

The Debate on the Bourgeois Revolution Revisited

*Recently, some French historians have called for an end to the discussion of the causes and meaning of the French Revolution, declaring it to be 'terminated'. But an occurrence that raises such fundamental philosophical and moral questions can never end. For the dispute is not only over what has happened in the past but also over what may happen in the future.*¹

The object of the notes below is to argue the following:

- That the traditional Marxist conception of bourgeois revolution is—with serious consequences for both Marxists and Marxism—fundamentally flawed.
- That, this notwithstanding, Marxism retains its validity as a tool of historical enquiry. The problem is not that Marxism itself is 'wrong' but that it has been consistently misunderstood and misapplied by generations of Marxists, not least in the field of historiography.
- That the debate on the origin and nature of the bourgeois revolutions is no mere scholastic obscurantism but rather has, on a number of different levels, a practical and increasingly urgent relevance.

The classical Marxist model, developed with regard to the eighteenth-century French Revolution, painted a picture of bourgeois revolution as a result of a clash between, on the one hand, an ascendant capitalist bourgeoisie (drawing behind it the plebeian masses) attempting to free itself from the strictures of an over-arching feudal order, and, on the other, a reactionary feudal aristocracy intent on maintaining a controlling position in political and economic life.² The ensuing struggle, political in form, focusing on control of the apparatus of the state, was rooted in an antagonism between two different forms of socio-economic structure, represented by antagonistic social classes: the revolution was social in content, bilateral in terms of protagonists, and 'national' in geographical extent. Its result was the inauguration of a new social order based on the predominance of the capitalist mode of production and the social and political ascendancy of the bourgeoisie.

This model of bourgeois revolution, articulated over the course of the middle third of the twentieth century by historians with strong ideological and/or organisational links with the Communist Parties,³ enjoyed a great deal of acceptance within mainstream historiography. But the onslaught of the so-called 'revisionist' interpretations of the French Revolution over the course of the 1960s and 70s which the Marxist model inevitably produced left the latter in a state of disrepute. And in this respect it is necessary to say that on practically every point the

¹ Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899-1919* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990), xxiv.

² The landmark works with regard to France are Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (originally published in 1939 as *Quatre-vingt-neuf*) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), and Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution 1787-1799* (originally *Précis d'histoire de la Révolution française*, 1962) (London: New Left Books, 1974). For the development of a similar interpretation of the seventeenth-century English Civil War, see Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640* (1940) (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979) and *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714* (1961) (London: Nelson, 1961).

³ Lefebvre was greatly influenced by Marxism and, although never a member of the French Communist Party, is generally acknowledged as a close 'fellow-traveller'; Albert Soboul remained a member of the Party until his death in 1982. Christopher Hill was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain until the exodus of the late 1950s (he resigned in 1957).

revisionists have been proved right over the Marxists.

Most importantly:

- It is clear that in the pre-Revolutionary France of the eighteenth century there was an evident communality of economic and social interests between the nobility and the upper layers of the professional middle classes (the so-called 'bourgeoisie').⁴
- It is also clear that in its initial stages at least the key event that toppled the *ancien régime* in France was a revolt of the nobility and not the revolt of anything that could remotely be termed a capitalist 'bourgeoisie'.⁵
- That even in its later, more advanced and radical, phases, the leadership cadre of the Revolution was drawn in good part from lawyers and minor—and increasingly impoverished—state officials; not, in other words, from a rising, revolutionary bourgeoisie, but if anything from a disillusioned and declining one. Moreover, this particular 'bourgeoisie' was not in the least bit interested in 'overthrowing feudalism' (this latter coming from the subsequent revolt of the peasantry) but had in fact been practically falling over itself to buy into the system of venal offices.⁶
- That far from inaugurating the undisputed triumph of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist mode of production, what ensued in France was a backward and inefficient economic structure based on small-scale proprietary holdings, internationally laggard and unable to keep up with those countries which did indeed experience surging growth of large-scale capitalist industry over the course of the nineteenth century, for example Germany and Britain—countries whose bourgeois revolutions have generally been held to be absent and retarded respectively.

The weight of evidence in this vein has been seized upon by commentators of a number of disciplines as irrefutable proof that Marxism, at least in the sphere of historiography, is 'wrong'. And this, of course, is the real core of the matter. The actual historiographical debate as to the bourgeois or non-bourgeois character of the French Revolution often takes on the appearance of a scholastic dialogue of the angels on the head of a pin variety: those who argue that the Revolution was not bourgeois on the grounds that pre-Revolutionary France was feudal (Taylor) find themselves in the same camp as those who try to prove the same proposition by arguing that it was already capitalist (Cobban). With what consequence? No: the real significance of the debate on the class character of the French Revolution lies in the way it has been used as a cipher to discredit what Cobban once called 'abstract social theory', for which read Marxism. Those wishing to *defend* Marxism in this field have a responsibility to be mindful of this when engaging with the debate. And in this respect Marxists have been their own worst enemies by elaborating and defending on this terrain a theory which is not only fundamentally flawed both methodologically and factually but which has manifestly been proved to be so. For this reason alone, a fundamental reappraisal of the Marxist theory of bourgeois revolution is long overdue for Marxists. Moreover: within Marxism itself, the flawed model of bourgeois revolution has been put to practical use to justify all manner of popular frontist manoeuvres by ascribing to the ('modern', 'industrial', etc.) bourgeoisie a seemingly unjustifiable historically progressive role at the level of politics even well into the later twentieth century: another pressing reason for a reconsideration of Marxist interpretations of bourgeois revolution.

⁴ George V. Taylor, 'Types of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France', *English Historical Review* 79 (1964), and 'Noncapitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution', *American Historical Review* 72 (1967); Colin Lucas, 'Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution', Douglas Johnson (ed.), *French Society and the Revolution* (Cambridge, 1976).

⁵ Elizabeth Eisenstein, 'Who Intervened in 1788? A Commentary on *The Coming of the French Revolution*', *American History Review* 71 (1965).

⁶ Alfred Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution* (London: Cape, 1968), 100-102.

Of course, the problem of the bourgeois revolution has a wider resonance than a simple historical debate on France. Along with providing the general outline for an abstract theoretical model of the general phenomenon of bourgeois revolution, the Marxist interpretation of the the French Revolution as a paradigm against which other European experiences can be compared has featured in a wealth of historical studies of ‘other’ bourgeois revolutions.

- 1 In the case of England/Britain, the 1960s saw the appearance of a series of highly influential articles in the radical journal *New Left Review*—articles which were to stamp their mark on discussion of the fundamental contours of English/British history for a generation of Marxists—which postulated that the particular pattern of British capitalist development was in good part explicable by the fact that in the seventeenth century England experienced a bourgeois revolution which was, by virtue of its prematurity (both temporal and ideological), *sui generis*.⁷ It was argued that the modern English-British state and society had acquired at birth something of a pre-modern, non-bourgeois character, the effects of which were to find their continuing expression in the distinctive economic and political make-up of British society.

What was of significance here was not only the central importance of the bourgeois revolution in determining subsequent social development but that the particular bourgeois revolution under consideration differed in essential respects from an (implicit and unexplained but evidently based on the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution) norm that obtained or occurred elsewhere. As Anderson argued in ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, perhaps the most celebrated essay of those elaborating what has come to be known as the Nairn-Anderson Theses, ‘England had the first, most mediated and least pure bourgeois revolution of any major European country.’ For Anderson, if the English Civil War and Glorious Revolution constituted a ‘bourgeois revolution’, it was a bourgeois revolution only by ‘proxy’, since at its heart was a conflict not between antagonistic social classes, ‘bourgeois’ and ‘feudal’, but between different segments of the same—rural and land-owning—class. Thus, although from the standpoint of a ‘capitalist revolution’ the English Revolution could be judged in its results to have been ‘supremely successful’, at the same time ‘it left almost the entire [pre-revolutionary] social structure intact.’ This interpretation was accorded a central explanatory significance as one of ‘the fundamental moments of modern English history.’⁸

The *raison d’être* of the essay was indicated by its title: the anachronistic social structure bequeathed by the peculiar experience of seventeenth-century revolution was held to be responsible for the increasingly evident crisis of 1960s British capitalism. Anderson concluded it with the view that ‘the unfinished work of 1640 [...] must be taken up where it was left off.’⁹ This idea that what was distinct about British society was its backwardness was anathema to historians of both the left and the right, and as a consequence the essays generated something of an intellectual furore; even today they can still be regarded as something of a watershed in the development of Marxist approaches to British and English history.

⁷ The series of essays published in *New Left Review* in this period, which sought to provide a comprehensive historical explanation for the perceived looming crisis of British capitalism in terms of an ‘impure’ and ‘mediated’ course of capitalist development are: Tom Nairn, ‘The British Political Elite’ and Perry Anderson, ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, *New Left Review* 23 (January-February 1964); Tom Nairn, ‘The English Working Class’, *New Left Review* 24 (March-April 1964) and ‘The Anatomy of the Labour Party’, *New Left Review* 27 and 28 (September-October and November-December 1964); Perry Anderson, ‘Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism’, *New Left Review* 35 (January-February 1966) and ‘Components of the National Culture’ *New Left Review* 50 (July-August 1968); and Tom Nairn, ‘The Fateful Meridian’, *New Left Review* 60 (March-April 1970).

⁸ Anderson, ‘Origins’, 28-30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 28-31, 53.

- 2 Anderson and Nairn's work was undoubtedly pioneering; and not least because they were among the first of the 'new left' Marxists to operate explicitly within the field of concepts developed by Antonio Gramsci, whose work was, at this point, largely unavailable in English.¹⁰ This theoretical debt is itself significant for Gramsci was, as Anderson acknowledges, the first European Marxist writer to attempt to seek an explanation for his own capitalist society's particular national features in the form of its bourgeois revolution in general and its deviation from a *normal* model (in Gramsci's case, explicitly that of the French Revolution) in particular. For Gramsci, it was the failure of the nineteenth-century Italian bourgeois liberals to foment an alliance with the peasantry on the basis of a thorough-going agrarian reform that lay at the heart of what he perceived as the 'failure' of the *Risorgimento*, a failure which manifested itself in the weakness of liberal bourgeois political culture in Italy and the fragility of the modern Italian state. Gramsci developed a conception of the *Risorgimento* as a 'passive revolution' in which the moderate liberals had come to find a compromise with the existing 'feudal' order, the price of which being a deep-seated rupture between Italian civil society and the Italian state. The ensuing instability of Italian liberal politics and the congenital political debility of the Italian bourgeoisie formed the historical seat for the subsequent emergence of fascism. And at the heart of Gramsci's analysis was the presence of the paradigmatic experience of France. 'It is clear that to oppose the moderates effectively, the Party of Action had to tie itself to the rural, particularly the southern masses, to be "Jacobin,"'¹¹ he wrote. His fundamental critique of the Action Party was precisely that it was *not* 'Jacobin'.¹² Thus for Gramsci what was decisive was the inability of the revolutionary-democrats (the Action Party) to create a bourgeois 'hegemony' in the process of Italian unification of a different character to that which was ultimately imposed by Cavour's Moderates; and, for Gramsci, the consequence of this failure was that the modern Italian state inherited a repressive, backward and undemocratic character at birth.
- 3 With regard to Germany, the 1960s were to see the eruption of a celebrated historiographical debate—subsequently known as the 'Fischer Controversy'—which centred around (if not explicitly by name then certainly implicitly by concept) the historical significance of the pattern of bourgeois revolution in Germany. The debate was initially focussed on a disagreement as to the nature of the German state's aims in the First World War. In 1961, Fritz Fischer published his *Griff nach der Weltmacht*,¹³ in which he argued—contrary to the accepted historical wisdom in Germany at the time—that Germany's war aims in 1914 were consciously both aggressive and annexationist right from the outset. Fischer's argument challenged the then currently-accepted historiographical wisdom in Germany, which had held that despite the contemporary existence of annexationist elements within the military structure, and the existence of pan-German extremism within Germany before 1914, Germany had not in fact been bent on aggression and that she had, in 1914, been forced to fight a 'defensive' war. What was fundamental to what was at stake in Fischer's interpretation was a challenge to the assumptions of the then existing historiographical

¹⁰ See, for example, Anderson's *English Questions* (London: Verso, 1992), 2 ff. and 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review* 100 (November 1976-January 1977), 6-7. As he recalls in the former, a decisive element in the evolution of his and Nairn's concepts was the effects of the latter's stay at the Scuola Normale in Pisa in the early 1960s: after his return from Italy, Nairn's familiarity with Gramsci, as Anderson puts it, 'had no equal in Britain at the time' (*English Questions*, 3).

¹¹ Excerpt from *Il Risorgimento*, quoted in S. J. Woolf, *The Italian Risorgimento* (London and Harlow: Longmans, 1969), 101-2.

¹² See, for a typical example: Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 79-82; for a summary of Gramsci's argument, see Paul Ginsborg: 'Gramsci and the Era of Bourgeois Revolution in Italy', in John A. Davis (ed.), *Gramsci and Italy's Passive Revolution* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 33-38.

¹³ Published in English as *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967). Fischer's view that the Germans—whose *Kaiserreich* 'occupied a position of special importance in the history of nations'—were 'the only people who did not create their state from below by invoking the forces of democracy against the old ruling groups, but "accepted it gratefully" at the hands of those groups in a defensive struggle against democracy' (*ibid.*, 3), is most revealing.

interpretation of Nazism, which had hitherto been viewed as an exceptional period in German history.¹⁴ The logic of Fischer's argument ran counter-posed to these assumptions; his conclusions regarding German foreign policy in 1914 suggested a place for Nazism within a chain of already-existing historical continuity, conclusions which were developed even more explicitly by others, for example by Hans-Ulrich Wehler:

[Bismarckian] social imperialism served to defend the traditional social and power structures of the Prusso-German state, and to shield them from the turbulent effects of industrialisation as well as from the movements towards parliamentarisation and democratisation. [...] If one pursues [...] the social imperialist opposition to the emancipation process in German industrial history—then one will be able to trace a line linking Bismarck, Miquel, Bülow and Tirpitz to the extreme social imperialism of the National Socialist variety, which once again sought to block domestic progress by breaking out first towards the *Ostland*, and then overseas [...].¹⁵

In this vein, in his *The German Empire 1871-1918*¹⁶ Wehler could argue that the 'central theme' of the history of the nineteenth-century *Kaiserreich* ('a unique creation among the nation states of Europe') was the way in which 'in a largely traditional society, only partially adapted institutionally between 1866 and 1871 and still ruled over by pre-industrial elites, the most advanced Western technology forced itself through with unprecedented speed and accelerated social change.'¹⁷ This argument was cited in support of the view that German history in the twentieth century could be in good measure explained by the fact that Germany failed in the nineteenth century to experience a 'bourgeois revolution' of the type undergone by her western neighbours: 'Germany modernised without experiencing a successful social or political revolution. [...] The *Junker* oligarchy remained extremely powerful nationally and almost omnipotent in the local politics of rural Prussia. Attempts to rest power away from them by the commercial and professional classes failed in 1848 and again in 1862.'¹⁸

Once again, albeit for different reasons and by a different route, we have before us in effect an attempt to explain national peculiarities through a conception of 'defective' bourgeois revolution.

- 4 This type of argument has also been applied to Spain. In the 1960s, the British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm commented that what had marked contemporary Spanish politics and society was the failure to engender 'an essentially capitalist economic development, a bourgeois parliamentary system, and a culture and intellectual development of the familiar western kind.'¹⁹ These historical functions, seen in the classical model as the prerogative of a liberal bourgeoisie, by failing to materialise were responsible for the chronic weakness of Spanish liberalism and the consequent congenital instability of the institutional political system. Other writers took up the theme. Paul Heywood argued, somewhat more explicitly, that

fundamental in the development of the Spanish state was the lack of a bourgeois-democratic revolution from below in which the structures of the *ancien régime* were broken. Unlike in Britain and

¹⁴ As Jürgen Kocka notes, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century German historians liked to lay stress on what were seen as the positive specificities of the 'German way'. 'The non-parliamentary character of the German "constitutional monarchy" was seen as an asset, not as a liability. One was proud to have a strong statist tradition, a powerful and efficient civil service, a long history of reform from above—instead of revolution, *laissez-faire* and party government.' ('German History Before Hitler: The Debate about the German *Sonderweg*', *Journal of Contemporary History* 23.1 (January 1988), 3.)

¹⁵ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 'Bismarck's Imperialism 1862-1890', *Past and Present* 48 (August 1970), 154.

¹⁶ Leamington Spa: Berg, 1985.

¹⁷ *The German Empire*, 9.

¹⁸ Kenneth D. Barkin, 'Germany's Path to Industrial Maturity', in D. K. Buse (ed.) *Aspects of Imperial Germany* (Sudbury, Ontario: Laurentian University, 1973), 29.

¹⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Spanish Background', *New Left Review* 40 (November-December 1966), 85-6. A view typical amongst the Spanish Marxists of the 1970s: see the remarks in Juan Pablo Fusi, *España: la evolución de la identidad nacional* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2000), 39-40.

France, there was no establishment during the nineteenth century of a relatively democratic polity able to adjust to and absorb new social forces.²⁰

Again, the paradigmatic experience of France (this time—perhaps surprisingly—coupled with that of England) is writ large in the account.²¹

In these four different ‘case studies’ we see the argument developed—be it implicitly or explicitly—that subsequent political and social development in each case can be in good part explained by a pattern of bourgeois revolution which is either not ‘classical’, or is absent, or is in one or more senses ‘retarded’. And the yardstick by which this judgement is made is either the French Revolution, as interpreted through the lens of the classical Marxist model, or a supposed ‘norm’ of bourgeois revolution, in turn evidently in good part founded upon this very same model. And it is important to register that each of the ‘national’ interpretations outlined above is no mere dry historiographical hair-splitting exercise in obscurantism but an analysis leading to inexorable practical consequences in terms of present-day political interpretation and activity.

- 1 In relation to Britain, the logic of the analysis of the English Revolution drawn up by Anderson and Nairn leads to a clear conclusion in the sphere of politics. If it is argued that the English bourgeois revolution is in some sense ‘incomplete’, and that, as a consequence, the British state is in need of ‘modernisation’ (‘that the unfinished work of 1640 and 1832 must be taken up where it was left off’), then the ‘completion’ of the bourgeois revolution—the ‘modernisation’ of the state—can be presented as a task to be accomplished under modern capitalism by a present-day ‘modernising’ bourgeoisie: the way is opened for a progressive political project that is not even social democratic, but liberal-bourgeois.²²
- 2 With regard to Italy and Germany, the location of the roots of fascism in a structural historical defect of absent or abnormal bourgeois revolution clearly has the practical consequence of shifting the focus of the development of fascism—and, perhaps rather more importantly, of preventing it—away from the field of conjunctural political action to that of historical inevitability and fatalism. There is a sense that those peoples who end up with fascism have done so because, historically, they deserve it; while those who have a prouder, nobler and altogether more ‘normal’ historical tradition of enlightened liberalism need not fear the possibility.²³
- 3 In the case of Spain, the notion that there had not been a ‘proper’ bourgeois revolution—an idea founded on the identification of bourgeois revolution with the classical Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution—was to inform the whole policy of the Spanish left—both its Socialist and Communist wings—from the period of the Second Republic practically up to the present day, a policy which based itself on the following misconceptions:

²⁰ Paul Heywood, *Marxism and the Failure of Organised Socialism in Spain, 1879-1936* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3-4.

²¹ The phenomenon is not exclusive to western Europe: the Japanese Communist school of *Kōza-Ha* (‘feudalist’) historians developed conceptions of the nineteenth-century Meiji Restoration in terms that resemble the essential contours of a ‘special case’ of bourgeois revolution determining subsequent national peculiarities. See George Beckmann and Genji Okubo, *The Japanese Communist Party 1922-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 135 ff.

²² It is indeed clear that the more mature Anderson has been more than receptive to such a project, as the attention he pays in his later work to the ideas produced by the circle of intellectuals around the old Eurocommunist journal *Marxism Today*, and to Charter 88, makes clear.

²³ This is no mere speculation for the former view is rife within certain circles of Anglo-American historiography: see, for example, atypical only for its crassness, A. J. P. Taylor’s *The Course of German History* (London, 1988)—one of the best known ‘popular’ English language histories of Germany—whose central premise is summed up in the statement that ‘it was no more a mistake for the German people to end up with Hitler than it is an accident when a river flows into the sea.’

First, bourgeois revolution was identified exclusively with *industrial* capitalism [...]; second, latifundism and *caciquismo* were identified with feudalism, leading to the denial that the 1876 Constitution could have been liberal; third, Spanish socio-political development was consistently and inappropriately compared with the French model [of 1789].

But, of course, in the 1930s for example,

there was no numerically significant or politically powerful dynamic bourgeoisie in the Second Republic pressing for progressive social change. Instead, the Socialists were confronted by a landed oligarchy which, far from being a politically bankrupt feudal remnant, organised quickly and effectively as a reactionary conservative bloc in order to impede as far as possible the moderate reforms of the Republican-Socialist government.²⁴

Even under the Franco régime, the Spanish Communist Party was to cling to this kind of conception: right up to the end of the dictatorship the Communist Party held that the Franco regime only represented the interests of the big banks and the landowners, and that the defeat of Franco, which right through from the latter half of the 1950s was seen as imminent, supposed the beginning of ‘an antifeudal and antimonopolist democratic revolution’ which would take on a series of measures such as the nationalisation of the banks and of large-scale industry, land reform, an anti-US foreign policy, etc.²⁵ The clear strategic corollary of this view was the need to foment an alliance with the ‘antifeudal and antimonopolist’ sections of the bourgeoisie in order to realise a transition to a bourgeois republic, a line pursued by the Communists right up to and during the *transición* of the 1970s. Needless to say, the Spanish bourgeoisie was in fact not at all keen on the idea of a republic, nor the prospect of nationalisation of industry and an anti-US foreign policy, a state of affairs however which did little to dampen the Communist Party’s spirits in pursuing a line of a rectification of the absent bourgeois revolution.

* * *

Yet the Marxist model of the bourgeois revolution cannot stand or fall on its consequences for political action in the present: this is merely subsidiary evidence. As I outlined at the beginning, the fundamental problem with the model is its inability to stand up to verifiable historical fact. And in this respect there have been a number of attempts to rectify the model’s shortcomings from those working within the Marxist tradition. Three broad levels of re-interpretation stand out: it is worth looking at these interventions one by one.

- 1 The first, and most radical, is that which denies—on the basis of their apparently consistently exceptional nature—the possibility of characterising the bourgeois revolutions by any common features other than by their deviation from a ‘normal’ pattern.

Thus, responding directly and in typical rumbustuous fashion to the ‘Nairn-Anderson Theses’, E. P. Thompson felt himself obliged to object to the presence of ‘an undisclosed model of Other Countries, whose typological symmetry offers a reproach to British exceptionalism.’ Thompson’s judgement was that ‘every historical experience is in a sense unique. Too much protestation about this calls into question, not the experience (which remains there to be explained) but the relevance of the model against which it is judged.’ His objection was to ‘a model which concentrates attention upon one dramatic episode—the Revolution—to which all that goes before and after must be related; and which insists upon an ideal type of this revolution against which all others may be judged.’²⁶ While in a more recent work, explicit in its

²⁴ Heywood, *Marxism and the Failure of Organised Socialism*, 114-5.

²⁵ Joan Estruch, *Historia Oculta del PCE* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2000), 209-10.

²⁶ ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, in E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 37, 47

rejection of what it dubs the ‘normative theory of bourgeois revolution put forward by Perry Anderson and others’, Colin Mooers suggests, after noting the uneven character of European capitalist development, that ‘it may be more accurate [...] to speak of more than one pattern of bourgeois revolution.’²⁷ Mooers’ interpretation, based on an historical analysis of France, Germany and England, seems to be that there is a generalised process of socio-economic transition to capitalism on a western European scale conjoined to which are a series of political epiphenomena which conform to no particular pattern in their own right.

Also of note in this respect is the view of Nicos Poulantzas who, in a similar vein, had argued—again on the strength of a comparison between the cases of England, France and Germany—that:

no exemplar model of bourgeois revolution can be found. Nevertheless, we may note one very striking common detail: *the bourgeoisie’s lack of political capacity (because of its composition as a class) to carry out its own revolution in open action.* [...] This is the root factor behind the *non-typical* character of the various bourgeois revolutions.²⁸

This approach—in practice denying the very intelligibility of the phenomenon of bourgeois revolution—can, and must, be rejected on a number of methodological grounds. Most importantly, if what characterises the bourgeois revolutions is their very atypicality, what then is the necessary ‘typical’ paradigm? What is it that is the yardstick by which these non-typical expressions are measured? The norm cannot be a ‘norm’ if what is typical is deviation. Moreover, since the very term ‘bourgeois revolution’—as a theoretical abstraction—implies a set of historical events with sufficiently common features to form a common field for theoretical inquiry, if all that is typical of the bourgeois revolutions is their atypicality, how are we to know what is a bourgeois revolution and what is not? No; the solution to our problem has to lie elsewhere.

- 2 Conceding the revisionist argument that the bourgeois revolutions themselves do not in fact represent the *political* ‘overthrow of feudalism’ by the revolutionary bourgeoisie, some commentators have adopted the procedure of designating as the ‘bourgeois revolution’ that very *socio-economic* process whereby the rising capitalist class does in fact supersede feudal social relations. Thus, Georg Lukács:

The truly revolutionary element is the economic transformation of the feudal system of production into a capitalist one so that it would be possible in theory for *this* process to take place [...] without political upheaval on the part of the revolutionary bourgeoisie.²⁹

An argument that has been echoed by Gareth Stedman Jones:

The triumph of the bourgeoisie should be seen as the global victory of a particular form of property relations and a particular form of control over the means of production, rather than as the conscious triumph of a class subject which possessed a distinct and coherent view of the world.³⁰

And, even more explicitly, in his contribution to a seminal intervention into the field of modern German history noted above, David Blackbourn remarked that:

If we do retain this term [i.e. the bourgeois revolution], it makes more sense (and not just in the German case) to apply it rather differently. We should direct our attention to long-term processes rather than short-term events, to quiet changes in economy and society rather than dramatic public episodes, to the effects of actions rather than the intentions of actors. Before the present century at least, the bourgeoisie characteristically became the dominant class in European countries [...] through means other than the heroic purposive conquest of power. Its real strength and power were rooted in the capitalist mode of production and articulated through dominance in civil society. This, rather than one specific

²⁷ Colin Mooers, *The Making of Bourgeois Europe: Absolutism, Revolution and the Rise of Capitalism in England, France and Germany* (London: Verso, 1991), 3, 4.

²⁸ Nicos Poulantzas, *Poder político y clases sociales en el estado capitalista* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1974), 232.

²⁹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin, 1971), 282.

³⁰ Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘Society and Politics at the Beginning of the World Economy’, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 1 (1977).

state form, is what deserves the label bourgeois revolution [...].³¹

Again, it is necessary to find fault with this approach. In the first place, if we account for the revolutionary transformation of the socio-economic structure in this way, we still have the problem of theoretically categorising the distinct *political* upheavals which generally appear to accompany the overall process. But there is a more serious objection that needs to be made. For while it is indeed necessary to situate the political upheavals designated as ‘bourgeois revolutions’ *within* the overall socio-economic transition from feudalism to capitalism, we cannot lose sight of the fact that while the former have taken a specifically national form—in that the object of the insurgents in each case was the structures of the (proto-national, Absolutist) state, the latter process, by the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not only supranational but intercontinental in scale. If the political process of bourgeois revolution is collapsed into the socio-economic process of transition, this transnational dimension of the latter is lost sight of and the globally developing capitalist mode of production is viewed as the sum of a series of ‘national economies’: a classical, ubiquitous even, error of social-democratic and Stalinist variations on Marxism.

- 3 Let us consider a third intervention, on the face of it more convincing at first sight: that which—again conceding the revisionist argument that, whoever was in fact in the leadership of the bourgeois revolution, it was certainly not a class conscious, revolutionary, capitalist ‘bourgeoisie’—contends that these revolutions were bourgeois not by virtue of their leadership cadre, but by virtue of their *objective effects on the future course of capitalist development*. Thus, for example, in his George Macaulay Trevelyan lectures delivered at Cambridge University in 1967 (concerning post-revolutionary Soviet historical development), Isaac Deutscher:

The traditional view [of the bourgeois revolution], widely accepted by Marxists and non-Marxists alike, is that in such revolutions, in Western Europe, the bourgeoisie played the leading part, stood at the head of the insurgent people, and seized power. [...] It seems to me that this conception, to whatever authorities it may be attributed, is schematic and historically unreal. From it one may well arrive at the conclusion that bourgeois revolution is almost a myth, and that it has hardly ever occurred, even in the West. Capitalist entrepreneurs, merchants and bankers were not conspicuous among the leaders of the Puritans or the commanders of the Ironsides, in the Jacobin Club or at the head of the crowds that stormed the Bastille or invaded the Tuileries. Nor did they seize the reins of government during the revolution or for a long time afterwards, either in England or in France. Here and there the upheavals ended in military dictatorship. Yet the bourgeois character of these revolutions will not appear at all mythical, if we approach them with a broader criterion and view their general impact on society. Their most substantial and enduring achievement was to sweep away the political and social institutions that had hindered the growth of bourgeois property and of the social relationships that went with it. [...] Bourgeois revolution creates the conditions in which bourgeois property can flourish. In this, rather than in the different alignments during the struggle, lies its *differentia specifica*.³²

Or, more recently, as Alex Callinicos of the British Socialist Workers’ Party has argued:

The revisionist claim is [...] damaging to classical Marxism only on condition that we conceive bourgeois revolutions as necessarily the result of the self conscious action of the capitalist class. [...] Responding to the revisionist attacks requires a shift in focus. Bourgeois revolutions must be understood, not as revolutions consciously made by capitalists, but as revolutions which promote capitalism. The emphasis should shift from the class which makes a bourgeois revolution to the effects of such a revolution—to the class which benefits from it. More specifically, a bourgeois revolution is a political transformation—a change in state power, which is the precondition for large scale capital accumulation and the establishment of the bourgeoisie as the dominant class. This definition requires, then, a political change with certain effects. It says nothing about the social forces which carry through the

³¹ ‘The Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoisie: Reappraising German History in the Nineteenth Century’, in David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 175.

³² Isaac Deutscher, *The Unfinished Revolution: Russia 1917-1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 21-22.

transformation.³³

However appealing this approach may be, once again we have to find fault with it. First, if, as seems the case, the bourgeois revolutions are not led by a class conscious revolutionary bourgeoisie—not occasionally, but, it appears, always³⁴—our duty is to ask *why*. The approach suggested by Deutscher and Callinicos does not attempt this: it accepts the seemingly remarkable phenomenon of fundamental political upheavals, on the face of it supposedly beneficial to capitalism, led by non-bourgeois forces as unworthy of further explanation. Yet, of course, the search for an explanation for this is absolutely central to any interpretation of the mechanisms and structure of the bourgeois revolution, if such are to be found.³⁵ In the second place, one has to question the definition of bourgeois revolution as ‘revolutions which promote capitalism’. In the cases of England/Britain and Germany (two of our ‘exceptions’) this indeed appears incontestable; in the case of France, however—and remember that France is the seat of our classical model, our paradigm case—the efficacy for future capitalist development of the modern type of the bourgeois revolution is indeed questionable: for the bulk of the nineteenth century, capitalist development in France remained very much the poor relation of what was occurring in Germany and Britain (and later the United States)—hardly what one would have expected of such a shining beacon of bourgeois-revolutionary upheaval, even if it is so characterised solely on grounds of objective consequences rather than social composition of leadership cadre. Again, we have to look elsewhere for a resolution of our difficulties.

* * *

Let us begin, then, by reiterating that the phenomenon of the bourgeois revolution, if it exists as such, has to be situated within the overall context of the broad socio-economic transition from feudalism to capitalism on a European scale, itself already the subject of a developed debate in Marxist historiography, a debate which focused on what precise mechanism was responsible for the supersession of feudal economic relations by capitalist ones. The pioneer in this field was the British Communist historian Maurice Dobb, who, in a seminal work first published in 1946, postulated that (in England) the decisive factor behind the emergence of capitalism was the emergence ‘of a capitalist class from the ranks of production itself’: that is, from within the economic structure of the late feudal economy, rather than—as in the account of, for example, Henri Pirenne—as a product of the corrosive effect of an ‘external’, urban-based mercantile capitalism.³⁶

³³ ‘Bourgeois Revolutions and Historical Materialism’, *International Socialism* 43 (June 1989), 122, 124.

³⁴ Although we should note that Callinicos—unaccountably—believes that ‘the French Revolution was carried out under bourgeois leadership.’ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁵ We should note here the attempted resolution of this problem by Ellen Meiksins Wood—though it deserves no more merit than a footnote—who attempts to make a distinction between the ‘bourgeoisie’ and ‘capitalists’: ‘We may be utterly convinced that the [French] Revolution was undoubtedly “bourgeois” [...] without coming a flea-hop closer to determining whether it was also *capitalist*. As long as we accept that there is no necessary identification of “bourgeois” (or burgher or city) with “capitalist”, the “revolutionary bourgeoisie” can be far from being a fiction, even—or especially—in France, where the model revolutionary bourgeois was not a capitalist or even an old-fashioned merchant but a lawyer or office-holder.’ ‘Capitalism, Merchants and Bourgeois Revolution’, *International Review of Social History* 41.2 (August 1996), 225. This approach is, to say the least, unhelpful. Wood writes as a Marxist, and knows full well that for modern Marxism ‘bourgeois’ and ‘capitalist’ are terms that are practically interchangeable. Her definitions may be etymologically sensitive but they hardly help in the task of clarity of theoretical exposition.

³⁶ Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 126. Pirenne: ‘Monetary circulation [...] advanced side by side with trade. [...] In every direction where commerce spread, it created the desire for the new articles of consumption which it brought with it. As always happens, the aristocracy wished to surround themselves with luxury, or at least with the comfort befitting their noble rank.’ Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1936), 81; see also *ibid.*, 209-24. Dobb, of course,

Notwithstanding, Dobb was subjected to a sustained critique by the American Marxist Paul M. Sweezy,³⁷ who argued—in defence of Pirenne’s perspective—that ‘long distance trade could be a creative force, bringing into existence a *system* of production for exchange alongside the old feudal system of production for use.’³⁸ Whatever the particular merits of either side in this argument, the fundamental point for our purposes is that, regardless of whether commerce and mercantile capital are viewed either as cause or symptom of capitalist development, their very presence is predicated on the existence a market and sets of market relations, themselves predicated on the existence of a significant degree of commodity production—that is, production for the reason of exchange.³⁹ What was common to both sides in the debate was the view that commodity production, merchant’s capital, and a market, were all developing *within* the very structure of the late feudal economy.

This debate on the ‘transition’ was picked up again in the 1970s by Robert Brenner, who again forcefully opposed the Pirenne-Sweezy account.⁴⁰ Brenner attempted to offer an explanation for the unprecedented and self-sustaining economic growth that was unleashed in early-modern England: fundamental, he argued, were the differing patterns of relations between feudal lords and peasants which distinguished not only western from eastern Europe, but also England from France.⁴¹

There are two general points extant in Brenner’s intervention that are relevant for our purposes. First, Brenner reinforces the likelihood of capitalist development (albeit of divergent forms) within the feudal economy: indeed, his argument is founded precisely on an acceptance of the evolution of feudal relations into capitalist relations in certain instances. Second, he develops an analysis of the nature of the early-modern dynastic state itself—the very target of the bourgeois revolutions—by invoking the general category of ‘political accumulation’:

In view of the difficulty, in the presence of pre-capitalist property relations, of raising returns from investment in the means of production (via increases in productive efficiency), the lords found that if they wished to increase their income, they had little choice but to do so by *redistributing* wealth and income away from their peasants or from other members of the exploiting class. This meant that they had to deploy their resources toward building up their *means of coercion*—by investment in military men and equipment. Speaking

could invoke good authority for his argument, since, in a famous passage to be found in the third volume of *Capital*, Marx had described the necessary parameters of the process thus: ‘The transition from the feudal mode of production takes place in two ways. The producer may become a merchant and capitalist, in contrast to the agricultural natural economy and the guild-bound handicraft of medieval urban industry. This is the really revolutionary way. Alternatively however, the merchant may take direct control of production himself. But however frequently this occurs as a historical tradition [...] it cannot bring about the overthrow of the old mode of production by itself, but rather preserves and retains it as its won precondition. [...] Without revolutionising the mode of production, [mercantile capital by itself] simply worsens the conditions of the direct producers, transforms them into mere wage-labourers and proletarians under worse conditions than those directly subsumed by capital, appropriating their surplus labour on the basis of the old mode of production.’ (Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 3 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 452-53.)

³⁷ Paul Sweezy, ‘A Critique’, in Rodney Hilton *et al*, *The Transition From Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1976). Sweezy’s article (written in 1950), and the bulk of the ensuing debate, first appeared in the journal *Science and Society*: the whole debate—along with other material—has subsequently been reprinted in this Hilton volume.

³⁸ ‘A Critique’, 42.

³⁹ It should not need reiterating that commodity production itself predates capitalism as a mode of production by many centuries; for classical Marxism, capitalism—as a mode of production—can only be said to be operative when commodity production *predominates*.

⁴⁰ See Robert Brenner, ‘Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe’, in T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (eds.), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); ‘The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism’, in *ibid.*, 213-327; ‘The Social Basis of Economic Development’, in John Roemer (ed.), *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and ‘Bourgeois Revolution and the Transition to Capitalism’, in A. L. Beier, David Cannadine and James M. Rosenheim (eds.), *The First Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁴¹ ‘Agrarian Class Structure’, 35-7, 44-54, 54-6.

broadly, they were obliged to invest in their politico-military apparatus. To the extent they had to do this effectively enough to compete with other lords who were doing the same thing, they would have had to maximise both their military investments and the efficiency of these investments. They would have had, in fact, to attempt, continually and systematically, to improve their methods of war. Indeed, we can say the drive to *political accumulation*, to *state building*, is the *pre-capitalist* analogue to the capitalist drive to accumulate capital.⁴²

There are two important conclusions to be drawn at this point. First, we need to register that the development of a certain level of commodity activity is normal and to be expected within the overall feudal social nexus. Second, that the very feudal structure itself has an in-built tendency towards the construction of executive politico-military structures—states.

Bearing these points in mind, let it be recalled that earlier I referred to the intervention of Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn into the field of English/British historiography. A fascinating pointer towards a solution to our difficulty is provided by an essay, entitled ‘The Notion of the Bourgeois Revolution’, which surfaced in a 1992 collection of Anderson’s writings.⁴³ In this essay Anderson acknowledged an historiographical ‘impasse’ to be found in Marxist literature on the question, and set about to resolve it. After a discussion of the possibility that there might be present in each concrete case of bourgeois revolution possible ‘formal structures’ delimiting ‘the space of any imaginable bourgeois revolution’, Anderson came up with a possible list of what he called (borrowing the term from Althusser) ‘overdeterminations’: the fact that, being based on private property relations (however mitigated or relative), feudalism as a social structure was able to permit a certain degree of capitalist social development within itself; the presence of subordinate classes (peasants, and proletarians or semi-proletarians) to complicate any bipolar class competition between aristocracy and bourgeoisie; the heterogeneous social composition of the bourgeoisie, unfettered by the effects of feudal legal classification or the demarcation of the condition of manual labour; and the competition of states external to the domestic polity, be they bourgeois or feudal.⁴⁴ Anderson concluded thus:

Preliminary considerations [...] make it clear why none of the great turbulences of the transition to modernity has ever conformed to the simple schema of a struggle between a feudal aristocracy and industrial capital of the sort presupposed in the traditional Marxist vocabulary. The porous pattern of feudalism above, the unpredictable presence of exploited classes below, the mixed disposition of the bourgeoisie within, the competitive pressure of rival states without, were bound to defeat this expectation. In that sense one could say that it was in the nature of bourgeois revolutions to be denatured: these transformations could never have been the linear product of a single class subject. Here the exception was the rule—every one was a bastard birth.⁴⁵

This is of course an astonishing and fascinating conclusion for the author of ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’ to draw. It is at the same time frustratingly tantalising, for the essay is a mere sixteen pages long, as compared to *Lineages of the Absolutist State*,⁴⁶ his dissection of the physiognomy of the state structures of dynastic Absolutism that were the immediate object of the bourgeois revolutions, which weighed in at close to 600. In addition, it is practically the only time that Anderson has addressed the bourgeois revolution from 1974 to the present day, itself rather surprising given the centrality of the concept in much of his earlier work. Anderson appeared to be on the brink of a decisive theoretical advance in this essay, but he turned his back on it, and barely addressed it again. The reader is as capable of speculating as to why as I am.

⁴² ‘Social Basis’, 31-2.

⁴³ ‘The Notion of the Bourgeois Revolution’, in Anderson, *English Questions*, 105-18. The article is in fact dated 1976 in this collection, but, as far as I can tell, this appearance is its first in print.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 109-12

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 112-3. Conclusions prefigured in 1974 in an unpublished *New Left Review* memorandum, in which Anderson noted that ‘every bourgeois revolution is inevitably “denatured” in its structure, and that consequently all are exceptions within a common field.’ ‘A Dicennial Report’, cited by Duncan Thompson, *The Moment of New Left Review*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Brighton, 1997.

⁴⁶ London: New Left Books, 1974.

That said, however, and with the proviso that the characterisation of the bourgeois revolutions as ‘bastard births’ comes a little too close for my liking to the school of thought referred to above which denies the possibility of developing a systematic characterisation of the typology of bourgeois revolution, Anderson’s observations offer an important pointer ahead for an account of the bourgeois revolution consistent with both historical evidence and the rigours of Marxist theory. Following Anderson’s prescriptions, and also adhering closely to the analysis of late feudalism to be found in his *Lineages*, and bearing in mind my observations on the ‘transition debate’ outlined above, I offer the following outline analysis of the overall process under consideration.

In ‘pure’ feudalism (as an abstract mode of production), the immediate producer (the peasant) is united with the means of production (the land) by means of the private control of agrarian property by a class of feudal lords, who extract a surplus of production through *extra-economic* mechanisms. In other words, the immediate producer has not been separated from the means of production, and the appropriation of the surplus is ensured essentially by means of coercion or the threat of coercion.⁴⁷ In its early stage, virtually all property rights are relative: a feudal lord is invested by a superior to whom he owes knight service: he does not ‘own’ his land, he is granted ‘rights’ to it. Thus, there is developed a pyramid network—based on face-to-face contact—of dependent relationships of vassalage. But there is no precipitation out of specifically ‘political’ power as such, for this last does not emanate from a single source, since the functions of ‘government’ broadly understood are devolved downwards along the pyramid, at each node of which ‘political’ and ‘economic’ relations are combined.⁴⁸ Lords have personal retainers (and so does the monarch, who is only the ‘top’ lord), but there is no separating out of a caste of administrators as such. While the monarch has a theoretical sovereignty over all of the possessions covered by his title (or titles),⁴⁹ his practical and direct relationship is only with the lords who are directly tied to him through vassalage. They, in turn, relate directly to their own personal vassals, and so on.

With economic development and the growth of trade, however—especially with the commutation of feudal dues into *money* (in the form of rent), which promotes as a concomitant a weakening of these feudal relations⁵⁰—this state of affairs begins to change. Private property tends to become less conditional, less dependent on ties of service and vassalage, and more dependent on the market. This weakens the ‘political’ power of the feudal lords, since their wealth is accrued less through powers of (non-economic) coercion, being determined more by the operation of the market. Their ‘economic’ power increases, however: control of land becomes less dependent on duties and services performed, and more dependent on real powers of ownership. Land becomes, for example, inheritable; that is, the *ownership* of land, rather than the conditional ‘right’ to use it. Thus while economic power becomes, through the rise in commodity relations, more concentrated at the lower end of the social structure, politico-legal sovereignty tends to concentrate at the summit.⁵¹ This mechanism is self-reinforcing, in that it becomes necessary to extract a proportion of the surplus through means other than direct coercion at the level of the demesne: the centralisation of the politico-military state apparatus generates

⁴⁷ This process is fundamentally different to the method of surplus appropriation specific to capitalism, where it is achieved through the means of a mutually agreed ‘economic contract’; because the producer is separated from the means of production, other than the ability to labour (for Marx, a precondition for capitalist development), there is no *need* for ‘non-economic’ coercion.

⁴⁸ Perry Anderson, *Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: New Left Books, 1974), 147-53, and *Lineages*, 19-20, 401-13.

⁴⁹ The complexities of overlapping sovereignties strongly indicate the dynastic—‘feudal’—nature of these states. As Engels wryly observed of fifteenth-century Burgundy: ‘For part of his lands, Charles the Bold [...] was the emperor’s vassal, for others the King of France’s vassal; on the other hand, the King of France, his liege lord, was simultaneously in certain areas the vassal of Charles the Bold, his own vassal [...]’: ‘On the Decline of Feudalism and the Emergence of National States’, Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 47 vols. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975-), vol. 26 (1990), 560.

⁵⁰ ‘Weakening’ and not ‘eliminating’, as Marx makes clear: ‘The transformation of labour rent into rent in kind in no way changes the nature of ground-rent, economically speaking. [...] By money rent [...] we mean not the industrial or commercial ground-rent based on the capitalist mode of production [...] but the ground-rent that arises simply from a formal transformation of the rent in kind, as this was itself simply transformed labour rent.’ *Capital* vol. 3, 930, 932.

⁵¹ See the account in Anderson, *Lineages*, 18-20, 25-7.

the need for centrally organised general taxation (the implementation of which is backed up by the use of or the threat of the use of force), further weakening the ties of serfdom and vassalage. This overall separation of the 'political' and the 'economic' into distinct 'spheres' is a feature of the rise of commodity relations (and comes to fruition with the advanced development of capitalist relations). The popular name for this process of upward concentration of political power (what in the field of political geography is called 'state formation') is Absolutism.

Characteristic of the Europe of the latter half of the fifteenth century and beyond is precisely this process of the building up of states and state structures. These emergent states were 'feudal' in that they arose on and sought to serve the social and political interests of the class of nobility,⁵² yet their emergence was *predicated* on the appearance of embryonic social relations of a non-feudal—capitalist—nature, expressed through the growth of trade and production for trade. And it was this state system of European Absolutism that was the focus, and the immediate target, of the chain of bourgeois revolutions, from the Netherlands to Germany, over the course of the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

And in France, the seat of our classical model? In pre-revolutionary France (as typically in feudal societies), a legally sanctioned order of estates was superimposed upon the developing and differential structure of ownership (or control) of the means of production. An aristocrat was an aristocrat, and so he remained—the possessor of a set of definite and legally-prescribed privileges. The emerging socio-economic structure lay hidden beneath the politico-juridical structure of estates. As long as land remained the principal source of wealth, the estates system and the economic structure tended to coincide. But by the late eighteenth century, the feudal class of 'lords', that is, those whose principle source of income was feudal *corvée*, whether in money form or not, and the legal category of nobility, no longer coincided; with the emergence of capitalist relations of exchange and production, this confluence between socio-economic and politico-legal structure became increasingly disjointed.

Capitalists accumulate surplus through the collection of rent as well as by making profits. In eighteenth-century France there were large numbers of bourgeois and even nobles who collected rents from tenants over and above the profits made by the latter. By any [...] definition these ought to be understood as capitalist rents. [...] To lump all income which is not profit into the same category of proprietorial income [...] is to lose an instrument for analysing the economic differences between liberal and conservative nobility in the early phases of the revolution.⁵³

This is the reason that George V. Taylor could note that the differentiation between what he called the 'proprietary sector of the middle-classes' and that the nobility 'was not in any sense economic; it was juridical.'⁵⁴ But of course this does not imply, *pave* Taylor, that capitalist economic relations did not operate.

Even if [...] [the elite's] members are mixed and interrelated with each other in the ownership of property [...] [they] did not share a *single* form of property; they shared two forms of property. [...] Underlying this 'single' elite there were two different economic relations—seigneurial production and merchant's capital—each operating to a specific set of property norms: the former according to customary law, i.e. homage, noble prerogatives and coerced labour; the latter according to principles of free contract and merchant property. This was a *composite*, not a single elite.⁵⁵

The French Absolutist state needed greater and greater sums of money in order to operate: money raised through taxes, and through loans (to cover the shortfall). In practice, loans, especially in the form of personal

⁵² Suggested by Brenner and convincingly demonstrated by Anderson in *Lineages*; a conception which echoes Engels' celebrated description of early-modern Absolutism that 'the political order remained feudal, while society became more and more bourgeois.' ('Anti-Duhring', *MECW* vol. 25 (1987), 97.) See also Poulantzas, *Poder político*, 202-11.

⁵³ Henry Heller, Review of George C. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge*, *Science and Society* 54.3 (Fall 1990), 377.

⁵⁴ Taylor, 'Noncapitalist Wealth', 487-88.

⁵⁵ Ricardo Dechesne, 'The French Revolution as a Bourgeois Revolution: A Critique of the Revisionists', *Science and Society* 54.3 (Fall 1990), 307.

debt of the king, were the only efficient mechanism for covering governmental (state) expenditure; taxes were the means for repaying the loans, and the security for raising more loans. Taxation was horrendously inefficient: there was, unlike in England, no central bank, nor, unlike in the Netherlands, no developed set of financial institutions. Taxes were farmed out to private tax-collectors, who also negotiated special loans for the government. (It is fitting that the employees of the influential tax-farmers were called *croupiers*.) The costs of intervention into the American war of Independence pushed this system to breaking point: in 1788 state expenditure exceeded income by around twenty per cent; payment of interest on state debt accounted for half of the state's income.⁵⁶ In order to secure loans, to cover the shortfall, to facilitate the operation of the government, more taxes needed to be raised (as security for further loans). The attempt to do this through levying taxes on the whole of the population, irrespective of rank, led to the revolt of the nobility, which brought the whole system crashing down.

In his account of the revolution,⁵⁷ George C. Comninel argued that central to its interpretation was the fact that there was a political division within the 'elite', between those, at the summit of the political structure, who wanted to reconstitute the state through an usurpation of monarchical authority to their own advantage, and those, at the lower end, who favoured a more 'liberal' solution based on a mediation of monarchical power. Comninel argued that prior to the crisis there existed an informal but real 'co-optive aristocracy', not necessarily defined by noble rank but defined essentially by political function, by a position of 'privileged access to royal favour and the chief offices of Church and state.'⁵⁸ The concerns of this layer (who included the highest levels of the actual—legal category of—nobility, the magistrates of the *parlement* of Paris, the most powerful tax-farmers, the provincial magnates, etc.) were effectively 'anti-Absolutist' because they sought to increment their own position of political power at the expense of the crown. This political layer initially found common cause with the lower levels of the elite, since this latter, influenced in France by the ideological concerns of the Enlightenment, also sought a limitation of monarchical power, albeit as a part of a project of political liberalisation. This layer tended to be located in the social frontier region in between the political elite (as defined above) and what we can call the 'common mass', those with no access to political power.⁵⁹ The attempt, in 1787, to push through comprehensive political and administrative reforms to the benefit of the monarchy, alienated this group as much it did the conservative aristocracy, and facilitated their finding common cause.

But these two politically distinct layers were wrenched apart by the proposal to convene the Estates General according to the protocols of 1614. These protocols would have strengthened the hand of the top level of the aristocracy, and, although objectively weakening the position of the monarch (relative to the upper aristocracy), were also detrimental to the project of liberalisation. So the dispute over the formation of the Estates General precipitated a process of division within the elite: divisions that were to find a further resonance amongst wider social layers. This analysis explains why it was that opposition to the convocation of the Estates General along the lines of 1614 was led at first not by the 'bourgeoisie', but by aristocrats; and why, upon its assembly, so many of the delegates of the first and second estates came over to the positions of the third. The very structure of the electoral procedure itself no longer corresponded with the identity of interests between the noble and

⁵⁶ William Doyle, *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 43-44.

⁵⁷ George C. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London: Verso, 1987).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 180-82, 196-205. In fact, the whole progress of French Absolutism, from Henri IV onwards, can be seen as a consolidation of royal power *against* magnate power, as a product of the tension between the authority of the big feudal lords and the centre. I noted earlier that the development of Absolutism involves both the concentration of 'political' power upwards, a necessary concomitant of the concentration of absolute private property at the base. The term 'Absolutism' reflects this: it means that monarchical authority is unmediated by ties of vassalage, that it is unchallenged (it has no pejorative meaning: the critique of absolute monarchy at the time was phrased as a denunciation of 'despotism', which was Absolutism perceived as arbitrary). The political authority of the big feudal lords was not ceded lightly. Periods of weakness at the centre (in time of crisis, or of royal minority, for example) were seen as opportunities for the magnates to reassert, through mobilisation of ties of faction and clientage, their authority.

⁵⁹ The region that Colin Lucas designated as a social 'stress zone'. 'Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution'.

commoner elite; the very basis of nobility itself by the end of the eighteenth century had shifted from ‘being the expression of [...] hereditary virtues to being the crude expression of great wealth and powerful connections.’⁶⁰

This analysis is of course founded on an acknowledgement of the possibility for a significant degree of capitalist development *within* the feudal economic structure. Yet, as I have tried to argue, this is precisely the ‘normal’ pattern of social development in Europe over the course of the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries; but it is not so much that capitalism develops ‘in the interstices of’ feudalism (although this is one way of looking at it) on a European scale, as that the *bourgeoisie* develops ‘in the interstices of’ the already existing elites. And part of the reason for this is of course as Anderson himself observed in his 1976 essay the lack of a fundamental antagonism between two types of private property: feudal and bourgeois. The elite thus tended to be marked by a communality of economic interests: ‘commercial’ (and (proto-) industrial), and ‘feudal’ and proprietary. The organic socio-economic process is a ‘growing over’ of feudalism into capitalism on a European scale; the *revolutionary* (in the sense of ‘revolution’ being understood in the modern sense as meaning a convulsive political change) content of this is supplied by the concomitant need for a qualitative re-ordering of the functional structure of the (national or proto-national) state: as the political lagged the social then the old political and legal categories no longer corresponded to the evolving social reality. The conflict thus engendered took the form not so much of a class struggle between feudalists and bourgeois but of an unbearable antagonism between *state* and *society* (or, in the language of Marx’s Marxism, between economic structure and superstructure). So the classical bourgeois revolutions are not—and nor should we expect them to be—the product of a social clash between capitalists and nobility, but rather of a political antagonism between an increasingly bourgeoisified elite (much of it emanating from layers within the nobility itself) and the politico-legal apparatus of dynastic Absolutism. The fight is not against the ‘nobility’ in its entirety, although it is indeed often against those layers of the nobility dominating the state apparatus (including, often, the king). Thus the Low Countries, England, France (initially at least), and Germany. The incorporation of apparently ‘pre-modern’ social and political elements over the course of this process is not aberrant, or ‘denaturing’, but *normal*. It is, other factors excepted, what we should expect.

Thus at the heart of the problem with the ‘classical’ Marxist conception of the bourgeois revolution is the fact that it is based on a conflation of two distinct processes: the long-term transition from feudalism to capitalism on the socio-economic and continental plane and the political crisis engendered by this process at the level of the state, of the superstructure.⁶¹ As a consequence, classical Marxism has adopted a model of bourgeois revolution which is false, a model based on a paradigm case—that of France—which thus understood is far from being so. In fact, I would argue, the ‘exceptional’ examples of bourgeois revolution are not those which appear to incorporate pre-modern elements into the new socio-political set-up but *precisely* those in which this ‘organic’ process is circumvented in some way. In the light of this analysis, norm and exception are reversed. In the model presented here, therefore, some of the possible candidates for ‘exception’ status are as follows.

- 1 France itself, where it was precisely the exceptionally thorough-going, sweeping nature of the popular radicalisation over the course of the revolution (not least in the countryside) that short-circuited the organic process of ‘normal’ bourgeois development, stunting for a century in the process the prospects for far-reaching development of capitalist relations.
- 2 Spain, where Absolutism was in fact overthrown not ‘organically’ by a ‘domestic’ elite but—‘too early’—by an external power, Napoleon. But this does not mean—as many have argued—that there was no bourgeois revolution in Spain. On the contrary:

The error of analysis of the Spanish left in the 1930s [...] and of many sympathetic historians has been to assume that because Spain suffered from a backward agriculture, the central issue [...] has been the need to make a bourgeois revolution against feudal remnants. In fact, just because Spain’s agriculture

⁶⁰ Ibid., 103.

⁶¹ In part this is a product of a deterministic mis-reading of Marxism; in part it could also be argued that it is a consequence of the need of mid-twentieth-century Stalinism to paint the ‘revolutionary’ bourgeoisie in a positive light.

was inefficient, it was no less capitalist. Spain's development took, in rather less spectacular circumstances, the Prussian path to modernisation.⁶²

- 3 The United States, whose bourgeois revolution was waged not against an internal Absolutism but on the one hand against an external capitalist state, Britain, and on the other against an indigenous population—whose fate was not 'growing over', but genocide—at least two modes of production off the mark.

* * *

By way of a conclusion, it is necessary to make the following, final, summary points.

- 1 The classical Marxist interpretation of the bourgeois revolution suffers from a number of theoretical flaws: a mechanical and deterministic conception of historical development; a 'national' bias; and the development—as a consequence of the above—of a false 'normative' model of the bourgeois revolution. The bourgeois revolution of the classical model is viewed as a product of a national *political* struggle between two antagonistic social classes: feudal nobility and capitalist bourgeoisie. The paradigm case is the French Revolution of 1789, with its 'bourgeois ideology' of liberty, equality and fraternity. Yet this model stands discredited, by simple virtue of the fact that it has been unable to stand by verifiable and verified historical facts.
- 2 Rather than the classical model, I propose the following alternative. As capitalist economic relations develop from the fourteenth century within the western-European feudal nexus, the consequent strengthening of the economic power and the weakening of the political power of the land-owning elites leads to the separation out of a series of putatively national political structures—embryonic national states—in a series of key European feudal polities. This process is the one commonly designated 'Absolutism'. Although this development results from the proceeding 'commodification' of feudal (economic) social relations, the Absolutist states remain based on the political (military and juridical) and social (economic) needs of the land-owning elite. But precisely because capitalist relations of (production and) trade develop 'in the interstices of' feudal ones it would be perverse to conceive of emergent capitalism as developing out of a process autonomous to the feudal social structure. In fact, capitalist relations emerge and evolve out of feudal ones—in the instances of land and investment—and happily co-exist with them in the instances of production and trade. What does not occur in any thorough-going sense at this stage is the crystallisation out of a distinct 'bourgeoisie'—defined fundamentally by its economic activity—with interests distinct from those of an equally clearly delimited feudal aristocracy; neither does there emerge a capitalist economic structure fundamentally antagonistic to an already-existing feudal one. Rather, what it is evident is a single economic structure—in which capitalist economic relations develop more or less harmoniously alongside feudal ones—and a single economic elite with combined and numerous economic interests and activities, both of which obtain over a continental rather than a national scale. Actual bourgeois revolutions, I would suggest, as a consequence do not arise at root from an antagonism between social classes, but from an antagonism between on the one hand the legal and political structures of the state and on the other the economic and political character of broader society: between a political and juridical structure founded on the exigencies of feudal privilege and a socio-economic structure increasingly influenced by capitalistic usury, unmediated ownership of land and proto-industrial forms of production. Conjunctural crises—war, military defeat, religious conflict, state bankruptcy—precipitate generalised unrest in which the most

⁶² Paul Preston, 'The Historiography of the Spanish Civil War', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981).

forward-looking sections of the socio-economic elite and those layers of the plebeian mass most unencumbered by feudal ideology (usually the ‘professional’ classes in the cities) mobilise against the worst excesses of feudal privilege and absolutist despotism, the former impelled by the desire to exert greater control over the state structure—historically speaking of relatively recent vintage—from which they feel excluded, the latter by the desire—bred from city and professional life—for greater and more ‘rational’ egalitarianism, or, simply, and with desperation, impelled by the ravages of war, disease, and hunger.

- 3 The most fundamental consequence of this analysis therefore is that the augmentation of substantial segments of the post-revolutionary social and political elite by significant elements of the pre-revolutionary order is not a paradox. The transition from the feudal to the capitalist modes of production in western Europe, although fundamental in character, is a process which is composed of an accumulation of evolutionary transformations; and it is, moreover, at heart the transformation of one form of private property into another. The incorporation of what are often dubbed ‘pre-modern’ or ‘pre-capitalist’ elements into the post-revolutionary set up is neither anomaly nor defect but normal and to be expected. The cases of ‘exceptional’ development are consequently not those in which there is no absolute rupture with the *status quo ante* but precisely those, such as France, where—for specific historical reasons—there is.
- 4 Once the automatic connection between the capitalist mode of production on the one hand and political structures based on liberal democracy on the other is broken; once it is accepted that the capitalist social order can and indeed does incorporate ‘pre-modern’ elements both naturally and harmoniously; once, in other words, the idealisation of the industrial bourgeoisie as the harbinger of modern capitalist democracy is buried—then the responsibility for later, twentieth-century catastrophe—war, military dictatorship, fascist reaction, etc.—is shifted from the terrain of historical inevitability to that of preventable conjuncture.
- 5 The elimination of an automatic causal historical connection between liberal democracy and modern capitalism also signifies the removal of any legitimate historical foundation for the twentieth-century political strategy of ‘popular frontism’. An absence of liberal democracy does not signify in any sense that that the bourgeoisie has ‘failed’ to carry out its historical mission. From the demand that the bourgeoisie fulfil the promise of its revolution we need to move to the conception that the working class, in order to at least salvage what liberty and democracy it already enjoys, must fulfil the promise of its own.
- 6 The other side of this coin is the rejection of the sectarian denial of the significance of the bourgeois-democratic side of working-class, progressive struggle. A denial of the significance (or even existence) of ‘democratic’ questions in order to insulate oneself from the dangers of bourgeois reformism is not Marxism but ‘economism’, a text-book example of which was offered by Alex Callinicos in an article directly responding to the positions of Anderson and Nairn. For Callinicos, the problem with the Anderson-Nairn analysis was that it placed

at the top of the left’s agenda the perfection of British parliamentary democracy through such devices as devolution or proportional representation. *Leaving aside whether such measures would be intrinsically desirable*, such a strategic focus could only reinforce the deep-seated parliamentary cretinism of the British left, and encourage their resistance to the fundamental truth of classical Marxism [...] that the path to socialism lies the revolutionary destruction of the state, not its reform.⁶³

But recognition of the existence of democratic deficiencies under capitalism does not automatically imply a bourgeois solution (even if one were possible), since, on the strength of the model offered above, there is no real historical evidence for any automatic imperative on the part of the bourgeoisie to fight even for its ‘own’ ideals of ‘capitalist democracy’; rather, the fight for ‘democratic demands’ is the task of the working class and its allies. The bourgeoisie has already shown itself incapable of realising its own democratic rhetoric, if what is understood by this is the kind of programme advanced by the radicals of the French and

⁶³ ‘Exception or Symptom? The British Crisis and the World System’, *New Left Review* 169 (1988), my emphasis.

American revolutions. Once again, to realise the promise of the bourgeois revolution, in our epoch the working class must take up the cudgels on behalf of its own.

7 At the heart of the theoretical confusion surrounding the ‘social interpretation’ Marxist accounts of the bourgeois revolution lies therefore a Marxism founded on a misreading and misinterpretation of theoretical fundamentals—a misreading that, as we have seen, has left the concept in a degree of disarray. Of course, there are powerful objective causes behind ‘bad theory’. But if people do not always get from Marxism what they deserve, they often get what they expect, and over the years something of a Marxist *vulgate* has developed conceptions of Marxism that are theoretically both crude and vulgar; and which uses texts from Marx to justify theoretical crudeness and vulgarity through recourse to higher authority. It is necessary in this respect to acknowledge that the Marxist conception of bourgeois revolution that we are used to dealing with is one that has been drawn up if not by Stalinists then at least by fellow travellers of Stalinism; and at heart, I suggest that this classical model is based on the one hand on a social-democratic fetishisation of capitalist democracy—the ideological product of an uncritical reception of the metaphysical rationalism of the Enlightenment, applied as a blue-print for the modern (national) bourgeois state—and on the other on a 1930s Stalinist-inspired popular-frontist idealisation of the democratic proclivities of the modern industrial bourgeoisie. The historians of the right who dedicated themselves to oppose the Marxist model of bourgeois revolution more or less openly directed their fire not only at *marxisant* accounts of history but also against Marxism itself as a valid body of theory. Thus a defence of Marxism as a viable tool of historical enquiry also necessarily entails a critical reception of extant Marxist historiography as well as a critical examination of Marx and Engels’ own historical writing, tasks beyond the scope of this present essay, but tasks which arise logically from it. This necessity is posed all the more sharply now that the Stalinist project itself has so manifestly failed on a world scale. There are two powerful pressures that need to be resisted. The first is the view that now Stalinism has ‘gone’ there is no longer any need to draw up a balance sheet of it. This is of course to forget that Stalinist ideologies and practices never remained hermetically sealed within the Communist Parties but rather tainted a good deal of ostensible non-Stalinist thinking and practice to a greater or lesser degree. The other pressure is the defensive reflex, in the face of present-day neo-liberal ideological triumphalism, to draw the ideological wagons into a circle. But it is precisely because the Stalinist project in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has failed so abjectly that we have all the more to demonstrate that Stalinist Marxism never was a Marxism but a dogmatic caricature of Marxism. Fundamentally, therefore, what I am *really* proposing in this essay is the necessity of the rehabilitation of Marxism as a credible tool of historical enquiry. The debate on the bourgeois revolution is nothing more than a useful starting point for this, the really necessary task.

León

February 2001