolution is part of a wider attempt to ‘rethink’ historical materialism (see [Appendix](#)).

## **The self emancipation of the bourgeoisie**

The main thrust of the revisionist critique challenges the idea that the bourgeoisie as a class led either the English or the French Revolutions. The difficulty in the English case was well expressed by Tawney himself: ‘Bourgeois revolution? Of course it was a bourgeois revolution. The trouble is that the bourgeoisie was on both sides.’ [35] Comninel summarises the revisionist consensus with respect to France:

The essential proposition is that, since both the nobility and the bourgeoisie had marked *internal* differentiation, and no impermeable boundary existed between them, and the two statuses had a good deal in common in terms of their forms of wealth, professions, and general ideology, it therefore would be more accurate to recognize a *single* ‘elite’ in the *ancien régime* or, more precisely, a dominant social stratum comprising different, but sometimes overlapping ‘elites’. [36]

The revisionist claim is, however, damaging to classical Marxism only on condition that we conceive bourgeois

revolutions as necessarily the result of the self-conscious action of the capitalist class. Such a view has often been defended by Marxists – indeed by Marx himself, for example in the passage cited above where he says that in the English and French Revolutions ‘the bourgeoisie was the class that *really* headed the movement.’ There is indeed a tendency in the Marxist tradition to treat these as the ‘classical’ bourgeois revolutions, in which the capitalist class consciously appropriated political power. As such, these revolutions – but above all the French – then constitute a norm by which other, later candidates for the status of bourgeois revolutions, are judged.

But what happens when these candidates deviate from the norm? Lukács argued that the irrationalist and anti-democratic traditions exploited by the Nazis stemmed from Germany’s failure to follow ‘the normal road of bourgeois-democratic development’. [37] The idea that Germany’s disastrous history in the first half of the 20th century was a consequence of its ‘failed bourgeois revolution’ in the 19th became part of the orthodoxy among liberal and social democratic historians and social scientists in post-war West Germany. Explaining Nazism in terms of Germany’s *Sonderweg* (special path) had political implications: the triumph of fascism could be seen as a peculiarly German aberration rather than as one instance of a general capitalist crisis. [38]

David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley observe in their outstanding critique of the idea of the German *Sonderweg*:

In order to have an aberration it is clearly necessary to have a norm ... here, sometimes explicitly, and often implicitly, it was ‘Western’ and most particularly Anglo-Saxon and French developments that were taken as a yardstick against which German history was measured and found wanting. [39]

The trouble is that the cases which constitute the yardstick may themselves not conform to it. Perry Anderson’s essay *Origins of the Present Crisis* (1962) is an example of what happens when this is recognised but the use in particular of the French



Revolution as a norm is not abandoned. Anderson sought to explain Britain's post-war decline by what he called the 'symbiosis' of the landed aristocracy and the industrial bourgeoisie. This process could be traced back to the English Revolution, '*the first, most mediated, and least pure bourgeois revolution of any major European country*', 'a "bourgeois revolution" by proxy', made by a section of the gentry which could not be identified with 'a rising bourgeoisie'. 'Thus the three crucial idiosyncrasies of the English Revolution, which have determined the whole of our subsequent history': first, the effect of the Revolutions of 1640 and 1688 in stimulating the development of capitalism; secondly, the '*permanent partial interpenetration*' of aristocracy and bourgeoisie on terms favouring the former's continued hegemony; thirdly, the limits of Puritanism as a revolutionary ideology, which 'because of its "primitive", pre-Enlightenment character, ... founded no universal tradition in Britain.' [40]

His interpretation of English history implies that Britain's economic decline relative to other developed capitalist societies could be reversed by a bourgeois 'modernisation' which eliminated those features – the monarchy, House of Lords, electoral system, etc. – which represent a deviation from the norm. Much of the most celebrated and powerful of the many critiques of Anderson was Edward Thompson's great essay *The Peculiarities of the English*, one of whose targets was 'a model which concentrates attention upon one dramatic episode – *the Revolution* – to which all that goes before must be related; and which insists upon an ideal type of this Revolution against which all these others may be judged.' [41]

It is the French Revolution which provides Anderson with the source of his ideal type by which its English counterpart is found wanting. But what happens if even the French case deviates from the norm? Eley argues:

The idea of Germany's failed bourgeois revolution contains one further assumption that is the most dubious of all, namely that the

model of ‘bourgeois revolution’ attributed to Britain and France (i.e. that of a forcibly acquired liberal democracy seized by a triumphant bourgeoisie, acting politically as a class, in conscious struggle against a feudal aristocracy) actually occurred. This assumption is both basic and extremely questionable. For the thesis of the abortive bourgeois revolution ... presupposes a reading of the English and French experiences which is effectively discredited. [42]

Where are we left if even the French Revolution cannot be seen unproblematically as the self conscious action of the bourgeoisie?

## **The structure of bourgeois revolution**

Responding to the revisionist attacks requires a shift in focus. Bourgeois revolutions must be understood, not as revolutions consciously made by capitalists, but as revolutions which promote capitalism. The emphasis should shift from the class which makes a bourgeois revolution to the effects of such a revolution – to the class which benefits from it. More specifically, a bourgeois revolution is a political transformation – a change in state power, which is the precondition for large scale capital accumulation and the establishment of the bourgeoisie as the dominant class. This definition requires, then, a political change with certain effects. It says nothing about the social forces which carry through the transformation.

Comninel would, I imagine, dismiss this formulation as a defensive manoeuvre designed to protect the theory of bourgeois revolutions from empirical refutation by the revisionists. But some such definition is required once we extend our gaze beyond the ‘classical’ bourgeois revolutions – the Netherlands, England, America, France – to consider other, more recent candidates, in particular, German and Italian unification, completed almost simultaneously at the end of the 1860s, and

the Meiji Restoration of 1868 in Japan. Thus Gramsci, long before the revisionists had appeared, characterised the Italian *Risorgimento*, achieved by the monarchy of Sardinia Piedmont through the incorporation of both the northern bourgeoisie and the traditionally land owning classes, especially in the south, as a process of ‘passive revolution’, in which ‘an ever more extensive ruling class’ was formed through ‘the gradual but continuous absorption, achieved by methods which varied in their effectiveness, of the active elements produced by allied groups – and even of those which came from antagonistic groups and seemed irreconcilably hostile.’ [43]

It was on the basis of a comparison of the cases of England, France, and Germany that Nicos Poulantzas argued that:

no paradigm case of the bourgeois revolution can be found. However, one very striking point common to every case should perhaps be noted: namely *the bourgeoisie’s lack of political capacity (because of its class constitution) successfully to lead its own revolution in open action ...* The all-important factor here is the *non-typical* character ... of the various bourgeois revolution. [44]

Although Poulantzas dismisses as ‘mythical’ the idea that the French Revolution is ‘the example of a “typically” successful bourgeois revolution’ [45], he does in fact think that bourgeois revolutions have a ‘characteristic feature’, namely that they are not the conscious work of the bourgeoisie. What was supposed to be a problem for treating 1640 or 1789 as bourgeois revolutions now becomes (dare one say) typical. Poulantzas’s stress on the ‘political incapacity’ of the bourgeoisie stems from his belief that the processes of economic competition so fragment the capitalist class as to deprive them of cohesion. It seems to me that he overstates his case: as Paul McGarr shows elsewhere in this journal and as I argue below, the French Revolution was carried through under bourgeois leadership. It is, however, exceptional for the capitalist class to play the leading role in bourgeois revolutions.

But how can this be so? Lukács provides an important element of the answer in his critique of Luxemburg's essay *The Russian Revolution*. Luxemburg's objections to Bolshevik strategy reflect, according to Lukács, an underlying misunderstanding: 'she imagines the proletarian revolution as having the structural forms of bourgeois revolutions.' Proletarian revolutions do not simply inherit an economic structure from capitalism which is implicitly socialist. On the contrary, 'after the fall of capitalism a lengthy and painful process sets in', involving the 'conscious transformation of the whole of society'.

It is this that constitutes the most profound difference between bourgeois and proletarian revolutions. The ability of bourgeois revolutions to storm ahead with such brilliant élan is grounded socially, in the fact that *they are drawing the consequences of an almost completed economic and social process in a society whose feudal and absolutist structure has been profoundly undermined politically, governmentally, juridically, etc., by the vigorous upsurge of capitalism*. The truly revolutionary element is the economic transformation of the feudal system of production into a capitalist one so that it would be possible in theory for *this process to take place without a bourgeois revolution*, without political upheaval on the part of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. And in that case those parts of the feudal and absolutist superstructure that were not eliminated by 'revolutions from above' would collapse of their own accord when capitalism was already fully developed. (The German situation fits this pattern in certain respects.) [46]

Capitalism, involving (though not, as we shall see in the next section, reducible to) the spread of commodity circulation, necessarily develops in a piecemeal and decentralised way within the framework of feudal political domination. It gradually subverts the old order through the infiltration of the whole network of social relationships and the accumulation of economic and political power by capitalists. The effect is both to the many capitalists to the ancien régime but also to change the nature of that régime, so that old forms conceal new, bourgeois relationships.

Does this mean, as Lukács suggests, that at the limit this subtle process of socio-economic transformation can dispense with the political overthrow of the *ancien régime*? Gareth Stedman-Jones indeed seems to suggest that bourgeois revolution is this process: ‘the triumph of the bourgeoisie should be seen as the global victory of a particular form of property relations and a particular form of control over the means of production, rather than as the conscious triumph of a class subject which possessed a distinct and coherent view of the world.’ [47] This is, once again, to go too far. For as should become clearer below, the dominance of the capitalist mode of production requires a political transformation, a change in the nature of state power. Moreover, the term ‘revolution’ should not be dissolved into the long-term socio-processes involved in the development of capitalism. Anderson rightly insists that ‘a revolution is an episode of convulsive political transformation, compressed in time and concentrated in target, that has a determinate beginning – when the old state apparatus is still intact – and a finite end when that apparatus is decisively broken and a new one erected in its stead.’ [48] Bourgeois revolutions should be understood as revolutions in this sense. Consequently, it is necessary to distinguish, as Eley puts it,

between two levels of determination and significance – between the revolution as a specific crisis of the state, involving widespread popular mobilization and a reconstitution of political relationships, and on the other hand the deeper processes of structural change, involving the increasing predominance of the capitalist mode of production, the potential obsolescence of many existing practices and institutions, and the uneven transformation of social relations.

[49]

Bourgeois revolutions exist at the intersection between objective historical processes and conscious human agency. As ‘episodes of convulsive political transformation’ they involve forms of collective action, including the intervention of political organisations of various kinds. But bourgeois revolutions also arise from and contribute to ‘the increasing predominance of the

capitalist mode of production'. As such, they tend to involve a gap between the intentions of the revolutionary actors and the objective consequences of their struggles.

Hill and Soboul, perhaps the most outstanding Marxist students of bourgeois revolution in the past generation, tended increasingly to stress this latter feature. Thus Soboul wrote in a book published in 1982 that even though the Jacobins

had as their ideal a society of independent small producers, the results of the Revolution nonetheless remained quite different: they cannot be measured by the intentions of its artisans. The initiators of a social movement are not necessarily its beneficiaries: the fact that several of the leaders of the bourgeois revolution were not real bourgeois does not affect the argument. History, moreover, is not made only by the actors who occupy the front of the stage. [50]

Similarly, Hill has in recent years insisted that 'the Marxist conception of a bourgeois revolution, which I find the most helpful model for understanding the English Revolution, does not mean a revolution made by the bourgeoisie.' [51] Indeed, he has written of the English Revolution: 'Like the French Revolution, it took those who had to guide it completely by surprise', and even, 'It is of the essence of the situation that no one really understood what was happening.' [52]

Bourgeois revolutions are, then, political transformations which facilitate the dominance of the capitalist mode of production; it is in no sense a necessary condition of such revolutions that they are made by the bourgeoisie themselves. This definition allows us to distinguish between variants of bourgeois revolution. But before considering these we must first examine the objective processes of capitalist development with which they interact.

## **Paths to capitalism**

The transition from feudalism to capitalism has been a subject of enormous controversy among Marxist historians and economists. The most celebrated debate on the question took place during the 1950s in the pages of the American journal **Science and Society** among members or sympathisers of the Communist Parties. It was provoked by Maurice Dobb's **Studies in the Development of Capitalism** (1946). Dobb defined feudalism as 'virtually identical with what we generally mean by serfdom: an obligation laid on the producer by force and independently of his own volition to fulfil certain economic demands of an overlord, whether these demands take the form of services to be performed or of dues paid in money or in kind.' Feudalism, he argued, was compatible with the relatively developed existence of markets. Consequently he rejected explanations of the decline of feudalism and rise of capitalism which gave primacy to the spread of trade and the growth of the towns as centres of commerce. Dobb argued that the merchant oligarchies of the early modern cities and the guild systems over which they presided acted as an obstacle to the development of capitalist production relations based on the exploitation of wage labour. The decisive change came with 'the birth of a capitalist class from the ranks of production itself', as the 'yeoman farmer of moderate means or handicraft small master' began 'to place greater reliance on the results of hired labour than on the work of himself and his family, and in his calculations to relate the gains of his enterprise to his capital rather than to his own exertions.'

[53]

This interpretation was strongly challenged by the American Marxist Paul Sweezy, who insisted that the main causes of the decline of feudalism were the rise of the towns and the spread of the market. Nevertheless, the general drift of the subsequent debate – and perhaps particularly the major contribution by the Japanese historian Kohachiro Takahashi – was in Dobb's favour.

[54] One reason for this outcome was the support apparently given to Dobb's position by Marx's own views in **Capital**

Volume III. Chapter XX is devoted to *Historical Facts about Merchant's Capital*, merchant's capital being the form of capital predominant in the early modern era, in which profits are derived not from the direct extraction of surplus value from wage labour (the basis of what Marx calls productive capital) but from the purchase and sale of commodities. Marx calls merchant's capital 'historically the oldest free state of existence of capital': 'In all previous modes of production, and all the more wherever production ministers the immediate wants of the producer, merchant's capital appears to perform the function *par excellence* of capital.' Marx goes on to argue:

Money and commodity circulation can mediate between spheres of production of widely different organisation, whose internal structure is still chiefly adjusted to the output of use values ... [Merchant's capital] in which spheres of production are connected by a third, has a two fold existence. On the one hand, that circulation has not yet established a hold on production, but is related to it as a given premiss. On the other hand, that the production process has not yet absorbed circulation as a mere phase of production. Both, however, are the case in capitalist production. [55]

This does not mean, of course, that Marx denies any significance to the expansion of mercantile capitalism but he accords a decisive role to the prevailing relations of production. Their character would condition the impact of expanding trade upon the social formation in question, and thereby the nature of the subsequent transition to the capitalist mode of production, in which, as he shows in Part 8 of **Capital** Volume I, involved crucially the direct producers' separation from the means of production and subordination to capitals themselves subject to the pressures of competitive accumulation. Marx therefore goes on to distinguish two paths to capitalism:

The transition from the feudal mode of production is twofold. The producer becomes merchant and capitalist, in contrast to the natural agricultural economy and the guild bound handicrafts of the medieval urban industries. This is the really revolutionising path.



Or else, the merchant establishes direct sway over production. However much this serves historically as a stepping stone ... it cannot by itself contribute to the overthrow of the old mode of production, but tends rather to preserve and retain it as its precondition. [56]

This distinction came to be known as that between Way I, in which petty commodity producers develop into productive capitalists, and Way II, in which urban merchants progressively establish control over production, for example through the putting out system whereby they provided raw materials and sometimes money capital to rural cottage industries. Way I, Marx's 'really revolutionising path', certainly seemed to correspond to Dobb's idea of 'the birth of a capitalist class from the ranks of production itself'. It was Takahashi who most comprehensively drew the implications of the idea of the two paths for the understanding of bourgeois revolution:

In both England and France that revolution had at its basis the class of free and independent peasants and the class of small and middle scale commodity producers. The revolution was a strenuous struggle for state power between a group of the middle class (the Independents in the English Revolution, the Montagnards in the French), and a group of the *haute bourgeoisie* originating in the feudal land aristocracy, the merchant and financial monopolists (in the English Revolution the Royalists and after them the Presbyterians, in the French Revolution the Monarchiens, then the Feuillants, finally the Girondins); in the process of both revolutions, the former routed the latter ...

However, in Prussia and Japan it was quite the contrary ... the erection of capitalism under the control of the feudal absolute state was on the cards from the very first ... Since capitalism had to be erected on this soil, on a basis of fusion rather than conflict with absolutism, the formation of capitalism took place in the opposite way to Western Europe, predominantly as a process of transformation of putting out merchant capital into industrial capital. [57]

Lenin had drawn a broadly similar distinction when discussing the development of capitalism in Russian agriculture. He argued

that there are ‘two paths of objectively bourgeois development’ – the ‘Prussian path’ in which feudal lords gradually become capitalist landowners and the ‘American path’ in which small peasants evolve into commercial farmers.

For Lenin, a society’s path of bourgeois development depends not simply on the prevailing relations of production but on political developments, and in particular on whether the small producers are able to sweep away the lords’ estates by revolutionary means. [58] The fruitful implications of this approach for understanding the varieties of bourgeois revolution should be obvious. This focus on different historical trajectories has in recent years been challenged by a considerably developed version of the Sweezy thesis. Its main advocate is Immanuel Wallerstein who insists that ‘the correct unit of analysis’ in analysing the transition to capitalism is ‘the world system’, more specifically ‘the European world economy’ which emerged in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. [59]

The Sweezy-Wallerstein school has been subjected to the most thorough and forceful criticism by Robert Brenner. [60] Brenner’s argument involves drawing a sharp distinction between capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. Capitalism is characterised by ‘modern economic growth’, in which the rapid development of the productive forces is made possible by investments which increase the productivity of labour; in Marx’s terms these involve the extraction of relative, rather than absolute surplus value – higher productivity allows the rate of exploitation to be increased by reducing the share of labour time devoted to the reproduction of the worker, rather than by extending the working day. Such a mode of development is impossible in pre-capitalist formations. Consequently, pre-capitalist modes are subject to a long-term tendency towards stagnation: in the case of feudal Europe this took the form of ‘Malthusian’ crises in which the rate of population growth outstripping that of agricultural output.

Under capitalism, by contrast, both main classes have an incentive to develop the productive forces intensively: the capitalist is subject to the pressure of competitive accumulation; the worker, by contrast, separated from the means of production, can gain access to the means of subsistence only by selling his or her labour power on terms which subject him or her to pressure to increase output through a variety of mechanisms. There is then a qualitative difference between capitalist relations of production constituted by the exploitation of wage labour and those forms, even when involved in production for the market, which are based on coerced labour. [61]

This analysis underlay Brenner's celebrated interpretation of the role of agriculture in the development of capitalism. First put forward in 1976, it provoked a controversy which although involving primarily non-Marxist historians, was in many respects a continuation of the debate on Dobb's **Studies**. Brenner distinguished three outcomes of the late medieval crisis of feudalism. The first, east of the Elbe, involved the intensification of serfdom. The second, most importantly in France, saw, on the one hand, peasant communities securing effective possession of a large proportion of the land, and, on the other, the development of the 'centralised state' into 'a "class like phenomenon", that is "as an independent extractor of the surplus" in particular on the basis of its arbitrary power to tax the land.' The third was found only in England, where the lords were able to prevent the peasants from winning freehold title to the land; there emerged, consequently, the classical 'trinity' of commercial landowner, capitalist tenant, and wage labourer.

Brenner advanced three theses. The first was that the late medieval crisis reflected the way in which feudal property relations systematically prevented the intensive development of the productive forces. Secondly, the outcome of the crisis itself depended on the relative balance of forces between lords and peasants in the class struggles which shook Europe between the 14th and 16th centuries. The peasants were strong enough to win

control of a significant proportion of the land in France, but were much weaker in England and eastern Europe where the results were, respectively, capitalist enclosures and the second serfdom. Thirdly, the emergence of capitalist property relations in rural England was an essential prerequisite of the Industrial Revolution. The increases in agricultural productivity which it made possible allowed England to escape from the Malthusian trap which sent continental Europe once again into general crisis in the 17th century; they also released a growing proportion of the working population into industrial pursuits; agricultural progress promoted the expansion of the home market as landlords, farmers and labourers bought increasing quantities of industrial goods. [62]

Brenner's account of the origins of capitalism has proved highly controversial. Two criticisms are directly relevant to the question of bourgeois revolutions. The first was that of voluntarism, of reducing the different trajectories taken by early modern societies to the contingent outcome of conflicts between lord and peasant. This criticism was perhaps most eloquently stated by the French Marxist historian Guy Bois, himself the author of a monumental study of late medieval Normandy:

Brenner's Marxism is 'political Marxism' ... It amounts to a voluntarist vision of history in which the class struggle is divorced from all other objective contingencies and, in the first place, from such laws of development as may be peculiar to a specific mode of production. [63]

In fact Brenner did put forward an account of the laws of motion of the feudal mode of production. This centred on the way in which the structural limits on the expansion of the productive forces promoted the drive to what he called 'political accumulation', the formation and expansion of centralised states:

In view of the difficulty, in the presence of pre-capitalist property relations, of raising returns from investment in the means of production (via increases in productive efficiency), the lords found that if they wished to increase their income, they had little choice

but to do so by *redistributing* wealth and income away from their peasants or from other members of the exploiting class. This meant that they had to deploy their resources toward building up their *means of coercion* – by investment in military men and equipment. Speaking broadly, they were obliged to invest in their politico-military apparatuses. To the extent that they had to do this effectively enough to compete with other lords who were doing the same thing, they would have had to maximise both their military investments and the efficiency of these investments. They would have had, in fact, to attempt, continually and systematically to improve their methods of war. Indeed, we may say that the drive to *political accumulation*, to *state-building* is the *pre-capitalist* analogue to the capitalist drive to *accumulate capital*. [64]

There is, therefore, a tendency inherent in feudalism towards political centralisation which arises from the military struggles between lords. Or, as Brenner himself succinctly puts it, ‘throughout the feudal epoch ... warfare was the great engine of feudal centralisation.’ Moreover, he argues that the relative strength of feudal states helps to explain the abilities of the respective aristocracies to resist peasant encroachments on the land.

Thus the fact that the English monarchy was from the early Middle Ages ‘unusually strong’, indeed ‘the most highly developed feudal state in Europe’, allowed the lords to highly effectively exploit the peasants. [65]

Some indication of the relative strength of the ruling classes of France and England is given by the fact that at the end of the 13th century the English lords held outright in demesne (ie subject to their direct control) one third of the cultivated land, compared to between one eighth to one tenth so held by the French lords. The relative power and centralisation of the French and English aristocracies led to the emergence of markedly different state forms in the later Middle Ages.

The relative weakness of the lords and strength of the peasants in France contributed to the gradual development of absolute monarchy in which surplus extraction became increasingly the

task of a state heavily staffed by lords. Brenner, in conceiving the absolute state as an essentially feudal regime, followed Engels who wrote of early modern absolutism:

‘The political order remained feudal, while society became more and more bourgeois.’ [66] By tracing the roots of ‘political accumulation’ to structural features of the feudal mode of production, he provides a refutation of the attempt by Theda Skocpol, Anthony Giddens, Michael Mann and other sociologists to treat the endemic warfare which played so essential a role in the formation of the modern European states as an autonomous tendency which cannot be explained in terms of the forces and relations of production. [67] Brenner also emphasises that the ‘absolute state was no mere guarantor of the old forms of feudal property based on decentralised feudal reaction. Rather it came to express *transformed* version of the old system’, one in which the lords made up for their limited power to extract rent from peasant communities by participating in a state whose concentrated power allowed it to squeeze the rural population by means of taxation. [68] The different forms of state in England and France – respectively, precocious early medieval centralisation making possible continued lordly control of the land, and late feudal centralisation as compensation for seigneurial weakness – are crucial to understanding the specific character of each country’s bourgeois revolution.

The second criticism involves an insistence on the central role of the cities and of the urban, mercantile bourgeoisie in the development of capitalism. This is expressed, for example, by Chris Harman. [69] Brenner’s argument is defective, suffering from a ‘rural economism’, in neglecting what were after all the *urban* centres of the bourgeois revolutions. The decisive part played by the London crowd in 1640–2 and by the *sans-culottes* of Paris in 1789–94 cannot apparently be accommodated within a framework which focuses primarily on the rise of *agrarian* capitalism. The argument raises three issues.

The first concerns the actual contribution of urban merchants to the development of capitalism. The most detailed portrait of early modern mercantile capitalism confirms Marx's view of its conservative character. The great French historian Fernand Braudel writes 'Capitalism and the towns were basically the same thing in the West.' But for Braudel, capitalism necessarily involves the violation of the law of free competition on which the market supposedly rests, depending usually on the establishment of monopoly. It is 'an accumulation of power ... a form of social parasitism.' As such, it tends to shun production:

Until the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, when capital moved into industrial production, now newly promoted to the rank of large profit-maker, it was in the sphere of circulation, trade and marketing that capitalism was most at home; even if it sometimes made more than fleeting incursions into other territory; and even if it was not concerned with the whole of circulation, since it only controlled, or sought to control certain channels of trade. [70]

Braudel shows in detail that capitalist involvement in either urban or rural production was very limited between the 15th and 18th centuries, for the fundamental reason that these activities were relatively unprofitable compared to long distance trade. The latter 'certainly made super profits: it was after all based on the price differences between two markets very far apart, with supply and demand in complete ignorance of each other and brought only into contact by the activities of the middle man.' [71]

Trade, not production, was thus the 'home ground' of early modern urban capitalism. It would, however, be ridiculous to conclude that the merchants and the global trade networks they spun were irrelevant to the development of capitalism – a point I emphasise below. Perhaps it is best to see the expansion of mercantile capitalism as a necessary but

not sufficient condition for the dominance of bourgeois relations of production. As long as capitalism did not conquer

production it was forced (and indeed largely content) to co-exist with feudalism.

The conquest of production by capitalists recruited largely from petty producers could only begin in agriculture – only the huge rises in agricultural productivity and output made possible by the establishment of rural capitalism offered a way out of the tendency towards demographic crisis which bedevilled Europe especially in the later Middle Ages and the 17th century. As Brenner puts it:

What, therefore, *marks off* the English economy from those of all its European neighbours in the seventeenth century was not only its capacity to maintain demographic increase beyond the old Malthusian limits, but also its ability to sustain continuing industrial and overall economic growth in the face of the crisis and stagnation of the traditionally predominant cloth industry. Although perhaps originally activated by cloth exports, the continuing English industrial expansion was founded upon a growing domestic market, rooted ultimately in the continuing transformation of agricultural production. It was, by contrast, the restricted and decaying home market – undermined by decaying agricultural productivity – which was at the root of the widespread drop off in manufacturing production throughout France, Western Germany and Eastern Europe. [72]

The second issue raised is the relative weight of town and country in bourgeois revolutions. It is unquestionably true that the urban masses provided much of the radicalising impulse in some of the decisive stages of the English and French Revolutions. Nevertheless, this judgement requires qualification. The importance of the French peasantry, particularly in 1789–92 is something to which I shall return to below. And it is striking how often it was areas of *rural* industry, for example, cloth making around Cirencester and Colchester, which proved centres of mass mobilisation in support of Parliament at the beginning of the Civil War in 1642. [73] But thirdly, even if an exclusively urban focus were appropriate when analysing the bourgeois revolutions themselves, the same need not be true of the



development of capitalism. There is no reason to believe – indeed it would be pretty reductionist to think – that the dynamics of these two forms of change would be the same. The fact that decisive events often occurred in the cities does not require that the main breakthrough to capitalism also took place there.

The existence of two distinct but related registers, those of socio-economic and of political transformation is worth insisting on because it seems that Brenner's influence has encouraged some to dissolve the process of bourgeois revolution into that of capitalist development. Comminel, for one, commits this error, reading the French Revolution through the lens of the rise of agrarian capitalism in England. The absence of agrarian revolution in 18th century France leads him to deny the very existence of capitalism there. [74] The argument seems to be that capitalists can only derive their profits from the extraction of surplus value from commodity producing wage labourers; if their income does not derive (at least indirectly?) from this source, then the group in question cannot be capitalists. Now whatever may be the merits of this claim, it does not correspond with Marx's views. As the passage cited above from **Capital** make clear, he regarded merchants as capitalists even though (by definition) their revenues came from 'commercial profit making'. Marx's refusal to equate capital with the exploiters of wage labour is important for any understanding of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Thus Lenin argues that the emancipation of the Russian serfs undermined but did not destroy the *corvée* (labour service) economy on the feudal estates: 'The only possible system of economy was, accordingly, a transitional one, a system combining the features of both the *corvée* and the capitalist systems.' He analyses with great subtlety the variety of forms (depending on the extent to which wage labour becomes the substance if not the form of the relationship) in which the labour service and the capitalist systems were combined: 'Life creates forms that unite in

themselves with remarkable gradualness, systems of economy whose basic features constitute opposites.’ [75]

This is more than merely a methodological point, since the early modern period in fact saw the emergence of various ‘transitional forms’ through which mercantile capital began to establish control over production. One was the phenomenon of what has come to be called ‘proto-industrialisation’ – the spread of rural industry, usually producing textiles, often on the basis of the putting out system.

While some of the claims made for ‘proto-industrialisation’ are exaggerated, it was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the later development of industrial capitalism, the spread of the cottage industry did represent the integration of peasant households into the market and their partial subordination to merchant capitalists seeking to escape the high wages and guild restrictions of the towns. [76]

Perhaps even more important was what Robin Blackburn calls the ‘systematic slavery’ of the British and French West Indies, later spreading to Cuba, Brazil, and the American South: the large scale exploitation of slave labour producing either mass consumption goods (sugar) or industrial inputs (cotton). The plantations were a perfect case of a ‘transitional form’, since the slaves largely met their own needs from subsistence cultivation, but worked in some of the largest industrial enterprises of the epoch and were integrated into the triangle of African slaves, colonial products and European manufactures underpinning the Atlantic economy. [77]

The significance of these ‘transitional forms’ for the case of the French Revolution in particular, is that they represent ways in which capitalism was warrenning into the feudal social and political order. The consolidation of an absolute state based on the extraction of surplus labour in the form of taxation from communities of peasant households meant, Brenner contends, the long term stagnation of French agriculture. [78] Simply to

focus on this undoubtedly very important feature of *ancien régime* society as Comminel does is, however, to ignore the complexity of the French social formation. Thus Braudel distinguishes three Frances, ‘France I’, ‘the Western seaboard’, one of the main centres of the Atlantic economy, ‘France II ... the huge and varied interior’, dominated by peasant agriculture, and ‘France III’, the ‘urban border zone to which Lyons holds the key’ oriented towards continental Europe. [79] The monarchy, feudal in being based on coercive surplus extraction, presided over a society undergoing substantial change – as is reflected by the fact that during the 18th century French overseas trade grew faster than, and industrial output as fast as, British trade and output. [80] Engels’ characterisation of absolutism can thus be applied to France on the eve of the revolution: ‘The political order remained feudal, while society became more and more bourgeois.’

### **The classical bourgeois revolutions, I: England [81]**

The ‘classical’ bourgeois revolutions are distinguished above all by the way in which popular mobilisation from below interacts with a determined but more conservative political leadership to transform the state. These features were most fully present in France between 1789 and 1794. The English case presents a similar but less developed pattern. Certain aspects of its causes, course and consequences are, however, worth dwelling on.

(i) *The crisis of the Stuart state.* The distinctiveness of England’s development explains the character of its revolution. Whereas the French monarchy succumbed to the decay of absolutism, the Stuarts were a casualty of an attempt to establish an absolutist regime. Brenner sums up the decisive change of the century before 1640: ‘the English greater landed classes gradually gave up the magnate form of politico-military

organisation, commercialised their relationships with their tenants, rationalised their estates, and made use of – but avoided dependence upon – the court.’ Thus, ‘agrarian capitalism arose within the framework of landlordism.’ [82] From this perspective it becomes clear why it was a mistake to identify the gentry with the bourgeoisie.

As Hill put it, “‘the gentry’ were not an economic class. They were a social and legal class; economically they were divided.’ [83] Some land owners, in status terms nobles or gentry, became commercial landlords; others did not. A portion, therefore, of what had once been the feudal lordly class came to depend on agrarian capitalism for their income; they should therefore be seen as part of the emergent bourgeoisie as much as urban merchants. [84]

This transformation of the English aristocracy had implications for the kind of state consistent with their interests:

Able to profit from rising land rents, through presiding over a newly emerging tripartite capitalist hierarchy of commercial landlord, capitalist tenant and hired wage labourer, the English landed classes had no need to revert to direct, extra-economic compulsion to extract a surplus. Nor did they require the state to serve them indirectly as an engine of surplus-appropriation by political means (tax/office) and war.

What they needed, at least on the domestic front, was a cheap state, which would secure order and protect private property, thus assuring the normal operation of contractually based economic processes. [85]

What they got instead from the Stuarts were successive attempts to install a continental style absolute monarchy. The Tudors had never been able to build up the powerful standing army at the basis of royal power in France or Spain. Henry VIII’s French war of 1543–6 proved of decisive importance, since to finance it he sold off the bulk of the lands seized from the Church in the Reformation, losing, as Anderson puts it, ‘the one great chance of English Absolutism to build up a firm economic base

independent of parliamentary taxation.’ [86] James I and, more systematically his son Charles I, sought to remove the constraint imposed by the consequent need to gain the consent of the landed classes in Parliament to raise money. It was not only the bulk of the gentry who were antagonised: the royal policy of granting trading monopolies to City oligarchs especially alienated merchants involved in the burgeoning Atlantic trade. [87] Charles’s policy of centralisation in Church, through Archbishop Laud’s drive against Puritanism, as well as in state, threatened not only the gentry, responsible for local government as Justices of the Peace, but the more prosperous yeomen and artisans who had come to exercise some political power at the parish level as village constables and church wardens. [88] The collapse of Charles’s attempt to rule alone, precipitated by rebellion in Scotland against Laud’s attempt to impose episcopal rule on the Kirk, came at an unfavourable economic conjuncture, dominated by the collapse of cloth exports and a run of bad harvests. Thus the scene was set for the Long Parliament.

(ii) *The role of the ‘middle sort’*. The work of Brian Manning has shown how the intervention of the London crowd was decisive in polarising the Long Parliament, driving much of the nobility and the gentry into the King’s arms, but at the same time enabling the most determined leaders of the House of Commons, such as Pym, to gain their objectives; mass pressure also forced the parliamentary leaders to adopt a more radical, political and religious programme. Once the resulting confrontation between the ‘popular party’ and the ‘party of order’ developed into civil war, mass resistance to the royalists took the form of a series of risings, particularly in the industrial districts of Gloucestershire, Essex, Suffolk, Lancashire and Yorkshire. [89]

Manning argues that it was ‘the middle sort of people’ who played the main part in these struggles – ‘peasants and craftsmen’, ‘the independent small producers’, in control of a household economy dependent primarily on family labour, distinct from landlords and merchants above, and wage labourers

below. From within their ranks a layer of capitalists was emerging – yeoman farmers producing for the market and greater craftsmen, both of which groups employed wage labour. Despite the conflicting interests of this new capitalist class and the mass of peasants and artisans, ‘the government of Charles I and the existing political, social and religious regime antagonised these bigger farmers and larger craftsmen, and led them to feel they had more in common with the main body of peasants and craftsmen than with the governing order and the ruling class. They assumed the leadership of “the middle sort of people” in opposition to the king, lords and bishops.’ The political tendency which articulated the interests of the ‘middle sort’ more than any other was the Levellers between 1646 and 1649. They developed a social critique of the old regime: at fault was not merely Charles I or even the monarchy itself, but a parasitic complex of interests embracing king, lords, clergy, lawyers and rich merchants. They sought to set in its place a decentralised democracy of small producers, in which all heads of household – but not women, servants or beggars – had the vote. [90]

Such a vision was profoundly at odds with the views and interests of the parliamentary leaders, their most radical wing, the Independent gentry represented by Cromwell and the other commanders of the New Model Army which defeated the king. The period after the end of the Civil War in 1646 saw Cromwell and the Independents engage in elaborate manoeuvres as they balanced between the conservative Presbyterian majority in Parliament, who wanted to disband the army and make a deal with Charles, and the Levellers, whose influence among rank and file soldiers was widespread. The decisive episodes unfolded in late 1648 and early 1649. The officers, with Leveller support, purged the House of Commons and then forced through the King’s execution, the abolition of the House of Lords and the proclamation of a Commonwealth in the place of the monarchy; Cromwell then turned on the Levellers, crushing a series of

mutinies and executing some of the ringleaders. The English republic provided the political carapace of a military government which completed the work of the Long Parliament by dismantling the remnants of Stuart absolutism. When its narrow social base sent the regime into crisis after Cromwell's death, Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660 on terms which required him to respect the changes made by the revolutionary governments. The attempt by James II to repeat his father's efforts to establish an absolutist regime led to his overthrow in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which replaced him by William of Orange and permanently limited the power of the Crown by that of a Parliament dominated, not by the 'middle sort', but by the landed classes. [91]

(iii) *The post-revolutionary state.* The mass of small producers certainly did not benefit from the revolution they had made. But who did? And can, indeed, the tumults of the 1640s and 1650s be described as a social revolution at all? The conservative historian J.H. Hexter and the radical sociologist Theda Skocpol are agreed that it cannot. According to Hexter, 'what makes the English Revolution suspect as a social revolution is the restoration of the peerage economically, socially, and ideologically after 1660.' [92] Skocpol offers a more theoretically elaborated argument, based on the claim that 'what is unique to social revolution is that basic changes in social structure and in political structure occur together in a mutually reinforcing fashion. And these changes occur through intense socio-political conflicts in which class struggle plays a key part.' Skocpol contends that the English Revolution meets neither of these conditions. 'It was accomplished not through class struggle but through a civil war between segments of the dominant landed class ... And whereas the French Revolution markedly transformed class and social structures, the English Revolution did not. Instead it revolutionised the political structure of England ... it reinforced and sealed the direct political control of a dominant class that already had many ... members engaged in

capitalist agriculture and commerce.’ The English Revolution was thus ‘a political, but not social, revolution.’ [93]

Skocpol is clearly wrong about the first point: we have seen the role played by class struggle, by the intervention of the ‘middle sort’, of the small producers of town and country, in the revolution. But what of the apparent continuity of domination by the landed classes, which the final settlement of 1688 merely reinforced. Skocpol’s argument, that what was involved was simply a political revolution is much too simplistic. The capitalist class develops in a gradual and molecular fashion within the framework of feudal relations of production. But a point is eventually reached where its further development requires a change in the *form* of the state. It does not follow from the fact that such change is required that it will occur, but should it happen the resulting transformation cannot be seen as merely political. The new form of state has a different social content from the old, one which maximises capitalist development.

Hill summarises the changed nature of the English state as a result of 1640 and 1688:

Nobody, then, willed the English Revolution: it happened. But if we look at its outcome, when the idealists, the men of conscious will on either side had been defeated, what emerged was a state in which the administrative organs that most impeded capitalist development had been abolished: Star Chamber, High Commission, Court of Wards, and feudal tenures; in which the executive was subordinated to the men of property, deprived of control over the judiciary, and yet strengthened in external relations by a powerful navy and the Navigation Act; in which local government was safely and cheaply in the hands of the natural ruler, and discipline was imposed on the lower orders by a Church safely subordinated to Parliament. [94]

The significance of the new form of state – as Hill puts it, ‘strong in external relations, weak at home’ – is best brought out in his critical discussion of Braudel’s great study of early modern capitalism. [95] Braudel strives unsuccessfully to



explain why it was first the Netherlands and then England, rather than France, which dominated the world economy in the 17th and 18th centuries because, Hill argues, ‘he underestimates the role of politics in the consolidation of Amsterdam’s hegemony and its replacement by London.’ More specifically: ‘An absolute monarchy with a standing army and a permanent bureaucracy may intermittently favour trade and industry for its own military purposes, but it can control them. The looser, freer Dutch and English states allowed capitalist interest to preponderate.’ The decisive factor in French failure and Dutch and English success in the global arena is thus ‘the differences between the two types of state’, between an absolute monarchy and early bourgeois states forged by revolution. [96]

The formidable character of the post-revolutionary English state is brought out in its capacity drastically to increase military expenditure to secure its dominant position in the world economy. The real spending of the British state rose fifteen fold between 1700 and 1815, with civil expenses never rising above 23 percent of total outlays. [97] Underlying this increase in military spending, which allowed the British ruling class to win their long series of wars with France between the 1690s and 1815, was formidable tax raising capacity. A recent study shows that the tax burden in Britain during the 18th century was not only higher than that in France but rose steadily, reaching a high point of 35 percent of physical output during the Napoleonic wars. [98] This reflected the English landed aristocracy’s commitment to devoting the necessary resources to establishing global hegemony.

The British state’s ability to find the resources for external expansion reflected its more advanced economic base as well as its class character. By contrast, the absolute monarchies suffered from endemic difficulties in financing their activities. Low productivity and high population growth limited the resources available. The nobility, integrated into the absolute state, generally enjoyed considerable tax immunities; the main burden

therefore fell on the peasantry. The landed aristocracy provided the main obstacle to reform of the tax system: ‘In all cases, it was difficult to do without the backing of the nobility which provided part of the administration and the greatest part of the military cadres, and which strung throughout every region a string of landlords, all interested in maintaining order.’ [99] The ultimately feudal character of the absolute state, its roots in a land owning class dependent on the coercive extraction of surplus labour, set internal limits to its reform.

## **The classical bourgeois revolutions, II: France**

It was, of course, one such attempt by an absolute monarchy to reform itself which precipitated the French Revolution. Ironically, the debt accumulated as a result of France’s only significant victory over Britain during the 18th century, in the American War of Independence, finally broke the monarchy’s back, pushing royal ministers to introduce reform packages, resistance to which by the aristocracy forced the convening of the Estates General, with consequences still resonating through the world.

(i) *Monarchy, nobles and bourgeois.* One of the most important general propositions about bourgeois revolutions is their cumulative impact. Each revolution alters the terms for its successors. Thus the English Revolution, by forging a formidable expansionist state, increased the burden on the French monarchy, which in any case was embroiled in military and diplomatic rivalries with the other Continental powers.

To the territorial and dynastic struggles of absolute monarchies such as Spain, France, and Austria formed by the competitive ‘political accumulation’ of feudal lords, were added the commercial rivalries generated by the formation of the world

market, in which bourgeois states such as Holland and England increasingly had a marked advantage. But important though the international context of the French Revolution was, the *internal* contradictions of the *ancien régime* produced its collapse.

What were these contradictions? The revisionist case, supported strongly by Comninel, is that nobles and bourgeois overlapped with each other and were internally divided. He concludes that ‘the French Revolution was essentially an *intra-class* conflict’. Now in the first place it is hard to imagine a revolution which did not involve a crisis within the ruling class. Lenin famously defined a revolutionary situation as occurring ‘when the “*lower classes*” do not want to live in the old way and the “*upper classes*” cannot carry on in the old way’. [100] But Comninel seems to be saying that the French Revolution is reducible to a crisis within the ruling class. This view has implications for how one accounts for the role of the masses in the revolution. But it is worth first making a couple of points.

It is hard to see how else the bourgeoisie could have developed within the framework of an absolute state based on the social and political predominance of a still feudal landed aristocracy except by forming all sorts of ties with the nobility. The purchase, not simply of land, but of seigneurial rights over land and of patents of nobility conveyed significant economic advantages on the aspirant bourgeois. The attractions of state office and of nobility were especially great given the role of the state as the great engine of surplus extraction.

It does not, however, follow from the links between lords and bourgeois that there were no conflicts. Furet suggests that it was probably becoming more difficult for commoners to become nobles during the 18th century. [101]

He argues that the limits on commoners reflected the nature of ‘the “absolute” monarchy’, ‘an unstable compromise between the construction of a modern state and the maintenance of principles of social organisation inherited from feudal times.’

Royal power had developed at the expense of the aristocracy, but the ‘ruling class’ in control of the state consisted of ‘the “court nobility” which attracted the global hostility of the rest of the order’. The divisions within the nobility reflected their attitudes towards ‘the modernisation of the state’. Some – *à la polonoise* – were ‘hostile to the state, nostalgic for their old local predominance’, others – *à la prussienne* – ‘desired on the contrary to seize the modernisation of the state for their own advantage’ especially by controlling the military, while yet others – *à l’anglaise* – advocated a ‘constitutional monarchy, parliamentary aristocracy’. [102]

The absolutist state thus at the same time divided the aristocracy and set limits to the extent and nature of bourgeois advancement. On this basis, the kind of line up which emerged in the Estates General – with the bourgeois Third Estate overwhelmingly in favour of a single chamber which it would dominate, the clergy more or less evenly divided, and two thirds of the nobles opposed – was entirely predictable.

Even Doyle, generally hostile to interpretations of the revolution as bourgeois, concedes that the struggles following the meeting of the Estates General in May and June 1789 reflected the nobles’ refusal ‘to share political power’:

By the time the Estates actually met, nobility and bourgeoisie, who basically agreed on so much, had become competitors for power rather than partners in its exercise. Only when the right of nobles to separate treatment in anything had been destroyed could the new political elite of propertied ‘notables’ an amalgam of former notables and bourgeois, get down to the exercise of power. [103]

The outcome of the first phase of the revolution, concluded with the consolidation of the National Assembly’s position, if not with the fall of the Bastille certainly after the march on Versailles in October 1789, was, in Doyle’s words, a situation in which ‘power in France now lay unchallengeably with a propertied elite recognising no special place for nobles, either at national or at local level.’ [104] How different is this from

Soboul's description of the Assembly 'building the new nation on the narrow social base of the property owning bourgeoisie'? [105] More generally, the French Revolution was, throughout its different phases, exceptional among bourgeois revolutions in that its leadership was overwhelmingly bourgeois. Lynn Hunt summarises in a recent study the conclusions of her research into the social background of those who held office during the revolution:

The revolutionary political class can be termed 'bourgeois' both in terms of social position and of class consciousness. The revolutionary officials were owners of the means of production; they were either merchants with capital, professionals with skills, artisans with their own shops, or more rarely, peasants with their land. The unskilled, the wage workers and the landless peasants were not found in positions of leadership or even in large numbers among the rank and file. The 'consciousness' of the revolutionary elite can be labelled as bourgeois insofar as it was distinctly anti-feudal, anti-aristocratic, and anti-absolutist. In their language and imagery, revolutionaries rejected all reminders of the past, and they included in their ranks very few nobles or Old Regime officials. The revolutionary elite was made up of new men dedicated to fashioning a new France. [106]

Hunt goes on to argue that 'the Marxist version of the social interpretation' of the revolution 'is not so much wrong in its particulars' as 'insufficiently discriminating. It cannot explain the difference in regional responses, the divisions within the bourgeoisie, or the failure of the revolution to stop in 1791, when the capitalist and commercial sectors had made their greatest gains.' [107] These objections are best considered together with the question of the role of the masses in the revolution.

(ii) *The revolutionary dynamic*. Comninel observes: 'From the revisionist perspective, the revolution is properly bracketed by the Assembly of Notables [which met in the spring of 1787] and the society of *notables* [under Napoleon], and the revolutionary years of 1791–4 stand out as a more or less lamentable

aberration along the way.’ [108] But, since Comninel himself believes the revolution to have been ‘an *intra-class* conflict’ how does this view differ from his own, apart from the fact that he doesn’t seem to think of 1791–4 as ‘lamentable’? Involved here is the question of *déravage*, of Furet and Richet’s claim that the period from the royal flight to Varennes onwards represents the liberal, bourgeois revolution made by the Constituent Assembly in 1789–91 ‘skidding off course’. For them 1790 is the ‘happy year’, in which the Assembly laid the foundations of a new France from which privilege was gone, and in which free enterprise was born. [109]

Such a view presupposes that the regime established by the Constituent Assembly was inherently stable so that its fall was sheer bad luck. This assumption is quite untenable. In the first place, the general economic situation was unfavourable: rising food prices, reflecting a catastrophically bad harvest in 1788, were the driving force behind the great mobilisations of the Parisian crowd in July and October 1789. Another poor harvest in 1791 contributed to the inflationary surge which lay behind the popular *journées* of 1792. Secondly, the famous decrees of 4–11 August 1789 left in place many seigneurial rights on the spurious grounds that they involved claims over land rather than over persons; the peasants over whom these rights were exercised would have to buy them out through a series of redemption payments. The result was a chain of peasant risings and other forms of resistance throughout 1790–2. The Assembly only finally abolished surviving feudal rights after the insurrection of 10 August 1792 which overthrew the monarchy, and forced the election of the Convention. [110] The Assembly settled very little as far as the peasants were concerned.

Thirdly, there was the growing danger of counter-revolution. Furet dismisses the idea of an ‘aristocratic plot’ as an artefact of revolutionary ideology, but counter-revolutionary networks spread rapidly throughout 1790, which Michel Vovelle describes as a year when ‘the counter-revolution was everywhere’ –

among the aristocratic émigrés in cities such as Metz, in local agitations in Montauban and Nîmes, in Burke's **Reflections on the Revolution in France**, and not least of all in the Tuileries, where Louis XVI wrote: 'I would rather be king of Metz than remain king of France in such a position, but that will soon come to an end.' [\[111\]](#)

Far from there being a profound discontinuity between 1789–91 and 1791–4 the entire period between the fall of the Bastille and Thermidor involves an increasingly radicalised version of the same pattern, in which popular movements, in the cities at least under the leadership of a section of the bourgeoisie, force through and defend changes against the opposition of counter-revolutionary forces whose strength is variable but which are always present. There were two main components of the mass movements of the Revolution. The first was provided by the peasantry, of which I have more to say below. It is, however, worth noting here Soboul's remark that 'from 1789 to 1793 and the definitive abolition of feudalism, the peasant revolt preceded the bourgeois revolution and pushed it forward.' [\[112\]](#)

The decisive political struggles generally occurred, however, in the towns, and above all in Paris. This is true even, P.M. Jones argues, in the case of issues affecting the peasantry: 'In the years that followed [4 August 1789] country dwellers tried *repeatedly* to abolish feudalism from below, but with negligible success. If any single event can be credited with accomplishing this feat, it was the Parisian and *fédéré* insurrection of 10 August 1792.' [\[113\]](#) Thanks to Rudé and Soboul, we know a fair amount about the urban popular movement that was the main driving force of the revolution. It was not a proletarian movement. While there may have been as many as 300,000 wage earners in Paris in 1791, Rudé points out that 'the wage earner had as yet no defined status as a producer and there were often numerous intermediate stages between workman and employer. The typical unit of production was still the small workshop, which generally employed but a small number of journeymen and apprentices.'

[114] The mentality of the independent small producer dominated master and *compagnon* (journeyman) alike. As Soboul puts it,

The *sans-culotterie* did not constitute a class, nor was the *sans-culotte* movement based on class differences. Craftsmen, shopkeepers, and merchants, *compagnons* and day labourers joined with a bourgeois minority to form a coalition but there was still an underlying conflict between craftsmen and merchants, enjoying a profit derived from a private ownership of the means of production, and *compagnons* and day-labourers, entirely dependent upon wages. [115]

Underlying this fragile unity was a common motivating factor: the scarcity and dearness of food. ‘Hunger’, Soboul observes, ‘was the cement which held together the artisan, the shopkeeper, and the workman, just as a common interest united them against the wealthy merchant, the noble, and the bourgeois monopolist.’ Indeed, he goes further and contends that ‘the economic fluctuations provided the rhythm of the revolutionary movement.’ It was economic pressure – and not the ‘autonomous political and ideological dynamic’ invoked by Furet – which provided the continuity underlying the revolutionary mobilisations from July 1789 to the unsuccessful risings against the Thermidorean regime in Germinal and Prairial III (April/May 1795). The *sans-culottes*’ campaign for price controls, which triumphed when they forced the Convention to pass the Law of the General Maximum of 29 September 1793, did not, according to Soboul, ‘reflect their concern for national defence as much as their interest in providing themselves and their families with sufficient food.’ More generally the link the *sans-culottes* saw between their own economic situation and the Terror was summed up in remarks the cabinet maker Richet was accused of having made on 1 Prairial III (20 May 1795): ‘Under Robespierre, blood flowed and there was enough bread. Today, blood no longer flows and there is a shortage. It seems, therefore, that we must spill a little blood before we can get bread.’ [116]



The leadership of the popular movement, above all in the decisive Year II, was provided by only a section of the bourgeoisie. Soboul presents the following alignment of class forces:

The most active wing of this revolution was not so much the commercial bourgeoisie (insofar as it continued to consist solely of traders and middlemen it managed to get on well with the old order – from 1789 to 1793, from the Monarchiens to the Feuillants and to the Girondins, it usually tended towards compromise), but the mass of the small direct producers whose surplus was seized by the feudal aristocracy with the full support of the judiciary and the means of constraint available to the state under the Ancien Régime. The political instrument of change was the Jacobin dictatorship of the lower and middle sections of the bourgeoisie, supported by the popular masses – social categories whose ideal was a democracy of small, autonomous producers, working together and operating a system of free exchange. [117]

Jacobinism thus represented “‘the truly revolutionary way’ from feudalism to capitalism’ in which a coalition of small producers under bourgeois leadership sweeps away the remnants of feudalism. Broadly to accept this analysis need not imply insisting on a strict correlation between membership of a particular fraction of capital and political alignment. The crucial point is that the bourgeoisie, itself a complex formation shaped by its development within the framework of absolutism and involvement in landowning, state offices, and mercantile capitalism, was divided over whether to compromise with, or to smash, the old order. On which side particular individuals or groups stood of this shifting line was not determined by purely economic factors. Thus Hunt argues that ‘the members of the new political class shared certain values that were shaped in large measure by common cultural positions.’ [118] The point is a perfectly valid one: not simply the formal system of political beliefs which evolved during the revolution, drawing on Enlightenment sources – above all, Rousseau – but also the complex set of revolutionary rituals and visual and verbal

symbols, to the study of which historians have in recent years devoted much attention, played a crucial part in forming a particular collective subject, the Montagnard wing of the bourgeoisie and their *sans-culotte* allies. Hunt's error consists in supposing that the complexity of the process through which this collectivity was formed counts against the Marxist case. [119]

It was the pressure of events which drove the Jacobins towards the revolutionary destruction of the *ancien régime*, pressure produced by two forces – the counter-revolution and the popular movement. The danger that the Montagnards ran of being outflanked from the left as well as from the right was very real. The *sans-culottes* were capable of taking independent action to force the Jacobin government to go further than it otherwise would have: the best example is provided by the *journées* of 4 to 5 September 1793, when the Sections mobilised successfully to push the Convention to pass decrees ordering the arrest of suspects, forming a revolutionary army to ensure grain requisitions, and (towards the end of the month) to impose general controls on prices and wages. Soboul describes the Jacobin response: 'Themselves supporters of a liberal economic policy, they nevertheless accepted regulation and price fixing as a war measure and as a concession to the demands of the people.' [120] Popular pressure sometimes pushed the Jacobins very far – for example on the land question. The Convention finally abolished all seigneurial dues on 17 July 1793. On 8 Ventose II (26 February 1794) Saint Just went much further, proposing to the Convention that the property of suspects be seized and used to indemnify 'poor patriots'. The resulting decree was never implemented, but it is an indication of the extent to which the Jacobin regime was willing to make inroads into private property in order to preserve popular support.

To say that the Jacobins sought to accommodate pressure from below is not to say that they were confronted with a rival system of government, that a state of dual power existed in Paris.

However, the subordinate but indispensable role played by the popular movement underlines the significance of the Jacobins themselves in containing but also channelling pressures from below. To suppose, as Daniel Guérin and his followers do, that Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety had become a reactionary force by November 1793 is an absurdity; it is to suppose that the Sectional movement, a coalition of small masters and artisans, could have provided the centralised political direction necessary to raise and command great armies, to construct and manage a war economy, to engage in the manoeuvres necessary to preserve a relatively wide political base for the revolutionary government. The radicalising impulses of the popular movement would have been dissipated without the leadership of the Jacobins. This leadership – like that of Cromwell and the Independents during the decisive phase of the English Revolution – was forced to balance between the masses and the bourgeoisie. The delicate nature of the operation involved was most obvious during the crisis of Ventôse-Germinal II (March 1794) when the Committee of Public Safety struck against the left and then the right, sending respectively Hébert and the other leaders of the Cordeliers and Danton and the Indulgents to the guillotine.

Underlying these manoeuvres was the consolidation of the Jacobin regime and the concentration of power in its hands. Progressively tighter restrictions were imposed on the Sections and on the popular societies which developed to evade these controls. The state bureaucracy ramified, incorporating within it many *sans-culotte* activists. At the same time large sections of the peasantry withdrew into political apathy, the better off having seen their main demands realised, the poorer disillusioned by the revolution's failure to deliver, most antagonised by the regime's efforts to requisition grain for the towns. Paradoxically, the centralisation of power weakened the Jacobin dictatorship since it dispersed the popular base without whose support it could not repel the offensive of a bourgeoisie

which now felt that its services could be dispensed with. In Soboul's words, 'the revolutionary government found itself caught as if suspended mid air, between the Convention which was impatient to throw off its yoke and the popular movement of Paris now irrevocably hostile to it.' [121] The final straw as far as the latter was concerned seems to have been the publication on 5 Thermidor II (23 July 1794) of a tariff of maximum wage rates for Paris implying significant pay reductions. This measure seems to have been an effort by the Jacobins, having suppressed the Hébertist left in Ventôse, to favour employers at the expense of workers and consumers at a time when the failure of the general maximum to prevent price rises had caused a considerable agitation among workers for higher wages (to which the government responded with repression). The effect was to antagonise the *sons-culottes* yet further when Robespierre's enemies were about to move against him. Stone masons were demonstrating against the new wage maximum on 9 Thermidor, the day of his fall. As Rudé and Soboul observe, 'the Robespierrists paid with their execution for the ineluctable contradictions of their policy.' [122]

(iii) *The 'peasant road' and French capitalism.* Bourgeois revolutions, I argue throughout this article, are to be understood primarily in terms of their consequences. But in the case of this, the greatest of bourgeois revolutions, we must confront what Hobsbawm calls 'one gigantic paradox', namely that French economic growth in the century after the revolution was, at best, sluggish. [123] A majority of commentators argue that the main factor underlying this outcome is the revolutionary agrarian settlement, which consolidated and extended the economic power of the peasant smallholders, who in 1789 represented two thirds of the population and already owned a third of the land. [124] The domination of rural France by petty proprietors limited the development of industrial capitalism:

The diseconomies of scale involved in small plot agriculture produced very low levels of profitability, and in consequence, very

little capital surplus was surrendered by the land ... Low profits also turned agriculturalists towards self-sufficiency, denying the urban-industrial sector a valuable measure of internal demand. And, in turn, the guarantees of equal inheritance worked against mobility of labour, imposing upon industrialists severe constrictions in the supply of factory workers. [125]

It is argued that, judged by its economic consequences, the French Revolution cannot be regarded as bourgeois. Skocpol's judgement, reaffirmed by Comninel, is that its 'overall outcome' was 'the symbiotic co-existence of a centralised, professional bureaucratic state with a society dominated by some moderately large and many medium and small owners of private property.' [126] There is, however, considerable controversy about the peasants in the French Revolution. Lefebvre argued that 'there was not one revolution, but several' – aristocratic, bourgeois, popular and peasant. The peasant revolution in particular 'possessed an autonomy proper to its origin, its procedures, its crises and its tendencies': it was 'autonomous above all in its anti-capitalist tendencies'. The 'mass of small proprietors ... were profoundly attached to collective rights of regulation, that is to a pre-capitalist economic and social world, not only by habit, but also because of the capitalist transformation of agriculture aggravated their conditions of existence.'

The peasant risings which began with the Great Fear of July 1789 were therefore anti-capitalist as well as anti-feudal: 'despite appearances, their influence was as much conservative as revolutionary: they overturned the feudal regime, but they consolidated the agrarian structure of France.' The result was thus a compromise, in which the poor peasants preserved their collective rights but gained little otherwise, the larger peasants obtained some of the church lands sold off by the revolutionary governments, and the rural communities retained much of their cohesion.' [127]

Soboul initially accepted this but came later to revise his views under the impact of the research of the Russian historian

Anatoli Ado, published in 1971. Ado, and following him Soboul, distinguished two main phases in the peasant movements during the revolution: that between 1789 and 1792, which saw risings whose main objective was the abolition of seigneurial rights and that of 1792–3, in which struggles were aimed at dividing common land and securing adequate food supplies. The Year II saw the better off peasants concentrate on protecting the gains they had already made. The poorer peasants, by contrast, launched a series of movements demanding the implementation of the decree of 10 June 1793 authorising the division of the commons among individual proprietors. Lefebvre had thought that it was the larger peasants who had favoured breaking up the common land. Not only did Ado and Soboul deny this, but they contended that:

despite its anti-capitalist tendencies, the programme of the small peasantry did not enter objectively into contradiction with the capitalist development of the countryside. In demanding the extension of free small property and small cultivation, and thus of commodity production, the peasants were fighting also for the enlargement of the base necessary for the development of capitalism. [128]

The slow growth of capitalist agriculture in 19th century France reflected not so much the extension of petty production but ‘a considerable persistence of large property’, involving such backward forms of cultivation such as share cropping. This state of affairs represented the relative failure rather than the success of the struggles of the small peasants. This new perspective on the peasants’ contribution led Soboul to reappraise the traditional Marxist view of the French Revolution as the model bourgeois revolution and rather to stress its uniqueness. [129]

Soboul’s abandonment of a general model of bourgeois revolution did represent a response to real difficulties. It did not, however, dispose of these difficulties. There is evidence that small peasants did press for the division of the commons, but there is much less of their success. [130] Moreover, if there had

been a more extensive redistribution of land to the benefit of the petty producers, it does not follow that the result would have been the more rapid development of agrarian capitalism. As the English case shows, large scale property is not an obstacle to this development provided that it involves, rather than such *rentier* forms as share cropping, the trinity of commercial landlord, capitalist tenant, and wage labourer. It is hard not to see the revolution in the countryside as yet another phase in the French peasantry's struggle to maintain and to extend its control of the land, under conditions which meant the relatively slow commercialisation of agriculture at a time when other powers – first Britain, later Germany – were making the transition to industrial capitalism.

What about the other side of Skocpol's equation, the 'centralised, professional bureaucratic state' which emerged from the revolution? Marx, on numerous occasions, stressed how the revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes completed the process of forming this state initiated by the monarchy. Consider, for example, this passage from **The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte**:

This executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organisation, with its extensive and artificial state machinery, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million, this appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores, sprang up in the days of the absolute monarchy, with the decay of the feudal system, which it helped to hasten ... The first French Revolution, with its task of breaking all separate, local, territorial, urban and provincial powers in order to create the civil unity of the nation, was bound to develop what the absolute monarchy had begun: the centralisation, but at the same time the extent, the attributes and the agents of governmental power. Napoleon [I] perfected this state machinery. [131]

Comninel concludes that Marx is describing a state based on a 'non-capitalist' form of surplus extraction, 'centralised rent extracted directly from the peasantry'. [132] But while Marx

does lay great stress on the French peasantry as the basis of the French state he argues that they had become subordinated to capital. Thus: 'The bourgeois order, which at the beginning of the century set the state to stand guard over the newly arisen smallholding and manured it with laurels, has become a vampire that sucks out its blood and brains and throws them into the alchemists' cauldron of capital.' Moreover, Louis Bonaparte, after his 1851 coup 'the executive authority which has made itself an independent power', would, Marx predicted, favour the economic interests of the bourgeoisie, while restricting its political influence. [133]

Nineteenth century France's most important phase of industrial and agricultural growth came under the Second Empire. Napoleon III's government promoted the rapid growth in railway construction and the activities of the *Crédit Mobilier*, the first major European investment bank, which concentrated savings to lend to entrepreneurs. The autonomy of the Bonapartist regime helped to promote this orientation. The state forged by the revolution, regarded by Comminel as 'non-capitalist', proved, under certain conditions, a formidable instrument of capitalist industrialisation. [134]

The fact that the French Revolution completed the formation of a centralised state capable of promoting capitalist development does not entirely remove Hobsbawm's 'gigantic paradox'. The advanced character of the revolution, the intense mobilisation of the small producers of town and country under radical bourgeois leadership to destroy the remnants of the *ancien régime*, set limits to the subsequent development of capitalism. Having leaned on the peasantry to extirpate feudalism, the bourgeoisie was forced to compromise with them – a compromise indeed which most did not find onerous, since they too were small scale capitalists. This outcome does not invalidate the view of the revolution as bourgeois, since it undoubtedly benefitted the 'really existing' capitalist class in France as opposed to some ideal construct derived from



comparison with England. The fact that the revolution's consequences were contradictory, both promoting and limiting capitalist development, is damaging only to a vulgar Marxist view of history in which the 'rising class' always and necessarily triumphs.

## **Bourgeois revolutions from above: Germany, the United States, Japan**

The English and French Revolutions thus represented a form of bourgeois revolution based on the 'truly revolutionising path' and involving the intervention of broad coalitions of small producers. But there is another variant of bourgeois revolution whose understanding is vital since it produced three of the four most powerful contemporary states – Germany, the United States and Japan. These are cases of 'revolutions from above', in which the existing state apparatus was used violently to remove the obstacles to the construction of unified capitalist economies. It is essential, therefore, to consider some of the main features of these revolutions.

(i) *The Prussian path and German unification.* The unification of Germany under Bismarck is generally regarded as the paradigm case of 'revolution from above', achieved through the fusion of the old Prussian *Junker* landed class and the modern industrial bourgeoisie. But what are the conditions of such a form of development? Soboul stresses the importance of agrarian class relations: 'the structure of modern capitalism has been determined by what were, in each country, in the course of the transition, the internal relations between the decomposition of feudal landed property and the formation of productive capital.' [135] And of course this is true: the existence of the *Junker* estates producing for the market provided the framework, after the Prussian Reforms of Stein and Hardenberg during the Napoleonic Wars, for an evolution from serfdom to wage labour

on a 'labour repressive' basis which left landlord political power intact. [136] But there were other conditions as well, involving the changed forms taken by the class struggle and the development of the world economy.

Analysing the failure of any section of the German bourgeoisie to play during the 1848 Revolution the kind of part performed by the Jacobins in France, Marx stressed the belated development of German capitalism: 'The German bourgeoisie developed so sluggishly, timidly and slowly that at the moment when it menacingly confronted feudalism and absolutism, it saw menacingly confronting it the proletariat and all sections of the middle class whose interests and ideas were related to those of the proletariat.' [137] Fearing the working class more than the *ancien régime*, the bourgeoisie sought a compromise with the Prussian monarchy. The revolutionary coalitions of the 1640s and 1790s failed to emerge in 1848 because the onset of industrialisation had widened the gap between labour and capital. As Stedman Jones observed:

In general the more industrial capitalism developed, the stronger was the economic power of the *grande bourgeoisie* in relation to the masses of small producers and dealers from which it had sprung, and the greater the distance between their respective aims. Conversely, the less developed the bourgeoisie, the smaller the gulf between 'bourgeois' and 'petty bourgeois', and the greater the preponderance and cohesion of the popular movement. [138]

The *débauche* of 1848 provided the context in Italy as well as Germany, for Gramsci's 'passive revolution', in which the bourgeoisie secured one of its most basic objectives – political unification – by means of an alliance with sections of the landed aristocracy. The basis of this accommodation was a more subaltern political role for the bourgeoisie – the upper echelons of the old state apparatus continued to be staffed by the old landed classes, even though it increasingly operated in the interests of capital. Eley argues of German and Italian unification, as well as of the Meiji Restoration in Japan:

Each might be described as a ‘bourgeois revolution from above’, in the specific sense that in a concentrated space of time and through a radical process of political innovation it delivered the legal and political conditions for a society in which the capitalist mode of production could be dominant. This was achieved by quite far sighted and visionary interventions by the existing states (or at least by the political pragmatism of ‘modernising’ tendencies within them), but without the social turbulence and insurrectionary extravagance *which marked the earlier Franco-British patterns.*

[139]

Once again the effects of previous bourgeois revolutions provided the context for these new transformations, in this case what Hobsbawm calls ‘the “dual revolution” – the French Revolution of 1789 and the contemporaneous (British) Industrial Revolution.’ [140]

Two questions are raised by viewing German unification in this way. First, can the changes involved be described as a *revolution*? If we recall Anderson’s definition of revolution as ‘an episode of convulsive political transformation, compressed in time and concentrated in target’, German unification meets these conditions. Its achievement depended in Prussia’s victory in two major wars, with Austria in 1866 and France in 1870. The fragility of Bismarck’s position and indeed of that of the Prussian monarchy is shown by the fact that a hostile bourgeois opposition could only be split and largely incorporated by one of the most reactionary *ultras* of 1848 pursuing a main objective of the revolution he had so detested – the destruction of the post-1815 German political order and its replacement by a unified state. That state, while based on a *Junker* dominated bureaucracy, included the institutional means for incorporating both bourgeoisie and labour movement alike in the *Reichstag* elected by manhood suffrage, and presided over Germany’s replacement of Britain as the chief European industrial power.

Secondly, was the bourgeois revolution in Germany completed as a result of this transformation? [141] Or did the post-1871 German state only imperfectly represent capitalist

interests? This is precisely the target of Blackbourn and Eley's critique of the idea of Germany's *Sonderweg* (special path). They argue that 'by comparison with Britain it was precisely the most "modern" and "progressive" aspects of Imperial Germany's capitalist development – namely, the higher levels of concentration, the rapid investment in new plants and technology, the experimentation with more sophisticated divisions of labour – that first permitted ... repressive labour relations ... to develop.' Furthermore, 'the massive growth of the SPD after 1895–6 ... forced many of the largest employers to continue a close political relationship with the big landlords', not as 'an ideological rejection of "modernity" but as 'a rational calculation of political interest in a situation where greater levels of parliamentary democracy necessarily worked to the advantage of the socialist left'. Thus 'the *Kaiserreich* was not an irredeemably backward and archaic state indelibly dominated by "pre-industrial", "traditional" or "aristocratic" values and interests, but was powerfully constituted between 1862 and 1879 by (amongst other things) the need to accommodate bourgeois capitalist forces.' [142]

(ii) *The American Civil War and Reconstruction*. There is, however, one very important case of what Anderson calls a 'revolution after the revolution' – the United States. The revolution of 1776 was a 'classical' bourgeois revolution on the English and French pattern: a coalition of New England merchants and Southern planters was driven into the struggle for the independence of the American colonies by the intransigence of the British imperial government and pressure from below from a plebeian movement of small producers in the great ports such as Boston and Charleston. [143] But in the mid-19th century the state created by that revolution was convulsed by a titanic conflict – the American Civil War of 1861–5, the greatest armed struggle involving a developed country between 1815 and 1914. The war was more than a merely military affair, ending as it did in the emancipation of four million black slaves. For the

American Marxist, George Novack, ‘the first American Revolution and the Civil War form two parts of an indivisible whole. They comprised distinct but interlinked stages in the development of the bourgeois democratic revolution in the United States.’ [144]

Why did the US need a second bourgeois revolution? American society in the mid -19th century involved three main elements. The north eastern seaboard was experiencing an industrial revolution, as mass consumer industries – textiles, boots and shoes, brewing – developed on the basis of factory labour. The western frontier was pushed steadily towards the Pacific by small holding farmers involved in petty commodity production. And the South was dominated by plantations worked by chattel slaves producing cash crops – above all raw cotton for the Lancashire factories at the hub of the industrial revolution. [145] At the heart of the Civil War lay the conflict between the emergent industrial capitalism of the North and the slave power of the South. Marx called it ‘nothing but a struggle between two social systems, between the system of slavery and the system of free labour.’ [146]

This conflict did not, however, spring from some necessary incompatibility between capitalism and slavery. As Robin Blackburn argues, the three great 19th century slave powers – the US, Cuba and Brazil – flourished thanks to the demand for their cotton, sugar, and coffee in the key industrial capitalist society, Britain:

Around mid-century, the prospects for marketing the slave produce of the Americas had never been better. Capitalism as an economic system ... thoroughly permeated and integrated the expanding slave systems in the Americas in the 1850s. British capital found advantageous outlets in each of the expanding slave states of the Americas .helping to build railways, equip plantations and finance trade. [147]

That precisely was the problem for the Northern capitalists, who, along with the western farmers, put the free labour Republican

candidate Abraham Lincoln into the White House in 1860, thus precipitating Southern secession from the US. The South, its plantations producing cotton for the Lancashire mills, was effectively an extension of the British economy. Michel Aglierta is only slightly overstating the case when he declares that:

The American Civil War was the final act of the struggle against colonial domination ... The slave form of production in the South owed its existence and its prosperity to an English dominated international trade. It blocked the unification of the American nation at every level, and threatened to put an end to the frontier expansion. The long phase of industrial growth in England after 1849 with its strong demand for agricultural raw materials, including cotton, incited the slave owners to expand their territory. Hence slavery gained new footholds in the lands conquered in the south west. In this way slavery braked the expansion of the textile industry and other industries using sub-tropical raw materials, and prevented the exploitation of immense mineral resources. The slave owners also exercised a preponderant influence in Congress, sufficient to thwart any protectionist policy. Industrial capitalism thus suffered as a whole, for the pilot industries of the economic division of labour were unable to withstand English competition. What was at stake in the Northern war effort was thus simultaneously the direct penetration of capitalism to the entire territory of the Union, the establishment of tariff protection, and the political and ideological unification of the nation under the leadership of the industrial and financial bourgeoisie. The reasons for the political alliance between the capitalists and the small agricultural producers are clear enough. The latter feared above all else the extension of the slave system to the free lands of the west, and the blocking of the sale of public land by a Congress dominated by the slave owners' representatives. Finally, these fiercely individualistic petty producers were also very strongly attached to the ideology and institutions of bourgeois democracy. Yet they were soon to find out to their cost that this was an alliance with the devil himself. [\[148\]](#)

Lincoln in his conduct of the war made it clear that the central issue was preserving and strengthening the American state, not freeing the slaves. Not simply Lincoln's own often highly

authoritarian methods of government but the mobilisation of resources required to defeat the South transformed the American state. As James McPherson puts it in his outstanding recent history of the Civil War:

The old federal republic in which the national government had rarely touched the average citizen except through the post office gave way to a more centralised polity that taxed the people directly and created an internal revenue bureau to collect the taxes, drafted men into the army, expanded the jurisdiction of the federal courts, created a national currency and a national banking system, and established the first national agency for social welfare – the Freedman’s Bureau. [149]

The Civil War was very much a revolution from above, waged by conventional armies and won by a federal government concentrating considerable powers in its hands. Nevertheless there were considerable pressure from below. The toilers who backed Lincoln were profoundly influenced by the ‘free soil, free labour’ ideology, projecting the image of a community of small producers in which all had the opportunity to rise, which he was so effective at articulating. And the Northern Abolitionists were prepared, in the period before the outbreak of war, to resort to illegal methods to destroy slavery – not simply to harbour fugitive slaves, but, in John Brown’s case, to take up arms. [150] Thirdly, and above all, the slaves themselves played an indispensable part in the Northern victory. As the Union armies penetrated the South many slaves abandoned their plantations. By the end of the war there were perhaps half a million black refugees behind the Northern lines. Even more important, 200,000 blacks served in the Union armies, providing a crucial source of manpower given the growing opposition in the North to the draft, which precipitated the terrible New York race riot of July 1863. [151]

Slave and free blacks rallied to the Union cause as a result of Lincoln’s decision to issue ‘as a just and necessary war measure for suppressing ... rebellion’ the Emancipation Proclamation of 1

January 1863 freeing all slaves in the secessionist states. [152] Lincoln's reasons for taking this step were pragmatic – both to isolate the Confederacy internationally by appealing to anti-slavery opinion, above all in the British working class movement, and to undermine the slave power internally. The consequences were enormous. In Eric Foner's words: 'The Emancipation Proclamation and the presence of black troops ensured that, in the last two years of the war, Union soldiers acted as an army of liberation.' [153] Like Cromwell and Robespierre before him, Lincoln gradually adopted increasingly radical policies under the pressure of events rather than by design. McPherson argues: 'He had moved steadily leftward during the war, from no emancipation to limited emancipation, with colonization and then universal emancipation with limited suffrage [for blacks]. This trajectory might well carry him to a broader platform of equal suffrage by the time the war ended.' [154] Lincoln's assassination in the very hour of victory, on 14 April 1865, cut short his leftward evolution, but there is no doubt that he belongs, along with Cromwell and Robespierre, in the pantheon of great bourgeois revolutionary leaders.

Northern victory freed the slaves, but left open the nature of the social and political regime that would succeed the Southern slavocracy. A conflict rapidly developed between Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, and the Radical Republicans led by Thaddeus Stevens in the Congress. The Radicals represented the wing of Northern capital which wished to use the power of the federal government, under whose military rule the rebel states now found themselves, to reconstruct Southern society by breaking planter power, enfranchising the freedmen, and even redistributing land so as to provide the basis of a small producers' democracy. During the phase of Radical Reconstruction at the end of the 1860s, Republican governments were installed in the South on the basis of an alliance of Northern immigrants, a section of Southern whites, many of



them poor whites who had suffered under planter rule, and the freed slaves.

Had this experiment succeeded, conditions of bourgeois democracy would have been established in the South as well as the North. That it failed was a consequence not simply of ferocious resistance by the planters and their allies, leading to the formation of terrorist organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan, but of the waning enthusiasm of the Republican dominated federal government. Confronted by the economic depression which struck in 1873 and by escalating class struggle which led, for example, to the Great Strike of 1877, Northern capital lacked the stomach to break Southern racist resistance to Reconstruction.

The final step in the retreat from Reconstruction came when, as part of the deal under which the Republicans got the White House after the hung presidential election of 1876, federal troops were withdrawn from the South, which was restored to 'home rule'. The South, under the 'Redeemer' Democratic regimes thereby installed, saw the political disenfranchisement of blacks, their subjection to a system of racist Jim Crow laws, and the establishment in place of slavery of other forms of coerced labour such as sharecropping. Even the formal political equality of bourgeois democracy was only won by Southern blacks as a result of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. [\[155\]](#)

The Civil War established the political hegemony of the Northern industrial and financial bourgeoisie. The power of the strengthened federal government could be – and was systematically – used to promote their interests. On this basis, the United States began its ascent to the status it achieved at the beginning of the 20th century, of the world's greatest industrial power.

(iii) *The Meiji Restoration in Japan.* The Meiji Restoration of 1868 – the overthrow of the Togukawa family who had ruled as *shoguns* since the end of the 16th century, carried out by a group

of *samurai* (warrior nobles) in the name of the hitherto purely titular Emperor (who took the name of Meiji) – was to a significant degree a response to the global dominance of Western industrial capitalism. The revolutionaries proceeded radically to modernise Japanese society, abolishing with the local governments of the *daimyo* (great lords), introducing civil equality and a uniform taxation system, imposing individual land ownership, replacing the military power of the *samurai* with a conscripted army, and providing a limited measure of parliamentary representation.

The nature of this transformation was a subject of great controversy among Japanese Marxists between the wars. One school, the *Kôza-ha*, linked to the Japanese Communist Party, argued, in line with Stalinist orthodoxy, that Japan remained a semi-feudal society reflected in the military, bureaucratic nature of the state and its basis among the large land owners; the bourgeois revolution had still to be completed in Japan. The other school, the *Rônô-ha*, argued that the industrial and financial bourgeoisie were politically dominant and that socialist revolution was on the agenda in Japan. [156] The issues involved are complex. [157]

First the Meiji Restoration differs from other bourgeois revolutions in that it did not occur against the background of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The dominant mode of production in Tokugawa Japan was not feudalism but the tributary mode of production. Both modes involve the coercive extraction of surplus labour from a smallholding peasantry, but whereas under feudalism it is the landlord who is the main agent of exploitation, in the tributary mode it is the state bureaucracy which taxes the peasantry of their surplus product. The *daimyo* held their land at the will of the *shogun*, rather than by hereditary right, and the *samurai* were rewarded for their services to their lords not with land but with stipends of rice. [158] One consequence of this pattern was that the *daimyo* and the *samurai* tended to be concentrated in the towns, unlike feudal lords, the

basis of whose power is rural. The consumption needs of the urban based nobles contributed to the commercialisation of agriculture. By the 18th century a layer of peasant landlords had emerged, amassing holdings, employing wage labour and producing cash crops. Some branched out into rural industry (*saki* brewing, silk weaving etc.), as did some provincial merchants, although the *chonin* (merchants) of the cities were firmly subordinated to the *daimyo*.

It was not, however, the merchants or the peasant landlords who made the 1868 revolution. Ellen Trimberger argues that 'autonomous military bureaucrats' played the decisive part in the Meiji Restoration. The tributary relations of production dominant in Tokugawa Japan 'bureaucratized the aristocracy and removed from control over the land.' This created the possibility that a section of the ruling class, detached from production and located in the state apparatus, might contemplate a radical transformation of economic relations. The incentive to achieve such a transformation was provided by the intrusion of the West from 1853. Contact with the outside world convinced a number of young *samurai* that Japan could avoid the colonial or semi-colonial status to which the rest of Asia was being reduced, only if they adopted political and social structures analogous to those which had allowed Western capitalism its stunning technological and therefore military superiority over the rest of the world. These radical *samurai* first overturned the *shogunate* and then dealt with conservative resistance with a combination of methods ranging from bribery to civil war. [\[159\]](#)

Takashi Toyoda argues that the leading role of *samurai* in the Meiji Restoration means that it cannot be regarded as a bourgeois revolution:

Neither politically not economically were the bourgeois promoters of the Meiji Revolution. The bourgeoisie of the time, parasitically attached to the seigniorial nobility, adapted passively to the political upheaval, without preserving the slightest spirit of enterprise. The first task of the revolutionaries was to preserve the

independence of Japan amidst the Powers by building a modern industry oriented towards military needs; but the bourgeois, without understanding these government imperatives at all, remained disoriented faced with the demands of the conjuncture. It was the *samurai*, linked to the government... who took direction of the economy and became capitalists, a phenomenon which characterised the Meiji Revolution. [160]

The supine role of the bourgeoisie counts for nothing, however, unless it can be shown that the Meiji Restoration did not promote the development of capitalism. Here Takashi undermines his own case when he challenges the *Kôza-ha* characterisation of the Meiji state as semi-feudal and absolutist: ‘The French Revolution, after having broken absolutism, had abolished all feudal survivals and centralization all the expressions of sovereignty in the democratic state ... But the Meiji Revolution had from its beginning essentially realized this immense world of the French Revolution.’ [161] There is, in fact, not the slightest doubt that the Meiji regime promoted the rapid development of industrial capitalism, building on the commercialisation of economic life under the *shogun*. The fact that the state bureaucracy which presided over this process was recruited from the *samurai* and autonomous of merchants and peasant landlords alike in no way alters the consequences of their policies, any more than does the fact that their reasons for seizing power and modernising Japan involved above the need to acquire the military power necessary to match the Western ‘barbarians’. The central feature of bourgeois revolutions is, as we have seen, the changes they bring about in the character of the state. The fact that this transformed state so directly involved itself in the promotion of capitalist industrialisation in Japan reflects the processes of uneven and combined development at work on the world stage – the global dominance of industrial capitalist powers to avoid succumbing, to which backward countries had to transform themselves. The state stepped in to fill the gap left by a weak and conservative local bourgeoisie. In thus adopting state capitalist policies the Meiji revolutionaries

blazed a trail which others were to follow in the 20th century.

## Conclusion

In its effects at least, the Meiji Restoration occupies a borderline between the ‘revolutions from above’ of the mid-19th century and a third variant of bourgeois revolution prevalent in the present century. This Tony Cliff has named ‘deflected permanent revolution’. Trotsky argued that the process of permanent revolution arose as a result of uneven and combined development: the global integration of capital created pockets of advanced industry amid backward peasant societies. The Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 revealed what this made possible. The bourgeoisie, even more terrified than its German counterpart in 1848 of the new industrial proletariat, sought an accommodation with the absolutist state; workers and peasants united in an alliance in whose programme the objects of bourgeois and socialist revolutions merged. The triumph of soviet power in October 1917 sanctioned both the break up of the gentry’s estates by the peasants and the establishment of workers’ control of factories. In Lenin’s phrase, bourgeois ‘passed over’ into socialist revolution; the essentially bourgeois democratic objectives of republican government and land redistribution were achieved by the dictatorship of the proletariat.

But what happened if the proletariat lacked the political organisation needed to provide revolutionary leadership to the peasantry? A succession of revolutions in the Third World – China, Cuba, Vietnam, Mozambique, Nicaragua – showed how things could then turn out. Nationalist movements, often marching under ‘Marxist-Leninist’ colours but dominated by the urban petty bourgeoisie, were able to lead and organise successful peasant wars against imperialism and its allies. The regimes brought to power by these revolutions proceeded to

construct state capitalist social orders, in which the task of capital accumulation was assumed by a state bureaucracy recruited from the victorious movement and collectively exploiting workers and peasants alike. [162]

The historical irony that movements claiming the inspiration of Marxism should do the work of capitalism, merely underlines the fundamental difference between bourgeois and socialist revolutions. Bourgeois revolutions are characterised by a disjunction of agency and outcome. A variety of different social and political forces – Independent gentry, Jacobin lawyers, *Junker* and *samurai* bureaucrats, even ‘Marxist-Leninists’ – can carry through political transformations which radically improve the prospects for capitalist development. No such disjunction characterises socialist revolutions. ‘All previous historical movements were movements of minorities,’ writes Marx in words I have already quoted from the **Manifesto**. ‘The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.’ Socialist revolutions involve the working class taking power for itself, rather than, as in both the ‘classic’ bourgeois revolutions and recent Third World revolutions, the masses being mobilised to secure the political dominance of capital.

Bourgeois revolutions thus tend to be minority affairs. This is true even of those which did involve a significant degree of popular mobilisation. Christopher Hill has explored in various recent works the dilemma of the English revolutionaries, confronted by the fact that the majority of the population were indifferent or hostile to their cause. [163] Richard Cobb’s brilliant study of the *armée révolutionnaires* dispatched into the French countryside during the Year II dramatises the conflict this involved between a primarily urban based movement and the mass of the peasantry resentful of these intrusions. [164] This state of affairs reflects the relatively low level of development of the productive forces: England in the 1640s and France in the

1790s were still primarily rural societies, in which most people lived in peasant communities isolated by poor communications whose horizons, even when their mood was radical, were primarily local. Hence the significance of the cities and the armies, both of which involved the concentration of relatively large numbers under conditions often encouraging political militancy.

The dominance of the capitalist mode of production made possible by these revolutions radically changes both the social and material conditions of further transformation. The progressive proletarianisation of the mass of the population creates a class whose interest lies in the common ownership of the means of production rather than some new form of exploitation, and whose mode of life encourages it to act collectively. The development of the productive forces, involving huge urban concentrations, vastly improved communications, and a radical increase in labour productivity, promotes the collective action of the working class and makes the goal of communism, the rule of the associated producers, feasible. But if in all these respects the nature of socialist revolution is radically different from that of bourgeois revolutions, there are continuities as well. Hill observes: ‘The idea of consciously making a revolution arrives late in human history, is perhaps not fully formulated till the **Communist Manifesto**. [165] But, as his own work has shown, Marx and Engels could build on earlier efforts to articulate and fight for the idea of the masses taking control of their own destiny, efforts which have flourished above all during the great bourgeois revolutions among the Levellers and Diggers of the 1640s and 1650s, among the Parisian *sans-culottes* of the 1790s. In these movements, aspirations to a far more radical social revolution than any dreamt of by Cromwell or Robespierre were expressed, for example by Winstanley and Babeuf. It is as much because of these intimations of the future as of the examples of revolutionary change they offer that Marxists regard 1640 and

1789 as part of the tradition whose high point – so far – came on 25 October 1917.

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## Appendix:

### Comninel and historical materialism

Comninel devotes Utile space to developing or justifying his interpretation of the French Revolution, though we are promised a second volume which will apparently fill this gap. He is rather concerned to show that ‘the theory of bourgeois revolution did not develop with Marx, and in fact is not even consistent with the original social thought which Marx did develop.’ Comninel devotes much space to elaborating this claim by tracing the concept of bourgeois revolution to what he calls the ‘liberal materialism’ of the Enlightenment.

Marx’s own early writings, and especially **The German Ideology**, apparently suffer from a ‘re-infusion of liberal materialist ideology, the effects of which continue to bedevil Marxist thought’ by encouraging ‘an uncritical focus on production as such, and an attendant precedence of productive technique over property relations.’ It was within this theoretical framework, still marked by bourgeois thought, that Marx identified the French Revolution with the triumph of the bourgeoisie. But later, in **Capital**, Marx’s ‘point of departure and continual focus *was ... class exploitation.*’ This approach, however, is inconsistent with the concept of bourgeois revolution:

It is hard to see how any sense can be made of bourgeois revolution, in its usual form, from the perspective of class exploitation. For the peasantry, who might be expected to be opposed to the feudal aristocracy, are not usually included at all ... The enduring struggle is that of the bourgeoisie and the urban people against the aristocracy. Where do relations of exploitation



figure among those classes.. ? And if the bourgeoisie were to be taken as capitalists, whom do they exploit? [166]

Comninel's argument bears some resemblance to that of an essay by Brenner on the English Revolution. [167] Several commentators have noted in **The German Ideology** the absence of the concept of the relations of production; instead Marx tends to use the vaguer expression 'form of intercourse' *Verkehrform*; the meanings of '*Verkehr*' include 'communication', 'commerce', and 'trade'. [168] I have argued elsewhere that Marx's reliance on the division of labour in **The German Ideology** involves 'a persistent confusion of technical and social relations', and that 'the first version of historical materialism bears some resemblance to the views of the 18th century Scottish historical school' – Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, John Millar *et al.*, the wing of the Enlightenment which sought most systematically to develop the idea of society progressing through distinct stages based on different modes of subsistence. [169] But these reservations about **The German Ideology** do not entail the rejection of the concept of bourgeois revolution.

The main theoretical influence on Comninel's work appears to be that of the Canadian Marxist, Ellen Wood, who supervised the doctoral dissertation that forms the basis of his book. Wood has sought to develop a version of Marxism which avoids the pitfalls of both 'orthodox' historical materialism, as defended by G.A. Cohen, which explains social phenomena by their tendency to develop the productive forces, and Althusserian Marxism, which reduces human beings to the 'bearers' of social structures. [170] The trouble with Wood is that, while she is quite clear about what she is against, she is fairly vague about the content of her own theory, beyond the (hardly original) point that the relations of production are simultaneously economic and political and that the separation of state and market characteristic of capitalism is therefore fundamentally misleading.

Comninel takes over this vagueness and squares it. Thus he tells us that ‘the central concept of historical materialism’ is ‘that the *realisation* of human social existence has corresponded to the *development of private property* and the fundamental social antithesis of the propertied and the propertyless’, which is about as clear as mud. His *Outline of the Method of Historical Materialism* is equally illuminating: ‘1. ... the key to social analysis is the specific relationship by which surplus extraction is effected’; ‘2. ... Class exploitation is intrinsically *political* as well as *economic*’; ‘3. ... Each era of class society is marked off by a *specific*, but *dynamic*, continuity of exploitation within the larger continuum of class history’. One thing is clear, though, namely that Comninel has no time at all for the productive forces. He wilfully and explicitly misreads one passage from **Capital** Volume III where Marx refers to ‘the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers’ as ‘always naturally corresponding to a stage in the development of the methods of labour’, arguing that ‘the “direction” of this correspondence can be reversed from what is usually understood, and priority can instead be given to the *exploitative relationship*, as it relates to ‘the development of the methods of labour’. [171]

Comninel is, of course, entitled to his own views, though it’s a bit rich that he should present them as Marx’s ‘mature’ theory. The effect of his excision of the development of the productive forces from historical materialism is that it ceases to be a theory of *change*, and becomes instead what Comninel at one point revealingly calls ‘*historical sociology*’. [172] Whatever its weaknesses, **The German Ideology** is a work of fundamental importance because it identifies as the source of historical change in the contradiction between the development of the productive forces and prevailing social relations (not yet specified as the relations of production) which have become fetters on this development. Comninel provides no alternative mechanism of historical change. It is not clear, therefore, in what

respect he can claim to provide a theory of history as opposed to a sociology of forms of exploitation, since he has no account of what leads one such form to succeed another.

To insist on the necessary role of the productive forces in explaining historical change is not to collapse into technological determinism, but is rather to insist that there is what Erik Olin Wright calls a 'weak impulse' for the productive forces to develop without which the succession of more advanced modes of production would be impossible. [173] Comninel's views on the relations of production are hardly more satisfactory. He tends to identify them exclusively with the form of extraction of surplus labour, leaving out of account the particular mode of effective control of the means of production which this form presupposes. Moreover, he fails to observe that Marx first developed the concept of the relations of production in **The Poverty of Philosophy**. Marx wrote this book in 1847, *before* many of the important passages on bourgeois revolutions which I have cited above. This doesn't sit well with the idea that the concept of bourgeois revolution represents Marx's immature thought.

As befits one of Wood's disciples, Comninel parades his hostility to Althusser and all his works. But there is nothing of which his book is more reminiscent than of one of the lesser works of the Althusserian school in its heyday. This is partly a matter of its form – all methodological preliminary, no substantive content. One searches the book vainly for any elaborated analysis of the French Revolution which the book claims to 'rethink'. But there are many similarities of substance. Comninel postulates an absolute 'break' between Marx's 'early' and 'mature' work. He also, like the Althusserians, accords primacy to production relations over the productive forces, sliding into a voluntarism as bankrupt as the technological determinism of Second International Marxism. Finally, because of earlier generations of Marxists' failure to understand Marx, historical materialism must be recommenced: 'While Marxists

have made seminal contributions to history – *as historians* – the historical process, and its class dynamics in pre-capitalist societies, have so far eluded the practice of Marxist history.’ [174] There may be some who find this iconoclasm exhilarating, but to me (once bitten, twice shy perhaps) it seems like poor stuff indeed.

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## Notes

The ideas in this article have been floating around in my head for many years now, and were sketched out in the concluding section of **Making History** (Cambridge 1987). I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to develop them in argument on various occasions: in a debate with Norah Carlin on bourgeois revolutions at *Marxism 85*, in the discussions of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in several meetings at *Marxism 88*, and in a stimulating exchange with Bob Brenner in a Chancery Lane cafe. Duncan Hallas has covered all the ground laboriously explored in this article with exemplary panache and brevity in *The Bourgeois Revolution*, **Socialist Worker Review** (hereinafter **SWR**), January 1988. I am grateful to Colin Barker, Lindsey German, Chris Harman, John Rees and Ann Rogers for their comments on this article in draft.

[**Note by ETOL:** There has been a slight change in the numbering of the footnotes compared with the original printed version of this article – footnote 117a has become footnote 117, footnote 117b has become footnote 118 and all subsequent footnote numbers have been adjusted appropriately.]

1. A. Cobban, **The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution** (Cambridge 1964), p. 7.

2. Marx and Engels, **Collected Works** (50 vols published or in publication, London 1975; hereinafter **CW**), VI, p. 486; see also **ibid.**, p. 519.

3. **Ibid.**, VIII, p. 161.

4. **Ibid.**, V, p. 178.

5. **Ibid.**, VII, p. 506.

- [6.](#) L. Trotsky, **Collected Writings and Speeches on Britain** (3 vols, London 1974), II, pp. 86–87.
- [7.](#) A.-P.-J.-M. Barnave, **Introduction à la Révolution française**, quoted in A. Soboul, **La Révolution française** (Paris 1988), p. 589. Oddly, the crucial phrase ‘a new distribution of wealth involves a new distribution of power’ is omitted from the English translation of this passage: E. Chill, **Power, Property and History** (New York 1971), p. 82.
- [8.](#) See for example, **CW**, XXXIX, pp. 62 and 65, and, on the Restoration historians, A. Soboul, **La Civilisation et la Révolution française** (3 vols, Paris 1970, 1982–3), II, pp. 23–6.
- [9.](#) A. Soboul, **La Civilisation**, pp. 27–34.
- [10.](#) G. Lefebvre, **Etudes sur la Révolution française** (2nd rev. edn, Paris 1963), p. 339. See Richard Cobb’s brilliant portrait, *Georges Lefebvre*, in id., **A Second Identity** (London 1969).
- [11.](#) Rudé’s preface to **The Crowd in the French Revolution** (Oxford 1972), vii, stresses the collaborative nature of the work undertaken by Cobb, Soboul, and himself under Lefebvre’s guidance.
- [12.](#) C. Hill, **The English Revolution 1640** (London 1972), p. 6.
- [13.](#) See, for example, E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Historians’ Group of the Communist Party*, in M. Cornforth, ed., **Rebels and their Causes** (London 1978).
- [14.](#) See J.H. Hexter, *Storm over the Gentry*, in **Reappraisals in History** (London 1961), and L. Stone, **The Causes of the English Revolution 1529–1642** (2nd edn, London 1986), ch. 2.
- [15.](#) R.H. Tawney, *The Rise of the Gentry, 1558–1640*, **Economic History Review**, XI (1941), pp. 4, 14, 18.
- [16.](#) H.R. Trevor-Roper, *The Gentry 1540–1660*, **Economic History Review**, Supp. No. 1 (1953), pp. 8, 18, 26, 34 and *passim*.
- [17.](#) E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, in T. Ashton, ed., **Crisis in Europe 1560–1660** (London 1965), p. 5.
- [18.](#) H.R. Trevor-Roper, *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, in Ashton, ed., **Crisis**, pp. 59, 67, 95, 93 and *passim*.
- [19.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 63.

[20.](#) L. Stone, *The Revival of Narrative*, **Past & Present** (hereinafter **P&P**) **85** (1979), p. 20.

[21.](#) Critical surveys of revisionist historiography include Stone, **Causes**, ch. 4, and B. Manning, *Class and Revolution in Seventeenth Century England*, **International Socialism** **2:38**. There was, of course, a political undertow beneath all this. Trevor-Roper, appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford by Harold Macmillan in preference to the more left wing A.J.P. Taylor, retired to Peterhouse, Cambridge, hatching ground of such pillars of the New Right as the philosopher Roger Scruton. In 1975 the Princeton historian J.H. Hexter, launched a savage and highly personal attack on Hill. *The Historical Method of Christopher Hill* reprinted in **On Historians** (London 1979).

More recently, a young Cambridge historian, Jonathan Clark, has developed a generalised critique of what he called ‘the 1960s model’, which he associated with such diverse figures as Hill and J.H. Plumb, and which ‘placed capitalism at the centre of the picture’ relying on ‘an economic determinism’ which, for example, explained ‘social change in the eighteenth century’ in terms of ‘a fictitious entity called the Industrial Revolution.’ Clark, whose skills at polemic and self advertisement earned him the just reward of a Fellowship of All Souls, made his Thatcherite loyalties explicit, invoking ‘the change in mood of the late 1970s’ to explain the decline of ‘the characteristic historiography of the late 1960s’, rooted as it was in ‘Attlee’s England and the world view on which it was premised’. J.C.D. Clark, **English Society 1688–1832** (Cambridge 1985) pp. 1–7.

[22.](#) Probably the most comprehensive survey of these controversies is W. Doyle, **Origins of the French Revolution** (Oxford 1980), Part 1.

[23.](#) Cobban, **Social Interpretation**, pp. 67, 168, and *passim*.

[24.](#) See Cobban’s attack on social theory, *ibid.*, 12–14.

[25.](#) F. Furet and D. Richet, **La Révolution française** (rev. edn, Paris 1972), p. 126.

[26.](#) See, for example, R. Cobb, *Nous des Annales*, reprinted in **A Second Identity**, and C. Mazauric, *Réflexions sur une nouvelle conception de la Révolution française*, **Annales historiques de la Révolution française** (hereinafter **AHRF**), 39 (1967).

- [27.](#) F. Furet, **Penser la Révolution française** (Paris 1978), pp. 167, 122, 34, 28, 170, 168.
- [28.](#) R. Cobb, **The Police and the People** (Oxford 1972), p. 200.
- [29.](#) Doyle, **Origins**, p. 24. See also the exchange between A. Soboul, W. Doyle and J. Leith in **AHRF 54** (1982), pp. 620–39.
- [30.](#) G. Lefebvre, *La Mythe de la Révolution française*, **ibid.**, 28 (1956), p. 344.
- [31.](#) Furet, **Penser**, p. 26; see also **ibid.**, pp. 24–5.
- [32.](#) See A. Callinicos, **Is there a Future for Marxism?** (London 1982), ch. 1.
- [33.](#) Quoted in H. Gough, *Genocide and the Bicentenary*, **Historical Journal 30** (1987), p. 978.
- [34.](#) G. Comninel, **Rethinking the French Revolution** (London 1987; hereinafter **RFR**), pp. 3, 200, 180, 195, 203, 205.
- [35.](#) Quoted in C. Hill, **Change and Continuity in Seventeenth Century England** (London 1974), p. 279.
- [36.](#) **RFR**, pp. 19–20.
- [37.](#) G. Lukács, **The Destruction of Reason** (London 1980), p. 57; see generally **ibid.**, ch. 1.
- [38.](#) See D. Blackburn and G. Eley, **The Peculiarities of German History** (Oxford 1984).
- [39.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 10.
- [40.](#) P. Anderson, *Origins of the Present Crisis*, in id and R. Blackburn, eds., **Towards Socialism** (London 1965), pp. 13–17.
- [41.](#) E.P. Thompson, **The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays** (London 1978), p. 47. See also the responses to Anderson's restatement of his case in *The Figures of Descent*, **New Left Review 161** (1987) (hereinafter **NLR**), M. Barratt Brown, *Away with All Great Arches*, **ibid. 167** (1988), A. Callinicos, *Exception or Symptom?*, **ibid. 169** (1988), and C. Barker and D. Nicholls, eds., **The Development of British Society** (Manchester 1988).
- [42.](#) Blackburn and Eley, **Peculiarities**, p. 59.
- [43.](#) A. Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks** (London 1971), pp. 58–9; see also **ibid.**, pp. 105–20.

- [44.](#) Poulantzas, **Political Power and Social Classes** (London 1973), p. 183; see generally **ibid.**, pp. 168–84.
- [45.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 173.
- [46.](#) G. Lukács, **History and Class Consciousness** (London 1971), pp. 284, 283, 282.
- [47.](#) Stedman-Jones, *Society and Politics at the Beginning of the World Economy*, **Cambridge Journal of Economics**, I (1977).
- [48.](#) P. Anderson, *Modernity and Revolution*, **NLR 144** (1984), p. 112.
- [49.](#) Blackburn and Eley, **Peculiarities**, pp. 82–3.
- [50.](#) A. Soboul, **La Civilisation**, II, pp. 45–6.
- [51.](#) C. Hill, **Continuity**, p. 279.
- [52.](#) Id, *Parliament and People in Seventeenth Century England*, **P&P 92** (1981), pp. 104, 108.
- [53.](#) M. Dobb, **Studies in the Development of Capitalism** (London 1946), pp. 35, 40, 126; see generally **ibid.**, chs. 2–4.
- [54.](#) R.H. Hilton, *ed.*, **The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism** (London 1976).
- [55.](#) K. Marx, **Capital**, III, pp. 325, 326–7, 328
- [56.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 336.
- [57.](#) K. Takahaishi, *A Contribution to the Discussion*, in Hilton, *ed.*, **Transition**, pp. 94–6.
- [58.](#) V.I. Lenin, **Collected Works** (Moscow 1965), XIII, 239.
- [59.](#) I. Wallerstein, **The Modern World System**, I (New York 1974), pp. 7, 127; see also **ibid.**, pp. 91ff.
- [60.](#) R. Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development*, **NLR 104** (1977), p. 37; see generally **ibid.**, *passim*.
- [61.](#) See especially id, *The Social Basis of Economic Development*, in J. Roemer, *ed.*, **Analytical Marxism** (Cambridge 1986).
- [62.](#) Id, *Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, in T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, *eds.*, **The Brenner Debate** (Cambridge 1985), p. 55 and *passim*.
- [63.](#) G. Bois, *Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy*, in Aston and Philpin, *eds.*, **Brenner**, p. 115.



[64.](#) R. Brenner, *Social Basis*, pp. 31–2. How close an analogy there is in fact between ‘political accumulation’ and capital accumulation is open to question, since the latter, but not the former, involves competition forcing on units of production the need to innovate technologically and to increase labour productivity.

[65.](#) Id, *The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism*, in Aston and Philpin, eds., **Brenner**, pp. 239, 257, 258.

[66.](#) F. Engels, **Anti-Dühring** (Moscow 1969), p. 126. See also C. Hill, *A Comment*, in Hilton, ed., **Transition**, and P. Anderson, **Lineages of the Absolutist State** (London 1974).

[67.](#) See Callinicos, **Making History**, pp. 157–72.

[68.](#) R. Brenner, *Agrarian Roots*, **op. cit.**, p. 81.

[69.](#) At meetings on the transition from feudalism to capitalism at *Marxism* 87 and 88.

[70.](#) F. Braudel, **Civilisation and Capitalism 15th–18th Century** (3 vols, London 1981), I, p. 514, II, pp. 122, 231–2.

[71.](#) **Ibid.**, II p. 405. See generally **ibid.**, ch. 4.

[72.](#) R. Brenner, *Agrarian Roots*, **op. cit.**, p. 325.

[73.](#) B. Manning, **The English People and the English Revolution 1640–1649** (London 1976), pp. 163–83.

[74.](#) **RFR**, p. 180.

[75.](#) V.I. Lenin, **The Development of Capitalism in Russia** (Moscow 1967), pp. 196, 199; see generally **ibid.**, ch. III.

[76.](#) The concept was coined by Franklin Mendels: see *Proto-Industrialisation: The First Phase of the Industrialisation Process*, **Journal of Economic History**, XXXII (1972). For a Marxist synthesis of early modern economic history laying great stress on proto-industrialisation see P. Kriedte, **Peasants, Landlords and Merchant Capitalists** (Leamington Spa 1983), and for a critique, D.C. Coleman, *Proto-Industrialisation: One Concept Too Many*, **Economic History Review**, XXXVI (1983).

[77.](#) See R. Blackburn, **The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776–1848** (London 1988), and S. Mintz, **Sweetness and Power** (New York 1985).

[78.](#) R. Brenner, *Agrarian Roots*, pp. 299–323.

[79.](#) Braudel, **Capitalism**, III, pp. 342–3. The diversity of France is one of the main themes of Braudel’s last book: see **The Identity of France**, I (London 1988), Part 1.

[80.](#) See C. Trebilcock, **The Industrialisation of the Continental Powers 1780–1914** (London 1981), pp. 112,114.

[81.](#) I do not discuss in any detail what are generally described as the other two ‘classical’ bourgeois revolutions, the Dutch and American Revolutions (although mention of the latter is made below). The revolution of the Netherlands of 1572 brought into being the United Provinces, a merchant republic which dominated the world economy for much of the 17th century: see for example, G. Parker, **The Dutch Revolt** (Harmondsworth 1979) and I. Wallerstein, **The Modern World System**, II (New York 1980). Hobsbawm calls the Netherlands ‘in many respects a “feudal business” economy; a Florence, Antwerp or Augsburg on a semi-national scale. It survived and flourished by cornering the world’s supply of certain goods and much of the world’s business as a commercial and financial intermediary. Dutch profits did not depend greatly on capitalist manufacture’, **Crisis**, p. 42. For an excellent survey of the debate on the English Revolution, see J. Rees, *Revolution Denied*, **SWR**, November 1987.

[82.](#) R. Brenner, *Bourgeois Revolution and the Transition to Capitalism*, in A.L. Beier, ed., **The First Modern Society** (Cambridge 1989), p. 302; he is here summarising Lawrence Stone’s major study, **The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558–1641** (Oxford 1965). I am grateful to Bob Brenner for letting me see this article before publication.

[83.](#) C. Hill, **Puritanism and Revolution** (London 1968), p. 17.

[84.](#) Norah Carlin is therefore wrong to identify the bourgeoisie entirely with urban capital: see *Marxism and the English Civil War*, **IS 2:10** (1980/1), pp. 110–12.

[85.](#) R. Brenner, *Agrarian Roots*, p. 298.

[86.](#) Anderson, **Lineages**, p. 125.

[87.](#) R. Brenner, *The Civil War Politics of London’s Merchant Community*, **P&P 58** (1973), a study further developed in a forthcoming book.

[88.](#) C. Hill, *Parliament and People*, pp. 119ff.

- [89.](#) B. Manning, **English People**, chs. 1–5, 7.
- [90.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 152–3, and chs. 9–10.
- [91.](#) For a lucid summary of the progression from 1640 to 1688, see D. Hallas, *1688 – the Decisive Settlement*, **SWR**, October 1988.
- [92.](#) Hexter, **On Historians**, p. 221.
- [93.](#) T. Skocpol, **States and Social Revolutions** (Cambridge 1979), pp. 5, 141, 294.
- [94.](#) C. Hill, *A Bourgeois Revolution?*, in J.G.A. Pocock, *ed.*, **Three British Revolutions** (Princeton 1980), pp. 134–5.
- [95.](#) **Ibid.**
- [96.](#) Id, **Collected Essays**, III, (Brighton 1986), pp. 132, 137, 138, 140.
- [97.](#) M. Mann, **The Sources of Social Power**, I (Cambridge 1986), pp. 483–5.
- [98.](#) P. Mathias and P. O’Brien, *Taxation in Britain and France, 1715–1810*, **Journal of European Economic History** 5 (1976).
- [99.](#) G. Ardant, *Financial Policy and Economic Structure of Modern States and Nations*, in C. Tilly, *ed.*, **The Formation of Nation States in Western Europe** (Princeton 1975), pp. 205, 213, and *passim*.
- [100.](#) V.I. Lenin, **Collected Works**, XXXI, p. 85.
- [101.](#) Furet, **Penser**, pp. 144–5.
- [102.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 147, 140, 150.
- [103.](#) Doyle, **Origins**, pp. 211–12.
- [104.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 212.
- [105.](#) A. Soboul, **The French Revolution** (2 vols, London 1974), I, p. 208.
- [106.](#) L. Hunt, **Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution** (London 1986), p. 177; see generally **ibid.**, ch. 5.
- [107.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 178.
- [108.](#) **RFR**, p. 21.
- [109.](#) Furet and Richet, **La Revolution**, ch. 4.
- [110.](#) P.M. Jones, **The Peasantry in the French Revolution** (Cambridge 1988), ch. 4.

[111.](#) M. Vovelle, **La Chute de la monarchie 1787–1792** (Paris 1972), pp. 139, 145, 153, 168; see generally **ibid.**, chs. 4 and 5, which are to some degree a running critique of the *déravage* thesis.

[112.](#) A. Soboul, *A propos d'une thèse récente sur le mouvement paysan dans la Révolution française*, **AHRF 45** (1973), p. 89.

[113.](#) Jones, **Peasantry**, p. 122.

[114.](#) Rudé, **Crowd**, pp. 17–18.

[115.](#) Soboul, **Parisian Sans-Culottes**, p. 254.

[116.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 53, 54, 252, 254.

[117.](#) Id, **French Revolution**, I, p. 8.

[118.](#) Hunt, **Politics, Culture and Class**, pp. 178–9.

[119.](#) See more generally on the nature and formation of collectivities, see Callinicos, **Making History**, chs. 4 and 5.

[120.](#) Soboul, **French Revolution**, II, p. 382.

[121.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 408. See id, **Parisian Sans-Culottes**, 251ff, and M. Bouloiseau, **La République jacobine** (Paris 1972), ch. 6.

[122.](#) G. Rudé and A. Soboul, *Le Maximum des salaires parisiens et le 9 thermidor*, **AHRF 26** (1954), p. 22 and *passim*.

[123.](#) E.J. Hobsbawm, **The Age of Revolution** (London 1973), p. 217.

[124.](#) See Jones, **Peasantry**, esp. chs. 1 and 5.

[125.](#) Trebilcock, **Industrialisation**, p. 135. For a very similar judgement from a Marxist perspective, see T. Kemp, **Industrialisation in Nineteenth Century Europe** (2nd edn, London 1985), ch. 3.

[126.](#) Skopcol, **States**, p. 204. Compare **RFR**, p. 202.

[127.](#) G. Lefebvre, *Les Paysans et la Révolution française*, in id, **Etudes**, pp. 341, 342, 343–4, 352, 353, and *passim*.

[128.](#) Soboul, *Mouvement paysan*, p. 95.

[129.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 99, 100. Soboul's concentration towards the end of his life on agrarian questions – see especially **Problèmes paysans de la Révolution, 1789–1848** (Paris 1976) – does make Comninel's claim that Marxist historians of the revolution have ignored the peasantry (**RFR**, p. 151) seem particularly silly.

[130.](#) Jones, **Peasantry**, pp. 137–54.

[131.](#) CW, XI, 185.

[132.](#) RFR, p. 203.

[133.](#) CW, XI, pp. 190–1, 194.

[134.](#) See Trebilcock, **Industrialisation**, pp. 150–5, 185–7. David Harvey offers an interesting Marxist analysis of Paris under the Second Empire which makes some of the same points in **Consciousness and the Urban Experience** (Oxford 1985), ch. 3. See also Blackburn's comment on Comninel in **Overthrow**, pp. 549–50 n 4. This book is, incidentally, a splendid vindication of the concept of bourgeois revolution as an essential instrument for understanding the modern world. Perhaps its central theme is that 'anti-slavery was linked to an overarching process of "bourgeois-democratic" revolution' (*ibid.*, p. 538) – a link demonstrated above all by the decree of the Convention of 16 Plûviose II (4 February 1794), which abolished slavery in the colonies, thus allying the Jacobin republic with the insurgent slaves of St Domingue: see *ibid.*, ch. VI.

[135.](#) Soboul, **La Civilisation**, p. 63.

[136.](#) See Anderson, **Lineages**, Pt. II, ch. 3.

[137.](#) CW, VIII, p. 162.

[138.](#) Stedman Jones, *Society and Politics*, pp. 86–7.

[139.](#) Blackburn and Eley, **Peculiarities**, p. 84.

[140.](#) Hobsbawm, **Age**, p. 11.

[141.](#) In a recent article Anderson argues to the contrary, advancing the general thesis that capitalist states have generally undergone periods of radical change subsequent to the original revolutions which established them – Holland's 'Batavian Revolution' of the 1780s, the 19th century French Revolutions, the American Civil War, the German Revolution of 1918, and the upheavals experienced by continental Europe and Japan as a result of the Second World War:

The general significance of these 'revolutions after the revolution' was everywhere the same. They were essentially phases in the modernisation of the state, which thereby permitted a reinvigoration of the economy. The most conservative and or regressive social elements – Dutch regents, Southern slave owners, French legitimists, Japanese landlords, Prussian junkers, Italian

latifundists – were eliminated. Something like a fresh historical start occurred, at the summit of society. (Anderson, *Figures*, p. 48).

The function of this theory is to rehabilitate Anderson's normative conception of bourgeois revolution, according to which Britain's relative decline is explained by its failure to conform to this pattern, since it alone of the major capitalist states did not undergo such a 'revolution after the revolution'.

[142.](#) Blackburn and Eley, **Peculiarities**, pp. 109, 123, 124–5, 146. Ironically, Eley draws in his analysis of the Wilhelmine state on Anderson's discussion of Prussian Absolutism: compare **ibid.**, p. 133 and **Lineages**, pp. 277–8. Anderson's ideas about 'modernising' revolutions seem to be connected with Arno Mayer's claim that the European *ancien régimes* survived into the 20th century: see Mayer's **The Persistence of the Old Regime** (New York 1981) and my critique in **Against Post-modernism** (Cambridge 1989), ch. 2.

[143.](#) See esp. H. Frankel, [Class Forces in the American Revolution](#), in G. Novack, *ed.*, **America's Revolutionary Heritage** (New York 1976; hereinafter ARH).

[144.](#) G. Novack, [The Civil War – its Place in History](#), in ARH, pp. 249–50.

[145.](#) See, for an overview of American society in this period, J. McPherson, **Battle Cry of Freedom** (New York 1988), ch. 1, and, on the nature of America's Industrial Revolution, D.M. Gordon, **Paris 1, Segmented Work, Divided Workers** (Cambridge 1982), ch. 2.

[146.](#) Marx and Engels, **The Civil War in the United States** (New York 1961), p. 81.

[147.](#) Blackburn, **Overthrow**, p. 542.

[148.](#) M. Aglietta, **A Theory of Capitalist Regulation** (London 1979), pp. 77–8.

[149.](#) McPherson, **Battle Cry**, p. 859. See also E. Foner, **Reconstruction** (New York 1988), ch. 1.

[150.](#) G. Novack, [Homage to John Brown](#), in ARH.

[151.](#) W.E.B. Du Bois, **Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880** (New York 1969), chs. IV and V.

[152.](#) **Speeches and Letters of Abraham Lincoln** (London 1949), p. 203.

[153.](#) Foner, **Reconstruction**, p. 10.

[154.](#) McPherson, **Battle Cry**, p. 844.

[155.](#) Du Bois, **Black Reconstruction**, Foner, **Reconstruction**, and P. Camejo, **Racism, Revolution, Reaction, 1861–1877** (New York 1976).

[156.](#) See Kaoru Sugihara, *Le Débat sur le capitalisme japonais (1927–1937)*, **Actuel Marx 2** (1987). Many have been dealt with in a most illuminating unpublished paper by Colin Barker [[Origins and Significance of the Meiji Restoration](#), 1982] which I largely follow in the subsequent brief discussion.

[157.](#) Colin Barker, *Origins and Significance of the Meiji Restoration* (1982).

[158.](#) See in addition to **ibid.**, pp. 13ff., E.K. Trimberger, *State Power and Modes of Production*, **Insurgent Sociologist 7** (1977), and, on the tributary mode of production in general, C. Wickham, *The Uniqueness of the East*, **Journal of Peasant Studies 12** (1985).

It should be said that this view is controversial since, first, many Marxist students of Japan (Takahashi, Anderson *et al.*) believe that Tokugawa society was feudal, and secondly, many would doubt that the concept of a tributary mode of production is in fact preferable either to Marx's idea of an 'Asiatic Mode of Production' or to regarding pre-capitalist Asian societies as simply as feudal.

[159.](#) E.K. Trimberger, **Revolution from Above** (New Brunswick 1978), p. 41; see generally chs. 2 and 3. Trimberger regards Japan as the *only* full case of 'revolution from above' which she believes necessarily involves the intervention of 'autonomous military bureaucrats'. This seems much too restrictive. B. Moore, **The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy** (Harmondsworth 1969), pp. 254–75, discusses why the Meiji Restoration was not accompanied – and challenged – by a 'peasant revolution'.

[160.](#) Takashi Toyoda, *Révolution française et Révolution Meiji: étude critique des interprétations de Kosa et Rono*, **AHRF 35** (1963), pp. 21–2.

[161.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 18.

[162.](#) T. Cliff, **Deflected Permanent Revolution** (London 1983); see also my reflections in [Trotsky's Theory of the Permanent Revolution](#)

[and its Relevance to the Third World Today](#), **IS 2:16** (1982).

[163.](#) C. Hill, **God's Englishman** (Harmondsworth 1972), **Milton and the English Revolution** (London 1977), and **The Experience of Defeat** (London 1984).

[164.](#) R. Cobb, **The People's Armies** (New Haven 1987), Bk. II.

[165.](#) C. Hill, **Change**, p. 279. See also Callinicos, **Making History**, ch. 5.

[166.](#) **RFR**, pp. 4, 68, 133, 142, 155, 151.

[167.](#) R. Brenner, *Bourgeois Revolution*.

[168.](#) See G. Therborn, **Science, Class, Society** (London 1976), pp. 355–75, and G. Labica, **Marxism and the Status of Philosophy** (Brighton 1980), pp. 282–4.

[169.](#) A. Callinicos, **Marxism and Philosophy** (Oxford 1983), pp. 48, 51.

[170.](#) See especially E.M. Wood, *The Separation of the Economic and Political in Capitalism*, **NLR 127** (1981), which includes an acknowledgement to Comninel (p. 67n).

[171.](#) **RFR**, pp. 134, 170–3, 169: compare Marx, **Capital**, III (Moscow 1971), p. 791.

[172.](#) **RFR**, p. 77. See the discussion of different versions of historical materialism and of a weaker 'materialist sociology' in A. Levine, **The End of the State** (London 1987), ch. 5.

[173.](#) E.O. Wright, *Giddens's Critique of Marxism*, **NLR 138** (1983), pp. 27–9. See also my **Making History**, ch. 2.

[174.](#) **RFR**, p. 104.

