

The origins of the French Revolution

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Q. What are the principal causes of the French Revolution?

A. Since the 1950s historians have usually divided the origins of the Revolution into the traditional categories of historical explanation: economic, social, ideological and political, with cultural being added on from the 1980s. There is still some merit in such a mode of analysis. Incorporating a broad perspective and a certain economic and social determinism, it derives from wider ideas of historical explanation due to the influence of Marxism and then the New History of the 1930s. Revolution, in general, has long been assumed to have long-term economic and social causes and the French Revolution is no exception.

The French economy was doing well from about 1730 onwards, especially in terms of rises in production and foreign trade. The population rise kept the benefits for many in check, but consumerism was on the increase, strikingly so in some sectors, as was social mobility, with a particularly marked rise in the numbers of the prosperous middle classes. An economic downturn began around 1778, sharply exacerbated in the late 1780s with the effects of a commercial treaty and bad harvests for wine and grain. In 1789 France was in the grip of a particularly bad economic crisis. Some historians have seen the downturn as generating significant revolutionary tension. Others argue that this tension was the background to a more political revolution that might not have succeeded without the general disorder and intervention of the crowd.

Socially, France was undergoing changes and increased tensions during the eighteenth century. Paradoxically, as social mobility and moveable wealth expanded, privilege was on the increase and there were more, and perhaps more often embittering, divisions in society. Those without the relatively easily acquired privileges of offices or nobility felt slighted, and new nobles resented the older nobility's attempt to remain more exclusive. The bourgeoisie was beginning to feel more self-confident in its own privileges and merits. Artisans resented exclusive and restrictive guild practices, however, while the rural poor displayed mounting anti-seigneurial attitudes and behaviour. No doubt all this tension was not enough to cause a revolution, but it did shape the choices people made in 1789.

Culturally, France was undergoing significant changes especially from mid-century onwards. The luxury trades and the availability of commodities from the New World, such as coffee and tea, drunk in cafés that were meeting places, led to a new degree of consumerism. A more commercial culture was developing. The availability of periodicals, what has been termed a 'reading revolution', the famous art exhibitions in the Louvre from 1737 onwards, the parterre of the theatre, the critical subtexts to paintings

and plays, promenades with newsmongers, clandestine pamphleteering, – all were helping to create a public sphere in which discussion took place. Religious controversies over Jansenism also led to a more politically aware Parisian bourgeoisie, and famous trials became a vehicle for public discussion of government and social injustice. Combined with notions of patriotism and citizenship, these changes prepared sections of the population to make new choices when the opportunity arose in 1788–89.

Everyone agrees that the most obvious reason for the collapse of the regime lay in its financial problems. The French monarchy had always had such problems, but the eighteenth century saw a great rise in the cost of warfare. France had insufficient revenue to maintain its international role as a great power, although some historians argue that its revenue was sufficient but that its credit mechanisms, unlike those of Britain with its Bank of England, were deficient. (If that is the case, then the problem was more political than fiscal, as the reform of institutions would have been the key to survival.) In the event, the American War of Independence involved a costly naval war with Britain and the budgetary problems were so great that a major reform initiative was put before an Assembly of Notables in 1787, who rejected most of it. Attempts to impose the reforms led to a major political crisis in 1787–88 that developed into a revolution in 1789.

A revolution has to be conceivable before it can take place, it is argued, so the intellectual origins have always been a major area of inquiry. The Enlightenment's critique of society and institutions, especially of despotism and the Church, laid the foundations for a new order. Historians of differing political persuasion and different ideas of the nature of the revolution have singled out several aspects of the eighteenth-century ideologies. Ideas of liberty, equality, the fellowship of man against oppression, democracy as an idealized solution, have all been accorded an important role, undermining respect for the traditional elites and order of things. Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893) saw the French nation, even the peasants and artisans, thrown into turmoil by the babblings of *philosophes*. But a major issue has been how far such ideas remained those of a narrow elite or permeated down the social scale to those artisans and peasants. After the pioneering studies by Daniel Mornet, Robert Darnton has since the 1960s made a major contribution with several works on the diffusion of ideas.

Economic, social and intellectual changes were no doubt conducive to change, even rapid change, and a financial crisis provided the occasion. But politics itself is the major cause of the revolution. The political institutions were so bound up with social and fiscal privilege that reform was a dangerous enterprise likely to arouse fierce opposition. A divided political elite, whose factional manoeuvres undermined reform, was closely identified with the monarchy. The king and queen badly mismanaged the situation, along with their ministers. The *parlements* resisted reform on the grounds that it was a despotic extension of central government, and the Paris *parlement* blocked loans that might have seen the monarchy through without major reform. Once reform was attempted from 1787, the political crisis snowballed, until cries for the Estates General to meet, as the only body competent to do root and branch reform, were too loud to resist. The ministry had no choice but to capitulate to these calls as the financial crisis was so severe that there was no further room for manoeuvre. The electoral process in early 1789 certainly helped to politicize the lower orders, if only in an elemental sense that change was about to

occur; a more sophisticated politicization occurred among the better off, who also had access to the hundreds of political pamphlets published each month. In this context of evolving opinion, the failure by the monarchy to seize the initiative in the early days of the Estates, in May, was disastrous. An exasperating deadlock developed between the two privileged orders: the nobility and clergy, on the one hand, and the Third Estate with its numerous lawyers, on the other. Although the Third Estate was equal in numbers to the other two orders combined, it feared much-needed reforms of fiscal privilege would be blocked by their having two votes against one. Exasperation led to radicalism, to the declaration of national sovereignty by the Third Estate on 17 June, and after the failure of a royal compromise on 23 June, to an enforced union of the orders into the National Assembly at the end of June. As the country fell into disorder with food riots and increasing peasant attacks on châteaux, a conservative reaction was prevented by popular support which led to the Fall of the Bastille on 14 July. In the context of growing internal disorder, the king could not prevent revolution, for such was the force of popular revolution that his officials became powerless and counter-measures became impossible. In this situation, the triumph of the Third Estate led to the almost complete failure of royal power: a political revolution occurred in July 1789.

Q. Is there a different explanatory model?

A. However, while all these elements teach us much, and are no doubt the best first approach, a major flaw lies at the heart of the enterprise. This is the question of what exactly we are trying to explain. It becomes apparent that the various perspectives are not views of one revolution, but of several: by the Third Estate, by the urban classes, by the peasants, and in ideas. Each specialist seems to be trying to explain a slightly or very different revolution, perhaps one caused by economic or fiscal problems, social or intellectual tensions (see below under historiography for more detail). My preferred model is structured differently, but requires a more determined view of what it means to search for the origins of 'the revolution'. What is a revolution? What stages does it go through in order to take place? Sociologists have various models, but my preferred inspiration is one of 'state failure'. Various elements lead to a crisis that is dynamic, transforming by its nature. The crisis is far more than a precipitant of a revolution ready made in the minds of men, as it were. This crisis brings into politics new groups and interests that the socio-political system has trouble coping with, but which at first are traditionally, not revolutionarily, motivated. Most political systems are rather good at dealing with traditional problems, but when the issues are new, or politics is under pressure conceptually, or simply the scale of the problems is too vast, existing strategies and techniques of government become over-stretched, ineffective. The crisis develops, as ineffectual attempts to resolve it (political mismanagement) bring in wider groups, like ripples made by a stone in a pool. Gradually, in some cases suddenly, people realize that something is changing, and begin to make new choices. From the growing competition the crisis spreads, until government becomes impossible, and political collapse occurs. Into the vacuum step new groups, determined to remodel the system to serve their interests better. So, what needs to be explained is 'state failure'. This means first investigating the nature of the state, its resources and political management, its inherent tensions and contradictions, its governing elite's ability to deal with crises. Then we must ask how the crisis develops to undermine confidence and pose virtually insurmountable

problems for the regime. Finally, we must consider how and why new groups become involved, and try to understand their choices in 1788–89. Here intellectual and cultural history have a particularly important role to play, for their choices were complexly motivated and were far from being mere political, social or economic reflexes.

Given this perspective, I find it most helpful to adopt a simple framework that enables the various elements to be seen in relationship to each other as they evolve over time. This is one of long-term, medium-term and short-term origins. Further exposition of this can be found in the Introduction to *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Campbell, 2006).

Q. Why has there been a long-standing debate about the origins of the French Revolution?

A. The French Revolution was a cataclysmic event that changed the course of history. It went through a number of phases each with a different character, and each with numerous complexities. So, from the first, interpreters were often focusing on different aspects when constructing their explanations. It was common to judge causes by the consequences, so a revolution that abolished the nobility must have been egalitarian; one that remodelled or even attacked religion must have been wilfully produced by atheists; one that allowed the common people to have power must have been intentionally demagogic. In the early days, during the revolution itself, History as a discipline of cause and effect was also in its early days, so frameworks of explanation were rudimentary. Most common was the idea that the revolution was caused by plots: a Jansenist or Jesuit conspiracy, an Orleanist plot or a Masonic or philosophic cabal. And of course, as the revolution was so varied and complex, each could see in it either their political dream or nightmare. Was it a triumph of the people over despotism, or the anarchic overthrow of a stable society with a descent into chaos? The optimistic vision of the revolutionaries was countered by the pessimistic conservatism of opponents, appalled by the scale of the social, political and cultural changes. Debate was and still is fuelled by the politics of the interpreter, and it is easy to find at least some evidence for widely differing views.

As the constitutional monarchy gave way in 1792 to a republic, constant foreign war and the Terror (in 1793–94), followed by an unsuccessful attempt at stability (1795–99), culminating in a military dictatorship (1799–1814), early historians tended to adopt the perspective of one of these periods. Revolutionary change to the existing regimes was still an issue in the first half of the nineteenth century, so interpretations had clear political overtones. Defenders of the French Revolution in the nineteenth century often wanted another one that was liberal, constitutional and limited power to the middle classes, which fitted well with 1789–92, but 1793–94 had to be interpreted as an aberration as Jacobin demagogues pandered to the lower orders; more radical historians (and activists) espoused the more democratic Jacobin constitution. The progressive right saw the revolution as inevitable but chaotic, finally transcended by a Bonapartist regime of order. The Catholic right saw nothing but disorder and irreligion; the rest of the right saw the revolution as avoidable and a presumptive attempt at remodelling society that was by its nature doomed to failure (Edmond Burke). All these positions were fundamental to nineteenth-century politics in Europe, and the Revolution provided

exempla of the various contemporary possibilities. To an extent these views continued into the twentieth century and even survive today. Jules Michelet's view of the revolution as a popular rising by the oppressed, a *révolte de la misère*, so evocatively expressed, caught the Romantic imagination. Interestingly, by the 1840s class-based interpretations were quite usual. The revolution was seen as the culmination of the rise of the Third Estate, destined to supplant the anarchic and incompetent nobility, and aided by support from the levelling old regime monarchy. This view was enshrined in the basic textbook of French history used in schools, A. Thierry's (1795–1856), *Essay on the History of the Third Estate (Essai sur l'Histoire du Tiers Etat)*.

But Karl Marx added another perspective, essentially by redefining the role of the bourgeoisie that was the hero of the tale. His all-encompassing vision was of a middle class that was economically progressive, a vehicle for the new ideologies of progress and equality, based on the requirements of the growing capitalism in early modern Europe. In the hands of such historians as Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre, and Albert Soboul in the twentieth century, this evolved into the orthodox view of the revolution. In their eyes, the revolution was the product of economic and social change in the eighteenth century as modern capitalism developed. This led to a more dynamic and ambitious middle class (bourgeoisie) that was frustrated by the limited opportunities in a country still controlled by a reactionary nobility whose wealth was still rooted in seigneurialism and landownership and whose power was supposed to have been limited by Louis XIV and the state apparatus. During the *ancien régime* the nobility hoped to regain its former role in the state. In 1787–88 noble resistance to reform amounted to a 'noble reaction' as the nobility took advantage of the monarchy's weakness to retain its privileges and demand more power. The economic downturn and fiscal shortcomings of the 1780s created motivation and opportunity for the Third Estate to defeat this reaction in 1789, in a progressive and capitalist revolution. This overall view was only challenged comprehensively from the mid-1950s.

Q. What has been the impact of Anglo-Saxon interpretations?

A. First, a different overall interpretation was put forward in 1955 by R.R. Palmer and Jacques Godechot, and substantiated in two volumes by Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* (2 vols, 1959–64). Here he argued that the chief characteristic of the age of revolutions was not the rise of a capitalist bourgeoisie but the idea of democracy. So the French Revolution, like the American Revolution, was essentially about liberal democracy.

Also in 1955, Alfred Cobban gave an inaugural lecture published the next year as *The Myth of the French Revolution*. In it he argued that if by the French Revolution we mean a bourgeois capitalist revolution, then the French Revolution was a myth. This provocative conclusion was intended to highlight two key points. First, that the revolutionary bourgeoisie, far from being capitalist, was actually mainly composed of lawyers and officeholders. His second point was that this class of officeholders was in decline, not expansion. In his *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (1964, 1999), he also used the evidence of the Marxists' own studies to show that eighteenth-century capitalism was not so very dynamic, and that the bourgeoisie as well as the

nobility was heavily involved in landownership and seigneurialism. This was a deliberate and hugely successful attempt to invite research on the too-easy categories of analysis used by historians. Robert Forster's work on the nobility of Toulouse also showed the nobility behaving in investment and estate management very like 'bourgeois capitalists'. French work on early industrial production showed that higher noble investment was a crucial factor in heavy industry. The easy categories were becoming very blurred as bourgeois looked like nobles and vice versa, and it was later suggested that they perhaps formed more or less a single elite.

It was George Taylor who, in four devastating articles, dealt the deathblow in the Anglo-Saxon world to the usefulness of the Marxist categories of analysis for the French revolution. His research on types of capitalism in eighteenth-century France highlighted four types of capitalism, none of which was 'modern'. He argued that the revolution was not caused by the rise of a group of modern capitalists. Going further, he argued that the revolution was not understood best in economic terms but in political terms. The revolution was essentially a political event. Such views had an enormous impact on teaching and research in the English-speaking academic world – and virtually none at all in France. Few French historians then read English and no-one was prepared to challenge the orthodox views of the entrenched Marxist establishment of top professors in French universities. The prevailing attitude was that French history was best left to the French. These studies were not translated or debated.

Q. What impact did the work of François Furet have upon the debate and why?

A. The answer to this question can begin with the fact that for a critique of the orthodox Marxist view to be taken seriously in France, it had to come from a Frenchman. Chaussinand-Nogaret was in fact the first to write a Cobban-influenced critique in the famous journal *Annales* in 1971. However, the more far-reaching, and indeed scathing, critique of Marxism by François Furet was destined to renew the debate. This was very much from his own perspective, and the Anglo-Saxon critique ended up sidelined. This was because he saw the old approach of cause and effect in economic and social terms as (his words) 'irrelevant to the problem at hand'. (Cobban was translated into French only in 1984.) A new way of understanding the revolutionary dynamic had to be found. His book of 1978, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, begins with a long first chapter 'The revolution is over'; it was followed by his republished article from *Annales*, 1971, declaiming against the Marxists' 'revolutionary catechism'; another on the brilliant insights of Tocqueville followed; and a new chapter on the sociologist Augustin Cochin ended the book. The book encapsulates a programme for the rest of his work. His approach succeeded in shifting debate onto new ground. An ex-Marxist himself, he had become disillusioned and very anti-Marxist. Other nineteenth-century historians had a far more sophisticated analysis of the revolution than Marx or his twentieth-century disciples. In place of economic and social determinism, Furet placed an innovative intellectual history approach. Ideas and discourses were most important for understanding the revolution, and taking his cue from Tocqueville, these ideas may not be what the contemporaries thought they were. He stresses that the revolution was essentially a competition for power about and through words and symbol. Lynn Hunt's book of 1984 explores in depth this insight about the importance of representation and symbols. Furet's

ideas of the causes of the revolutionary dynamic were echoed by Keith Baker, who argues (highly contentiously in my view) that a new politics was created from the 1750s in which the competition between discourses was the agent of revolution. Furet's idea that the revolution was bound to lead to a totalitarian regime owes a lot to J.L. Talmon's book of 1952, but it employs an entirely new framework of explanation.

Q. How did the debate on the origins change during the 1980s and during the Revolution's Bicentenary?

A. François Furet's position on the French Revolution was that it was 'over'. By this he meant that France had a new political culture in the 1980s and the revolution was no longer an issue whose actuality should trouble the French as it had in the past. His work tried to imply that the sort of revolutionary tradition that began in France with 1789 was doomed to failure, as revolution ended in violence and terror. The bicentenary coincided with the hammer blows to Marxism delivered by the wave of Eastern European revolutions of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the event, the debates on the bicentenary were unexpectedly vehement for a society that was supposed to have moved on. Most of the debate, however, focused not on the origins of the revolution but on the development of the Terror, and the question of whether the Terror was a necessary consequence of revolution, being inherent in the ideologies of 1789, and inevitable given the necessary working out in their contradictions in revolutionary politics. The Marxist interpretation in the hands of Albert Soboul, Claude Mazauric and Michel Vovelle fared badly in debate because, as Furet suggested, in the France of 1989, no-one was listening any more. On the other hand, Furet's idea of the power of words and the logic of events, and Baker's view of the motor of revolution being contradictions in discourse and ideology, also came under attack from British and American historians. The final upshot seems to have been that in spite of garnering numerous acolytes and supporters, Furet's views were important in providing a much-needed stimulus to debate and research, but not a convincing answer. Yet no-one has been able to come up with another interpretation that is as stimulating, refreshing or suggestive as his.

Q. How would you summarize the present state of research on the question of origins?

A. Let's first state that in terms of overall interpretations, none is at present convincing and the field is wide open. However, the very nature of History as a discipline has changed in the past twenty years and the sense that an overall interpretation is useful or viable has declined. Historical studies are fragmented, with historical 'truth' and 'causality' endangered notions. For my part, I think the attempt at overall explanation needs to be made because it helps clarify our positions and ask new questions, quite apart from the need to introduce students to an intelligible but contested past. The problem is how to develop a sufficiently flexible paradigm that incorporates the recent research and yet still allows within its parameters room for new elements to be incorporated.

The critical case for the revisionists was best put by William Doyle in *The Origins of the French Revolution*, still an essential starting point. Since its publication in 1980, various approaches have been put forward. Roger Chartier's exploration of the 'cultural

origins' focused attention on this aspect, without making a convincing case. To return to our original problem, the cultural origins of what? Which revolution? It is currently fashionable to stress the modernity of the revolution, less so to stress its 'early' or 'pre'-modernity.

Sociologists remain especially interested in the origins as a topic. Challenging comparative studies were published by Theda Skocpol in 1979 and Jack Goldstone in 1991. Skocpol highlighted the strains of modernization (the term is, however, a contentious one) on states, and recently Bailey Stone has developed this with an essay on the strains imposed by international competition. Goldstone is more comprehensive with a particular stress on the impact of rapid population growth and a fiscal system ill equipped to cope with the state's requirements. The main problem with both is a relative failure to incorporate ideology, and insufficient understanding of the complex *ancien régime* state whose failure they are discussing. Another strand of interpretation wants to see the revolution as modernizing, and consequently stresses the role of ideas selectively studied for their impetus to modern democracy of political culture. It is to be hoped that historians will place equal stress upon all those aspects that continued to reflect the recent and distant past, such as classical republicanism, or a crisis of the (still largely) seventeenth-century state.

The concept of 'political culture' is perhaps one of the most fruitful lines of inquiry, and much recent work has explored its ideologies, presuppositions and development over time. Understanding how royal power collapsed also requires an understanding of how that power functioned normally, and in particular we need to understand more about patronage and clientage, court society, faction and the hybrid bureaucracy of the Bourbon state. The failure of the state provided a situation in which cultural and intellectual elements of the problem came to the fore, enabling us to understand how new groups became involved in revolutionary politics.

Key publications by Peter Campbell

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Further reading

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