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The French Revolution has perhaps attracted more attention in history than any other event and its study involves what other professional historians have said about it.

THE MARXIST INTERPRETATION –

The 'classic' interpretation of the French Revolution in historical scholarship was the Marxist approach which sees the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution, marked by class conflict. The French Revolution was not simply a political struggle from an absolute monarchy to democratic republicanism but represented a deeper shift from feudalism to capitalism. According to the Marxist historians, the Revolution was led by an alliance between the bourgeois elite and popular classes against the landowning nobility. The greatest success of such an alliance occurred in 1789 but by 1791, revolutionary events were marked by class conflict which in turn produced an urban political movement by the sans-cullotes. The Terror represented the pinnacle of the sans-cullotes movement. Thus, the French Revolution was essentially a class struggle in which the nobility was destroyed, the class of the sans-cullotes was awakened and the bourgeoisie won control of the state. The scholars who advocated this view include – Alphonse Aulard, Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre, Albert Soboul and Michel Vovelle.

- **ALPHONSE AULARD**– Aulard's writings promoted democratic republicanism and had no sympathy for the monarchy. According to Aulard, the despotic abuses of the Ancien Regime justified the violent uprising of 1789. He admired the courage of the Constituent Assembly deputies but felt that the Constitution of 1791 was a flawed document that allowed the monarchy too much power. He praised the efforts of Georges Danton and other militarist activists, which culminated in the insurrection of 10 August 1792 and the declaration of France's first democratic republic. For Aulard, the establishment of a republic under the National Convention marked the zenith of the Revolution.
- **ALBERT MATHIEZ**– Albert Mathiez challenged the views of his teacher, Aulard. Influenced both by the victory of Bolshevism in Russia and the legacy of French socialist leader, Jean Jaures, Mathiez wrote that the French Revolution came about due to a class conflict in which the prospering bourgeoisie triumphed over both the established nobility and the emerging proletariat.

Mathiez rejected Aulard's beloved Danton as a corrupt bourgeois politician and defended Robespierres's efforts to save France through the Terror. In Mathiez's view, Robespierre was not a dictator but a democratic politician responding to popular pressure from Parisian workers. His defense of the Terror was passionate and had a great influence on a generation of historians from Europe and the United States. Mathiez's successors - Lefebvre, Soboul and Vovelle, closely followed the master.

- **GEORGES LEFEBVRE**– George Lefebvre in his book 'The Coming of the French Revolution' puts forward the view that the French Revolution stemmed from the bourgeoisie's rise, which eventually led to the overthrow of the aristocratic ruling class in France. Lefebvre divided the revolution in 4 stages – 1) the Revolt of the Nobles or the Aristocratic Revolution 2) the victory of the Bourgeoisie or the Bourgeois Revolution 3) The mobilization of the urban masses or the Popular Revolution 4) the Peasant Revolution. All the classes united to rid the country of absolutism. Following WWII, Lefebvre's work became the leading work of the Marxist school of thought on the French Revolution and held the field for almost 20 years.
- **ALBERT SOBOUL**– Soboul maintained that the French Revolution could be understood as a class struggle, in which the bourgeoisie backed by the force of the masses, gained power from the aristocracy, overthrew the old order and restructured the state to fit its own interests. The masses involved themselves in the revolution and their actions proved to be decisive in taking down the Old Regime and assuring the victory of the bourgeoisie.
- **MICHEL VOVELLE**– Vovelle believed that the revolution began in the provinces and subsequently spread around France. He said that the revolution defined itself as it went along and in doing so, followed the belief of writers such as Lefebvre and Mathiez, who argued that the French Revolution was inevitable.

Most scholars accepted the Marxist theory of class conflict. However the argument of the Marxist school began to be questioned which led to an enormous transformation in the scholarship on the French Revolution. It was marked by the almost total collapse of the orthodox Marxist interpretation and a range of sharp attacks on virtually all of its major points and approaches leading to a complete collapse of the Marxist paradigm.

THE REVISIONIST INTERPRETATION –

The Revisionist historians, who critiqued the Marxists, were of the view that the French Revolution cannot be seen as a bourgeois revolution which destroyed feudal political structures. The revisionists insist that class struggle played little role in the Revolution and it had nothing much to do with the development of capitalism.

LIBERAL REVISIONISM – The liberals believed that the French Revolution when taken as a whole was necessary to move France from a pre modern to a modern society. According to them, the Ancien Regime had become so paralyzed by its own internal contradictions, that by the 18th century only revolutionary change could resolve France's grave problems. Liberal historians viewed the revolution as an agent of progress, despite its great faults and demonstrated the virtues of revolutionary change. They explain the excessive violence of the Terror by noting the grave circumstances that led to its establishment.

- **ALFRED COBBAN**– Alfred Cobban, the British historian who began revisionism, questioned whether the French Revolution was led by a rising bourgeoisie. He noted that only 13 percent of the leaders of the Third Estate were from the world of commerce – merchants, manufacturers or financiers and thus this revolution was not made by a capitalist bourgeoisie. Rather, Cobban argued that the greatest number of leaders came from the ranks of local, petty public officials such as administrators, prosecutors, judges and the like. He said that the French Revolution was one of notables and not of capitalists. Cobban also felt that the Ancien Regime was so beset with structural problems and contradictions that nothing short of revolution would reform the country. However, the revolution was not all about senseless violence as the construction of a liberal political order would have been impossible without the clashes of 1789 and the achievements of the Constituent Assembly.
- **GEORGE TAYLOR**– Taylor added much empirical ammunition to the revisionist view. Just as Cobban disagreed with the role of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, Taylor demonstrated how the investment patterns by the bourgeois and noble families were remarkably similar. He attacked the belief that the bourgeoisie led the French Revolution because he pointed out that the bourgeoisie and the nobility were economically indistinguishable. George Taylor suggested that the best way to understand the revolution involved the envisioning of it as a political contest for power. However most historians didn't agree with Taylor and avoided the view that the revolution began purely for political purposes.

The works of Cobban and Taylor brought the nobles and the bourgeoisie closer together, both socially and economically and had successfully picked apart much of the Marxist case for the start of the French Revolution. However, by the time Colin Lucas put forward his view in the 1970s, the Revisionist school had become an entrenched minority among the French Revolutionary scholars. The Revisionists remained an iconoclastic minority until the publication of Francois Furet's "Interpreting the French Revolution" in 1978.

NEO-CONSERVATIVE REVISIONISM – Furet and his collaborators differed from earlier revisionists in one very significant manner as they undermined the very foundations of Liberal historiography. Usually former liberals themselves, the neo-conservatives turned against the whole idea of revolutionary change as itself illiberal and see the Terror as the essence of the French Revolution. By the 1990s neo-conservative revisionism had clearly become the ascendant interpretation of the historical establishment across the world.

- **FRANCOIS FURET**– Furet attacked the Marxist revolutionary catechism but unlike other revisionist historians, he returned to political and intellectual theories for the French Revolution. By studying more carefully the meaning of revolutionary rhetoric, Furet ignited new interest in the cultural history of the revolution and the relationship of the Enlightenment to the French Revolution was resurrected into a burning issue for debate and controversy. Though conservative in his attitude towards the revolutionary era, Furet argued that the democratic ideas of certain enlightened philosophers such as Rousseau became the heart and soul of the French Revolution. Democracy here did not mean governing by consent but the power of a national state to defeat those who opposed its will. Furet wrote that the revolution embraced a radical ideology of popular sovereignty so that any abuse of power could be excused so long as it was achieved in the name of the people. Thus, he argued that the trajectory of the revolution from its first day was towards the state using democratic ideology in a despotic manner and that process culminated in the

Terror, which was the pinnacle of revolutionary democracy and dictatorship. Furet interpreted the early years of the revolution as a prologue to the Terror and he viewed the Napoleonic Empire as its epilogue. For Furet, the Terror was not an accidental phase of the revolution but rather emblematic of the entire revolution. He also argued that the revolution was radical from the start and its early achievements were only a mirage. Over a period of time, Furet became arguably the most important historian in the world of the French Revolution which furthered the demise of Marxist historiography.

- **KEITH MICHAEL BAKER** – Baker was one of Furet's earliest and strongest supporters and did a lot to revitalize the intellectual history of the French Revolution. He traced how certain Rousseauian strands of the Enlightenment political ideology mutated into revolutionary Jacobinism. The influence of Rousseau upon the French Revolution has been among the most heated debates in 18th century studies and no one has discusses this problem with more sensitivity and erudition than Baker. Rousseau had set forth his theory of the general will in his book 'The Social Contract'. According to Baker, the French Revolution's free fall into Rousseauian democracy as well as the Terror was not the product of 1792-93 when the nation was at war, but was the result of deliberate decisions made by the National Assembly in the summer of 1789 in a way in which political power and violence had been reconceptualised. Baker argued that by accepting Rousseau's theory of general will as the basis for rejecting the absolute veto in 1789, the Constituent Assembly was opting for the Terror. Like Furet, Baker placed the Terror squarely at the centre of the revolutionary process and it was not some detour away from political norms or the Revolution's true goal. It was the outcome of the Constituent Assembly's repeated adoption of Rousseauian political principles.
- **JACOB TALMON** – Jacob Talmon's intellectual history, which had much in common with the newer approach of Furet, argued that the French state became a totalitarian democracy during the Terror. He traced the idea of totalitarian democracy to certain key Enlightenment figures such as Rousseau through Sieyes to Robespierre. Like Furet, Talmon associated Rousseauian democratic ideas with a collectivism that quickly turned oppressive and in short saw the Terror as the essence of the French Revolution. However, Talmon's method was primitive in comparison to that of Furet and Baker and tended to distort Enlightenment ideology. Thus his view was only extended by the most extreme historians writing today.

Therefore, whether in its older form from Talmon, or its more sophisticated version from Furet, Neo-Conservative Revisionism had clearly become the ascendant interpretation of the historical establishment in England, France and the United States by 1989.

THE NEO-LIBERAL OR POST REVISIONISM INTERPRETATION – The most important developments in the historiography of the French Revolution have been Neo-Liberal challenges to the position laid out by Furet and his colleagues. Unlike the Revisionists, Neo-Liberal interpretations do not minimize the oppressive character of the 18th century nobility. The aristocracy is seen as a distinct political group with interests opposing those of commoners. The Neo-Liberal arguments insist that the period of the Constituent Assembly was substantively different than the Jacobinism of the Terror. The neo-Liberal interpretations also claim that the collective violence of the Revolution's early years was necessary to the establishment of a liberal and free state. These historians also challenge the view that the Revolution was a primary failure. According to them, a rising bourgeoisie may not have started the revolution, but the revolutionaries successfully destroyed the Ancien Regime and refashioned a society that made a 19th century liberal state possible. The Neo-Liberals define class more in terms of specific professions and occupations with varied social interests than in terms of a

solid group with political interests. These writers stress on culture as opposed to the Marxists social or the Revisionists political reasons for the start of the French Revolution.

Alongside the Neo-Liberal response to Revisionism, the other significant recent trend in French Revolutionary scholarship has been the maturation of women's and gender history. In the 1970s, with the rise of a contemporary **feminist movement**, the pace was set towards a new history that took into account the fate of women and used gender as an analytical tool in the general histories or document collections on the revolution. A new research agenda was established for the field which made us realize that women participated in every major event in the revolution and the influence of elite women in the clubs and presses of Paris. Thus the feminist inspired historians instead of identifying women as the primary subject widened the scope to include revolutionary discourse, policies, events and culture; interpreted through the lens of gender. The feminist historians included - Lynn Hunt, Joan Landes and Simon Schama.

- **LYNN HUNT** – Hunt discussed the hostility directed toward aristocratic and revolutionary women who entered the political sphere. In a study from the 1980s, Hunt explored why the Jacobins replaced Marianne with Hercules as the anthropomorphic symbol of the French nation. In an article on Marie Antoinette, who was seen as a symbol of the relations between women and the public sphere in the 18th century, Hunt demonstrates how attitudes towards the French queen reveal much about the ways in which French revolutionary leaders hoped to shape sexual roles in the new republic.
- **JOAN LANDES** – Joan Landes who shifted the lines of research from women to gender, argued that the crucial factor for women in the French revolution was not their participation but rather their formal exclusion from political life altogether. Women were not simply forgotten or ignored by the new leaders of the Revolution but instead there was a more pervasive gendering of the public sphere. According to Landes, the lines between public men participating in civic life and domesticated women caring for family and children alone were more purposively drawn by the Jacobins than ever before. Landes blames this on Rousseau as his reformulation of political culture included a devastating critique of gender roles under the Old Regime which divided gender more rigidly than had ever been the case for the French aristocracy. However Landes argued that the new bourgeois political sphere was in many ways more regressive than what women had experienced in the Old Regime and the new republic showed far less toleration for public women. Therefore from Landes, historians learned that the omission of women from the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizens, was not a prejudicial oversight but rather they were excluded because the Republic had been conceived as an exclusively masculine public sphere.
- **SIMON SCHAMA** – The best example of the appropriation of feminist history for Neo-Conservative purposes is found in Simon Schama's *Citizens*, which arguably incorporated more recent scholarship on women than any other recent general history. Using Hunt's research on Marie Antoinette, Schama depicted the 1793 trial of the Queen as merely one facet of the stormiest phase of sexual politics in the French Revolution.

It has been seen that the Revisionists and the new feminist scholars shared two essential attitudes about the French revolution. Firstly, both groups believed that the French revolution marked a step backwards for women's rights. Secondly, both gave credence to the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and it was his highly contentious ideas that gave rise to new notions of female domesticity. The post-revisionists, like the revisionists do not have an ultimate theory for the beginning of the French

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hello, jenny. the posts that you see here are a kind of consolidation of notes (lectures and otherwise) contributed by various people. some of them are old. many of them are brief and concise. it may not be possible for us to include every argument of each and every historian. apologies. but will try our level best in bringing as much information available to us into public domain as possible for both popular and academic debates. keep reading, commenting and suggesting. thank you. cheers!

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