

# INTRODUCTION

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This work seeks to reclaim the idea that the French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution. It asserts that in 1789, a massive popular uprising allowed the middle class to assume power by overthrowing the political and social order of the *ancien régime*. Profound changes in the economy, social structure, and culture of eighteenth-century France made such a revolution possible. That century saw a notable development of capitalist trade and manufacture, largely under the auspices of the middle class. The expansion of the capitalist economy during this period tended to upset the traditional life of millions of French peasants, setting the stage for an agrarian revolution. Similarly, the development of dispersed manufactures and new concentrated industries, made hundreds of thousands of wageworkers dependent on the vagaries of the capitalist economy. As a result they too became prone to social and political unrest. A deep economic crisis at the end of the eighteenth century proved to be the spark that set off a revolution in which millions of peasants and workers challenged the existing political and social order.

The overall expansion of the role of profit in the economy and growth in the numbers, wealth, and confidence of the bourgeoisie, made it possible for this class to take political advantage of popular upheaval in order to wrest control of the state from the dominant classes of the *ancien régime*. The following quarter-century, including the period of Napoleon, was marked by bloody and earthshaking upheavals in France and in the rest of Europe. But they were also characterized by significant continuity based on the progressive ascendancy of a revolutionary middle class over the rest of society. These twenty-six years of revolutionary government witnessed a steady increase in the self-confidence of this class, and the strengthening of its hold on political and social power. The legal, cultural, and institutional changes set in place during this period set the stage for the further development of a capitalist economy and society in the nineteenth century. It is in this sense that the French Revolution is described as a bourgeois revolution.

To the casual student of history such an assertion might not seem to be particularly controversial. Indeed, for a long period throughout the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century, such a view of the French Revolution was taken to be obvious, even self-evident, to historians of all political persuasions. Yet, our casual reader of history would be surprised to learn that for the last thirty years, this view has been contested and even rejected by the most influential elements of the academic world in the Anglo-Saxon countries. The notion of a bourgeois revolution has come to be challenged in France itself. Tainted by Marxism, the view of the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution has been anathema to these so-called revisionist historians.

Over the last generation it is not too much to say that these conservative and not-so-conservative scholars have dominated the historical study of the French Revolution in Britain, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere in the Anglo-Saxon world. While unable to produce a convincing substitute for the notion of a bourgeois revolution, these historians have produced a wide-ranging and serious critique of the traditional view. Many believe that the notion of the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution has been discredited. Even some Marxist scholars have accepted the revisionist perspective. We believe, however, that after a generation of scholarly dominance, revisionism has exhausted itself and is now at a dead end. Accordingly, our work represents a timely attempt to reassert the notion of the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution. Avowedly Marxist in inspiration, this account is based on a synthesis of much of the important French and Anglo-Saxon scholarship of recent years. In the course of this survey we attempt to confute the most important arguments offered by the revisionists against the notion of a bourgeois revolution. We try to demonstrate that the view of the French Revolution, as the moment when the middle class took political power, is the only one that can make sense of the existing historical research.

Much of the account that follows, like past Marxist narratives, dwells on the facts of economic and social history. In that sense it is biased in favor of seeking out what was innovative in the realm of economics and social relations, as one would expect in such a materialist narrative. The growing power of the middle class and the expansion of capitalist industry are major themes. Yet it is one of the major contentions of the revisionists that one of the main keys to the outbreak of the Revolution was the development of a radical political culture. They have argued that the importance of this new culture has been ignored by Marxist proponents of the traditional view of a bourgeois revolution. Recent scholarship has confirmed that a new political culture was born in this period that proved to be important in giving shape and direction to the Revolution. Therefore, in accord with the strictures of the revisionists, this work takes into account changes in the realm of culture that might have affected the political order. In particular, it stresses innovation in political thought, especially in the

period prior to and during the Revolution. But in the thought of such pivotal figures as Pierre-Louis Roederer, Etienne Clavière, Alexis-Théophile Vandermode, and Jean-Baptiste Say, this work discovers not simply a revolutionary approach to politics, but a new political economy. As we shall see, the objective of such thinkers was not simply to invent a new political order appropriate to the rule of the bourgeoisie, but one compatible with an emergent capitalist economy.

In French society prior to the Revolution, capitalism grew up within the interstices of feudalism. Accordingly, it was characterized by complicated and contradictory tendencies in which feudal and capitalist elements coexisted. Nobles created industries, capitalists became ennobled, so-called bourgeoisie lived off rents, and capitalists bought fiefs in order to exploit them in a capitalist manner. The revisionist critics of the French Revolution have had a field day dwelling on these contradictions in order to try to deny the existence of a capitalist bourgeoisie, the existence of capitalism, or the reality of a bourgeois revolution. It is important therefore to clarify the terms and theoretical premises of our argument.

We begin by outlining what we mean by feudalism and capitalism, what we mean by bourgeoisie and a bourgeois revolution. France, prior to the Revolution, must still be considered a feudal society. The essence of feudalism is the antagonistic relationship between a ruling class of noble landlords who control access to land, and a dominated class of subservient peasant farmers. As such, the overall setting of feudalism is a largely agrarian society with limited productive potential. The producers in such a society are largely peasant families interested primarily in producing their own subsistence. Most of the limited surplus they do produce is directly or indirectly coerced from them in the form of rent. By the eighteenth century, feudalism in France had evolved from a hierarchical and parcelized system of landlordship, into one thoroughly ordered and regulated by the administrative apparatus of the absolutist state. The absolutist state reinforced the power of the landlord class while basing itself fiscally on a tax system which itself was a kind of centralized rent. By then the French economy was characterized by the production of commodities for exchange in the market, facilitated by the substantial growth of specialized manufacturing, long-distance trade, and commercial banking. Towns and cities accordingly had assumed considerable importance. But these elements, which were to fully flower under postrevolutionary French capitalism, had developed in the interstices of feudal society over several centuries and did not become fundamentally incompatible with it until the crisis of the French Revolution.

Like feudalism, capitalism is a system that is founded on an antagonistic class relationship. In this case the opposition is between waged workers and capitalists. The workers, who are the producers under capitalism, have limited, or no control, over the means or processes of production and therefore have restricted or no means of producing their own subsistence.

In other words, they have limited or no means of independently producing their own livelihood. As a result, they are compelled to sell their labor power to employers in return for a wage that enables them to buy food and other necessities. The wage then is essentially the value of the commodity-labor power. Capitalism, in contrast to feudalism, is a system in which tools, manufacture, technological innovation, and finally machinery and fixed industrial capital, progressively dominates the productive process. As a result, workers are provided with constantly expanding productive capacity, albeit under capitalist control. Using these increasingly efficient means of production, they are able, during their hours of work, to produce increasingly more value than the value of their own labor power. This surplus value-unpaid labor-is the fundamental source of surplus under capitalism in contrast to the primacy of rent under feudalism. Transformed by the productive process into commodities for sale in the marketplace, surplus value is realized by capitalists as profit.

Marxist and non-Marxist accounts of the French Revolution agree that prior to the Revolution, rent was the primary form of surplus extraction in the French economy. A Marxist account then must demonstrate that within this system, profit played an increasingly larger role in the economy in the eighteenth century, and that accordingly, the power of capitalists who accumulated such profits increased.

It will accordingly be shown that one of the ways in which the role of profit increased during the eighteenth century was through substantial progress in the use of profit-enhancing tools, and in the development of manufacture, technological innovation, and finally machinery and fixed industrial capital. Equally if not more important as a source of expanded profit was the transformation of the most fertile agricultural regions in the north of France into areas dominated by capitalist farming. In the well-known concluding chapters of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx demonstrated the decisive importance of the capitalist transformation of agriculture to the emergence of English capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Much less well known but important to our study, are Marx's remarks on the capitalist development of French agriculture prior to the French Revolution. These are to be found in his analysis of the doctrines of the eighteenth-century French economists, the Physiocrats, in his *Theories of Surplus-Value*.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of their writings, Marx assumed that French agriculture prior to the Revolution operated according to the dynamics of capitalism. Indeed, so much was this the case that, according to him, it enabled these writers to outline the essential contours of capital: "the analysis of *capital*, within the bourgeois horizon, is essentially the work of the Physiocrats. It is this service that makes them the true fathers of modern political economy."<sup>3</sup> It was the dramatic emergence of capitalism in the rural sector in this still largely agricultural country, according to Marx, which made it possible for these economists to discover the essential nature of value and surplus value in particular.<sup>4</sup> As Marx described it, "the Physiocratic system is presented as the new capital-

ist society prevailing within the framework of feudal society. This therefore corresponds to bourgeois society in the epoch when the latter breaks its way out of the feudal order. Consequently, the starting point (of modern political economy) is in France, in a predominantly agricultural country, and not in England, a predominantly industrial, commercial and seafaring country.”<sup>5</sup> The essential nature of capital is more starkly revealed through its sudden surfacing in the relatively backward French agricultural sector than in the more diversified and sophisticated economy of England.

According to Marx, then, the state of French agriculture in the eighteenth century corresponds to the period when the bourgeoisie is breaking its way out of the feudal order. Marx’s conclusion does not carry weight in itself. Its validity as insight is established by our subsequent review of the recent historiography of eighteenth-century French agriculture that fully confirms the impressive development of capitalist agriculture in eighteenth-century France. Part of this development included a great interest in, and the investment of substantial capital in, agricultural improvement.

Marx notes that “the foundation of modern political economy is the conception of the value of labour power as something fixed.”<sup>6</sup> According to him, it is to the credit of the Physiocrats that “...the *minimum of wages* therefore correctly forms the pivotal point of Physiocratic theory.”<sup>7</sup> The Physiocrats and following them Marx, believed that securing maximum surplus value in capitalist agriculture in France was based on keeping wages as low as the maintenance of subsistence would allow. They assumed that working for wages was essential to the subsistence of eighteenth-century workers.

Denial of this point is critical to the argument of the important revisionist George Comninel.<sup>8</sup> Comninel rejects the idea that prior to the French Revolution capitalist farming existed on the large tenant farms of northern France which operated on the basis of wage labor and profit. He dismisses the idea that such operations were capitalist, because the labor force was kept dependent on its own subsistence production rather than being fully proletarianized.<sup>9</sup> To the contrary, we shall demonstrate that what drove these rural workers to work for wages was that they could not produce their own subsistence, lacking *sufficient* or any means of production. Not only were they forced to sell their labor power in the market, but they were compelled to buy the greater part of their subsistence there as well. In order to perpetuate this situation, the Physiocrats emphasized the need to preserve the so-called minimum of wages, a form of economic coercion critical to maintaining a sufficient workforce available to employers in what was an emerging capitalist agriculture. The fact that some of the prerevolutionary workforce resorted to self-provisioning, does not signify that they were not dependent on wages. As Michael Perelman has pointed out, limited self-provisioning historically helped to raise the rate of surplus value by making it possible to keep wages at a minimum.<sup>10</sup> In the final analysis, it was success in extracting surplus value from workers

rather than the unlimited character of market coercion upon workers, which determined the capitalist character of the most productive sectors of French agriculture.<sup>11</sup>

The French Revolution began as the result of an overall crisis of society, as we shall see. Among other factors inherent to the crisis of 1789, was the fact that the existing social and political order had become a barrier to the further accumulation of profit. It ought to be admitted that this crisis might have been solved otherwise than through a revolution. But, in fact, it was decided by virtue of a revolution led by the bourgeoisie. In order to avoid subsequent confusion, we therefore lay out clearly what we mean by the terms bourgeoisie and bourgeois revolution. Prior to the Revolution, the word *bourgeois* had different meanings. It could refer to a member of the third estate or to a member of the ruling elite or to a citizen of a town. It could mean a person who lived off rent, engaged in contemptible economic activities, or was a boss—someone who bought and employed the labor of others. Among these definitions the last would be closest to the Marxist conception. In this work, bourgeois refers to a capitalist or to someone who makes a large if not the largest part of his income, from profits—agricultural, manufacturing, or commercial.

It might be conceded by revisionists that some bourgeois were living off profits in the Marxist sense. But it has been argued that other bourgeois and among them the most prominent, gained the largest part of their livelihood not from profits but from rents. The key term in this respect is *prominent*. As Maurice Dobb pointed out years ago with respect to the English Revolution, the most prominent elements of the bourgeoisie were deeply implicated in the feudal system of rents and privilege prior to the Revolution.<sup>12</sup> It was perhaps even more the case in France, where prior to the onset of the revolutionary crisis, much of this upper element of the bourgeoisie accepted, with no doubt some reservations, the ideology of hierarchy and privilege of the *ancien régime*. That does not gainsay the fact that the great majority of the over two million bourgeoisie in France at that time lived primarily off profits. Indeed, many bourgeoisie whose income was more or less dependent on rent, were collecting capitalist and not feudal rents, as we shall see.

As we have noted, profits did play an expanding role in the French economy throughout the eighteenth century. But the dominance of rents, feudal relations, and the regulations of the *ancien régime* constituted an ongoing brake on profit-making activity. Increasing rents and the ongoing state control of the grain trade restricted profits and limited if it did not entirely block, investment in the agricultural sector. The feudal system and the administrative apparatus of the *ancien régime* checked the emergence of a unified national market. Limited gains in productivity and output and consequently higher prices for food restricted disposable income and the market for manufactures, inhibiting investment in fixed industrial capital. These rent-based constraints on profits and capital accumulation were tol-

erable so long as the economy was expanding, as it did for most of the eighteenth century. The crisis of 1789 was in part the point when such restrictions based on the continued domination of rent induced a crisis of profits which became an element of the overall crisis.

The crisis of 1789 was in part, a crisis of profits in the commercial and industrial sector. But it was also a crisis of the whole society, including the looming threat of hunger, mass layoffs of workers and artisans, and state bankruptcy. It became a revolutionary political crisis because the financial and political capacity of the absolutist government of the *ancien régime* came into question. Millions of peasants and hundreds of thousands of workers and craftsmen rebelled against the existing order, alongside the bourgeoisie. Why then do we label the revolution a bourgeois revolution? In the first place it's because the bourgeoisie assumed leadership over this revolution. Almost to the eve of the Revolution the bourgeoisie had more or less coexisted with the privileged orders of nobility and clergy within the society of orders of the *ancien régime* with only relatively minor complaints and objections. But with the onset of the crisis in 1788, the bourgeoisie rapidly became conscious of its antagonistic interests to the nobility and to the whole order of privilege, and began to mobilize politically and ideologically as a class. Mass urban insurrection and peasant revolt were indispensable features of the revolutionary process that followed. But revolution is supremely a political event entailing the seizure of control of the state. Without taking control of the state everything accomplished by revolutionary violence is potentially reversible. It was only the bourgeoisie, increasingly self-conscious as a class and endowed with sufficient economic, political, and cultural resources, which in the first instance could challenge and overthrow the absolute monarchy and the feudal order and establish a new state.

It is this political capacity of the bourgeoisie that makes it possible to refer to the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution. But appreciating the Revolution as a bourgeois revolution also entails understanding the relationship between control of the state and the development of class power. The initial success of the bourgeoisie did not mean that France was a fully developed capitalist economy led by a fully conscious and self-confident bourgeois class. It only meant that the bourgeoisie had developed enough economic as well as political strength to get rid of the *ancien régime*. It would take an extended process over the next twenty five years for it to mature as a class while further developing its economic underpinnings. Its control of the state played a large part in enabling it to do so. Indeed, the next quarter-century would see a continuous struggle to consolidate its control of the state against internal and external enemies. This political and military struggle itself helped to develop the confidence and identity of this new ruling class. In the meantime, the new educational, technical, scientific, and cultural institutions created by the revolutionary state, directly helped to articulate its ideals, aspirations, and needs. Equally if not

more important, the bourgeoisie would use the state to strengthen itself economically. The new state that the bourgeoisie created and dominated would sweep away feudal constraints, protect capitalist property rights, and unify the country legally and administratively into a national market. It would foster the profitability of agriculture and the creation of industrial capital on a more extended scale than prior to the Revolution. It is in this larger sense that the French Revolution is properly referred to as a bourgeois revolution.

## Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York, 1977), chap. 26-29, pp. 873-907.
2. Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value* (Moscow, 1963), pt.1, 44-68.
3. Marx, *Theories*, pt. 1, 45.
4. Marx, *Theories*, pt.1, 46. Value (crystallized labour) is a foundational concept of Marxism. Here we are treating it not as a concept subject to the proofs of economic "science." Rather, we are dealing with the notion of value as a premise or hypothesis, that is, as an insight central to an understanding of Marx's own conception of capitalism as a social formation.
5. Marx, *Theories*, pt.1, 50.
6. Marx, *Theories*, pt.1, 45.
7. Marx, *Theories*, pt.1, 45.
8. George Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London, 1987).
9. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution*, 190-91.
10. Michael Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation* (Durham, North Carolina and London, 2000), 92-123.
11. Neil Davidson, "How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions: Four Critiques and a Reconstruction," *Historical Materialism* 13:3 (2005), 20-21.
12. Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York, 1963), 120-23.