

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE EMPIRE



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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SOCIAL INTERPRETATION

To most liberal writers looking back from the nineteenth century, the French Revolution seemed a historically ordained landmark on humankind's long, arduous, and honorable road to freedom. Its excesses were deplorable and gave serious pause but in the final analysis were incidental. In their view, agency in the French Revolution resided essentially in the middle classes, history's anointed avatars of freedom.

As marxist ideology ripened and spread at the end of the century, this emphasis on class received a new and powerful inflection. To Karl Marx and his followers the French Revolution was rooted in class struggle, its major protagonists a rising bourgeoisie (the hero in the liberal saga) and a declining but still powerful aristocracy. A subplot in the marxist drama offered a glimpse of the class struggle to come: the complex relationship during the revolutionary decade of the dominant bourgeois revolutionaries with and against the common people.

Liberal historians such as Louis-Adolphe Thiers and François-Auguste-Marie Mignet shared with the Marxists an assumption that the French Revolution had positive results of world-historic importance and had not originated from mere contingent circumstances, from mistakes of judgment, for example, by the royal court in the crisis of 1787–1789. Both perspectives saw it as a bourgeois revolution in its origins, course, outcomes, and significance. Both, in other words, provided a social interpretation of the French Revolution.

The anatomy of social class in the Old Regime.

During the first half of the twentieth century this social interpretation crystallized into a dominant historical paradigm, exemplified in the work of Georges Lefebvre, the respected dean of French revolutionary historians until his death in 1959. While the nobility of late-eighteenth-century France still maintained the highest rank and positions in society along with the

aristocratic upper clergy, Lefebvre wrote, “in reality economic power, personal abilities and confidence in the future had passed largely to the bourgeoisie. Such a discrepancy never lasts forever. The Revolution of 1789 restored the harmony between fact and law.”

This classic paradigm or orthodoxy later eroded. A growing body of research required new assessments of both the nobility and the middle classes. The stark line once presumed to have divided those social groups blurred, while internal divisions within each became more apparent. With its two traditional protagonists thus dissolving into a more complex and less tidy social landscape, the social interpretation of the revolution's origins lost its sway.

In the so-called revisionist view, one sees intra-elite jostling and conflict where once two armies of bourgeois and noble were girding for their titanic clash in 1789. Instead of a bourgeoisie we see various parochial groups at the top of the old third estate (the commoners). Merchants of course formed an important subculture; at their most dynamic they did indeed represent “money in motion,” the strategy of high risk in quest of high return, as against the minimal risk and secure if low return that funneled most people's capital into land or annuities. But such dynamic merchants were scarcely typical of the middle classes. Moreover, they often distrusted outsiders, and their “culture of the counting-house” must have seemed esoteric and arcane to others. The same was true of lawyers (barristers), attorneys, doctors, and other professionals. Meanwhile among the numerous middle-class rentiers, some identified their *état* (social status) as “bourgeois living nobly”—perhaps the most suggestive piece of social nomenclature in Old Regime society.

On the other side of the divide, the nobility formed a complex pyramid, with an enormously wealthy plutocracy at the apex whose sources of income and investments differed little from those of the wealthiest bourgeois. Nor can one legitimately see the Enlightenment as a bourgeois ideology, since many of its patrons, not to mention some of its leading writers,

came from the second estate (the nobility). Indeed, a convincing case can be made that the elites of both the second and the third estate were growing closer and more homogeneous even as their parochial rivalries and jealousies increased. While nobles assuredly retained a keener and more exclusive notion of honor, most of the elite respected the role of wealth, talent, and public service in society. Together they might well have constituted an incipient class of *notables* that would eventually render obsolete the constricting framework of first, second, and third estates. But we will never know, because the Revolution erupted in 1789.

Cultural origins? In a narrow sense, the monarchy's impending financial bankruptcy and political ineptitude in the period 1788–1789 opened the door to the French Revolution. But what deeper causes explain the explosive outcome in the summer of 1789? In the revisionist view the generative force for the French Revolution lies less in class conflict than in cultural ferment. The elites of late-eighteenth-century France constituted a cultural class. The growth of a civil society less tied to the state or to official hierarchies, the concomitant expansion of a public sphere of discourse and criticism, an expanding reading public, a publishing industry vigorously entrepreneurial

and skilled at the distribution of officially banned works—these were perhaps the incubators of revolutionary sentiment. A growing public consciousness might have eroded or “desanctified” traditional social values and political authority. Contributing to such ferment were barristers who published widely selling briefs (not subject to royal censorship) in which the private lawsuits and scandals of high aristocrats became public causes célèbres. Acrimonious controversies within and around the clergy did not help the cause of traditional orthodoxy. And in the best-selling underground books and pamphlets, the world of high royal politics was ridiculed as a sink of incompetence and corruption.

Elite elements from all three estates shared this consciousness and in 1789 constituted a self-styled “patriot party” that led the struggle first against absolutism and then against hereditary privilege. At that point the more traditional elements of the nobility balked and dug in their heels to defend the status quo. They fought to halt the transformation from its inception and at every point forward. By so doing, they set themselves apart as much-reviled “aristocrats” who stood against the interests of a virtuous people and a regenerated France. The early experience of patriot deputies to the Estates General in confronting this opposition is what made them “revolutionaries.”

SOCIETY, INDIVIDUALS, AND THE STATE

The French Revolution called into question and largely destroyed the juridical and institutional framework of traditional society. Social position and political influence would no longer correspond to divisions between the three estates. The first estate of the clergy lost its corporate standing, privileges, and special consideration, while the noble second estate lost its formal identity altogether. The nobles' fiscal and juridical privileges disappeared in 1789, and in the following year the National Assembly abolished their titles. Thereafter their situation deteriorated, as nobles became the most exposed aristocrats in an increasingly hostile environment. Their ranks were thinned by the executions of the Terror, while many who escaped by emigrating from France had their property confiscated and sold off as national properties (*biens nationaux*). In one sense this change was permanent. Nobles would never regain their full material or (except for a brief interlude between 1815 and 1830) political pre-eminence. Yet their aura of social superiority could not be entirely extinguished. The prestige of the Faubourg Saint-Germain (the neighborhood par excellence of the nobility) not only revived but flourished in the nineteenth century, as the most eminent noble families nurtured an almost racial sense of pride in their "houses," whether or not they still served the state. In this sense the Old Regime lived on in post-revolutionary France.

Revolutionary individualism. The traditional concept of liberty, however, expired almost completely. Before 1789 liberties had been understood as a series of customs, arrangements, and perquisites that conferred privileges on social groups, some corporations, and localities such as towns or provinces. In 1789 this tradition of liberty as privilege gave way to a universalized concept of liberty common to all citizens. In the economic domain this concept dictated the abolition of institutions that restricted individual initiative, such as guilds, chambers of commerce, and workers' associations. Revolutionary ideology extolled the notion of individual opportunity and competition (*émulation*). Even regulatory restrictions over the professions were reduced to a minimum or eliminated altogether to facilitate *émulation*. Instead, the competitive examination (*concours*) became a favored vehicle for achieving meritocratic selection in certain professions and branches of the armed forces.

Individualist thinking extended into family relations as well. Marriage, for example, came to be viewed as a contract between two free, consenting individuals rather than an arrangement between families

sanctified by the Catholic clergy. As a logical corollary, an unsatisfactory marriage could now be dissolved either by mutual consent or for cause, and after 1792 divorce became an option. Revolutionary legislatures lowered the age of minority while granting women greater rights in regard to property and to contracts. In the crucial matter of inheritance, regional customs and traditions favoring eldest sons gave way (at least in law) to an egalitarian individualism that required equal shares for each child, regardless of age or sex.

National integration. Lest French society be entirely atomized by such liberal individualism, however, revolutionary ideology simultaneously advanced extremely strong claims for the national state, continuing in a different register the centralizing work of the absolute monarchy. But where once the king had played both a substantive and a symbolic role in representing his people, the National Assembly stripped him of any claim to sovereignty and reduced him to a mere executive head of state with real but limited powers. The power to make laws devolved (on behalf of the sovereign people) to an elected legislature.

The National Assembly's first constitution achieved a subtle fusion of centralization and decentralization. On the one hand, it sought to establish uniformity across the variegated mosaic of French provinces and *pays*, so that French citizens, no matter where they lived, would have the same rights, powers, responsibilities, and obligations. The pyramidal and almost geometric structure of departments, districts, cantons, and communes became a blueprint for integrating villages into a new civic order, with the intention of bridging the mental and behavioral chasm between town and countryside. While this could be interpreted in the villages as an attempt by towns to impose their own interests on rural France and to dominate the countryside, it arguably inaugurated a modernizing process that proved beneficial to everyone, even if it took more than a century to complete. At the same time the revolutionaries provided for self-government—that is, for local administrative powers—so long as national law reigned supreme everywhere. As French political life grew increasingly polarized during the revolutionary decade, however, that supremacy was repeatedly challenged. Rebellion against Paris became commonplace, especially in areas hostile to the Revolution because of its religious policies or because of the imperious ways of urban revolutionaries in their departments and districts. But in the long run the design implanted by the National Assembly established a supple civic infrastructure for public services in France—an empowering framework for the collective life of the French people of town and country.

Gradually a set of normative provisions and public responsibilities entered the fabric of French collective life: the upkeep of local roads; the hiring of a rural constable (*garde champêtre*) in every village; a quasi-public poor-relief agency in every town; and (briefly in 1793–1794) a remarkable system of public-assistance entitlements paid by the national treasury. Arguably the most important public service that any state could provide to its people was primary education. Here the French Revolution made a precocious commitment to free, universal public primary education for boys and girls. The National Convention's Lakanal Law of 1794, calling for salaried male and female teachers in every commune above a certain population, was implemented in the districts for about a year before hyperinflation and a changing political climate aborted the effort. But universal public education remained a benchmark for subsequent regimes, all of which kept alive the commitment in some normative fashion.

THE REVOLUTION AND RURAL SOCIETY

If a social interpretation of the Revolution's origins has been undermined by modern research, does it still illuminate the course and consequences of the Revolution? For Marx, of course, it was all that really mattered: the Revolution marked the definitive transition from feudalism to capitalism, from the reign of the nobility to the era of the bourgeoisie. By implication at least, that interpretation grossly overestimates the role of capitalists in forwarding the Revolution; most merchants were reluctant revolutionaries who were left far behind by more aggressive lawyers, former royal officials, and the like. Similarly, the effects of the Revolution in stimulating, enabling, or advancing industrial capitalism are dubious. To be sure, the liberal ideology of 1789 and its legislative record are not inconsistent with that outcome. The revolutionaries abolished almost all privileged corporations; formalized the Old Regime's prohibitions against trade unions and strikes; abolished most forms of state intervention in the economy; and on paper at least, granted to individuals maximal freedom to pursue their economic interests. But for the most part the era of the Revolution and empire was an ordeal rather than a golden age for maritime commerce, capitalist innovation, and industrial entrepreneurs.

On the other hand, a strong case can be made for the impact of the Revolution on landed society. "The National Assembly hereby completely abolishes the feudal system": thus began the historic decree of 4 August 1789 that forever destroyed several key un-

derpinnings of the Old Regime social order. Technically, feudalism as a sociopolitical system of vassalage had long since disappeared in France, so the term "feudalism" is wildly misleading. But insofar as the word stigmatized France's pervasive skein of social, corporate, and regional privileges (and that was its most common contemporary usage), feudalism was very much alive in 1789. This was especially true of seigneurialism in the French countryside. The 4 August decree dissected seigneurialism, abolishing on the spot certain seigneurial prerogatives while leaving others to an uncertain fate, which popular mobilization eventually resolved.

The abolition of seigneurialism. Thus the Assembly without hesitation abolished seigneurial hunting rights. Previously, local lords (*seigneurs*) were free to hunt over any land in their jurisdiction, no matter who farmed it and without regard to the depredations they might cause; the right to hunt was more or less reserved exclusively to them. The Revolution's affirmation of a right to hunt on one's property in 1789 in fact led to an orgy of hunting and an ecologically dubious slaughter of game. (Later this right to hunt would be restricted by the imposition of steep gun-licensing fees.) Similarly, the Assembly suppressed seigneurial courts, previously the lowest tier of both criminal and civil justice in the French countryside.

Judges appointed by the lords had often used their powers in this system to further the interests of their employers in disputes with their peasants. The Revolution replaced these generally unpopular and incompetent officials with locally elected justices of the peace who brought a far more accessible, honest, expeditious, and inexpensive form of conflict resolution to the French countryside—a reform that endured through every subsequent political upheaval.

The Assembly also abolished other elements of seigneurialism that it stigmatized as personal or servile obligations, such as demeaning labor or transport services owed by peasants to their lords, and seigneurial monopolies over ovens, winepresses, and olive presses. But property dues and rights that the Assembly considered legitimate—deriving from concessions to peasants of land held originally by lords in exchange for payment of various kinds—were not abolished. True, the Assembly considered such obligations outmoded and regressive, in contrast to a straightforward contractual obligation to pay rent. It hoped ultimately to disentangle land from considerations of social status and thus to commodify land completely. The Assembly ultimately expected these seigneurial rights—quitrents (*cens*), harvest dues (*champarts*, *tasques*), and heavy transfer fees (*lods et ventes*)—to disappear. But it would promote that goal only by making such dues redeemable (at great cost) by the peasants subject to them, so as not to trample the legitimate property rights of the lords. (The Assembly approached the question of venal offices somewhat differently. Stigmatizing the purchase of public offices as obsolete and objectionable, it recognized existing offices as a form of property. In this case, however, the state simply abolished all such venal offices but generously indemnified their owners for the losses.)

The distinction between illegitimate “servile” seigneurial rights and legitimate if obsolete seigneurial dues as property made eminent sense to the learned jurists who framed this legislation. But their blueprint left an onerous burden on peasants who might hope to buy their way out of those obligations. In fact, the vast majority of peasants considered the distinction meaningless, condemned the seigneurial system, and were determined to demolish it—by lawsuits, by passive resistance (not paying any of these dues), and in many parts of France by direct action (specifically, resuming the “war on the châteaux” that had first erupted in the summer of 1789 and had provoked the 4 August decree). After France went to war in 1792 and the government in Paris needed to rally popular support, it finally bowed to this popular pressure and in 1793 abolished all seigneurial obligations without any compensation.

Agrarian innovation? The abolition of seigneurialism did not in itself modify the ownership of France’s arable land. Land owned by the lords, whether as part of their direct domain (*demesne*) or as parcels that they rented to peasants, remained their property, and the rents or crop shares continued to be paid. Whether the abolition of seigneurialism opened the way to a more capitalist agrarian system is another question. Some historians have argued that seigneurialism itself—by virtue of the lord’s enormous power over land and families—had permitted market-driven innovation in regions such as Burgundy. Hence, by strengthening the small peasant’s position, the abolition of seigneurialism retarded capitalist innovation, since most peasant smallholders sought security in habit and tended to resist the risk-reward enticements of serious innovation. A different kind of argument supports the same net conclusion. Many lords in France’s more backward regions (and even in places like Burgundy) had been content to extract income from their tenants without any interest in productive methods or innovation. After 1789 they simply continued to rent out their parcels of land under short-term leases that discouraged innovation, often under sharecropping (*métayage*) arrangements. In this respect the abolition of seigneurialism would have done little to stimulate agrarian capitalism.

But an alternative perspective would suggest that the Revolution brought a turning point in French agrarian history by favoring the large peasant-proprietors. Such men indisputably gained a more advantageous position in rural society after the abolition of seigneurialism. Operating with less constraint and more income at their disposal, they could better capitalize on market opportunities and in due course increase production by way of innovation. The other major agrarian change brought by the Revolution might have reinforced this effect.

Revolutionary land transfers. A great quantity of land changed hands as a direct result of the French Revolution. The church collectively owned approximately 10 percent of the land in France. The rental income from this land constituted one of the church’s two main sources of revenue abolished in the 4 August decree, the other being the tithe. The Assembly proceeded to nationalize the church’s property—to put its land “at the disposition of the nation.” The state would now take responsibility for maintaining the church and paying the clergy’s salaries. Meanwhile, it would gradually sell off the land and use the income to pay down the enormous state debt that had precipitated the crisis of the royal government and the calling of the Estates General.



DISTRIBUTION OF NATIONAL PROPERTY

The historian Georges Lefebvre tracked the sale of the *biens nationaux* in one department in the north of France, where the church had owned 20 percent of the land (an unusually large amount) before 1789. Altogether, 20,300 peasants purchased 52 percent of this property (totaling 71,500 hectares), while 7,500 bourgeois purchased 48 percent (65,700 hectares). But those raw totals do not tell the whole story. Lefebvre looked in detail at the land that ended up in peasant hands and found that the lion's share went to a very small number of already-wealthy peasants. During a brief interval when land was being sold in smaller plots or to syndicates of peasants, 90 percent of the peasant purchasers came onto the scene and acquired about 40 percent of the land that ultimately went to peasants. But another 9 percent of peasant purchasers bought up 39 percent of the total peasant acquisitions in parcels ranging from 5 to 40 hectares, while a mere 1 percent (or about 200 peasants) came away with 21 percent of the total, usually in lots greater than 40 hectares.

France had long possessed an active and complex land market—with ownership distributed across the social order: nobility, church, urban middle class, and peasants. This complexity resulted in great competitiveness for land—by far the dominant source of wealth and status as well as subsistence. Now up to a tenth of France's land was to come on the market. While some believed that this could be used to turn landless peasants into proprietors—that it could support a social policy of redistribution—most insisted that since the purpose of nationalization was financial, the terms of transfer had to maximize the inflow of revenue to the state treasury. Hence the *biens nationaux* (national properties), as this land was now called, were sold off in large rather than small plots and at auction in the district capitals rather than in the localities. Therefore, most of the former church land ended up in the hands of the wealthy urban middle class and the large peasants, while first-time peasant owners acquired relatively little. The same was true of a second component of the *biens nationaux*, the land of the émigrés confiscated by the state after they were

banned from returning to France on pain of death in 1793.

Although the *biens nationaux* were generally sold in large plots beyond the reach of small peasants, some of this land came back on the market when the original purchasers subdivided their acquisitions and resold them. In Alsace it would appear that the proportion of peasant purchasers thereby ultimately reached as high as 80 percent. Nonetheless, the typical purchaser was a wealthy middle-class person or a large-scale peasant. These purchasers, among other things, now had the most tangible interest in the success of the Revolution and in resisting counter-revolution, whose triumph would jeopardize their acquisitions.

The peasant community. Before the Revolution many regions of France sustained a strong peasant communalism. Peasant interdependence revolved around shared routines of husbandry and use of common land for grazing (when such property was not leased out to produce income for common village expenses). In open-field regions in the north and center all cultivators followed similar agrarian practices, including the right of “vacant pasture,” which opened fields to grazing by the livestock of all citizens in a village right after the harvest. Progressive thinking generally condemned such practices as a drag on individual initiative, innovation, and productivity. French agrarian reformers (*agronomes*) advocated changes comparable to the English model of agrarian modernization: the rearrangement of small scattered plots into large compact farms, the enclosure of those farms, and the division of common land so that it could be cleared and incorporated into the arable. The inertia of landlords and peasants, misgivings among some provincial royal authorities, and occasional resistance by peasants had defeated most efforts to introduce such changes before 1789.

With its ideology of liberal individualism, the Revolution promised new departures in this area. The National Assembly proclaimed that individuals should be free to use their land as they saw fit, without communal constraints. But it proved impossible to legislate such a notion. Communalism, vacant pasture, and the like were too deeply ingrained. The common lands (*biens communaux*), however, presented an especially inviting and tangible target. Considered by most political economists an unproductive, regressive use of resources, the common lands were also eyed by small or landless peasants in certain regions as a way of finally coming into possession of their own land. On the other side, wealthy peasants who maintained large flocks of livestock might favor the status quo in which the common land helped support their sub-

stantial grazing needs. The interests at play were complex and difficult to predict. In any case, in the same radical climate that abolished seigneurial rights, the National Convention passed a law in June 1793 authorizing the division of common land if one-third of a village's households voted to do so. Such a division would provide each household with an equal share of land, which could not be immediately resold. Some common land was duly divided under this policy, but local contention and indecision limited its effect. In 1795 the Convention suspended the law, which was annulled in 1797. The status quo of village communalism survived largely intact, perhaps above all because it provided security to most peasants.

THE SANSCULOTTES

After centuries of oligarchic rule under the sway of the monarchy, France's cities and towns vaulted toward democracy in 1789. In Paris and in twenty-six of the thirty largest cities, municipal revolutions ousted royal officials or traditional ruling cliques and installed broader-based local governments reflecting "patriot" sentiment. National legislation soon normalized this transformation, providing for the popular election of mayors and town councils in all towns and villages. Middle-class groups dominated the scene at first, but gradually the sansculottes—local businessmen, master artisans, journeymen, shopkeepers, white-collar employees, and wage earners—invaded the political arena as well.

Revolutionary crowds. Revolutionary crowds first appeared during the historic mass protests (*journées*) of 1789 in Paris, when spontaneous mobilizations saved an imperiled National Assembly by storming the Bastille in July and forcibly returned the royal family to Paris from Versailles in October. Subsequent mobilizations were less spontaneous but equally large and momentous: the Parisian insurrection of 10 August 1792 that drove Louis XVI from the throne; the armed demonstration of 2 June 1793 that forced the National Convention to purge the Girondins; and the menacing mass demonstration of 5 September 1793 that led the convention "to place terror on the order of the day." The Parisian crowd was arguably the most tangible force propelling the Revolution forward. At the least these crowds are remembered as the Revolution's most visible social phenomenon—the symbol or embodiment, at least in its own eyes, of popular will and the power of an aroused people. The last *journée* of the revolutionary decade came in the spring of 1795, at the height of the Thermidorian reaction, when embittered and desperate Parisian sansculottes stormed the Convention to demand food and to resuscitate the moribund democratic constitution of 1793. The repression that followed, coupled with an increasingly vigilant policing of the capital, put an end to the revolutionary crowd but not to its memory. In July 1830 and in 1848—not only in Paris but in several European capitals—revolutionary crowds, conscious of their historic antecedents, again made history.

The Paris sections. The sansculottes did not appear on the revolutionary stage solely in this spasmodic, episodic guise. In remarkable fashion they established an ongoing presence in municipal life, especially in the forty-eight sections, or neighborhood wards, of Paris. From the bottom up, and outside the prescribed framework of local government, the Parisian sansculottes built an unprecedented participatory infrastructure. Each section had a general assembly (much like a New England town meeting), an executive committee, a revolutionary committee to deal with “suspects,” a welfare committee, a force of national guardsmen, and an elected police commissioner and justice of the peace. Thus the sections resembled forty-eight small Rousseauesque republics where direct democracy seemed to be operative.

In reality, that image is deceptive. In each section small and shifting local oligarchies dominated. In social terms these leadership cadres have been aptly described as a “sansculotte bourgeoisie”—not the oxymoron it may seem. Many men who thought of themselves as sansculottes were property owners, often employers of artisanal labor, shopkeepers, or local entrepreneurs. Deeply rooted in their communities, they were advocates for their proletarian neighbors, whom they could mobilize for action. These cadres of sectional militants numbered no more than five or six thousand in a city of about 600,000, but they formed

a new kind of socially heterogeneous and populist elite. Intensely preoccupied if not obsessed with the issue of subsistence supplies and bread prices, ferociously antiaristocratic, and sentimentally egalitarian, they were pedagogues to their more plebeian neighbors in the revolutionary ideology of fraternity and civic equality. Believers in as much direct democracy as possible, they distrusted the National Convention even while serving as its fiercest partisans. They backed the war effort to the hilt on the home front and advocated redistributive Jacobin social policies, such as national pension entitlements for needy working families with children.

Provincial militants. While never as dominant or as well organized as in Paris, sansculottes could be found in many other towns, filling local Jacobinic clubs (*sociétés populaires*), staffing revolutionary committees, and manning ad hoc paramilitary battalions formed to provide “force behind the laws” of the Terror. Wary like their Parisian counterparts of the motivation and behavior of rural citizens, the provincial sansculottes were obsessed with the requisitioning of food supplies (on which urban consumers as well as the armed forces depended) and the imposition of price controls. They were also the staunchest partisans of the Terror and of the most radical “de-Christianization” initiatives of 1793–1794—harassment of constitutional

priests, rituals of blasphemy in church buildings, and the conversion of churches to “temples of reason.”

It has been easy to demonize the sansculottes for their fanaticism, violence, populist intolerance, and philistinism. But it has also been tempting to romanticize them, as Richard Cobb has done. As the historian of the sansculottes’ paramilitary battalions (*armées révolutionnaires*), a key instrument of the Terror, Cobb admired their spontaneous revolutionary enthusiasm. He defined them less by their mixed and largely popular social composition than by their temperament—imprudent, naive, dogmatic, fervent. In his mind they were the opposite of the “possibilists” and the calculating “revolutionary bureaucrats” (chief among them Maximilien Robespierre). While this is an interesting way to see the sansculottes, their significance is perhaps greater in more conventional social terms. In the sansculottes the chasm between elites and popular masses was briefly bridged. Their leaders may have been men of property, but that did not prevent them from fraternizing with ordinary workers, fulminating against aristocrats and *les gros*, and propagating egalitarian values.

The social amalgam of sansculottes would have been unthinkable before 1789, when men who worked with their hands had scarcely anything in common with the educated, propertied elites. And in 1848 scant possibility remained of resuscitating that amalgam. By then the social mix had disaggregated, notably by way of the national guard in the 1815–1848 period. Far more than the notorious plutocrats of those decades, the national guard drew a stark line through the social order between the working man who could not afford the uniform necessary for membership and the lower-middle-class master artisan or shopkeeper who could. Thus, the June days of 1848 provided the final epitaph for the remarkable phenomenon of sansculottism in the French Revolution.

THE NAPOLEONIC REGIME AND FRENCH SOCIETY

On 18 Brumaire Year VIII (9 November 1799) a group of disillusioned republican moderates joined forces with General Napoleon Bonaparte to overthrow the Directory. While the politicians did not desire or foresee the emergence of an untrammelled dictatorship in France or a French empire stretching across Europe, they did envisage the pacification of a society fractured by a decade of revolution. First they eliminated the unpredictable annual elections and the governmental instability that ensued. While maintaining the republic in name, they put in place a strong centralized

government headed by General Bonaparte and a legislature that was little more than a co-optive oligarchy. Within two or three years the Napoleonic regime forged the outlines of a social settlement. Civil equality and the abolition of seigneurialism would stand as the fundamental social gains of the Revolution. The transfer of the *biens nationaux* would be irrevocable. Émigrés would be allowed to return and the Vendée rebels pardoned as long as they submitted to the laws. Social peace would be promoted by a reinstatement of the Catholic Church by a concordat negotiated with Rome in 1801.

The self-constituted governing oligarchy of Brumaire largely comprised moderate parliamentary veterans of the revolutionary regimes. Most moved directly from the defunct legislative houses of the Directory era into the new institutions created after Brumaire: a Senate; a bicameral, rubber-stamp parliament; an apolitical Council of State to draft laws at the behest of first consul Bonaparte; and a corps of appointed prefects who would replace the locally elected departmental administrations of the revolutionary decade. Continuity and consolidation brought an unprecedented degree of security, both political and financial, for these men of the Revolution. The vast majority of his collaborators proved so grateful to Napoleon that they readily supported him in his most extravagant ambitions.

Elite formation: Notables and nobles. What of provincial society under the Napoleonic regime? The government assembled lists of the six hundred largest taxpayers in each of the ninety-odd departments. The regime thereby identified the important local people who were likely to have networks of clients under their influence. Informally, at least, these men became the new *notables* of France and later of the non-French areas of the empire. The regime could confer tangible recognition on these *notables* in various ways, such as appointing them to honorific posts in departmental electoral colleges or local advisory councils.

This process of regime-sponsored elite formation reached a climax with the creation of a Napoleonic nobility in 1808. An emperor, after all, needs a nobility and courtiers to refract his own pretensions. But this was to be a nobility based on state service, military and civil, and solid wealth. (“Such titles will henceforth serve only to mark for public recognition those who are already noted for their services, for their devotion to the prince and the fatherland.”) The first cohorts were filled with the generals, senators, and counselors of state intimately associated with the regime. Later, however, Napoleon cultivated prominent Old Regime nobles by conferring new titles on them.

Thus the Napoleonic nobility was a novel amalgam reflecting the emperor's eclectic ideas about the basis for high status. By 1814, 3,263 citizens of the empire had received titles, with 59 percent bestowed on military officers and 22 percent on high state functionaries; over a fifth of the Napoleonic nobility came from noble families of the Old Regime.

While Napoleon's permanent legacies to modern France were institutional—the corps of prefects, the Council of State, the centralized university, the Bank of France, the civil and criminal codes—his concept of *notables* also proved durable. When the Old Regime nobility regained its titles and recovered its prestige after the Restoration, the Bourbon also recognized the titles of the Napoleonic nobility, perhaps giving the whole idea of a French nobility greater credibility. More important, the idea of provincial *notables* identifiable by their superior level of property and land taxes regardless of birth endured through much of the nineteenth century. Napoleon thereby helped realize the vision in progressive thought before 1789 of an amalgam of wealth and talent from across the three estates—a true elite in which birth alone would not be decisive.

Conscription. Another practice of the Napoleonic regime proved equally durable and of far greater consequence: the claim of the state on young men for military service. Initiated as a one-time emergency measure in 1793—the *levée en masse* in which all single, able-bodied young men were drafted into the army—military conscription was enacted on a formal basis by the Directory in 1798, but it was only under Napoleon that it was consolidated, rendered permanent, and integrated into the normative fabric of social life. At first the draft evasion that had plagued the troop levies of the Convention and the Directory continued under Napoleon. But gradually by persistence, intense commitments at every level, improved administrative methods, and sheer coercion, the Napoleonic state broke the back of this endemic resistance and made conscription a routine obligation throughout the empire. By winning this battle Napoleon assured a steady flow of manpower into his increasingly large and far-flung armies. But perhaps more important, by decisively establishing this power of the state over society, the Napoleonic regime created the prototype for the mass conscript armies and reserve forces that nearly destroyed European society a century later.

See also France (in this volume); Land Tenure; The Liberal State; Military Service; Peasant and Farming Villages; Serfdom: Western Europe (volume 2); The Aristocracy and Gentry; Collective Action; Revolutions; Urban Crowds (volume 3); Patriarchy (volume 4); Journalism (volume 5).

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