

Historical Papers

Quatre-Vingt-Neuf Revisited: Social Interests and Political Conflict in the French Revolution

George C. Comninel

Québec 1989

Volume 24, Number 1, 1989

URI: id.erudit.org/iderudit/030995ar
<https://doi.org/10.7202/030995ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN 0068-8878 (print)
1712-9109 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Comninel, G. C. (1989). Quatre-Vingt-Neuf Revisited: Social Interests and Political Conflict in the French Revolution. *Historical Papers*, 24 (1), 36–52. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030995ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1989

Article abstract

Fifty years after its publication, *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* — Georges Lefebvre's classic statement of the social interpretation of the French Revolution — is widely thought to have been discredited. Revisionist historians have effectively challenged the idea that the bourgeoisie was a revolutionary capitalist class overthrowing feudalism, and this has been taken to repudiate both Lefebvre's interpretation and Marxist history generally.

Yet the new revisionist orthodoxy has been unable to provide a credible alternative account of the origins and course of the Revolution. A “new” social interpretation is therefore suggested which, ironically, is very close to that originally offered by Lefebvre for, while the idea of a bourgeois-capitalist class revolution clearly is refuted by the historical evidence, a return to *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* reveals that this concept did not play a central role in Lefebvre's account. Nor is it integral to Marx's historical materialist method of analysis. Indeed, a fresh historical materialist class analysis of the ancien régime supports a very different social interpretation than that of “bourgeois revolution,” one largely consistent with Lefebvre's interpretation of the complex but integral social revolution unleashed in 1789.

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online. [<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>]



This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research. www.erudit.org

***Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* Revisited: Social Interests and Political Conflict in the French Revolution**

GEORGE C. COMNINEL

Résumé

Fifty years after its publication, Quatre-Vingt-Neuf — Georges Lefebvre's classic statement of the social interpretation of the French Revolution — is widely thought to have been discredited. Revisionist historians have effectively challenged the idea that the bourgeoisie was a revolutionary capitalist class overthrowing feudalism, and this has been taken to repudiate both Lefebvre's interpretation and Marxist history generally. Yet the new revisionist orthodoxy has been unable to provide a credible alternative account of the origins and course of the Revolution. A "new" social interpretation is therefore suggested which, ironically, is very close to that originally offered by Lefebvre for, while the idea of a bourgeois-capitalist class revolution clearly is refuted by the historical evidence, a return to Quatre-Vingt-Neuf reveals that this concept did not play a central role in Lefebvre's account. Nor is it integral to Marx's historical materialist method of analysis. Indeed, a fresh historical materialist class analysis of the ancien régime supports a very different social interpretation than that of "bourgeois revolution," one largely consistent with Lefebvre's interpretation of the complex but integral social revolution unleashed in 1789.

* * * * *

Cinquante ans après sa publication, l'oeuvre devenue classique de Georges Lefebvre sur l'aspect de la Révolution française, Quatre-vingt-neuf, est fortement discréditée. Les historiens révisionnistes ont en effet remis en question l'interprétation voulant que la bourgeoisie ait été une classe capitaliste révolutionnaire qui voulait renverser la féodalité. Ils désavouaient ainsi et la thèse de Lefebvre et l'histoire marxiste en général, sans arriver, cependant, à proposer une alternative plausible sur l'origine et le déroulement de la révolution.

Nous présentons une "nouvelle" interprétation sociale de la Révolution qui, ironiquement, se situe très près de celle de Lefebvre. Il faut admettre que l'idée de Lefebvre à laquelle s'attaquent clairement les révisionnistes n'est pas au centre de son oeuvre. Pas plus, d'ailleurs, qu'elle ne résume la méthode d'analyse historico-matérialiste de Marx. Dans une toute nouvelle analyse de l'Ancien régime, le marxisme offre, en effet, une interprétation sociale fort différente de la thèse de la révolution bourgeoise, une interprétation qui rappelle celle que fait Lefebvre du caractère complexe mais essentiellement social de 1789.

I would like to thank Anne Ball for reading and offering critical comments on several drafts of this essay.

Until the past decade or so, the “social interpretation” of the French Revolution had long expressed the standard historical view that the fundamental cause of the Revolution was the struggle of a rising bourgeois class against the dominant feudal aristocracy, fuelled by the development of capitalism. Yet it is a commonplace of recent historiography that this interpretation — associated with the “Great Tradition” of the Revolution’s Republican and socialist historians, and most particularly with the work of Georges Lefebvre — has today been rejected by all except doctrinaire Marxists. It is important to declare at the outset, therefore, that with respect to a central point of this revisionist challenge there can be little doubt: the historical evidence clearly does not support the idea that a capitalist class waged the French Revolution against feudalism. Some different understanding of the origins and meaning of the Revolution thus must be found than that of a bourgeois-capitalist class revolution.

Yet, contrary to the new revisionist orthodoxy, a genuinely *social* interpretation of the Revolution conceived in other terms is not only possible, but necessary. Even more to the point, not only can the general principle of social interpretation be maintained, but the essentials of such an interpretation are still to be found in the work of Georges Lefebvre. Far from being repudiated, Lefebvre’s interpretation has merely been misrepresented and neglected. Indeed, the central point in what follows is that the social interpretation contained in Lefebvre’s classic *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* has all along offered a viable analysis of the Revolution.¹ Rather than being primarily an expression of the theory of bourgeois-capitalist class revolution, *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* (published in English as *The Coming of the French Revolution*) conceives of a broad and complex social revolution. Instead of a simple one-class revolution, Lefebvre’s conception of the social revolution is based on the interaction of separate revolutionary movements, rooted in the social interests of four different groups, *none* of which was conceived in relation to capitalism. Recognized in these terms, Lefebvre’s conception offers a compelling interpretation of the Revolution which, for the most part, still stands today.

It is, of course, true that the stunning success enjoyed by revisionist history over the past two decades has generally been seen as directly challenging the interpretation of *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf*. In much of this now well-known literature, the challenge is explicit. Alfred Cobban had Lefebvre specifically in mind in his original criticism of the social interpretation in the 1950s and 1960s, and Lefebvre was the foil for the most successful synthesis of the revisionist challenge to date, William Doyle’s *Origins of the French Revolution*.² Still more recently, considering the “death of the Great Tradition” for a bicentenary review of “The French Revolution and its Historians,” Norman Hampson

-
1. Georges Lefebvre, *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* (Paris, 1939), translated by R. R. Palmer as *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton, 1947). Further quotations are from the Vintage edition (New York, n.d.).
 2. William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1980); Alfred Cobban, *The Myth of the French Revolution* (London, 1955), reprinted in *Aspects of the French Revolution* (London, 1968) and *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (London, 1968).

concur that evidence has “cut the ground from beneath the feet of Lefebvre.”³ Yet on closer examination it will be seen that this reflects a systematic confusion of Lefebvre’s conception of the social revolution with the supposedly “Marxist” account of bourgeois-capitalist class revolution.

This reevaluation of Lefebvre’s work is prompted by more than a recognition that 1989 marks the fiftieth anniversary of *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* as well as the Revolution’s bicentenary, for it is increasingly clear that, despite important contributions to the study of communities and institutions in the ancien régime and Revolution, recent historiography has failed to provide any adequate interpretation for the Revolution as a whole. Indeed, the new history’s most notable tendency has been precisely to deny that any integral unity existed to be interpreted in the first place, a view closely associated with the opinion that most of what happened after 1789 was a dreadful mistake, the tragic ascendancy of ideological politics.

Norman Hampson’s recent work perfectly captures both this decomposition of the Revolution as a meaningful event, and the explicit link between this view and conservative political thought. Thus, he contends that to describe opposition to the Revolution as “‘counter-revolutionary’ in a pejorative sense is to subscribe to the old myth that there was a French Revolution that was by definition a boon to humanity in general, to which all right-thinking people were rationally and morally bound to subscribe.”⁴ Whereas in the Great Tradition the Revolution stood for the establishment of modern liberal democracy, in the new history it is characterized as antipluralist and terroristic. Hampson emphasizes his rejection of the so-called “old myth” by titling his recent book on the opening phase of the Revolution *Prelude to Terror*. While insisting there was no historical necessity to the Revolution or its course, Hampson attributes the “grim sequel” of the years which followed the Constituent Assembly directly to the political choices made by its delegates. He explicitly embraces a counterrevolutionary perspective close to that of Edmund Burke:

When Burke attacked the French revolution he argued that it was impossible to pull a country up by the roots and make a fresh start. The Constituent Assembly showed that the process was liable to get out of control and the final cost might prove more than anyone would have cared to pay if they had foreseen it, but that it could be done.⁵

Determined to have it both ways, Hampson denies there was anything unitary or inevitable in the history of the Revolution, yet argues that “the seeds of the Terror had been sown” once the assembly opted for “popular sovereignty and the construction of the ideal society” instead of adopting the values of pluralism.⁶

Such a return to the conservative politics of Burke, along with an already established return to Tocqueville, emerges as a major theme of the new history. This is

3. Norman Hampson, “The French Revolution and its Historians,” in *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and its Legacy 1789-1989*, ed. Geoffrey Best (London, 1988), 232.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Norman Hampson, *Prelude to Terror* (London, 1988), 185.

6. *Ibid.*, 186-87.

apparent, not only among English historians, but in France as well, particularly in the work of François Furet.⁷ Though this new historiography, the Revolution has been systematically dismembered, broken into many wholly disconnected fragments. As R. B. Rose puts it, "It is no longer entirely clear that a French Revolution actually happened at all."⁸ On the one hand, in stressing the divergences between the regions, agrarian zones, professional groups, cultural contexts, and the like, the impression is given, as Rose says, "that the Revolution was different in all the ninety-odd *Départements* and indeed in all the 40,000 or so villages of France."⁹ On the other hand, in denying any *social* basis whatever for the Revolution, the one unity that will be conceded is, as Hampson puts it, as "a clash of cultures rather than of classes."¹⁰ Yet the very point in conceiving of the Revolution as a "cultural" conflict is to stress discontinuity between a consensus alleged to have existed in 1788 and early 1789, and the violence of the revolutionary years.

This is apparent in the way revisionist historians such as Hampson, Doyle, and Furet have taken to emphasizing the role of the Enlightenment in forging the near-universal embrace of "a new and better age" among the whole of the *ancien régime's* educated elite.¹¹ Indeed, Hampson goes so far as to describe the future antagonists of the Revolution as initially "rather more in agreement about what should be done than the rival wings within most present day political parties."¹² As Furet describes it, the original, and underlying, unity of the elites was unfortunately broken by an "autonomous political and ideological dynamic."¹³ Hence, according to Doyle, despite its bitterness the Revolution in the end simply "clarified" the existing social situation by providing "common shelter" to all men of property, in a France henceforth to be "ruled not by nobles but by 'notables'."¹⁴

Wholly in keeping with the conservative perspectives of Burke, Tocqueville, and the American historian Crane Brinton, this view insists that, before July 1789, there was a broad, conservative-liberal consensus which responsible politicians sought to reconstruct after the fury of the republican era. The "meaning" of the Revolution is therefore reduced simply to the achievement of liberal constitutional monarchy, which Hampson, echoing Brinton, sees largely to have been realized *before* the storming of the Bastille.¹⁵ By this analysis, the entire course of revolutionary conflict was unnecessary: a terrible tragedy, wholly attributable to antipluralist politics and revolutionary ideology.

-
7. See François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (London, 1981), or "The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville's Thought," *Tocqueville Review* (1985-86): 117-29.
 8. R. B. Rose, "Reinterpreting the French Revolution: Cobban's 'Myth': Thirty Years On," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 32:2 (1986): 238.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. Hampson, *Prelude to Terror*, 87.
 11. *Ibid.*, ix-xi and 1-3. See also Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The Nobility in Eighteenth-century France* (London, 1985).
 12. Hampson, *Prelude to Terror*, x.
 13. Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, 1978), 170-71; *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 130.
 14. Doyle, *Origins*, 24.
 15. Hampson, *Prelude to Terror*, 49-51; Crane Brinton, *A Decade of Revolution* (New York, 1963), 26-27 and 33-35.

Even if they accept the idea that the bourgeoisie did not constitute a capitalist class, this insistence that the long and violent struggle of the Revolution lacked any social foundation which might help explain it has left many historians uneasy. This was the criticism Colin Lucas made of Doyle's *Origins of the French Revolution*: "It is difficult to understand the sustained intensity of the revolutionary will to impose a new social organization without a pre-history of social conflict."¹⁶ Indeed, Doyle himself had suggested that few would follow George V. Taylor in describing the Revolution as having been purely political.¹⁷ Yet rather than proceeding to offer any *social* explanation for the Revolution, the revisionist accounts continue to resort to the nominally "cultural" explanation. As a result, they ultimately return to stress a polarization of ideology that contrasts sharply with their amorphous and fragmented view of the social context.

It is the *persistence* of the underlying political conflict made manifest in the Revolution's antiaristocratic ideology which must be explained. For at the heart of the Revolution there was clearly an enduring political intent, the specific goal of establishing a new structure of political and social relations, stripped of aristocratic privilege and prerogative. It is difficult to understand how this protracted struggle and the enormous energies it consumed can credibly be explained as purely the result of arbitrary political choices and ideological commitments. Ideology alone, without some social interest to help account for the intensity of political purpose, seems inadequate to explain the enormity of the Revolution.

With the revisionist accounts having failed at every turn to provide a satisfactory explanation for this persistent and intentful revolutionary conflict, it is not unreasonable to turn to consider anew the terms of the social interpretation advanced by one of the Revolution's greatest historians. Yet what is striking in rereading *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* is not only that the revisionist historians have failed to explain the conflict of the Revolution, but that they never confronted Lefebvre's social interpretation in the first place. The only grounds ever offered for dismissing the social interpretation has been that the bourgeoisie cannot be described as a capitalist class. This has been taken to be a stinging refutation of Marxism as such and, at least implicitly, a repudiation of the whole principle of materialist social analysis in history. This is particularly the case since most observers, Marxist as well as non-Marxist, have assumed that historical social analysis is primarily concerned with interests determined by economic property.

The only point the revisionist argument actually addresses concerning the social interests of the bourgeoisie and nobility is that they did not take the form of a conflict between fundamentally different forms and relations of property. This was first argued by George V. Taylor in two pivotal articles, and by now the evidence that nobles and bourgeois shared essentially the same forms of property is quite conclusive.¹⁸ This is a matter of considerable importance, and one of the chief reasons (though, as will be seen, not the only reason) for concluding that the bourgeoisie and nobility actually belonged

16. Colin Lucas, "Notable against Notable," *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 May 1981, 525.

17. Doyle, *Origins*, 20.

18. George V. Taylor, "Types of Capitalism in Eighteenth Century France," *English Historical Review* 79 (1964): 478-97, and "Noncapitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American History Review* 72 (1967): 469-96.

to the *same* social class. Yet, far from undermining the idea of a social interpretation for the French Revolution, this finding becomes central to the development of a new class analysis of the ancien régime. On the basis of this analysis, it is possible to identify the real social basis for the virulent conflict that erupted between the bourgeoisie and aristocracy and, ultimately, to explain much of the character of the Revolution in terms of fundamental social interests. More than a little ironically, the terms of this analysis can be seen, on the whole, to be in keeping with those originally put forward by Georges Lefebvre.

ii

It must again be emphasized that, notwithstanding the significance of their argument about the property of nobles and bourgeois, the revisionist historians have never dealt with the fundamental issues of historical social analysis in any satisfactory way. It is not possible to consider here in any detail Marx's theory of class or his method of historical materialism, issues taken up in my *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge*.¹⁹ Yet, if historians might ordinarily not be expected to engage in this sort of rigorous social theory, it is none the less the case that a great deal has been made of the evidence regarding social interests in the ancien régime, with little effort to understand it.

Instead, a leap of logic is too often made from the fact that Lefebvre, and the Marxist historians generally, accepted in at least some sense the idea of "bourgeois revolution," to the conclusion that, as a result, the social interpretation of the Revolution has been disproved. Any further analysis of material interests in the prevailing social relationships is dispensed with, in favour of demographic rhythms, cultural *mentalités*, and postmodernist preoccupations with "discourse." Indeed, many historians now seem to feel obliged to learn an arcane new literary jargon, while leaving the concerns of systematic social analysis almost wholly neglected. In Taylor's two articles, for example, two diametrically opposed conceptions of the property relations of the ancien régime — respectively capitalist and noncapitalist — were put forward. Yet not one of the historians who refer so emphatically to the significance of this work has undertaken to clarify the issue.

Perhaps before we all accept the premise that history itself is just a form of "discourse," we ought at least to pause, and consider once again what might be learned from the method of historical materialist social analysis. For, as it happens, it is not only Lefebvre's work which the revisionists have failed to repudiate. Rejection of the idea that the Revolution was the overthrow of a feudal ruling class by a rising capitalist bourgeoisie is no more a refutation of the core of Marx's work than it is of Lefebvre's. Although both at least accepted the problematic concept of bourgeois class revolution, it was not in fact central to the ideas of either.

It is quite true that the class structure of the ancien régime can be shown to be very different from that presumed by the theory of bourgeois revolution. Yet, ironically, it is

19. George C. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London, 1987).

this historically verifiable class structure, and not that associated with "bourgeois revolution," which can be seen to have been reflected in the social interests described by Lefebvre's social interpretation and to be consistent with Marx's thought. While a detailed class analysis of the ancien régime and the social conflict of the Revolution clearly calls for a major study, it is still possible to sketch here in broad outlines both the grounding of such a social interpretation in Marx's work, and how it is prefigured in *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf*. I will first briefly consider Marx.

While it is widely presumed that the idea of bourgeois revolution is one of the linchpins of historical materialism — not least by many Marxists — such is not at all the case. This is a point I have argued at length elsewhere, so I will restrict myself to a few basic observations. To begin with, Marx did not invent the idea of bourgeois revolution. Instead, as both he and Engels acknowledged, it was adopted fully developed from liberal historians, and the idea first emerged among the bourgeois revolutionaries themselves.²⁰ Indeed, the origin of the concept during the Revolution helps make understandable the extent to which its view of the struggle against aristocracy reflected a specifically ideological purpose. Marx accepted this class characterization of the Revolution, only to *reject* its merely liberal politics as inadequate to his purpose of achieving true human emancipation in socialist society. Neither the concept of bourgeois revolution, nor its liberal ideological purpose, were ever integral to Marx's method of historical social analysis.

It has become increasingly apparent in recent years that a relatively crude and mechanistic conception of Marx's historical thought has tended to displace the historical materialist ideas developed in the course of his life work. Instead of endlessly reinterpreting the handful of short passages usually culled from his work — passages informed by the standard liberal histories of his day — Marx's historical thought is best approached in terms of a theoretical overview, for which few of the details have yet to be worked out. That is to say, we cannot turn to Marx for history as such, but only for a method of social analysis with which to approach history.

At the heart of Marx's historical materialism is the idea that the whole development of Western society since ancient Greece has been marked by the systematic opposition of exploitive and producing classes. It was the dynamic development of such polar exploitive relations through succeeding social forms which he had in mind in asserting that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."²¹ This idea of a historically dynamic opposition between polar classees — the exploiters and

20. There is a huge literature on the liberal origins of the concept, which I discuss in *Rethinking the French Revolution*, 53-74, 107-19. Among the works in English, see Stanley Mellon, *The Political Uses of History* (Stanford, 1958); François Mignet, *History of the French Revolution* (London, 1913); and Barnave's *Introduction à la Révolution française*, edited and translated by Emanuel Chill as *Power, Property, and History* (New York, 1971). For Marx's and Engels' recognition of this origin, see Raphael Samuel, "British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One," *New Left Review* 120 (1980): 33n.

21. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, *Collected Works* (New York, 1976), 6:482.

exploited of each society — is the key to Marx's overview of the successive epochs of Western history.

In several ways which are beyond the scope of this paper, the theory of bourgeois revolution does not make sense in these terms, conforming instead to the classical liberal or Whig conception of "progress" through historical stages.²² As just one contradiction, note that the theory of bourgeois revolution offers no working class opposed in polar exploitation to the supposed capitalist class of the bourgeoisie. Instead there are the *sans-culottes*, which virtually all authorities — most notably George Rudé and Albert Soboul — recognize to comprise masters, journeymen, and labourers alike, taking their group identity from consumption rather than production.²³ Indeed, after a more systematic consideration of the issues of class exploitation and historical development, even Soboul came to agree the bourgeoisie as such were not a capitalist class in the ancien régime and turned instead to describe the wealthy peasant *laboueurs* in these terms.²⁴ If we cannot concur in this latter judgment, it is at least indicative of a serious need to reconsider the classes of the ancien régime.

In undertaking this, it must be recognized that much of what Marx accepted about the history of precapitalist societies was not based on his own historical materialist analysis, but taken over from other writers — liberals who also used the concept "class," but with a very different meaning. Because Marx devoted himself almost exclusively to the study of capitalist class society, using history primarily in a retrospective way to clarify the nature of modern capitalism, most of his comments on earlier epochs do not reflect any original social analysis. Although the greater part of his life work took the form of a critique of liberal political economy, in order to be able to describe the operation of capitalism as a class society, Marx never undertook a comparable critique of the liberal history upon which he relied. Clearly, then, rather than taking the idea of "bourgeois revolution" for granted, a historical materialist approach to the ancien régime and Revolution ought to begin with a critical reassessment of the structure of class relations.

iii

If even Marx's historical materialist method is not called into question in rejecting the idea of bourgeois revolution, still less is Lefebvre's conception of the Revolution. Neither capitalism nor any social interest related to it ever played any significant part in Lefebvre's analysis. Lefebvre does locate the Revolution in a general context of growing commercial prosperity, and he does identify this as capitalism (although in proper historical materialist terms there is a qualitative difference between mere commerce, however profitable, and *capitalism*, as a specific system producing surplus-value

22. See Ronald Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976), and Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931).

23. See George Rudé, *The French Revolution* (London, 1988), 94-95, and *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959), 178-79; Albert Soboul, *The Parisian Sans-culottes and the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1964).

24. Soboul, "Du féodalisme au capitalisme: la Révolution française et la problématique des voies de passage," *La Pensée* 196 (1977): 61-78; "Qu'est-ce que la Révolution?" *La Pensée* 217/218 (1981): 33-45.

through capital's purchase and use of the commodified labour-power of workers). Yet, in virtually his only substantive discussion of "capitalism," Lefebvre focuses on the nobles who "let themselves be won over by the bourgeois spirit, took an interest in the progress of capitalism and tried to obtain some of its profits" — much as the revisionists themselves have argued.²⁵

Indeed, Lefebvre goes so far as to defend the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen against a charge of having "allowed capitalism to develop without control and for having thus caused the proletariat to rise against it." Far from acting as cynical instruments of capitalist interests, he says, the Constituents "had before their eyes a society in which modern capitalism was barely beginning," allowing them still to believe "that every man might own a few acres or a shop that would make him self-sufficient."²⁶

The whole thrust of Lefebvre's analysis is that, although the Revolution may ultimately have contributed to the development of modern capitalism, its origins lay in the unequal differentiation of status between the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, and not in any capitalist social requirements.²⁷ It is the idea of bourgeois/aristocratic conflict, not that of a struggle over ruling-class power, that explains the role of the Great Tradition in Lefebvre's work. He emphasizes that the Revolution was fought specifically over the constitutional issue of noble privilege. In Lefebvre's view, during 1788-89 the

agreement of the orders turned to radical dissension when they looked to their respective positions in the state. The nobility ... conceded fiscal equality at most; it wished its other privileges maintained and reinforced. The Third Estate wished complete civil equality; some of its petitions showed, at most, a willingness for the aristocracy to retain some honorific distinctions.²⁸

Throughout *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf*, Lefebvre's focus is sharply upon the conflict over aristocratic privilege, ultimately leading to the conclusion that "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen stands as the incarnation of the Revolution as a whole."²⁹

So far is this from attributing the Revolution to the determining influence of capitalist social interests that one might begin to wonder whether, for Lefebvre, it was not perhaps simply a political revolution after all. The essential point here is that Lefebvre's social interpretation is rooted in his broader conception of *social revolution*, and not in the idea of bourgeois class revolution. What explained the violence of the French Revolution for Lefebvre was not the "deeper cause" he conventionally attributed to "the growth of commerce and industry." This could not explain the French Revolution, he noted, for "In England ... social evolution has gone on in relative calm."³⁰ This is much as Professor Rudé has argued recently, in differentiating the French Revolution from the other so-called "democratic revolutions" of the Atlantic world:

25. Lefebvre, *Coming of the French Revolution*, 13.
 26. *Ibid.*, 185.
 27. *Ibid.*, 4.
 28. *Ibid.*, 64.
 29. *Ibid.*, 182.
 30. *Ibid.*, 4.

If we are only concerned with the spread of the ideas of the Enlightenment, the long-term legislation of the revolutionary Assemblies and the liberal "Principles of '89", then the similarities between the revolutions in France and in these other countries are strikingly close.... Yet, important as this is, it omits an essential and quite distinctive element of the French Revolution: the active participation of the common people from 1789 onwards and all the consequences that flowed from it.... So in France, and not elsewhere, there were such phenomena as the peasant "revolution", the *sans-culotte* movement of 1793, the Jacobin Dictatorship, the *levée en masse* and *armées révolutionnaires*, and the social experiments and Republic of the Year II.³¹

The point, then, is precisely that the Revolution was a complex social revolution, the integral identity of which was due specifically to the interaction of several *different* movements, with different social foundations, and not simply to a liberal political revolution by which the bourgeoisie overthrew aristocratic privilege.

This complex integral character is the central idea of Lefebvre's work, embodied in his conception of the four component "revolutions" which came together to forge the French Revolution as a whole. The separate revolutions of the aristocracy, bourgeoisie, urban people, and peasants are not only indispensable, but inextricably linked: "The elements in the revolutionary complex cannot be taken apart."³² It was through the conjunction of these different movements that the Revolution as a whole unfolded around the central issue addressed by the Declaration of Rights, the enduring conflict between bourgeoisie and aristocracy over privilege. What he described in *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* in terms of the four "acts" of the Revolution, Lefebvre again summarized in his later general history:

the nobility intended both to impose itself on the king and to hold the bourgeoisie down. To oppose the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie became the apostle of the equality of rights, and when popular force stepped in the Old Regime abruptly gave way.... Artisans and peasants, however, supporting the "notables" in their struggle, turned the same principle of equal rights upon the bourgeois, who had used it to arm themselves, and the Revolution for a time led first to political democracy and then to an embryonic social democracy.³³

The nature of the Revolution as a whole, and the specific meaning of its central struggle over civil equality, were bound together in this integral logic of development. It was always in this specific context of complexity — reflected in Chateaubriand's observation that "the patricians began the Revolution, the plebeians finished it" — that Lefebvre embraced Clemenceau's conception of the Revolution as "a *bloc*, a single thing."³⁴

It is, of course, just this conception of the Revolution as a whole that the revisionists have sought to discredit, arguing instead that the course taken after the creation of the liberal Constitution of 1791 was a *déravage*, or skidding off-course.³⁵ Yet, in challenging

31. Rudé, *The French Revolution*, 162-63.

32. Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, 180.

33. Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: From Its Origins to 1793* (New York, 1963), xviii.

34. *Ibid.*, xvii; *Coming of the French Revolution*, 5 and 180.

35. The classic account of this *déravage* is by François Furet and Denis Richet, *The French Revolution* (London, 1970).

the idea of the unity of the Revolution, the revisionists have simply relied upon their assertion that no underlying social interest existed to explain an enduring conflict. If, indeed, the bourgeoisie and nobility can be said to have fully shared a conservative-liberal consensus in 1788 and early 1789, and there was no social basis for uncompromising political conflict over the issue of aristocratic privilege, then the Revolution might well be said to have lacked an integral logic. If, however, there was a social basis for the struggle between respectively bourgeois and aristocratic political positions, and if it can be linked to the more obvious social interests identified with the demands of the peasants and urban people, then Lefebvre's social interpretation of the Revolution as a *bloc* can be seen to be vindicated.

It is, then, to Lefebvre's conception of the four separate revolutionary movements that we must turn. Each was conceived in social terms, yet none is depicted as based on capitalism, nor is the conflict between the bourgeoisie and aristocracy even attributed to a difference based upon property. On the contrary, the terms of Lefebvre's social interpretation are entirely consistent with a new and quite different analysis of the ancien régime as a fundamentally noncapitalist class society.³⁶ It is impossible to take up the nature of these class relations here in any detail, but a brief sketch will establish the relevance of Lefebvre's conception of the social revolution. Perhaps the chief point of divergence in this analysis is the argument that, while there was indeed a ruling class in the ancien régime, it comprised *both* the bourgeoisie and the nobility, which were differentiated only by status, not class relations.

Briefly, while the exploitive social relations of the ancien régime no longer corresponded to those of medieval feudalism, they showed no signs of even nascent development of the commodification of labour-power and appropriation of capitalist surplus-value. This is to say that, while capitalism was already coming into its own in England, the class relations of the ancien régime were entirely unconnected to the capitalist mode of production, despite the fact France enjoyed abundant commercial prosperity along with the rest of Europe. Rather than being capitalist, the economic surplus of France (like most of Europe) was still produced by peasants, although no longer through specifically feudal relationships.

Eighty per cent or more of the population were peasants, and all paid at least one and usually several forms of rent, as well as a crushing burden of taxes and tithes. Surplus product, therefore, was extracted through a structure of wholly precapitalist rent relations that was based not only on landed property (in both seigneurial and unprivileged forms) but also on the absolutist state and the church, which extracted and redistributed enormous sums. It is precisely this centrality of state institutions to the class system of surplus appropriation which is crucial to understanding the social origins of the political conflict of the French Revolution. The state itself was not simply a neutral arbiter of property relations, whether feudal or capitalist; it was instead directly implicated in surplus appropriation and, hence, central to the social interests of the dominant class. This is highlighted by the fact that the very offices of state administration and jurisprudence were venal, directly constituting a form of private property.

36. Comminel, 193-205.

Thus, while property can be said to have been central to the class relations of the ancien régime, one of its primary forms was not what we understand to be “economic” property at all, although it was essential to attaining the highest forms of wealth and status. The class character of the nobility was based in part on their collection of rent directly from peasants, but *in combination* with their extraction of taxes and tithes through the leading offices of the state and church. Yet this same combination of relationships was, at the same time, characteristic of as much as 90 per cent of the bourgeoisie: the ownership of land, or *rentes* based upon it, and the possession of state office, largely through the judicial system. Only a small fraction of the bourgeoisie were engaged in commerce — and they were not, it must be emphasized, engaged in capitalist production. While it was this small group which was most likely to acquire great wealth, they almost always used such wealth to buy ennobling offices and estates, retiring permanently from commerce to live as part of the privileged status group of the nobility. Far from being opposed classes, the nobles and bourgeoisie together formed the ruling class of the ancien régime, which, as is in every other historical class society, encompassed a broad range of wealth and power, from great magnates to those barely above the level of “ignoble” manual labour.

The polar classes of the ancien régime, therefore, were the peasantry on one hand, and the bourgeois and noble owners of land and offices on the other. The class conflict between the peasants and the appropriators of their surplus agrarian product was, of course, one of the four key social elements which contributed to the complex whole of the Revolution. At the same time, it was the direct role of the state in this system of surplus appropriation which was central to the structure of social interests through which the other movements of revolutionary conflict emerged.

In light of this analysis, it is striking to what extent Lefebvre attributes the political conflicts of the Revolution precisely to the issues of state office, and particularly to the potential threat to the bourgeoisie’s access to offices which recognition of noble privilege in the new constitution might have posed. The issue of state office is first introduced by Lefebvre as a focus of aristocratic social interest during the ancien régime. While emphasizing that there was a constant and normal process of rising from bourgeois status into the nobility, he calls attention to the simultaneous tendency towards “exclusiveness” among those who had noble status. By exclusiveness Lefebvre does not mean a general contraction in social relationships. He refers explicitly to the possession of state offices, considering in turn military and naval commissions, bishoprics, the *parlements*, and intendancies, and to the efforts by which the *parlements* and provincial Estates sought to preserve and extend their powers.³⁷

It is in this context that Lefebvre considers the aristocracy’s long-standing contention with the monarchy over the distribution and exercise of power, finding in it the social basis for the struggle against absolutism that was the “aristocratic revolution”:

It is customary to characterize the eighteenth century as the age of the rise of the bourgeoisie and the triumph of “philosophy,” but the century also witnessed the last

37. Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, 14-18.

It is customary to characterize the eighteenth century as the age of the rise of the bourgeoisie and the triumph of "philosophy," but the century also witnessed the last offensive of the aristocracy, of which the beginnings of the Revolution were merely the crowning effort.³⁸

In short, the nobility, not content with monopolizing the higher public employments, nourished an ambition to share in the central government and to take over all local administration.³⁹

The "aristocratic offensive," then, did not represent some return to feudalism, but was an expression of the essential social interests of the higher nobility in the ancien régime, a contest over possession of the power and institutions of a state which was central to the noble career, and crucial to the acquisition of wealth and advancement.

To this end, one part of the higher nobility contested with another part, drawing up sides between royalist and aristocratic positions, much as Nannerl Keohane has described in *Philosophy and the State in France*.⁴⁰ Indeed, whereas the revisionists see in Montesquieu the expression of that supposed consensus of conservative-liberal values they attribute to the Enlightenment as a whole, Lefebvre recognizes that "the liberty which he preached was a liberty of the aristocracy, and his *Spirit of the Laws*, from this point of view, can be considered the handbook of aristocratic belief."⁴¹ Of course, during the conflicts that began in 1788-89, there were liberals, too, who cited the authority of Montesquieu. The point is precisely that the Enlightenment did not really represent a consensus, at least not over politics and society, but only a common language and a set of common texts, which were used to different purposes by people with different understandings, based on different social interests.

Far from consensus, there were two opposed views as to whether the ranks of the richest proprietors ought to possess a virtual monopoly of effective political representation on the basis of noble privilege, with very real issues of property and material social interest at stake. Recognizing that the state itself was a central focus of class relations — that through it were disposed differential rights to the exercise of power and appropriation of wealth, organized through venal offices and tied to the status system of nobility — it is not hard to see that conflicts which might, from our perspective, appear to have been "purely political" were instead directly concerned with social interests. This does not mean that the great proprietors were automatically for the aristocracy, nor that the poorer ones were all patriots. It does, however, mean that, when positions were taken up, it was in a very real context of individual and group social interests.

This relationship between social and political interests, based on the importance of the state, is apparent in Lefebvre's analysis. Not only does he describe the political opposition of the aristocracy to the absolute monarchy in terms of social interests linked to the state, but he describes the social and political interests of the bourgeoisie the same way. In the first place, his account of the bourgeoisie is clearly not based on "capitalism."

38. Ibid., 15.

39. Ibid., 18.

40. Nannerl O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France* (Princeton, 1980).

41. Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, 18.

While he does describe some bourgeois as capitalists, it is in a loose sense. Even so, his point is that they were relatively few, and that industry was much constrained and subordinated to commerce.⁴² Further, contrary to the impression given by critics of the social interpretation, Lefebvre indicates that “the upper bourgeoisie of finance and commerce” were distinguished from the aristocracy only by status.⁴³ Indeed, over forty years ago R. R. Palmer pointed out that, according to Lefebvre, “when the Revolution began the bourgeoisie probably owned as much rural land in France as did the nobility, a fact singularly awkward to a purely materialist theory of class conflict.”⁴⁴ This fact, of course, is awkward only to a theory of bourgeois capitalist class revolution. It is, indeed, an integral part of Lefebvre’s social conception of the Revolution, for he explicitly describes the social interests of the bourgeoisie in terms of their access to the state.

It is truly striking that, when acknowledging that the ideas of the Enlightenment were also a force in shaping the revolutionary spirit of the bourgeoisie, along with their social interests, the only interest Lefebvre actually mentions is that of the contest with the aristocracy over positions in the state.⁴⁵ He first notes that, despite an envy of the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie generally sought to emulate and, if possible, join it, rather than being driven to oppose it:

Officeholding and the professions established among them a hierarchy of which they were exceedingly jealous, and which engendered “cascades of disdain,” as Cournot put it. Nothing was more pronounced than the ordering of ranks within this bourgeois society.... It has therefore often been thought surprising that this class, whose spirit was so far from democracy, should have been so imprudent, in attacking the aristocracy, as to strike at the very principle of social hierarchy itself.

But the bourgeoisie had its reasons. The abolition of legal hierarchy and of privilege of birth seemed to it by no means incompatible with the maintenance of a hierarchy based on wealth, function or calling.⁴⁶

This is very far indeed from being a class revolution to implement the social relations of capitalism, the only grounds on which the revisionists have ever criticized this interpretation. Lefebvre instead argues that the bourgeoisie, who were already hemmed in by the growing exclusiveness of the aristocracy *specifically in relation to state offices*, were unwilling to accept a new constitution that would enshrine the domination of those endowed with noble status: “From the moment when the nobility laid claims to being a caste, restricting public office to men of birth, the only recourse was to suppress the privilege of birth and to ‘make way for merit’.”⁴⁷

Again and again, it is this social conflict — the struggle to prevent the aristocracy from seizing the state for themselves once they had put an end to the mediating role of the absolutist monarchy — which Lefebvre singles out. Of the municipal posts of the

42. Ibid., 37-38.

43. Ibid., 40.

44. Ibid., xiv.

45. Ibid., 40-42.

46. Ibid., 40-41.

47. Ibid., 41.

ancien régime he writes: "The bourgeoisie were bitterly jealous of these monopolists of local office, and would gladly have forced an opening for themselves into the city administrations."⁴⁸ Of the legal professionals who formed a majority among the revolutionaries he notes not only that "Lawyers of all kinds — judges, solicitors, notaries and barristers — were especially numerous, for there were many more courts than there are today, and manorial justice lived on in numberless rural parishes," but also that "To them the Revolution was to open a career."⁴⁹ Ultimately, for Lefebvre, it was such underlying social interests — and not simply the embrace of abstract ideological positions — which explain the broad and enduring bourgeois opposition to aristocratic privilege. In this light we may better appreciate that it was perhaps not only as an abstract appeal to liberal sentiments that the Abbé Sieyès complained in *What is the Third Estate?* that the aristocracy monopolized "all the best posts."⁵⁰

iv

Clearly, then, the social interpretation of *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* was not based on the idea of bourgeois-capitalist revolution that has so generally been attributed to it. It is true that Lefebvre was generally inclined to accept that idea as well, but always as a "deeper cause," which was specifically incapable of explaining the violence and radicalism of the social revolution in France.⁵¹ His later history of the Revolution was part of a broad and comparative historical series, "Peuples et civilisations," and it begins with five chapters describing the general eighteenth-century background of European expansion and social and economic development.⁵² In this discussion he makes much of the rise of "capitalism," and yet his analysis of the French Revolution itself still does not. It is still the aristocracy which started the Revolution, and still only the decree by the Paris *parlement* that the Estates should be called according to the forms of 1614 which precipitated the bourgeois "war" against aristocracy.⁵³

Once it is recognized that Lefebvre's explanation for the Revolution rests upon a historically verifiable social struggle over the state itself, the further suggestion that long-term patterns of general social development may also have had an influence cannot be entirely ruled out. After all, in this long-term sense, even so impeccable a revisionist as Denis Richet has been prepared to accept the idea of "bourgeois revolution."⁵⁴ It does not seem unreasonable to hold that the renewal and transformation of the nobility — tied on the one hand to the rise of trade and property transactions, but on the other hand to an increasing dependence of the ruling class as a whole upon the state — contributed to growing contradictions between unprivileged bourgeois interests and noble status. Yet this is not at all the same as arguing that capitalism as such was in any way at issue in the Revolution, nor that it was fought between two opposed classes.

48. Ibid., 85.

49. Ibid., 39.

50. E. M. Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?* (London, 1963), 54-57 and 177n.

51. Ibid., 4-5.

52. Lefebvre, *The French Revolution*, 3-93.

53. Ibid., 97 and 102.

54. Denis Richet, "Autours des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française: Elites et despotisme," *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations* 24 (1969): 1-23.

Instead, the evidence is most consistent with the view that a conflict over fundamental social interests in political representation and the offices of the state broke open into a civil war headed by opposing groups from within the ruling class. The critical turn was the unexpected involvement of the people of Paris, rising to save the National Assembly from almost certain dispersal by the King, and so securing an irreconcilably great victory for the liberals against the claimants of aristocratic prerogative. With the popular revolution and peasant uprisings of July 1789, the complex dynamic of the social revolution was launched.

The differentiation of consistent political positions appeared immediately, as the chief counterrevolutionary exiles decamped to fight for restoration of aristocratic privilege. The politicization of the urban people, which George Rudé has shown to have begun the previous spring on the basis of their direct social interest in the state's role in guaranteeing an affordable food supply, intensified and took on formal structure through the revolutionary clubs and press.⁵⁵ The peasants, meanwhile, continued to provide the essential context for the Revolution — and they too pursued their social interests, both in eliminating seigneurial privileges from agrarian relationships and in developing regionally specific stances towards the new régime.

Perhaps most significantly, the differentiation of political positions among the revolutionary leaders also began at once, and equally reflected divergences in social interest. It is not, of course, that the Jacobins can be distinguished from the Girondins, or even from the constitutional monarchists, as belonging to different classes. It is clear, however, that support for the radical national project of the Jacobins carried a concrete social interest with it directly, in the prospect of a career in politics and administration. Lefebvre himself recognized the importance of this careerism, and it can be seen in the extent to which every successive stage of the Revolution brought an increase in the size and burden of the state and military, culminating in Bonaparte's empire. The role of social interest is also evident in the efforts of the more conservative revolutionaries to emphasize, instead, greater protection of property rights, revealed particularly in their debates with the Jacobins over imposition of a property qualification for franchise and office. Indeed, it was in precisely this context of debate *within* the bourgeoisie that the idea of a bourgeois class revolution, alleged to represent the interests of the greater owners of private property against "the Nation" as a whole, was first put forward by the more radical revolutionary leaders.⁵⁶

These rival bourgeois conceptions of the role and nature of the state were central to the ongoing political development of the Revolution, forced to confront counterrevolution on the one hand and the increasingly radical popular movement on the other, while maintaining control of the peasant countryside. Thus, a conflict within the ruling class opened up to form part of a complex dynamic of social revolution. It is not, of course, as if the course of the Revolution was in any way predestined, any more than Lefebvre thought.⁵⁷ Rather, there was a structure of interests and limitations within

55. George Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (New York, 1980), 111.

56. See Shirley Gruner, "Le concept de classe dans la révolution française: une mise à jour," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 9/18 (September 1976), 406-23.

57. Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, 179.

which the Revolution developed, through active political struggle. In this regard even Hampson would agree that the "seeds of the Terror had been sown" in the politics of the Assembly; the question is simply whether this politics was about anything of material social interest.

In so brief a sketch as this, it is barely possible to touch upon the ways in which the different interests of the four movements Lefebvre identified came together and interacted to shape the course of the social revolution as a whole. Yet it is not perhaps necessary to go into all the details of the Revolution's development to establish that the social interpretation put forward by Lefebvre in *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* goes a long way towards explaining its complexity. The crucial role of the popular movement in driving the social revolution, for example, was outlined by Lefebvre in *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* before being taken up in detail by George Rudé and Albert Soboul. The validity of their analysis of the popular movement has never really been challenged by the revisionists, but only the political context of the Revolution that made it meaningful. Once the real social basis for an enduring struggle between bourgeoisie and aristocracy has been recognized, that context can be seen to have been restored.⁵⁸

With respect to the bourgeoisie itself, there is much work still to be done in exploring the shaping of the bourgeois state in relation to the interests of lawyers and other professionals, financiers, and war-profiteers. However, recent works by historians such as Michael Fitzsimmons on the Parisian barristers, and Michel Bruguière on state finances, although written from the perspective of the new revisionist "orthodoxy," reinforce the view that it was the state itself, and particularly its career opportunities, that were centrally at issue.⁵⁹ In fact, notwithstanding a certain proliferation of cultural studies and postmodernist meditations, there has been a wealth of important research into the society of the ancien régime and Revolution in recent years which, far from calling *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* into question, tends to support its social interpretation. After fifty years, then, a return to Lefebvre's brilliant synthesis still has much to offer.

58. For an elaboration of this point, see George C. Comninel, "The Political Context of the Popular Movement in the French Revolution," in *History from Below: Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology in Honour of George Rudé*, ed. Frederick Krantz (Montreal, 1985). An abridged edition of this *festschrift*, also containing this article, was issued as F. Krantz, ed., *History From Below* (London, 1988).

59. Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Parisian Order of Barristers and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987); Michel Bruguière, *Gestionnaires et profiteurs de la Révolution: L'administration des finances françaises de Louis XVI à Bonaparte* (Paris, 1986).