In defence of the French revolution

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The French Revolution set the benchmarks for radical and democratic politics, and it was the launch-pad for socialist politics.

The Oxford dictionary dates the word "democrat" from 1790 ("an adherent or advocate of democracy; orig. opposed to aristocrat in the French Revolution"). It dates "revolutionary", in general use, from 1794; "liberal" in the modern sense and "constituent assembly" from 1801; "radical", from 1802; "socialist", from 1833.

The terms "right" and "left" in politics derive from where the factions sat in the French revolutionary assemblies.

The French Revolution launched the concept of human rights - rights which belong to everyone equally and automatically whatever their birth or livelihood. Under the old regime "liberty" meant much the same as "privilege" - defending the traditional rights or privileges associated with a particular status (noble, priest, merchant, craft worker, peasant) against other groups or against the king and his tax-collectors.

The Revolution redefined liberty as inseparable from rights which belong to everyone equally. Under the old regime, "liberty" was almost the opposite of "equality"; in the Revolution it was almost the same thing.

The ideas of the French Revolution did not spring out of a void. Many of them had been advanced by the philosophers of the 18th century Enlightenment, pioneered in the American War of Independence of 1775-81 or foreshadowed in the earlier revolutions in England (the 1640s) and the Netherlands (1568-84). The dictionary dates "patriot" in the sense of "one who maintains and defends his country's freedom and rights" from as early as 1605, "nationalist" from 1715, "politics" as a word for the views of a person or party from 1769.

But the French Revolution marked a new start. It was the most radical of the revolutions which replaced the new order of fixed hierarchy and privilege by a new system of free trade, free enterprise, equality before the law, and a ruling class based on profits from the market economy. It provided the example of how an old regime could be completely overturned and society reconstructed on new principles, it set the benchmarks for radical and democratic politics within the limits of capitalism, and it was the launch-pad for socialist politics.

That is why conservatives want to discredit the Revolution. [1] In England, bookshop displays on the Revolution are dominated by Simon Schama’s Citizens, a book which argues that the Revolution set back the modernisation of French society, and did so, moreover, at the cost of vast bloodshed; its “enduring product” was only "a new kind of militarised state". [2] In France, Pierre Chaunu has claimed that the revolutionary Terror was "the beginning of a long and bloody sequence which runs from the genocide of the French Catholic West to the Soviet Gulag, the ravages of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the autogenocide of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia." [3]

1. The case against the Revolution

In Simon Schama’s book, all the violence done by the revolutionaries is described in horrified and colourful detail; the violence of the counter-revolutionaries in the Vendee in 1793 or in the White Terror of 1794-5 is noted briefly and dispassionately. The king, the queen and the other leaders of the old order are described with great sympathy, the revolutionaries with loathing.

But there are more serious conservative arguments - as follows. [4]

The old regime was hierarchical and riddled with privilege, but fluid. It did not exclude or repress those whose wealth came from trade and industry; on the contrary. Since the 16th century, the king had raised money by selling official state positions to the highest bidder.

This practice enabled successful bourgeois to enter the nobility by buying an official position that brought nobility with it, and many did so. Many nobles were active in trade and industry; many bourgeois bought land or bought the right to receive the feudal dues from land. The bourgeoisie and the nobility were not two hostile classes, but two parts of a single ruling class. Historians used to say that there was an "aristocratic reaction" in
the 18th century in which the nobility made its control of power and wealth more exclusive; but many now deny this. [5]

Liberal, modernising, free-trade ideas were widespread in this class, in the nobility as much as in the bourgeoisie. That is why the nobility put up so little resistance to the reforms of the National Assembly in 1789; indeed, many of the initiators of the reforms were nobles.

What was significant about the revolution, then, was not so much the reforms it legislated as the dangerous principle it established of change through violence [6]. That principle then took its toll, with the even greater slaughter of the Terror.

That masses of the poor people of the cities came to play a central role in the Revolution was a setback to progress rather than an advance. For those masses were hostile to the new liberal, modernising, free-trade ideas, and preferred a traditional, regulated economy. "The Revolution drew much of its power from the (ultimately hopeless) attempt to arrest, rather than hasten, the process of modernisation". [7]

After all the destruction, what was there to show? The new ruling class, under Napoleon, was very similar to the old one: landowners and state officials.

French trade and industry suffered during the Revolution and grew very slowly after it. "The 'bourgeoisie' of Marxist history long believed to be the essential beneficiary of the Revolution was, in fact, its principal victim." [8] And the poor were no better off than before.

2. Marx and Engels on the French Revolution

Some problems with the conservative case are obvious. If the French Revolution was so much ado about so very little, then why did it have such an impact? If only Marxist dogma can make us see the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution, then why did bourgeois writers of the time and of the early 19th century, long before Marx, also see it as such? [9]

But some of the conservatives' detailed arguments are powerful. The French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution; but it was also more complicated.

Engels wrote: "Modern industry... was still unknown in France... The 'have-nothing' masses of Paris, during the Reign of Terror, were able for a moment to gain the mastery, and thus to lead the bourgeois revolution to victory in spite of the bourgeoisie themselves. But in doing so, they only proved how impossible it was for their domination to last under the conditions then obtaining."

And Marx described the outcome of the Revolution as follows: "The centralised State power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy and judicature, originates from the days of absolute monarchy, serving the nascent middle-class society as a mighty weapon on its struggle against feudalism. Still, its development remained clogged by all manner of medieval rubbish, seignorial rights, local privileges, municipal and guild monopolies and provincial constitutions. The gigantic broom of the French Revolution of the eighteenth century swept away all these relics of bygone times, thus clearing simultaneously the social soil of its last hindrance to the superstructure of the modern State edifice raised under the First Empire [Napoleon]... During the subsequent regimes the government... became a hotbed of huge national debts and crushing taxes..."

Again: “This executive power [in France] with its enormous bureaucratic and military organisation...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 seignorial privileges of the landowners and towns became transformed into so many attributes of the state power, the feudal dignitaries into paid officials...The first French Revolution...was bound to develop what the absolute monarchy had begun: centralisation, but at the same time the extent, the attributes and the agents of governmental power. Napoleon perfected this state machinery...All revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it...

"But under the absolute monarchy, during the first Revolution, under Napoleon, bureaucracy was only the means of preparing the class rule of the bourgeoisie..." [10]

The rest of this article tells the story of the Revolution and tries to unravel these complexities.

3. The Old Regime

When the revolutionary National Assembly abolished most of France's vast jumble of privileges on 4 August 1789, it declared that it was abolishing "the feudal régime".

Feudalism emerged in Europe in the Dark Ages that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire. Peasants gathered round military leaders. The peasants would hold patches of land but have to give labour on the lord's own land, military service, or a share of the crop.
The lord might in his turn have feudal obligations to an overlord or king. Each feudal lord was not only the economic but also the political and law-administering power in his area (fiefdom). Beside the lords' fiefdoms stood the Church, a great corporate landowner, and, from the 11th century, growing cities. Feudal society was a complex web of overlapping powers.

In the 14th century feudalism fell into crisis, unleashing wars and mighty struggles between the lords, the peasants, and the cities. Between the mid-15th and mid-17th century, strong monarchies ruling large, compact states emerged from the wars. In Eastern Europe the social struggles ended with the peasants more tightly enserfed. In Western Europe, the peasants made gains, weakening their feudal ties. Trade and crafts developed in the cities, though within "guilds" which enforced traditional controls to restrict competition.

France had been the 'classic' country of feudalism, and it became the 'classic' country of the new sort of monarchy. The huge palaces at the Louvre and Versailles symbolised the regime.

Taxes were very heavy. [11] They were not collected directly by the State, but contracted out to the "Farmers-General" (usually nobles [12]), who made vast profits for themselves on the side.

The nobles were exempt from almost all taxes. The Church paid no taxes at all (only a 'voluntary gift' to the king), and bishops were often among the most wealthy nobles.

The State tied the nobility to itself by forcing some 4,000 of the higher nobles to live at Versailles and by establishing a system of provincial governors (intendants) appointed by the king. It raised money by selling official posts. Many nobles drew more income from these posts than from the feudal dues on their land. The best posts were largely reserved for nobles, but a steady trickle of bourgeois bought their way into the nobility by buying middle-rank posts. The State encouraged industry, in the form of state or state-guaranteed monopolies.

The regime remained in many ways feudal. Neither taxes nor laws were uniform; they varied greatly across the country as they were modified by a crazy patchwork of traditional privileges. Internal customs barriers between one part of the country and another restricted trade.

Serfs, tied to the land, still numbered one and a half million (out of a total population of about 25 million). A large proportion of peasants had become sharecroppers, paying a percentage of their crop to a landowner in return for a lease on the land.

Peasants owned about a third of the land in France (the proportion varying from area to area). They had resisted attempts to clear them off the land, enclose common land, and launch capitalist farming more successfully than English peasants; but they were desperately poor. [13]

Only a few owned enough land to produce substantially for the market and employ labour. Most had not enough land to live on, and needed odd jobs to feed themselves. "At least one tenth of the rural population did nothing but beg from one year's end to the other". [14]

French agriculture was backward. Its productivity in 1810 was half that of English agriculture. [15] Feudal dues and obligations totalled between 5 and 10 per cent of all agricultural production, and the income of the nobility (one and a half per cent of the population) 20 to 30 per cent of the national income. [16] Feudal dues, then, were a sizeable part of the income of the nobles, and a big burden on the peasants.

Over 80 per cent of the people lived in the countryside. But Paris had around 600,000 people. It was the second biggest city, after London, in the Western world. The bourgeoisie had several layers. The majority were masters of small shops and workshops - petty bourgeois rather than modern capitalists. Professionals, especially lawyers, were to dominate the revolutionary assemblies. Rentiers lived off interest, dividends, urban rents, or land (the bourgeoisie owned maybe 35% of land [17]). Large-scale merchants and industrialists were a small minority.

In Paris there were about 5,000 nobles, 10,000 clergy and 40,000 bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie shaded off into the poorer class of petty traders, craftworkers, labourers and vagrants.

Around half the population were wage-labourers; but there was not a distinct wage-working class. Small workshops would employ only one or two journeymen. Many workers were employed casually on building sites or as messengers, carriers, gardeners, and servants. Only a small minority of the wage-workers were regularly employed in sizeable capitalist workplaces. [18]

The bourgeoisie's access to office and to noble status damped its conflict with the nobility. [19] Thus France remained feudal although it was the second commercial and industrial power of Europe, after Britain.

Liberal and free-trade ideas spread among the wealthy classes, inspired by the models of England and of the new American republic.

From the 1760s the regime stumbled into severe economic trouble. The State, increasingly unable to balance its budget, tried to extend its powers of taxation, and clashed with the nobles. The nobles squeezed the peasants. Crops failed. Life became harder.
4. The explosion of 1789

In August 1788 the monarchy tried to gain assent for a programme to restabilise the State finances by convening the Estates General. This was a sort of parliament, dormant since 1614. Traditionally it assembled in three ‘estates’ - clergy, nobility and ‘Third Estate’ (the other 98 per cent of the people). There was agitation for the Third Estate to be ‘doubled’ (allowed as many representatives as the other two put together) and for decisions to be taken by all three estates voting together. The king tried to compromise by ‘doubling’ the Third Estate but insisting the three estates vote separately.

On 5 May 1789 the Estates General convened. The Third Estate stood firm for the estates voting together, the nobility for separate voting.

The conflict of previous years between nobles and the monarchy was now overshadowed by a struggle opposing the bourgeoisie to both nobles and monarchy. Whatever the sympathy of many wealthy nobles for liberal ideas, the bulk of them stood solid against the alarming claims of the Third Estate.

Whatever the ties of the bourgeoisie to the old order (a great number of the Third Estate deputies were state officials [20]), they felt alienated and aggrieved by the privileges of the nobility. Whatever the access of wealthier bourgeoisie to noble status, it didn’t reconcile them to the old regime.

Around one-quarter to one-third of the noble families in 1789 had been ennobled since 1700. [21] Assuming that the bourgeoisie was five times more numerous than the nobility, that means in each generation about one bourgeois in fifty would gain noble status. For the other 49, and maybe even that one, it was not enough to offset their anger at the way feudal privilege stifled the development of France. [22]

On 17 June the Third Estate (joined by a few clergy) declared themselves the National Assembly. On 23 June the king instructed the National Assembly to dissolve, and reaffirmed that the estates must meet separately. The Assembly, which by now had been joined by three liberal nobles, refused. On 27 June the King gave in and instructed the nobles and clergy to join the National Assembly.

On 14 July a crowd stormed the Bastille, the royal prison in Paris. A militia was formed (called the "bourgeois militia", and later the National Guard) and a council made up from the Third Estate’s electoral college took over the city. Diehard nobles emigrated. By the end of July bourgeois militias and bourgeois municipal councils had taken power in most cities.

In late July and early August a vast peasant revolt swept France. Alarmed by rumours of an aristocratic plot to slaughter the peasants, and encouraged by the belief that the king and the National Assembly had abolished tithes and feudal dues, the peasants rebelled against paying those dues. They also destroyed enclosures and claimed back common land.

Local bourgeois often tried to suppress the peasant revolt. But in Versailles, in a hectic session on the night of 4 August, the National Assembly abolished most feudal privileges and dues. It abolished the sale of State offices and proclaimed equality before the law.

By the morning after, some of the deputies were having second thoughts. The final text of the decree required most feudal rights to be bought out rather than flatly abolished. (Abolition without compensation was eventually decreed by the Jacobin Convention in July 1793).

On 26 August the Assembly adopted a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen: “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights…”

Louis XVI refused to ratify the decrees of 4 August and the Declaration of Rights. On 5 October some six or seven thousand women, followed by 20,000 men of the National Guard, marched from Paris to Versailles. They forced Louis to ratify the decrees and to come to Paris. Versailles would never again be a royal palace.

5. 1789-91: revolution and counter-revolution gather force

In Paris, the Assembly continued to redesign society according to the ideas current among the more enlightened of the wealthy classes.

It decreed free trade in grain (August 1789) and made loans at interest legal (October 1789). It declared equal rights for Protestants (December 1789) and for Jews (January 1790). It abolished titles (June 1790), and guilds and monopolies (March 1791). It adopted a Constitution (September 1791), with voting limited by money qualifications. It also banned trade unions (June 1791).

The Assembly also had to tackle the money crisis which had ruined the old regime. This is did by confiscating Church lands and selling them (November 1789). If Church property was confiscated, how were the priests to be supported? The Assembly adopted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (July 1790), making priests salaried state officials. It was the first step towards confrontation between the Revolution and the majority of France’s priests, supported by millions of pious peasants.
The bishops stalled. On 27 November the Assembly adopted a demand that all priests swear loyalty to the constitution.

In March 1791 the Pope denounced the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. In May and August 1792 measures were adopted providing for deportation of priests who refused to swear loyalty.

The leaders of the Assembly, Lafayette and Mirabeau, wanted compromise and stabilisation. But both revolution and counter-revolution were gathering force. The reforming ideas discussed among the wealthy few before 1789 were setting fire to millions; more and more nobles were emigrating and mobilising support from the aristocratic and royal families of other countries.

Factions ("right" and "left") formed in the Assembly. The press expanded hugely, from 60 papers in all France to 500 in Paris alone. By August 1790 the left-wing Jacobin Club (launched in December 1789) had 1200 members in Paris; by June 1790, 450 affiliated clubs in the provinces. The Jacobins charged a fairly high membership fee; other clubs were more open and more radical.

General people’s assemblies met frequently in the 60 districts, and then, after May 1790, the 48 sections, of Paris.

6. The Flight to Varennes, war, the Jacobin Republic

The position of Lafayette and Mirabeau, the constitutional monarchist leaders, became precarious. On 20 June 1791 the king, increasingly frustrated, tried to escape from Paris and link up with counter-revolutionary troops on the frontier. He was intercepted and brought back to Paris. A demonstration in Paris on 17 July demanding a republic was dispersed by the National Guard, who shot dead 50 people.

On 1 October 1791 the Legislative Assembly, elected according to the new Constitution with a money qualification for voting, convened. The dominant faction in it were the Feuillants, liberal monarchists who had split from the Jacobins in July 1791.

Agitation for war was launched by a section of the Jacobins round Brissot (later called Girondins, because many of them came from the Gironde, the area round the great port of Bordeaux). The Austrian Empire had family links with the French monarchy; Germany princes on the border with France were harbouring émigré nobles.

"War to the palaces, peace to the cottages," said the Girondins, was necessary to consolidate the Revolution. A section of the left, round Robespierre and Marat, opposed war; people would not like "missionaries with bayonets", and the war could lead to a military dictatorship in France. But on 20 April 1792 France declared war on Austria.

The war would radicalise and harshen the Revolution, bringing first the Girondins and then Robespierre to power; but it would also vindicate Robespierre’s warnings.

Louis XVI appointed a Girondin ministry. The war went badly. The Girondin leaders said aristocrats were secretly plotting for an Austrian victory (and indeed the Court was).

On 12 June Louis sacked the Girondin ministers and replaced them by Feuillants. Tension grew. Lafayette tried to get the National Guard to suppress the Jacobins. The Paris sections went into permanent session. Citizens without the money qualification for voting were allowed into section meetings and into the National Guard. 47 of the 48 sections in Paris came out for a republic. The Assembly declared the confiscation of émigrés’ property. The armies opposed to France issued a manifesto threatening "exemplary vengeance" and "military execution".

On 10 August a revolutionary committee, based on the sections, took over the city administration of Paris. The National Guard and volunteer troops from Marseilles stormed the king’s palace. The Girondin ministers were restored, and the Assembly decided that a Convention would be elected by universal male suffrage. Lafayette, having failed to get his troops to march on Paris, gave himself up to the Austrians on 19 August. On 21 September the Convention met and declared France a Republic.

On 2-6 September armed crowds rampaged through the city’s prisons and massacred the prisoners, not just the counter-revolutionaries but also common criminals.

This atrocity, however, was not typical of the great uprisings which set the course of the Revolution: 14 July 1789, 5 October 1789, 10 August 1792.

Those uprisings were far from modern working-class methods of struggle like strikes and factory occupations. But they were not wild riots. Apart from 14 July 1789, they all relied on organisation, through the clubs, the sections, and the National Guard; their political aims were set by hours and hours of debate in the sections beforehand. They were based on the working petty bourgeoisie (sans-culottes) rather than the very poorest people of the city.

Of 120 Parisians active on 10 August 1792 whose occupations are known, 95 were shopkeepers, small traders, craft workers or journeymen.
The members of the revolutionary Convention were mostly from the next layer up of the middle class. Of 891 members of the Convention, fully 468 were lawyers, 142 were other professionals, and 83 were merchants, manufacturers, or bankers. [27]

The Convention was further to the left than the Legislative Assembly. The Girondins, who had split away from the Jacobin Club, had a majority. But now they, like others before, would be ruined by their efforts to keep the Revolution within limits acceptable to the wealthy. They voted to condemn Louis XVI but tried to avoid the death penalty; he was guillotined on 21 January. Obstinately sticking to free trade, they rejected growing popular demands, from late 1792, for price controls on bread; the Jacobins did not like those demands either, but were more willing to bend to them.

In March 1793 bloody counter-revolution erupted in the Vendée, in western France. "In the more commercialised regions farmers and bourgeois made common cause against nobles and the immensely rich Church", but in the Vendée the whole rural society was set against the cities. [28] On 1 April 1793 the Republic's leading general, Dumouriez, followed Lafayette; he tried to turn his army against Paris, failed, and fled to the Austrian lines.

On 6 April the Convention set up an emergency Committee of Public Safety; on 4 May it passed the Law of the Maximum, controlling grain prices. On 31 May and 2 June a committee which had been set up by 33 of the 48 Paris sections organised a new uprising which forced the Convention to expel 29 Girondin leaders. The Jacobins came to power.

7. The Jacobin Republic and the Terror

The new Jacobin regime decreed the final abolition without compensation of all feudal rights. It adopted a new Constitution on 24 June 1793 which, while insisting on the bourgeois rights of property, proclaimed many of the principles of the modern parliamentary welfare state: universal male suffrage, the right to work or maintenance, public education for all.

The Constitution was quickly overwhelmed by the emergencies of war and counter-revolution. The Girondins launched armed revolts in the provinces. The counter-revolutionaries scored victories in the Vendée. On 13 July the Jacobin leader Marat was assassinated by the Girondin Charlotte Corday.

On 26 July the Convention declared the death penalty for hoarders. On 5 September 1793 the Paris Commune organised a new uprising, forcing the Convention decision on "revolutionary armies" to requisition grain and to promise a "General Maximum" - general price controls on food, legislated on 9 September. This uprising started as a demonstration of building and other workers for bread and higher wages on 4 September; the petty-bourgeois Commune first tried to disperse this demonstration by military force, then co-opted it, asking employers, too, to close their workshops on the 5th and march on the Convention. [29] When the Jacobins legislated the "Maximum", they included controls on wages as well as prices.

On 22 October 1793 the Committee of Public Safety set up a special committee with sweeping powers to control production and trade and to requisition supplies. At the same time the Jacobins moved to secure themselves against the left. Militant sans-culotte leaders were arrested. The sections were restricted to two meetings a week. Activists got round this by setting up 'sectional societies'; the government denounced them and finally forced their dissolution in May 1794.

The government appointed agents to supervise the communes and districts, and banned them from liaising independently.

The Society of Republican Revolutionary Women was dissolved and women's clubs were banned. [30] The Terror began. Queen Marie-Antoinette was guillotined on 16 October, the Girondin leaders on 31 October. Lyons, where a Girondin-royalist alliance had seized power in May 1793, was reconquered in October 1793; the Convention decided to change the city's name to Ville-Affranchie (Liberated City) and erect a monument declaring "Lyons made war on Liberty; Lyons is no more". After the counter-revolutionary armies in the Vendée had been defeated in December 1793, the whole area was subjected to mass terror. [31] More widespread peasant counter-revolution continued until 1799-1800.

The Jacobin agents of the Terror frequently combined it with radical social policies - levies on the rich, building public workshops and hospitals, state welfare for the poor. Jeanbon St André, a member of the Committee of Public Safety who later became an official under Napoleon, recalled it proudly: "[It was] a government of passionate Jacobins in red bonnets, wearing rough woollen cloth, wooden shoes, who lived on simple bread and bad beer and went to sleep on mattresses laid on the floor of their meeting halls when they were too tired to wake and deliberate further. That is the kind of men who saved France. I was one of them, gentlemen. And here, as in the apartments of the Emperor... I glory in the fact". [32]

The Terror was not just decreed by an elite. It was supported and indeed urged on the Jacobins by a substantial section of the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie, as was the campaign against religion ("dechristianisation") which
accompanied it in many areas despite Robespierre’s consistent opposition. But right from the start the Terror was linked with the Jacobins’ drive to control the masses.

The Terror was not a totalitarian state or anything like it. It was a frantic mobilisation against counter-revolution, made frantic by the war emergency and by the utopianism of much sans-culotte thinking.

Price controls and laws against hoarding did not and could not bring what the sans-culottes wanted: equality and enough to eat for everyone. They could find no answer but an increasingly desperate search for saboteurs.

The Terror did rally the forces to defeat counter-revolution and foreign armies. But both the Terror itself, and the leading Jacobins’ efforts to limit the Terror by controlling the sans-culottes, narrowed and sapped the Jacobins’ support.

8. Thermidor, Bonaparte, Restoration

In March 1794 the government guillotined the supporters of Hebert, the left-wing of the Convention; in April, the supporters of Danton, who had argued for easing off the Terror. In June and July the Terror rose to its highest pitch in Paris.

But on 26 June 1794 the French armies had won the battle of Fleurus. This victory, easing the war emergency, was fatal for Robespierre. On 27 July 1794 (Thermidor year II by the new revolutionary calendar) a faction of more moderate Jacobins moved against him. The Paris Commune tried to mobilise the sections and the National Guard, but failed.

Robespierre and 21 others were guillotined on 28 July.

The ideal of the small shopkeepers, traders and craft workers who formed the core of the great uprisings of the Revolution was a society where everyone owned a little property, but no-one much, and where prices, wages, and profits were regulated to ensure equality. It was unworkable. The Jacobin leaders, committed as they were to unrestricted bourgeois property rights and the free market, did not want it anyway. But the war emergency and the pressure from below forced them into makeshift experiments.

After Thermidor the Jacobins’ radical policies unravelled fast. Power in the Convention shifted towards moderates. The Terror ended, and a White Terror began; in May-June 1795 hundreds of Jacobins held in prisons were massacred; the “jeunesse dorée” (gilded youth - expensively dressed young thugs from the wealthy classes) ruled the streets of Paris. The Paris Commune was abolished; the sections purged and banned from meeting more than once every ten days; the Jacobin Club closed down. Requisitioning was abandoned; price controls were cancelled on 24 December 1794.

On 1 April 1795, and again on 20-23 May, the exhausted and starving working people of Paris rose again, for “Bread and the Constitution of 1793”. They were defeated.

Again, as in August 1792, most of the insurgents were the working petty bourgeoisie - small shopkeepers, workshop masters, craft workers, or clerks. [33]

The bourgeoisie at the time of the French Revolution was not yet a compact, self-aware class. The lawyers and professionals who dominated the revolutionary assemblies represented not their own immediate interests but those of different layers of the bourgeoisie, according to their views and personal connections. The constitutional monarchists allied with the small group of big merchants and industrialists and with the liberal bourgeois-oriented nobility. The Girondins allied with a middle layer of merchants and entrepreneurs; the Jacobins with the working petty bourgeoisie, who in turn were generally able to bring wage-workers with them. All believed that they represented the whole nation, though in fact very different attitudes to property, reflecting different interests, were clear. [34]

Neither the lawyers and professionals of the Jacobin leadership, nor the working petty bourgeoisie, could have governed alone; an alliance welded together by the pressure of the war emergency was able to govern briefly, though only as an emergency regime. Once the emergency slackened, the wealthier sections of the bourgeoisie reasserted themselves.

A new Constitution was proposed in June 1795. The speaker introducing it explained the principles of the new order: “A country governed by landowners is in the social order; a land where non-landowners govern is in the state of nature... If you grant unreserved political rights to men without property... they will establish... harmful taxes on commerce and agriculture.” [35] By 1795-6 the government - still based, after all, on the revolutionary Convention elected in 1792 -- was alarmed and battered by the revival of royalism.

It was saved only by the victories of the French army. The national army created through mass conscription defeated armies largely run by dynasties and made up of mercenaries.

Prussia, Britain and other powers had entered the war alongside Austria in 1792-3. France won victories in 1794-5, occupied Belgium, made peace with Prussia in April 1795, and secured an alliance with Holland.
In March 1796 Napoleon Bonaparte took command of France's army. A series of wars, interrupted by short
peaces, led to the peak of his power in 1807-10. His empire covered half of Europe - Spain, Italy, Switzerland, the
Low Countries, Western Germany and Poland.

Napoleon's grandiose tomb in Paris has an inscription praising his victories and a principle - Free Trade. In most
of the countries he conquered, changes were introduced similar to those made in France in 1789-91: abolition of
serfdom, guilds, monopolies, and feudal privileges; confiscation of Church lands; equality before the law. France's
Civil Code, designed by Napoleon to sum up the legal framework of the new bourgeois order, was extended to
those countries.

At the same time Napoleon ruthlessly despoiled those countries for the benefit of France's treasury. Only that
plunder enabled the French state to keep upright - and only at the cost of Napoleon establishing a military
dictatorship from 23 October 1799 (18 Brumaire).

9. Clearing the way for capitalism?

Did Napoleon, however, at least create a stable regime for capitalist development? The change from a society of
feudal privilege to a free trade society was stable and irreversible, but France's political system proved unstable.

In 1815 Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo and the monarchy returned to power, backed up by England, Austria,
Prussia and Russia. A White Terror followed against democrats, republicans, Jacobins and Bonapartists. The
nobility regained a lot of political power. Revolution in 1830 pushed it to the sidelines again, and put the richest
bourgeois, the "financial aristocracy", on top. [36] Revolutions and counter-revolutions switched power from one
section of the bourgeoisie to another until a more or less stable bourgeois republic was formed after 1871. By
then a sizeable layer of industrial and commercial capitalists was, at last, central to the bourgeoisie.

The general pattern elsewhere in Europe, in England and Germany for example, was for the rising bourgeoisie
and the old aristocracy to compromise. In France, the clash between the bourgeoisie and nobility had been too
violent for a solid compromise to be reached easily between the wealthier bourgeoisie and the liberal nobility,
both minorities of their classes. The relative strength of the classes also made compromise difficult; neither was
strong enough easily to make the other a junior partner, nor weak enough easily to accept being a junior partner
itself.

The bourgeoisie was weak, disunited, and heavily dependent on the State. Of 67,000 'notables' in 1810, 25%
were landowners, 34% administrators, 14% professionals, 16% others and only 11% tradesmen.

The nobility had been seriously damaged. "A typical provincial noble may have lost... one third of his income as a
result of the Revolution"; presumably the higher nobility, based at Versailles, who were more conspicuous
politically, would have lost more, and nobles certainly lost their near-monopoly of high public office. But nobles
were still a big proportion of France's wealthy people: 34% of France's biggest landowners in 1803 had been
nobles before the Revolution. [37]

Moreover, the State machine itself was the main source of income for the wealthy. It had expanded from maybe
60,000 officers in 1778 to 130,000 civil servants in 1839. [38] As Marx put it: "The parties that contended for
domination regarded the possession of this huge state edifice as the principal spoils of the victor." [39] The
nobility and different fractions of the bourgeoisie were set in competition with each other for these spoils.

French industry did grow faster after the Revolution than before: 61 per cent between 1730 and 1830, then
another 60% in 20 years between 1825-34 and 1845-64. [40] But it grew much more slowly than Britain's or
Germany's. Before the Revolution, French trade and industry had lagged only a short distance behind Britain, and
were way ahead of Germany's. Between 1801-14 and 1865-74, French industrial output increased fourfold;
British, sevenfold. By 1880 Germany was overtaking France industrially. [41]

According to Eric Hobsbawm, "The Jacobins established that impregnable citadel of small and middle peasant
proprietors, small craftsmen and shopkeepers...which has dominated the country's life ever since. The capitalist
transformation of agriculture and small enterprise... was slowed to a crawl; and with it the speed of urbanisation,
the expansion of the home market, the multiplication of the working class... Both big business and the labour
movement were long doomed to remain minority phenomena in France, islands surrounded by a sea of corner
grocers, peasant smallholders, and cafe proprietors". [42]

And Tom Kemp: "The effects of the Revolution and its sequel were detrimental to French economic growth both
directly, by diverting resources to non-productive outlets and curtailing trade links with the overseas world, and
indirectly through a land settlement which... tended to retard the growth of an internal market, the creation of an
industrial working force and the transfer of resources from the land to industry." [43]

Although bourgeois bought most of the Church and émigré land sold during the Revolution, the peasants gained
land: in the department of the Nord, they increased their share of the land from 30% to 42%. [44] Napoleon's
Civil Code wrote peasant custom into law by compelling landowners to divide their land equally among heirs
rather than bequeathing the whole lot to a single heir; this helped keep landholding fragmented. Both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary mobilisations of the small-proprietor classes forced the State to conciliate those classes; hence the "sea of grocers and peasant smallholders". France remained much more rural than Britain or Germany.

10. The French Revolution and us

Is Simon Schama right to maintain that the French Revolution meant little progress and much mayhem? No. The legal and institutional results of the Revolution did help the development of the productive forces, both in France and in the countries transformed under Napoleonic conquest. They would probably not have happened anyway. In Austria, Emperor Joseph II attempted between 1780 and 1790 to introduce from above liberal, free-trade reforms similar to France's of 1789-91. Very little of his work survived his death, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire remained heavily feudalistic up to World War I.

The social policy of the Jacobin Republic of 1793-4 was unsustainable; but the only reason why Schama thinks it was backward-looking is that he identifies "modernisation" entirely with Thatcherism! The old regime had controls on the economy to preserve a traditional social hierarchy, with privileges and monopolies for the wealthy classes. The sans-culottes wanted controls on the economy to create an equal society of small property-owners. Although they were unworkable as a whole, in many ways sans-culotte ideas blazed a trail for socialism. The Jacobin Republic of 1793-4 set benchmarks for radical and democratic politics for a whole era. So much the worse for it, as far as Schama is concerned. Indeed, he endorses Louis XVI's apology for himself: "How was it possible to have a coherently governed state of the size and populousness of France with administrations hostage to the fickleness and hysteria of press and club opinion?" He comments that "the designated successor to royal authority - the Sovereign People - was no more capable than Louis XVI of reconciling freedom with power." Schama's language is vague, but makes sense only if he is saying that parliamentary democracy is no better than, or maybe worse than, absolute monarchy.

He philosophises a great deal about "the moral squalor of the revolutionary predicament," meaning that any use of popular violence to bring about political change leads inescapably to terror and atrocities. Instead of examining the particular class conflicts behind the Terror, he generalises vastly; once you have decided that violence against aristocrats can improve society, then you are bound to go on seeking more aristocrats and crypto-aristocrats until you are knee-deep in blood. [45] The logic does not hold, unless you assume that only kings and bureaucrats are capable of rational thought, not working people.

Yet the French Revolution was in fact the first great example in world history of working people organising in a sustained way, debating ideas in print and by word of mouth, and then acting collectively to implement them. It was not and could not be socialist. But it did incubate the beginnings of the modern socialist movement.

In 1795, Gracchus Babeuf, a Jacobin who had worked in the Paris food administration, came to the conclusion that the only way to bring about equality was common ownership of wealth. He organised a group called the Conspiracy of Equals, which was broken up by the police in 1796. Babeuf was guillotined but his ideas, through such people as Auguste Blanqui, inspired a whole current of socialist militancy in the 19th century. The group which Marx and Engels joined when they became socialists, and for which they wrote the Communist Manifesto, was part of that current. The French Revolution is the starting point for our politics.

Footnotes

1. Not all conservatives want or have wanted to discredit the Revolution. The alternative conservative argument is that capitalist society corresponds to human nature; revolution may have been necessary in the past to oust artificial ancient despotism, but it cannot be needed in future now that we have modern democracy, the product of the great Revolution.


5. Doyle, p.21; Sutherland, p.15ff; but not all the "revisionists" share this view. "In the course of the 18th century," write Furet and Richet, "aristocratic predominance in French society was greatly increased... From the death of Louis XIV [in 1715] the aristocratic counter-offensive began. It did not have the power to destroy royal absolutism, but it did manage progressively to control it through a quasi-monopoly of official positions... The monarchical state lost a part of...its aptitude for reform." (p.31)
6. Schama insists that the Revolution was bad from the beginning. "The notion that, between 1789 and 1791, France basked in some sort of liberal pleasure garden before the erection of the guillotine is a complete fantasy. From the very beginning, the violence which made the Revolution possible in the first place created exactly the brutal distinctions between Patriots and Enemies, Citizens and Aristocrats, within which there could be no human shades of grey." (p.436). Furet and Richet argue that the revolution "went off the rails" in 1790-1 (p.125ff of their book).

7. Schama, p.184
8. Schama, p.787
9. Albert Soboul, The French Revolution 1787-1799, NLB 1974, p.51. George Comninel, Rethinking the French Revolution, Verso 1987, p.53ff. Comninel argues that the whole notion of the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution is an uncritical borrowing from liberalism: "the theory of bourgeois revolution did not originate with Marx, and in fact is not even consistent with the original social thought which Marx did develop" (p.4). Marxists should recognise that the conservative critics have indeed exploded the 'traditional' Marxist view of the French Revolution, and instead develop a theory of the Revolution more in line with Marx's basic method. I find the argument baffling.
11. Fernand Braudel (Civilisation and Capitalism, 15th-18th centuries: Volume 3, The Perspective of the World, Fontana 1985, p.312-3) reckons that Crown revenues were about 5% of national income. This seems low. But much more tax was collected from the people than reached the Crown, and most people's surplus over subsistence was very small.
12. Between 1726 and 1791, 90 per cent of the Farmers General were nobles - Doyle, p.21.
16. Feudal dues: Sutherland, p.72. Total noble income: Perry Anderson, Lineages of the Absolutist State, NLB 1974, p.101; the figure is for the 17th century, but I see no reason to suppose that it was hugely different in the 18th century. See also Doyle, p.116.
17. Soboul, p.35-45, estimates that peasants owned about a third of the land, the Church about 10%, and nobles about 20%, so bourgeois about 35%. All these proportions varied widely from region to region.
18. See Soboul, p.35-54 and George Rudé, The Crowd in the French Revolution, OUP 1959, p.12-19. Soboul (in The Sans-Culottes, Princeton UP) quotes estimates of 70,000 for the number of wage-workers in Paris, and 290,000 for wage-workers and their families. For the average number of workers per employer, Soboul cites a figure of 16.6, but gives reasons to suppose that the true average could be as low as 6. Thus there were between 4,000 and 11,000 employers in Paris. With their families, they would number between 16,000 and 44,000). Doyle estimates 105,000 bourgeois in Paris.
19. Marx, letter to Engels, 27.7.1854; Selected Correspondence, Progress Publishers 1975, p.82; Anderson, p.97. Doyle, p.129, cites an estimate that the bourgeoisie had grown threefold between 1700 and 17.
21. Sutherland, p.17; Doyle, p.21.
22. Schama makes a great deal of the fact that various bourgeois revolutionaries were not "fuming failures" but "success stories of old-regime capitalism" (see p.410, for example). Of course they were. Otherwise they would not be bourgeois. 1 in 50 is a maximum estimate for the proportion of bourgeois ennobled; it could be 1 in 200. Cf Doyle, p.120, 129.
24. Furet and Richet, p.108-11; Schama, p.527. Of the members of the Jacobin Clubs between October 1791 and May 1793, 45% were artisans, tradesmen, or shopkeepers; 25% members of the liberal professions, government officials or salaried employees (i.e. clerks, etc.); 1.6% manual labourers. (M Kennedy, The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution, Princeton UP 1988, vol.2, Appendix D)
25. Maybe the Girondin leaders were also motivated by the prospect of profits from war contracts. Sutherland, p.138.
27. Cobban, p.110.
28. Schama, p.694. I don’t know how Schama reconciles this observation with his denial that the Revolution was a class struggle.
29. Rudé, p.128; Sutherland, p.206; Soboul, p.333-4; Furet and Richet, p.226-7.
30. During the Revolution feminism was very marginal, and under the Civil Code women’s legal position became worse than before the Revolution. Schama uses the male prejudice which dominated Revolutionary thinking to discredit the Revolution. But in the long view of history, the French Revolution, by establishing the idea of human equality, contributed to the modern movement for equality for women.
31. Some 1700 people were shot or guillotined in Lyons, and some 40,000 in the whole Terror; Soboul, p.388. Schama claims a quarter of a million people were killed in the Terror in the Vendee, but gives no details.
33. Of 168 arrested on 20-23 May 1795 whose occupations are known, 45 to 50 were wage-earners and the rest shopkeepers, craft workers, etc. Rude, p.155.
34. I think this view of the French Revolution can illuminate what I (though not necessarily other contributors to _Workers’ Liberty_) would call the bourgeois revolutions of the late 20th century - those in the Third World, usually made by middle-class groups against much of the big bourgeoisie (which was linked to landowning oligarchies or a colonial power) and often leading to a sort of permanent Jacobin war dictatorship.
35 Soboul, p.454.
37. Sutherland, p.385-7 (but he suggests one-third may be an exaggeration for the nobles’ loss of income). The picture of the post-Revolutionary bourgeoisie is confirmed by Tom Kemp (_Industrialisation in nineteenth century Europe_, Longman 1969, p.63, 57): “Well into the nineteenth century the property interests of the bourgeoisie continued to be mainly concentrated on lands and buildings. Loans to the state offered a further secure outlet... State offices and service, as well as landed property, for long conserved a special attraction for members of the bourgeoisie...” It is also confirmed by Jacques Droz (_Europe Between Revolutions 1815-1848_, Fontana 1967, p.39): “The power of the civil service, inherited from the Empire, caused a rush for the bureaucratic professions...a career in the civil service came to be regarded as the chief means of social betterment...so far it was rare for money to be invested in companies or industrial undertakings, for the risk was regarded as too great.”
38. Figure for 1839: Hobsbawm, p.236; for 1778, Furet and Richet, p.34. Warning: they may not be comparable. Marx, in _The Eighteenth Brumaire_, gives a much higher figure: half a million state officials. The army was not enormously bigger after the Revolution than before: in 1756-60 (wartime) it was 330,000; in 1789, 180,000; in 1812-14, 600,000; in 1816, 132,000; in 1830, 259,000 (Paul Kennedy, _The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers_, Unwin Hyman 1988, p.99, 154).
42. Hobsbawm, p.91-2.
43. Kemp, p.52.
44. Soboul, p.559.
45. Passages quoted: p.559, 675, 637. For the argument about violence, see p.436, 532, 690, 852, etc.

**What to read**

The best short introduction to the French Revolution and its place in history is _Revolutionary Europe 1783-1815_ by George Rudé (Fontana).

For a more detailed history, go on to _The French Revolution 1787-1799_ by Albert Soboul.

_The Crowd in the French Revolution_ by George Rudé gives a vivid picture of the sans-culottes in Paris. _Class Struggles in the First French Republic: bourgeois and bras nus_ by Daniel Guérin focuses on the conflict between the Paris masses and even the most radical Jacobin leaders.

_Origins of the French Revolution_ by William Doyle is the best summary of the ‘revisionist’ case, a lot more serious (and shorter) than Simon Schama’s much-boosted volume.
Old-fashioned, not all scientific, romantic and bombastic, *The French Revolution* by Thomas Carlyle (written in the 1830s) nonetheless conveys some of the excitement and drama of the Revolution.