

## The Historiography of the 1789 Revolution from Alfred Cobban to Recent Times

*Pamela Pilbeam*

Alfred Cobban was Professor of French History at University College, London from 1953 to 1968. He was the outstanding historian of France in Britain. His first books were on Edmund Burke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He dedicated his Rousseau volume to his wife Muriel, who organised ordinary life so effortlessly that he was able to devote himself totally to writing, to teaching, and to shaping and managing the study of history. For him, as for Marc Bloch, whom he admired, a historian could only understand the past in the context of the present. He was deeply concerned about the turbulence, violence and inhumanity of the world in which he lived. He argued with force that society needed to return to past moral and ethical standards. He was committed to egalitarian social reform. He published a series of powerful and influential accounts of the contemporary world, from *Dictatorship in Theory and Practice* in 1939 to a history of Vichy France in Arnold J. Toynbee's *Hitler's Europe* in 1954. In 1949 he wrote a brief introduction to a new edition of Édouard Dolléans, *Le Chartisme*. The first edition in 1914 was introduced by Sidney Webb, leading Fabian and founder of the LSE. Cobban was sympathetic to Fabian socialism, which favoured social reform through education and legislation. The most controversial of his thirteen books and numerous articles were critical analyses of the research of leading scholars in French universities. He was an empiricist, disdaining abstract theory. Historical writing had to be based on archival evidence, but he abhorred "mere academic magpie-collecting of insignificant facts".<sup>1</sup>

Cobban's most remembered and influential contribution to history was his interrogation of the social significance of the 1789 Revolution. He claimed that French academic historians, led by Georges Lefebvre, believed that the 1789 Revolution was made by and for the bourgeoisie in line with the Marxist claim that 1789 was the first stage in an inevitable historical process which would lead to a proletarian takeover and a classless society. Albert Soboul began his 1965 account of 1789 with the statement: "La Révolution marque l'avènement de la société bourgeoise et capitaliste dans l'histoire de la France."<sup>2</sup> In his inaugural lecture as professor of French history in 1954 ("The Myth of the French Revolution," attended by the French ambassador), in his Wiles Lecture in 1962, and finally in *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, Cobban asserted that, although the 1789 Revolution radically changed France politically, its complex social structures were far more difficult to alter.<sup>3</sup> Cobban questioned both contemporary sociological and especially Marxist theory

---

Pamela Pilbeam is Emeritus Professor of French History at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her most recent book is *Saint-Simonians in Nineteenth-Century France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

She is very grateful to the anonymous reviewers of *French History and Civilization* for their thoughtful and positive comments on this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Cobban, "The Enlightenment," 102.

<sup>2</sup> Soboul, *La Révolution française*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Cobban, *Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*.

concerning 1789.<sup>4</sup> He quoted detailed evidence from Lefebvre,<sup>5</sup> Ernest Labrousse,<sup>6</sup> and Soboul on the complexity of French society. He concluded that their own archival evidence and massively detailed research did not support the more simplistic Marxist theories they later enunciated, perhaps overlooking that historians tend to simplify in textbooks. Cobban did not deny that the Third Estate members elected to the Estates-General in May 1789 were predominantly bourgeois. Citing the earlier detailed statistical research of Lefebvre himself and the U.S. historian George V. Taylor,<sup>7</sup> Cobban pointed out that they were predominantly bureaucrats, state servants and professionals, especially lawyers and landowners, not capitalists and that this had been Lefebvre's own conclusion in *Quatre-vingt neuf*. Lefebvre claimed, and Cobban agreed, that 1789 was the consequence of long-term social conflict, but Cobban argued that social change was the result of slow development, not revolution. Cobban had great respect for Lefebvre as "the most recent of the greater historians of the French Revolution".<sup>8</sup> He sent Lefebvre copies of his academic articles, which Lefebvre retained in his personal library. They can be found today in the collections on the 1789 Revolution at the Château de Vizille.<sup>9</sup>

Cobban turned to the social consequences of the Revolution. He noted that in the summer of 1789 the decision of the new National Assembly to abolish feudal or seigneurial dues and the tithe, was not a choice by bourgeois deputies, as Marxists claimed. Many bourgeois had bought these rights and, as Lefebvre wrote, "the bourgeoisie had neither the time nor the desire to attack the tithe or the feudal rights".<sup>10</sup> Abolition was dictated by peasant anti-seigneurial insurrection, the general panic of the summer of 1789, known as the *Grande Peur*. Lefebvre, in his own book, *La Grande Peur de 1789*, had also stressed the significance of peasant action. The abolition of seigneurial dues and the tithe on the night of August 4, 1789 may be seen as one of the main social consequences of 1789 and was a victory of country people against the towns. Cobban, while acknowledging that the more substantial peasants were victors, noted that feudal dues actually survived in higher rents peasants were obliged to pay if they were not outright owners of their land.<sup>11</sup>

Cobban went on to refute the Marxist claim that 1789 led to capitalist growth. Indeed the upheavals of revolution and twenty-five years of war retarded the French economy, which Henri Sée and Albert Soboul also recognised.<sup>12</sup> There was no sudden major large-scale industrial take-off in France as in Britain, but slow, gradual economic growth. Nor did 1789 lead to rapid social change, in part because the Revolution had made peasant land tenure more secure. Although the seigneurial system was abolished and heads of émigré families lost land, Cobban reminded readers that nobles retained virtually the same proportion of French land after 1815 as they had before 1789.<sup>13</sup> *Social Interpretation* caused quite a stir, not least for a distinctly odd review (anonymous, but by Richard Cobb) in the *Times Literary Supplement*, nicely dealt with by Betty Behrens.<sup>14</sup> Lefebvre and his colleagues found Cobban's "myth" of 1789 negative, but this did not stop Roland Mousnier inviting Cobban to give a paper in Paris in 1965.

<sup>4</sup> Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Lefebvre, *Paysans du Nord*.

<sup>6</sup> Labrousse, *Crise de l'économie française*.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, "Types of Capitalism in eighteenth-century"; Taylor, "Noncapitalist wealth and origins of the French Revolution".

<sup>8</sup> Cobban, *Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution*, 36.

<sup>9</sup> I am very grateful to Professor Pierre Serna for this information.

<sup>10</sup> Lefebvre, *Études sur la Révolution française*, 249.

<sup>11</sup> Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, 103, 119.

<sup>12</sup> Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Cobban, *Social Interpretation*, 119, 161; Cobban, "The Vocabulary of Social History".

<sup>14</sup> [Cobb], *Times Literary Supplement*; Behrens, "Professor Cobban and his critic."

In his short history of 1789, published in 1965, Soboul noted “the vain efforts that have been made to deny the true historical nature ... of the French Revolution.”<sup>15</sup> Nearly ten years later he summarised recent approaches to 1789. Soboul stressed 1789 as a national revolution and claimed that the traditional view of the significance of 1789, set out by Guizot, Tocqueville, Mathiez and Jaurès, had been undermined since the 1950s. First came R.R. Palmer, who, with Jacques Godechot, argued that in the second half of the eighteenth century the Western world had experienced an Atlantic Revolution. Soboul observed that this interpretation lessened the significance of 1789 in France. Cobban, he said, went further, denying that 1789 was anti-feudal and capitalist.<sup>16</sup> However Soboul agreed with Cobban that capitalist structures developed very slowly in France, so by 1974 their views were not massively different. Soboul cited Cobban’s relevant publications, which presumably he had read in English.

Cobban’s challenge to contemporary views were part of a substantial re-thinking of 1789 in France in the 1960s. Younger scholars undertook detailed analyses of local society, which added considerable subtlety to textbook Marxism. Think of the work of Maurice Agulhon on the Var,<sup>17</sup> Alain Corbin on the poor in the Limousin,<sup>18</sup> Pierre Goubert on Beauvais,<sup>19</sup> and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie on Languedoc.<sup>20</sup> Their theses transformed social history in France. Reference to Marxist social conflict was notably absent in the numerous conferences and publications commemorating the bicentenary of 1789.

In the 1960s, however, François Furet and Denis Richet were the only historians in France who agreed with Cobban’s claim that 1789 had had very limited social impact.<sup>21</sup> Soboul was as contemptuous of their interpretation as he was of those of Cobban. Furet, quoting Cobban, denied that 1789 was primarily about social cleavage and class interest but rather about challenges to political legitimacy.<sup>22</sup> Like Cobban, Furet also claimed that in 1789 peasants were less anti-aristocratic than anti-capitalist, hostile to the embourgeoisement of feudal dues.<sup>23</sup> Furet also challenged Marxist views on the bourgeois revolution and supported Cobban’s contention that although bourgeois groups were committed to 1789, very few had links with capitalism. For Furet there was more than one revolution, a peasant revolution against feudal dues, which bourgeois revolutionaries had to accept, even when it was not in their interest. Then, a bourgeois revolution which created a representative system, opened careers to talent and decreed freedom of labour and enterprise.<sup>24</sup> Furet revived interest in de Tocqueville’s interpretation that in political terms 1789 was less a dramatic break, but a continuation of attempts at institutional reform.

Cobban also questioned Marxist theory on the inevitability of the replacement of noble by bourgeois power, noting that a new elite of *notables*, blending noble and bourgeois power was emerging, making the idea of a straightforward bourgeois takeover simplistic. Cobban highlighted research being undertaken in France. From the 1950s the role of the notables was exhaustively researched by among others André-Jean Tudesq and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret,

<sup>15</sup> Soboul, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 165. I am grateful to the anonymous reader for *French History and Civilisation* for pointing out this refutation of Cobban’s criticism.

<sup>16</sup> Soboul, “L’historiographie classique de la Révolution française,” 40–58, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Agulhon, *The Republic in the Village*.

<sup>18</sup> Corbin, *Archaïsme et modernité*.

<sup>19</sup> Goubert, *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis*.

<sup>20</sup> Le Roy Ladurie, *Les Paysans de Languedoc*.

<sup>21</sup> Furet and Richet, *La Révolution française*; Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*; Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*. For a brief summary of arguments around the “bourgeois revolution,” see Pilbeam, “The Bourgeois Revolution 1789–1815,” 210–14.

<sup>22</sup> Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 94.

<sup>24</sup> Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 127.

whose essay on the nobility William Doyle translated into English nine years later.<sup>25</sup> The theme was taken up by Doyle himself, by Cobban's student, John Mackrell, in his thesis on the attack on "feudalism" published in 1973 and by David Higgs, whose *Nobles in Nineteenth-Century France* stressed the persistence of noble power. Cobban's suggestion that office-holders such as *parlementaires* were critical of the Crown because their offices were losing value was not, however, sustained by the later detailed research of William Doyle, on which he embarked after he had read Cobban's account. Doyle also expressed doubt over Cobban's suggestion that office-holders made a profit during the Revolution when they were compensated for losing their offices.

Cobban did not belittle the political importance of the Revolution or the need felt in 1789 to make French society fairer and more equal. He noted the role of Enlightenment ideas in bringing about revolution, but was less concerned with the Enlightenment as a body of theory than its practical application. His outstanding contributions were *Rousseau and the Modern State* and *In Search of Humanity. The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History*. For Cobban, the Enlightenment authors were primarily optimistic utilitarian reformers, French Benthamites. What mattered was their commitment to humanity and their search for ethical standards. His book was less a detailed account of enlightened ideas than a study of their long-term legacy – and the way in which enlightened ideas were abandoned in the twentieth century. Several of his British students followed him on this path, the most outstanding being Keith Baker, now a much-honoured senior professor at Stanford, renowned for his work on Condorcet and the revolutionary content of philosophic ideas in 1789.

Very few of Cobban's books were translated into French, although most exist in their English editions in the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. A translation of *Social Interpretation* did not appear until 1984, *Le sens de la Révolution française*, with an introduction by Professor Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. It received few reviews in France.<sup>26</sup> Le Roy Ladurie, Annaliste, star micro-historian, and a Communist until 1956, was by the 1980s an anti-Soviet conservative. This introduction was his only published observation on Cobban's ideas. Ladurie approved of Cobban's empirical, non-ideological approach, and his emphasis on the role of the peasantry in 1789. Like Cobban, he found Marxist explanations out of date and too simplistic to explain such a major event as 1789. Ladurie reiterated most of Cobban's interpretation, pointing out that it was not Marx, but Marxists in the second third of the twentieth century who called 1789 "Marxist", and it was Mathiez who compared Bolshevism and Jacobinism.<sup>27</sup> Ladurie observed that Cobban's ironical criticism had done the Marxists a great service in obliging them to reconsider their own theories. Ladurie also agreed with Cobban that in so far as 1789 was an attack on feudal institutions, it was the peasantry, not the bourgeoisie who waged war. Bourgeois owners of feudal rights lost out. Next, he agreed that the bourgeoisie who gained from 1789 were not capitalist; capitalists were more likely to be noble. Many aspects of the economy, particularly foreign trade, suffered badly as a consequence of 1789. It was landowners, some *notables*, nobles and bourgeois, some less well-off, who gained most. The peasant revolt, so dear to Lefebvre, was anti-noble and anti-seigneurial, but it was also anti-bourgeois and anti-urban. Ladurie concludes that Cobban's view of 1789 was elitist, but that he encouraged the study of urban popular movements. Cobban's conclusion, important and novel in his day, was that everything turned on landownership and connected revolutionary social questions. He was the "*coryphée*" of the countryside, yet, like François Furet, who shared his views, was himself a townsman. Furet, additionally, had noted the role of clubs, intellectuals and foreign war in creating public opinion. Cobban stressed above all the role of the peasant in 1789, and this, Ladurie observed,

<sup>25</sup> Tudesq, *Les Grands notables*; Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La noblesse au XVIIIème siècle*.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffroy, "Compte-rendu"; Querrien, "[Compte-rendu]".

<sup>27</sup> Mathiez, *Bolchevisme et le Jacobinisme*.

put him close to Lefebvre, “whom he criticised and admired”.<sup>28</sup> Ladurie did not mention that elsewhere Cobban wrote passionately on intellectual issues in 1789. In largely approving Cobban’s views, Ladurie offered no explanation as to why *Social Interpretation* had not been translated twenty years earlier, or why Raymond Aron’s series had decided on a translation in 1984. Perhaps it was simply that, like Furet, Cobban fitted into post-Marxist French history. Cobban’s only other book translated into French was a beautifully illustrated series of essays on eighteenth-century Europe written for a general public, which he edited and to which he contributed a chapter on music.<sup>29</sup>

Cobban’s reputation owed much to his doctoral teaching, which was central to his work. His doctoral seminar met weekly at the Institute of Historical Research on Monday afternoons. Students contributed research on topics ranging from the Wars of Religion (N.M. Sutherland), aspects of Louis XIV’s reign (Roger Mettam, Julian and Cynthia Dent), to 1789 (George Rudé, Nora Temple, Olwen Hufton, Clive Church), and the nineteenth century (Irene Collins, David Higgs, and myself). In the 1950s and 1960s Cobban was the leading supervisor of French history doctoral students in Britain, attracting students not only from the UK, including Oxford and Cambridge, but also from North America, particularly Canada. Cobban was already known in North America from his visits to universities and conferences, such as that of the Society for French Historical Studies, where he gave one of the eight papers at its first conference in 1958. His first Canadian students were John McLaughlin (University of Western Ontario), John Boshier (York University, Toronto) and Harvey Mitchell (University of British Columbia, Canada). Another crop of Canadian undergraduates completed doctorates with Cobban in the 1960s, some of whom had been taught by the earlier generation, including David Higgs, (University of Toronto), Tim Le Goff (York University, Toronto, and professor at the Collège de France), and Donald Sutherland (University of Maryland, College Park). Sutherland, a multiple prize-winner, is the author of *France, 1789–1815: Revolution and Counterrevolution*, published by Fontana.

From the mid-1960s historians became decreasingly convinced that economic factors were of prime importance in shaping society. Identity became paramount; region, gender, religion, ethnicity, and a range of broader cultural issues such as language, education, leisure activities etc. Microhistory was often preferred. The concept of revolution itself was questioned by Michel Foucault and post-modernists, who rejected the notion that events had precise causes or results. While many historians were uncomfortable with the intellectual relativism of post-modernism, contingency and chance found favour again. The outbreak of revolution tends now to be explained more by chance and personal decisions – or lack of them. Leading exponents are William Doyle and Timothy Tackett, who blame the king for his ineptitude, indecision, and stubbornness in failing to reform absolutism. Peter McPhee and others in France and elsewhere have focused on popular and regional issues. McPhee has analysed how “rural and small-town men and women adopt, adapt to and resist change from Paris”.<sup>30</sup> In his day Cobban was described as revisionist, but interpretations of 1789 moved with such speed that the term soon became out of date. McPhee prefers “minimalist” when describing those who, while not challenging the enormous and long-term impact of the Revolution on French institutions, continue to assert the slowness of French social change.<sup>31</sup>

What does revolution mean in France today? In their most recent series on the history of France, which, apparently, President Sarkozy urged the publishers Seuil to produce to ensure French national history was not forgotten, the contemporary age no longer begins in 1789 but in 1799. The 1789 Revolution is now an end, not a beginning. “*Histoire contemporaine*” starts

<sup>28</sup> Le Roy Ladurie, préface, Cobban, *Sens de la Révolution française*, 7–17.

<sup>29</sup> Thanks to Professor Tim Le Goff (York, Canada) for this information.

<sup>30</sup> McPhee, *Liberty or Death*.

<sup>31</sup> McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 178–223.

with 1799, in order, according to *Le Monde*, to situate France in the modern world. The first volume, *L'Empire des Français, 1799–1815* makes little reference to 1789 and even the personal role of Napoleon is downplayed.<sup>32</sup> Subsequent volumes mute the significance of revolution in the nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> Chronologically embracing the revolutions of both 1830 and 1848, the second volume, *Monarchies postrévolutionnaires 1814–1848*, blots revolution out. But revolutions are not white rabbits; they do not disappear. Although both of the “post revolutionary monarchies” themselves fell prey to revolution, in this volume the 1830 revolution is no longer “Three Glorious Days”, but a mere passing incident in the middle of a chapter. The third volume is called *Le crépuscule des révolutions 1848–1871*.<sup>34</sup>

Revolutions are certainly obscured in the dusk in recent French historiography. Having abandoned any Marxist justification for revolution (predictably, given the collapse of the USSR), the French seem puzzled to explain their own tendency for repeated revolutions. The term “civil war”, used by Marx to describe the Paris Commune of 1871, has become a favoured description of what used to be called revolution. Insurgents are depicted as blood brothers rather than revolutionaries.<sup>35</sup> Revolutions now seem to be rather embarrassing accidents, devoid of analytical substance. The decline of the French Communist and Socialist parties, for whom 1789 was central to their philosophy, might provide some clue. More recently revolution was discredited when the Arab Spring brought disastrous conflict, not liberating change, to the Middle East. But revolutions remain serious concerns in the present day, especially because of the inequalities and widespread poverty that contributed to revolution in 1789, and subsequently have been intensified by the growing gap between rich and poor in the modern world.

### References

- Agulhon, Maurice. 1982. *The Republic in the Village: The People of the Var from the French Revolution to the Second Republic*, translated by Janet Lloyd. Cambridge.
- Behrens, B. 1966. “Professor Cobban and His Critic”. *Historical Journal*, 9: 236–41.
- Caron, Jean-Claude. 2009. *Frères de sang. La guerre civile en France au XIX siècle*. Seyssell.
- Chaussinand-Nogaret, Guy. 1976. *La noblesse au XVIIIème siècle: de la féodalité aux lumières*. Paris.
- [Cobb, Richard]. 1965. [Review]. *Times Literary Supplement* 64, Jan. 7.
- Cobban, Alfred. 1934. *Rousseau and the Modern State*. London.
- Cobban, Alfred. 1946. *Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution*. London.
- Cobban, Alfred. 1956. “The Vocabulary of Social History,” *Political Science Quarterly* 71, no. 1: 1–17.
- Cobban, Alfred. 1959. *In Search of Humanity. The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History*. London.
- Cobban, Alfred. 1964. *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*. Cambridge.
- Cobban, Alfred. 1970. “The Enlightenment.” In J.O. Lindsay, ed. *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 7. Cambridge.
- Cobban, Alfred. 1984. Preface to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le sens de la Révolution française*. Paris.
- Corbin, Alain. 1975. *Archaïsme et modernité en Limousin au XIXe siècle: 1845–1880*, 2 vols. Paris.

<sup>32</sup> Lignereux, *Empire des Français*.

<sup>33</sup> Goujon, *Monarchies postrévolutionnaires*.

<sup>34</sup> Deluermoz, *Crépuscule des révolutions*.

<sup>35</sup> Caron, *Frères de sang*.

- Deluermoz, Quentin. 2012. *Le crépuscule des révolutions, 1848–1871*. Paris.
- Furet, F. and D. Richet. 1965. *La Révolution française*. Paris.
- Furet, Furet. 1978. *Penser la Révolution française*. Paris.
- Furet, François. 1981. *Interpreting the French Revolution*, translated by Elborg Forster. Cambridge.
- Geffroy, Annie. 1988. “Compte-rendu: Alfred Cobban, Le sens de la Révolution française.” *Mots: Les langages du politique* 16, 207–11.
- Goubert, Pierre. 1960. *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730*. Paris.
- Goujon, Bertrand. 2012. *Monarchies postrévolutionnaires 1814–1848, Histoire de la France contemporaine*, vol. 2. Paris.
- Higgs, David. 1987. *Nobles in Nineteenth-Century France*. Baltimore.
- Labrousse, G.E. 1944. *La Crise de l'économie française à la fin de l'ancien régime et au début de la Révolution*. Paris.
- Lefebvre, Georges. 1924. *Paysans du Nord pendant la Révolution française*. Lille.
- Lefebvre, Georges. 1932. *La Grande peur de 1789*. Paris.
- Lefebvre, Georges. 1939. *Quatre-vingt neuf*. Paris.
- Lefebvre, Georges. 1954. *Etudes sur la Révolution française*. Paris.
- Le Roy Ladurie, Emmanuel. 1966. *Les Paysans de Languedoc*. 2 vols. Paris.
- Lignereux, Aurélien. 2012. *L'Empire des Français 1799–1814, Histoire de la France Contemporaine*, vol. 1. Paris.
- McPhee, Peter. 2002. *The French Revolution, 1789–1799*. Oxford.
- McPhee, Peter. 2016. *Liberty or Death. The French Revolution*. New Haven & London.
- Mathiez, A. 1920. *Le Bolchevisme et le Jacobinisme*. Paris.
- Pilbeam, Pamela. 1990. “The Bourgeois Revolution 1789–1815.” In *The Middle Classes in Europe, 1789–1914*, 210–14.
- Querrien Anne. 1985. “[Compte-rendu]: Alfred Cobban, Le sens de la Révolution française.” *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine* 25, 107.
- Soboul, Albert. 1965. *La Révolution française*. Paris.
- Soboul, Albert. 1974. “L’historiographie classique de la Révolution française. Sur les controverses récentes.” *La Pensée*, 40–58.
- Soboul, Albert. 1977. *A Short History of the French Revolution 1787–1799*. London.
- Taylor, George V. 1964. “Types of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France.” *English Historical Review* 79: 478–97
- Taylor, George V. 1967. “Noncapitalist Wealth and Origins of the French Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 72: 469–96.
- Tudesq, André-Jean. 1964. *Les Grands notables en France (1840–1949): étude historique d'une psychologie sociale*. 2 vols. Paris.