This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

The Peasantry in the French Revolution

presented by

Boksil Baek

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

M.A. degree in History

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Date May 18, 1984

THE PEASANTRY IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History

1984

ABSTRACT

THE PEASANTRY IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

BY

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The purpose of this work is to study the role of the peasantry in the French Revolution and thereby to put the peasant revolution in its proper place in the interpretation of the French Revolution as a whole. For this purpose the questions of why the peasants revolted, what they demanded, and what they achieved are examined with focus on two important agrarian issues: feudal rights and the collective life of the rural community.

Throughout the revolution the peasants' demands for the abolition of feudal rights without compensation and for the maintenance of collective rights interacted with the opposite position of the revolutionary leaders. The result were concessions by the latter, who needed the support of the peasantry to overcome the internal and external threats. Thus the peasant revolution and the revolution of the urban leaders coincided, and became interwoven in the whole French Revolution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my greatest thanks to Dr. Anne Meyering who has spent her invaluable time and energy in guiding me in the study and writing of this thesis. I also extend my appreciation to Dr. Paul R. Duggan for his helpful advice and guidance.

I cannot find proper words to express my special thanks to my husband for his encouragement and constructive criticism. Finally I owe an immense debt of gratitude to my parents who have always prayed for me.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Any understanding or explanation of the French Revolution presupposes the problem of an interpretation, that is, whether it was a bourgeois revolution or not. As one of the central experiences of modern history, along with the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, and the Communist Revolution, the French Revolution has justly received incessant historical attention. Since De Tocqueville tried to write a scientific history of the revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, the revolutionary historiography has become a field of ever-increasing variety of researches and debates. Throughout the nineteenth century historians concentrated their interests mainly on the political history of the Revolution, a fact reflecting their situation facing the changing political conditions of the contemporary world.[1] It was in the early twentieth century that Jean Jaurès and Albert Mathiez accustomed historians to look into the social and economic aspects of the revolution. By these historians the so-called Marxist (orthodox) interpretation[2] of the revolution was first developed in its modern form, and since then has been maintained by a distinguished group of historians, including Georges

Lefebvre and Albert Soboul as the most prominent ones.

According to this orthodox theory, the French Revolution was a typical bourgeois revolution marking a decisive stage in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. This means that, economically, the revolution freed the nation's productive forces and ensured the growth of capitalism that had been held in check by the feudal structure of society; and, socially, the revolution brought the victory over the traditional privileged classes of old regime of the bourgeoisie, who destroyed the old order and reconstructed the state to fit its own interests.[3] Thus, for the orthodox historians the French Revolution was

> 'only the culmination of a long economic and social evolution which has made the bourgeoisie the master of the world,' it being understood if never or rarely precisely stated that by 'bourgeoisie' was meant the class of 'modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor.'[4]

The essential cause of the French Revolution, according to the orthodox theory, lies in the conflict between a rising class, the bourgeoisie, and a decadent class, the aristocracy.[5] By the late eighteenth century the former was growing in numbers, economic power, and political consciousness, with capitalism as the economic basis of its power. On the contrary, the latter was holding to its privileges all the more tenaciously as its actual function was declining. Believing it was thwarted by the aristocratic obstinacy, the bourgeoisie became hostile toward the feudal (privileged) structure of the old regime. And the result was the renewal of social structure on the basis of a bourgeois ideology of

liberty and equality. This undermining of the aristocratic and feudal society by the evolution of the economy which increased the wealth and power of the bourgeoisie is the bourgeois, capitalist revolution.

For the orthodox historians class conflict is the key to understand the revolution. Although the revolution went through various stages and, accordingly, the main actors in each stage were different, the conflicting classes throughout the whole course of the revolution were essentially two --bourgeoisie versus aristocracy.[6] "The revolution is thus a 'bloc'": it is anti-feudal and pro-bourgeois throughout its diverse history.[7]

Although orthodox interpretation has given a powerful incentive to the studies of the movements of the largely unnoticed lower classes --the peasantry and urban masses-- in their own, this is still in the framework of the orthodox view of the revolution as a bourgeois revolution. The experience of sans-culottes, for instance, has been extracted from the previously unexplored archives --thanks to the assiduous work of Soboul-- and been made the subject of historical treatment. They have been given an important place in the history of the revolution, especially in the year II, as a party that provided the bourgeoisie with the physical force necessary to overthrow the old regime. Driven by hunger, they intervened at a crucial moment and succeeded in putting some pressure on the bourgeois leaders, but, in the main, they remained under the control of the

the bourgeoisie. Thus the sans-culottes movement, in the orthodox theory, remains within the framework of the bourgeois revolution.[8]

Similar things can be said about the peasant movement in the French Revolution. By his monumental study of the peasantry in Northern France during the revolutionary period, Lefebvre rescued the peasantry from the peripheral position as an unnoticed mass and made it move to center stage. Thereby Lefebvre initiated an entire genre of the French Revolutionary studies which viewed the Revolution 'from below.'[9] Lefebvre emphasized that the peasant revolution had its own autonomy in its origin and attitude, and warned against the tendency to regard it as a mere repercussion of urban uprisings. However, while emphasizing the autonomy of the peasant revolution, the orthodox theory maintains that

> 'the peasants acted within the framework of bourgeois revolution.... The fundamental objective of the peasant movement coincided with the aims of the bourgeois revolution: the destruction of the feudal relations of production.'[10]

Thus the part played by the urban and rural masses, in the orthodox theory, tends to be reduced to one of secondary importance, simply consolidating the power of the bourgeoisie. In the orthodox interpretation the fundamental picture of the revolution remains a class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, in which the bourgeoisie achieved the breakthrough from feudalism to capitalism.

This interpretation reigned supreme as an established explanation in the revolutionary literature until Alfred

Cobban appeared to launch a severe criticism of it. In his inaugural lecture given at the University of London in 1955, and later in 1964 in a publication of a book titled The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution, Cobban attacked the accepted theory of the French Revolution as "the overthrow of feudalism by the bourgeoisie." He argues that the concepts embodied in this notion of "bourgeois revolution" have become irreconcilable with the empirical data gathered by either Marxist or non-Marxist historians, and that it is merely a myth envisaged by the pre-conceived social theory regardless of the historical evidence.[11] "To fit in with the theory," he argues,"eighteenth-century France had to be envisaged as still basically a feudal society, but....after the revolution predominantly capitalist and industrial..."[12]

First of all, Cobban rejects the term "feudalism" for eighteenth century France, arguing that feudalism in its exact sense ceased to exist in France from the end of the thirteenth century; what was overthrown in 1789 was a vestige of feudalism --seigneurial rights.[13] Cobban goes on to argue that even if he concedes that by the term "feudalism" is meant seigneurial rights, it was not the revolutionary bourgeoisie but the peasantry that dealt a mortal blow to them.[14] The bourgeoisie was reluctant, Cobban argues, to abolish feudalism, for some of them had become benefactors of seigneurial rights through purchase of them. Quoting Lefebvre's words that "the bourgeoisie, up to July 14, 1789,

had neither time nor desire to attack tithe and feudal rights," (in Études sur la Révolution française, p. 343) Cobban strengthens his argument that the achievement of August 4, 1789 and furthermore, of July 17, 1793, should be attributed to the peasantry. In this regard, Cobban argues, the peasant revolution cannot be subsumed within the framework of a bourgeois revolution.[15]

With regard to the composition of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, Cobban denies the orthodox theory that it consisted of bourgeois who played a role in the capitalist relations of production --commercial and industrial entrepreneurs. In eighteenth-century France capitalism had not progressed so far as to produce a revolutionary class claiming to reform society. Even accepting the existence of some capitalistic activities in this period, Cobban argues, the revolutionary bourgeoisie was not the industrial capitalists as supposed by the orthodox theory but the declining office-holders and professional men.[16]

As to the results of the revolution, Cobban rejects the orthodox view that the revolution paved the way to the further development of capitalism in the following century; instead, the revolution may have retarded the growth of a modern capitalist economy.[17] For no such progress followed the revolution. France did not industrialize until late in the nineteenth century. Most important, most wealth was still in the form of land, and the new ruling class, despite a change in its membership, was still the landed class.[18]

Cobban's attack on the orthodox interpretation has profoundly affected the historiography of the French Revolution. It provoked much resistance and self-defense from the historians more or less committed to the accepted theory. At the same time, his disagreement with Lefebvre and Soboul precipitated further researches not only of the revolutionary period but also of the old regime, the results of which tend to support his argument. Thus Cobban appears to have succeeded in showing the deficiencies of the old paradigm, but unfortunately he did not provide a new alternative.[19] There has arisen a vast controversy as to the nature of the revolution as a whole, and it has not been settled yet.

As far as the peasant revolution is concerned --which is my subject in this work-- both the orthodox interpretation and Cobban's argument agree that it played an important role in destroying the old regime. However, the great difference between these two positions arises from how to define the place of the peasant revolution in the whole French Revolution. Even emphasizing the autonomy of the peasant movement, the orthodox theory maintains that it remained within the framework of the bourgeois revolution, whereas Cobban denies that.

The question is, which view is correct? Moreover, how should the peasant revolution be placed in the history of the French Revolution? With these interpretative questions in mind, I am going to look at the peasantry in

the French Revolution, focusing on three questions: why the peasants revolted, what they demanded, and what they achieved. For this purpose I will concentrate on two important aspects of the French rural life. One is the feudal structure under which most peasants were subject to various kinds of feudal dues and tithes, and the other is the collective life of the rural community which provided an important resource to most small and landless peasants.

To understand why the peasants revolted I am going to show how these two aspects of rural village life influenced the peasantry and increased their discontent. To understand what the peasants demanded when they revolted, I am going to show how they acted with regard to these two issues. To understand what the peasants achieved from their revolution, I will show what the relationship was between the peasantry and the leaders in the revolutionary assemblies and how this relationship worked to comply with the demands of the peasants concerning these two issues. By understanding these three questions, I think, it is possible to place the role of the revolutionary peasantry in its proper place in the French Revolution and thereby to determine how the peasant revolution relates to the problem of the interpretation of the French Revolution.

CHAPTER I

NOTES

[1]Alfred Cobban, Aspects of the French Revolution (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 256.

[2]This interpretation has received support not only from Marxist historians --thus called 'Marxist theory'-- but from non-Marxists --thus called 'orthodox theory'--. (From the footnote of Thomas E. Kaiser's article, "Feudalism and the French Revolution," History Teacher, 1979, 12(2), 214.) In my thesis I will use the latter term 'orthodox theory.'

[3]Albert Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution 1789-1799 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 1-5.

[4]Gerald J. Cavanaugh, "The Present State of French Revolutionary Historiography: Alfred Cobban and Beyond," French Historical Studies, VII (Fall, 1972), 588.

[5]Georges Lefebvre, The Coming of the French Revolution, trans., R.R. Palmer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947), pp. 1-2.

[6]Cavanaugh, p. 588.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., p. 589.

[9]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, ix.

[10]Cavanaugh, p. 589.

[11]Alfred Cobban, The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1964), pp. 10 and 16.

[12]Ibid., p. 169.

[13]Ibid., pp. 33, 36 and 53.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Cavanaugh, p. 590.

[16]Cobban, The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution, pp. 54-67.

[17]Ibid., p. 79.

[18]Ibid., pp. 86 and 89.

[19]Cavanaugh, p. 597.

CHAPTER II

THE ORIGIN OF THE PEASANT REVOLUTION

The peasant question in revolutionary France was bound to be of importance in a country which was a predominantly agrarian country from time immemorial. The peasantry formed over three-quarters of the total population of the kingdom, and agriculture was the principal industry. To understand the background for the peasant revolution it seems necessary to look into the conditions of the peasantry in the last decades of the old regime, for the causes of the peasant revolts did not appear one day but were accumulating and pushing the peasants in the direction of the revolts.

1. Social Structure in the French Countryside

In general, France in the eighteenth century was called a country of small proprietors who held their own land and exploited on their own account. They could buy, sell, and inherit the land, and could move as they liked. Serfdom which survived in nearly all the countries of Europe had long before ceased to exist, although not completely. It lingered on only in a few regions like Nivernais and the Franche-Comté in a mitigated form: "the serf was no longer really attached to the soil, and the principal characteristic

of serfdom in France was lack of freedom in disposing of goods" --mortmain.[1] Compared to the peasants of the eastern or central European countries, where the great landlords exploited their land on the basis of the forced labor of peasants (serfs), or those of England, where the peasants reduced to the status of day laborer worked for wage on the large estates of the landed nobility, the French peasants were much better-off.[2]

In 1789 the peasants owned a sizeable proportion of the cultivable land, possibly as much as one-third, although this proportion varied with regions.[3] (The remaining land was owned by the clergy and nobility (about 30%) and by the bourgeoisie (about same 30%).)[4] Viewed from a different angle, however, the picture of the peasant land-ownership appears less equitable. According to Soboul's estimation, while the clergy and nobles numbering about 480,000, or only 2-3% of the total population, owned about 30% of the total land, 22 to 23 million peasants, or almost 75-80% of the population, owned almost the same amount of land.[5] Thus the size of most individual peasant owner's holdings was extremely small and insufficient to feed a family. Moreover, the proportion of the landless families was scarcely neglible; it was as high as 20% in Limousin, 30-40% in Lower Normandy, and 75% in maritime Flanders.[6] These figures were reduced considerably, because landless peasants rented land from clergy, noble, and bourgeois landowners. The latter seldom worked their land themselves but leased it out in

lots of varying size as their land usually consisted of many scattered parcels. Similarly, the peasant owners could round out their own holding by cultivating additional parcels taken on lease. In this way the number of peasants who had nothing to farm either by ownership or by leasehold was reduced considerably, but never completely.[7] On the whole, however, the majority of the peasants did not have enough land for independent living. They were suffering from serious land hunger.

This does not mean that all the peasants had extremely small land holdings. Most historians, both Marxist-historians and non-Marxists, tend to agree in seeing rural society in this period as experiencing a high degree of social differentiation. The peasant populatior, far from being an undifferentiated mass, was actually split by economic interests and social aspirations into several groups. Despite regional variation in the agricultural system there could be discerned roughly three categories of peasants.[8] At the apex of the peasantry there was a small group of large-scale landowners or large-scale tenant-farmers. There were not many of the former but rather more of the latter, for the large estates were usually in the hands of the privileged or bourgeois, who as wealthy absentées seldom exploited the land themselves but leased to the farmers. On large farms of contiguous area this group engaged in large-scale farming for the market, employing wage labors, considerable capital and managerial skill. In the case the

farms consisted of a large area in small scattered plots, they were not managed directly using wage labor, but the plots were sublet to men of lesser means. The concentration of land by this group of large-scale farmers was a threat to small peasants whose opportunities to rent land were diminished. Also, the activities of this group as mass-producers, speculators, and hoarders of grain often aroused hostility from small peasants around them.[9] This group of large-scale farmers was most often found in the opulent grain-growing areas of northeast France.

Next came the category of <u>laboureurs</u> who owned or rented enough land for self-sufficiency or even a modest saleable surplus in a good year. They owned their own implements and plow-animals. They were more numerous than the first group but they formed only a minor proportion of the peasantry.

There lay a line of demarcation between these two groups of large-scale or self-sufficient peasants and the third group of the small and landless peasants who formed the majority of the rural population. The first two groups held enough land either by ownership or leasehold and lived above the self-sufficiency line. On the contrary, the third group held little or no land and always lived on the border line of poverty. With insufficient or no land, the latter group of peasants always tried to eke out their living by finding additional sources of income. They hired themselves out as day laborers for the well-to-do farmers or worked in

the rural industry. In regions like Picardy, Normandy, Brittany, Maine, rural industry, especially textiles was an indispensible source of income to the poor peasants.[10] When work was not available in the region where the peasant lived he often resorted to seasonal migration.[11] However, these ways of making additional income were not always available. In the worst case the poor peasants had no other choice but to resort to begging, which was not regarded as a shame but rather as a job like any other.[12] In bad years the number of beggars could assume a threatening proportion. The Great Fear which swept over France during the summer of 1789 can be explained in connection with this fact.

This social differentiation was one of the important features of French rural society. Basically most French peasants were free and possessed some land of their own. However, according to the extent of their landholdings the rural population was divided into the above three groups and did not share the same economic interests. The third group of small and landless peasants formed the rural mass and differed in their economic interests and social aspirations from the small groups of large-scale farmers or self-sufficient <u>laboureurs</u>. This clash among the rural population became well defined during the revolution and affected its outcome. It appeared particularly over the question of collective rights which will be discussed later in Chapter Four.

2. Feudalism in the Countryside

Even though the French peasantry was free and some peasants owned land, they were almost universally subject to feudal or seigneurial rights. Feudalism in its strict medieval sense --land system based on military relationship between lord and vassals-- had ceased to exist in France before 1789. But almost all the land was still subject to feudal tenure, and the dues derived from these rights continued to be levied.

In a strict sense 'feudal' and 'seigneurial' rights are not the same.[13] Feudal rights derived from the contracts governing tenure of fief. When the fief changed hands, the lord had a right to require his new vassal to make due acknowledgement and pay a fee. When a non-noble bought a fief, he had to pay the king a special levy called the franc-fief.

Seigneurial rights originated from the lordship exercised by the lords during the Middle Ages. The essential characteristic of the lordship was the administration of justice, high or low. High justice included the right to conduct criminal proceedings and operate police courts. Low justice included the rural police power and the right to settle troubles concerning feudal payments. It was a very valuable weapon of economic exploitation, for the lord, by this right, was judge in his own case.

The rights of justice entailed a number of lucrative

privileges which can be divided into two categories --one is honorific rights and the other is use rights. The former included the right to a special bench in the parish church and the right to erect weather-vanes on the manor-house. These rights were of no economic importance but, as outward symbols of power, caused great irritation.[14] "The zeal with which peasants attacked .... weather-vanes in the revolution shows that they, as well as the owners of these vanities, took them seriously."[15]

The other category of seigneurial rights included those of economic importance. The lord had the right of controlling weights and measures, of levying market tolls and road and river tolls, and of obliging peasants to personal service for the lord. Also he kept an exclusive rights of hunting and fishing, of keeping pigeon houses, which were very harmful to farming. Peasants were forbidden to kill the game which ravaged their crops and had no effective protection against the swarming of pigeons which descended on the newly-sown fields. The most important right was banalités. Banalités were the exclusive right of the lord to maintain a mill, oven, or wine press. He often farmed out this right for his own profit.

Apart from these strictly seigneurial rights which derived from the person, all owners of fiefs enjoyed real rights which derived from land. They did not exploit their land but granted the holding to the peasant under a perpetual title in return for payments the amount of which was fixed

once and for all. These payments consisted of two kinds: annual dues either paid in money or in kind and occasional dues levied on transfer of land by inheritance or sale. The latter was called lods et ventes and was very onerous, usually amounting to one year's revenue from the holding.[16]

Despite this distinction 'feudal' and 'seigneurial' became actually difficult to distinguish, because in the later Middle Ages land changed hands very rapidly. Seigneurial rights also became alienable and often passed into non-nobles. As this process became more and more complicated, it became more difficult in the eighteenth century to distinguish strictly 'seigneurial' from strictly 'feudal' rights. Thus the contemporaries understood either feudal or seigneurial to mean the same structure of dues and services which had survived from the Middle Ages. To them feudal or seigneurial rights meant only one thing: the burdens with which their lands were inflicted.[17] To them they were all the more onerous as they got nothing in return for what they paid. In the Middle Ages the lord was supposed to have the rights to levy these dues in return for the protection he provided to the peasants domiciled in his land. But as the lord's political function dwindled increasingly, he became a parasitic being. For the poor and subsistent farmers these dues were hateful because they pressed on their already low standard of living, while the better-off peasants hated them because they meant a reduction of their profits. Whatever their position, the peasantry felt the same hostility toward

feudal rights and this accounts for the extraordinary force of peasant action in 1789.

Another thing to which the peasant land was subject was tithe, whose proportion varied but amounted roughly to 1/13 of the harvest. Peasants were less hostile to the tithe itself than to its misuse. Originally it was levied for subsistence of priests, upkeep of churches and assistance of the poor. In practice, the purpose had changed. It had often been usurped by a lay person or monopolized by the higher ranks of the clergy. Even after the peasants paid their tithes, the upkeep of churches and the assistance of the poor became charged on them, making another burden.[18] Moreover, tithe was collected in kind, which meant that in time of scarcity and, consequently, of rising prices it was all the more profitable for the owners while threatening the very subsistence of most peasants.[19]

Toward feudal dues and tithes the peasants were resentful not only because they were onerous but because they simply meant a reduction of their agricultural produce without giving anything in return for their payment. Despite the divisions and different economic interests among the rural population it shared the same hostility toward feudal dues and tithes. This universal resentment enabled the powerful peasant revolution to take place, which finally abolished what remained of the feudal system in the countryside.

3. The Shrinking of Collective Rights of the Rural Community

Since the mid-eighteenth century the situation of the small peasants was worsening because of a considerable population growth. By the end of the Ancien Régime the population of France increased roughly by a third to about 25 millions from 19 millions at the end of the seventeenth century.[20] For the rural society the consequences of the population growth had three aspects. First, it precipitated a fragmentation of land through inheritance, making the problem of land hunger more serious. Most historians find its expression in the peasant cahiers drawn up in the spring of 1789. In them the peasants denounced big farms and demanded their break-up into small units so that larger number of peasants could have access to land. They even demanded the sale or lease of crown and church lands in small parcels.[21] Secondly, the surplus of labor resulting from population increase meant the lowering of the wage level of the day laborers and deterioration of their living conditions. Thirdly, the demographic pressure caused the rise in prices of food stuffs by increasing the demand for agricultural products, which could not expand as fast as population grew. Only those peasants who produced for the market could prosper, but most peasants with insufficient land who had to buy food themselves were heavily affected by the rising prices.

From an economic point of view, the problem of food

shortage and the price rise of food stuffs could have been solved if the productivity of individual peasant's land had been increased enough to offset the disadvantage of small size. But this was almost impossible in the existing agricultural system of France. French agriculture was based on a crop rotation system, in which a certain portion of the arable land --a third in the case of triennial rotation and a half in the case of biennial rotation-- should lie fallow for a year in order to prevent the exhaustion of soil coming from the continuous cultivation. As there was not enough manure, the French peasants did not have other method of improving soil other than letting it stand fallow.[22] This meant even less land area to cultivate for the peasants suffering from land hunger. As fallow land was subject to collective cattle-grazing by all animals in the whole village, the crop rotation system was strictly regulated by the village community. This precluded any possibility of change or improvement by individual peasants, even if they had the will and ability of doing so. Moreover, most of the small peasants were hostile to introducing new techniques and new crops, for they always lived in too narrow a margin of bare subsistence to run the risk of improvement. In a sense, the very fact of peasant land-ownership was a brake on agricultural development.[23]

For the poor peasants whose conditions were deteriorating, collective rights were an important resource. Collective rights were closely connected with the collective

life of the peasantry, or 'peasant community.' In the traditional agricultural system agriculture was based on communal operation: crop-rotation and other details of husbandry were strictly imposed and regulated by the rural community.

There were two aspects to this collective organization of village life.[24] First was the collective ownership and use of communal properties like forest, wasteland, and marshes. These common lands were owned by the rural community and provided communal livestock with grazing lands. Also, in the forests peasants could gather dead wood for firewood and cut trees to build or repair their homes or agricultural implements. The second aspect was the collective constraint upon private property for the benefit of the inhabitants as a group. Thus the landowner was actually far from exercising over his property the absolute right in the sense of Roman law.[25] The best examples were free pasture and glanage. Every peasant had the right of gleaning on the harvested fields --regardless of who owned them-- which was considerable, since the grain was cut by sickle. Cultivated fields after harvest, together with fallow land, were subject to collective rights of free pasture. This right also applied to private meadow after second haying, and sometimes even after first haying.

Marc Bloch, in his pioneering work tracing the agrarian history of France (French Rural History), shows that this practice of communal grazing on the arable, the

field structure (open fields, especially with long-narrow strips), and the strict crop rotation were closely interrelated with each other. According to Bloch, the difficulty of preventing grazing animals from straying outside the narrow field and invading other people's fields may have made the system of communal grazing the most suitable arrangement.[26] The practice of communal grazing on the stubble, in turn, may have required that all the fields in a particular section be sown and harvested at the same time with the same crop, the enforcement of strict crop rotation.[27]

Whatever the origin, communal grazing and other collective rights imposed limitations on private property by regulating the whole system of agriculture. Each peasant did not dispose as he saw fit of his own plots but had to conform with the practice of the whole community. This fact partly explains why new techniques and new crops have been so slowly adopted until recently in French agriculture.[28] Hence the condemnation by agronomists of collective rights as a factor obstructing agricultural improvement by precluding individual initiative. Also, the better-off peasants were hostile to the communal obligations that restricted their freedom to make a profit from their land. For the poor peasants, however, communal grazing and other collective rights were very important resources which they regarded as sacred a property right as any other.[29] Although agronomists condemned collective rights as encouraging small peasants to live in idleness by relying on others' property, even

landless peasants could raise livestock, thanks to communal pasture.[30]

In the second half of the eighteenth century collective rights suffered considerably at the hands of the privileged landowners and large-scale farmers enjoying government support. In an attempt to put an end to food shortages that often led to disturbances in town and countryside and eventually weakened its tax-base, the royal government adopted the reform ideas of the physiocrats. They were emphasizing the land as the main or unique source of wealth and thus urged reorganizing agriculture along capitalist lines. In order to do this it was necessary to do away with all regulations of cultivation and to grant free trade of grain; to suppress collective rights, especially the right of communal grazing on harvested fields which prevented their enclosure; and to divide up the common lands among the villagers for the purpose of increasing the yields of land and the cultivation of waste.[31]

Partly impressed by the new ideas of physiocrats and partly by the example of English enclosure, the royal government permitted enclosure in some provinces and division of common lands, thereby suppressing collective rights of the rural community.[32] In other words, the government encouraged agricultural production for the market and for profit, and therefore it was evident that these policies benefited primarily large-scale landowners and large-scale tenant-farmers. They welcomed these policies, for their farm

management would be free from the communal regulations and, moreover, the size of their land would be enlarged. For the small peasants and day laborers the effect of the suppression of their collective rights could be devastating. In the words of Bloch,

> Possessing little or no land, and .... too poor to attempt improvements which demanded at least a modicum of capital, these people had not the slightest interest in a reform from which they could expect no benefit.... Most of them owned a few animals, which subsisted entirely on the pasture offered by the common lands and the stubble fields subject to collective grazing.... Deprived of this resource, the humbler folk must either starve or fall into a much closer dependence on the <u>laboureurs</u> and greater landowners than any they had known in the past.33

Hence the rural masses protested vigorously and sometimes engaged in open resistance.

4. <u>The Worsening of Feudal Burdens</u>

In the meantime, the feudal burdens to which almost all the peasants were subject were becoming heavier in the last decades of the old regime by the so-called feudal or seigneurial reaction. This term "feudal reaction" was generally used to describe the systematic attempts of the lords to increase their revenues by enforcing their feudal rights on the peasants with increasing harshness. By the end of the <u>Ancien Régime</u> the lords themselves were impoverished --some were crippled with debts-- by the rise in the cost of living and the increased luxury of court life. Spurred on by need of money, they endeavored to get as much as they

could from their manorial rights as well as from their farm-rents.[34] Terriers (land registers in which peasants' obligations were recorded) were managed with more attention and were renewed more frequently with increasing precision. Moreover, each renewal tended to increase the amount of dues and to revive old rights that had fallen into disuse. Lords demanded payment of arrears of dues and more punctuality in paying dues.

This is the theory of "feudal reaction." Despite some doubts and questions raised about this theory, it has become an established explanation for the increasing feudal burdens and peasant dissatisfaction. Cobban, however, in his overall rejection of the orthodox interpretation of the French Revolution, criticized the use of the term "feudal reaction" as a misnomer for a historical fact.[35] More recently, William Doyle has gone even further to argue that there was no such feudal reaction as has generally been supposed.[36]

Cobban did not deny the fact of reaction. He admitted that the burdens of peasants were increasing. What he criticized about the theory of feudal reaction was the terminological problem. He argued that the increase in the peasant's burdens came from a growing commercialization in the management of seigneurial rights, not from a reversion to the past as the term "reaction" implied; and, therefore, it would be better to speak not of "feudal reaction" but of an "embourgeoisement" of the seigneury.[37]

On the other hand, Doyle argues, in his article,

"Was There an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-revolutionary France?," that the remaking of terriers in the reign of Louis XVI, which has been regarded as the most important feature of the reaction, would be meaningful as a proof of reaction only if they were not being made in previous years.[38] But, he argues, they were renewed in other earlier periods, usually as a means of reconstructing a domaine after war. For instance, terriers were extensively renewed in the fifteenth century after the Hundred Years' War and in the seventeenth century after the Thirty Years' War. Even in the regions where the war did not rage, they were remade.[39] Doyle goes further to argue that from this evidence it can be suggested that perhaps the renewal of terriers was always happening all the time. According to his argument, the fact that if the dues were not exacted for thirty years then rights lapsed simply means that terriers had to be revised at least every twenty-nine years; and, therefore, the remaking under Louis XVI was only the last phase of a perpetual process.[40] He concludes that

> .... we could no longer accept massive accumulations of evidence for a reaction under Louis XVI, such as those [provided by Lefebvre] for the Nord, unless it could also be demonstrated that such evidence could not be found in the same area for the earlier decades of the century.[41]

Although Doyle raised an interesting point, he was not able to prove it. Perhaps his proposition must remain as a hypothesis, for much of the evidence disappeared in the peasant revolts of summer of 1789. He is correct to argue

that renewal of terriers in the late eighteenth century was nothing new. It had been done in previous centuries, for it was a procedure made necessary by the changes in the landholders as a result of division, sale or for other reasons.[42] What is important in distinguishing the renewal of terriers in the late eighteenth century from those of earlier periods is the extent to which the burdens of peasants increased. The renewal of the late eighteenth century has been taken as evidence of feudal reaction because it contributed to increasing feudal burdens on peasants. The proof for this point lies in the fact that in certain regions of Western France, especially Vendee, where no examples of definite revision are recorded, the peasants did not have the same hostility toward their seigneurs as was found elsewhere.[43] Thus Doyle's argument that there had been renewals of terriers in earlier periods does not necessarily invalidate the notion of feudal reaction of the late eighteenth century.

Despite the differences of opinion about whether or not there was a feudal reaction, it seems difficult to dismiss the theory of feudal reaction as entirely without foundation. Doyle himself admits that the burdens of the peasants were growing heavier.[44] It may be helpful to quote Le Roy Ladurie's article, "Rural Revolts and Protest Movement in France from 1675 to 1788," to make this point clear. Although Le Roy Ladurie is not directly dealing with the problem of feudal reaction, he indirectly proves that the

seigneurial oppression was increasing at the end of Ancien Régime. Through analysing the rural revolts of the eighteenth century (after 1730s) and those of the seventeenth century he shows the change in the trends of the rural protest movements. According to him, there was a big difference in the nature of the revolts in these two centuries. The revolts of the seventeenth century were directed specifically against state taxation, with little or no attention to the seigneurial system. But in the eighteenth century (after 1730s) the object of rural protest changed from state to seigneurs.[45] Le Roy Ladurie argues that

> The new anti-seigneurial struggle, as it began to develop (for example in Burgundy) from 1735-40, as it flourished from 1750, to spread at last like wildfire from 1780, is in many ways a classic example of a battle against the old system of domination and exaction, and against the countless seigneurial rights.[46]

By emphasizing that this anti-seigneurial protest was typical of the late eighteenth century Le Roy Ladurie tends to prove the increase of seigneurial oppression on the eve of the revolution, or at least peasant hostility toward seigneurial system was rising to a critical point.

The intrusion of the capitalist spirit into the seigneurial system after the mid-eighteenth century contributed, in a way, to making the burdens of the seigneurial dues all the heavier. The increase in the price of agricultural products encouraged the lords to claim their rights more diligently, especially those levied in kind. To secure

greater revenue they increasingly farmed out the collection of their rights to professional collectors, who were inexorable in their work. In particular, when they were paid on a commission basis, their only interest was to squeeze out the seigneurial dues to the last drop. There were widespread complaints about the excesses of these collectors.[47] Among the seigneurial rights that were farmed out the most universally hated were the banalités of mill, oven, and wine press, especially the right of banal mill.[48] Usually the mills and ovens were farmed out to the highest bidder, who indulged in a wealth of dishonest means of extracting his personal profit from his compulsory customers. By controlling access to his mill he cheated calling over weight, charged special rates and took payment in kind, and that beyond the implicitly agreed portion.[49]

Besides farming out of seigneurial rights to the professional collectors, the seigneuries themselves were passing into non-noble hands on a fair scale. As a type of property, the seigneury had entered the nexus of buying and selling, and it was eagerly sought after by the wealthy bourgeois. Influenced by the social atmosphere of the old regime in which aristocratic values still predominated, they dreamed of escaping their non-noble status by acquiring seigneuries --a symbol of status and dominance.[50] By their nature the new bourgeois owners tried to obtain the maximum return from their investment. Thus the intrusion of capitalism into agriculture made in part under the cover of

seigneurial rights made them much more unbearable.[51]

In this respect, Cobban argues that the so-called reaction was not a reversion to the past but the application of new business techniques to old relationships.[52] He further argues

> There is at least some excuse for believing that the revolution in the French countryside was not against feudalism but against a growing commercialization; and that it was not a 'bourgeois' movement but on the contrary was directed partly against the penetration of urban financial interests into the countryside.[53]

Cobban is correct to point out that the increase of feudal burdens was partly due to the infiltration of urban wealth into the countryside. He is also correct to point out the peasant revolution was autonomous from the bourgeois movement. But his argument that the peasant revolution was not against feudalism but against a growing commercialism seems to be oversimplified. In the eyes of the peasants these two were not separate things. What they felt hostility to was the burdens they bore under the name of feudalism. Feudalism might be all the more hateful because of its commercialization. The resistance of the peasants was anti-feudal because it was anti-capitalist.[54]

Despite differences of opinion it is generally agreed that the feudal burdens of the peasantry were worsening on the eve of the revolution and its grievances were growing.

CHAPTER II

NOTES

[1]Lefebvre, The Coming of the French Revolution, p. 131. "Mortmain" is a lord's right by which he could take all the possessions of a serf who died without children residing with him at the time of his death.

[2]Lefebvre, "The Place of the Revolution in the Agrarian History of France," Rural Society in France, ed. Robert Forster and Orest Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 33.

[3]One of the most striking features of the French agrarian life was the regional variations. The rural physiognomy varied from eastern to western France, from province to province, even from parish to parish. However, in this thesis, I can only deal with the general features of French agrarian history.

[4]Lefebvre, The Coming of the French Revolution, p. 132.

[5]Albert Soboul, "The Social and Economic Character of the French Revolution: its Relevance in the Modern World," The Social Origins of the French Revolution, ed. R.W.Greenlaw (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1975), p. 26.

[6]Lefebvre, The Coming of the French Revolution, p. 132; "The Place of the Revolution in the Agrarian History of France," p. 35.

[7]Lefebvre, The Coming of the French Revolution, p. 133.

[8]Alun Davies, "The Origins of the French Peasant Revolution of 1789," History, XLIX (1964), 25.

[9]For the details of the activities of large tenant-farmers and the hostility they aroused in small peasants, see Robert Forster, "Obstacles to Agricultural Growth in Eighteenth Century France," American Historical Review, LXXV (1970), 1606-1607.

[10]Davies, p. 27.

[11]Davies, in the above article, shows how the poor peasants of Lower Burgundy moved from place to place in search of work available in different seasons (p. 27).

[12]Ibid., p. 28.

[13]The following paragraphs about this distinction are largely based on Lefebvre's explanation in his The Coming of the French Revolution, pp. 137-139.

[14]Sydney Herbert, The Fall of Feudalism in France (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1969, reprint of 1921 edition), p. 33.

[15]William Doyle, Origins of the French Revolution (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 196.

[16]Herbert, p. 24.

[17]In this sense, I am going to use the word 'feudal' and 'seigneurial' interchangably in the following pages.

[18]Herbert, pp. 38-39.

[19]Lefebvre, The Coming of the French Revolution, p. 137.

[20]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, p. 34.

[21]Herbert, p. 85.; Lefebvre, "La Révolution française et les Paysans," in idem., Études sur la Révolution française (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1963), p. 346.

[22]Isser Woloch, ed. The Peasantry in the Old Regime: Conditions and Protests (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 14.

[23]Tom Kemp, Economic Forces in French History (London: Dennis Dobson, 1971), pp. 20 and 69.

[24]Soboul, "The French Rural Community in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," Past and Present, 10 (1956), 82.

[25]Lefebvre, "The Place of the Revolution in the Agrarian History of France," p. 36.

[26]Marc Bloch, French Rural History: An Essay on its Basic Characteristics, trans., Janet Sondheimer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 44-45.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Woloch, p. 15.

[29]Lefebvre, "The Place of the Revolution in the Agrarian History of France," p. 36.

[30]Principally the number of cattle that each villager could send to the common herd depended on the size of his land, a system that favored the more prosperous. But in practice, even the poorest without any land of their own were allowed to send the few cattle they kept. Bloch, p.224.

[31]Lefebvre, "La Révolution française et les Paysans," p. 350.

[32]Lefebvre, "The Place of the Revolution in the Agrarian History of France," p. 37.

[33]Bloch, p. 224.

[34]In the late eighteenth century rents rose considerably as a result of the population growth which multiplied candidates for leases. (George V. Taylor, "Non-capitalist Wealth and the Origin of the French Revolution," American Historical Review, 72, 1966-67, 475.) According to Taylor, this fact was one of the obstacles to agricultural improvement, for it made it possible for the landowners to increase their revenues without trying to increase the productivity of soil.

[35]Cobban, The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution, p. 52.

[36]William Doyle, "Was There an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-revolutionary France?," Past and Present, 57 (1972), 97-122. In this article Doyle is treating the feudal or seigneurial reaction as one of the four main aspects of the so-called "aristocratic reaction" --political, ideological, social, and feudal reaction. What Doyle is trying to do in this article is to deny the thesis of "aristocratic reaction" by denying these four aspects were taking place.

[37]Cobban, The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution, pp. 47 and 52.

[38]Doyle, "Was There an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-revolutionary France?," p. 116.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid., p. 117.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Frederic Braesch, "The Sources of Social Conflict in 1789," The Economic Origins of the French Revolution, ed. Ralph W. Greenlaw (Boston: Heath, 1958), p. 90

[43]Ibid.

[44]Doyle, "Was There an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-revolutionary France?," p. 119.

[45]Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "Rural Revolts and Protest Movement in France from 1675 to 1788," Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture, 5 (1976), pp. 424 and 430.

[46]Ibid., p. 431.

[47]Cobban, The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution, pp. 48-49.

[48]Ibid., p. 50.

[49]Herbert, p. 26.

[50]Francois Furet, Interpreting the French Revolution, trans., Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 101.

[51]Lefebvre, "La Révolution française et les Paysans," p. 352.

[52]Cobban, The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution, p. 47

[53]Ibid., p. 52.

[54]Le Roy Ladurie, p. 432.

CHAPTER III

PEASANT REVOLUTION AND THE FEUDAL (SEIGNEURIAL) RIGHTS

The year 1789 was a critical point when the economic crisis, caused by the harvest failure of the previous year, coincided with the political crisis caused by the financial bankruptcy of the monarchy. This coincidence gave a crucial momentum to the long-simmering peasants' discontent with their worsening conditions and seigneurial exaction. The catastrophic harvest failure of 1788 caused serious food shortage and grain prices rose without interruption until July, 1789. From the high prices only the large landowners and large tenant-farmers benefited. Most of the small peasants and day laborers who were not self-sufficient and had to buy grain were hard hit. Already in the winter and spring of 1789 rural disturbances began to spread. But food riots themselves were not a new thing; the old regime had seen many jacqueries, which led to no revolution. What was unique about the revolts of 1789 was their dramatic coincidence with the political crisis, with revolutionary results. They occurred when the royal government had actually broken down, and thereby dealt a death blow to the old regime.[1]

The news of the calling of the Estates General raised vague but powerful hopes that at last something was to be

done to relieve the hardships and sufferings of the poor. Arthur Young's description of the expectations expressed through the mouth of an old country woman has almost become a cliché quoted by almost every historian dealing with this event. At the same time, however, the political ferment emanating from the electoral assemblies where the peasants elected the deputies to the Estates General ignited the peasant grievances into violent protests.[2] Moreover, the excitement of drawing up of the cahiers led the peasants to believe that to state a grievance in a cahier was automatically to have it redressed.[3] As early as March of 1789 peasants began to refuse to pay tithe and feudal dues and demanded their abolition, burning archives and even the châteaux. One historian estimated that more than 300 riots occurred in the four months preceding the fall of the Bastille.[4] One of the distinct characteristics of the revolts was their orderliness. There was little indiscriminate destruction or bloodshed. The protests were directed against carefully selected targets --manorial rolls.[5] In areas where peasants did not rise in revolt, they offered passive resistance by stoutly refusing to pay.

The rural disturbances in the spring and summer of 1789 show that the peasant revolution was developing autonomously from urban uprisings. The great contribution of Lefebvre to the historiography of the French Revolution is to have been the first to show it. He warns against the tendency to see the peasant revolts as a mere repercussion

of urban revolts.[6] Although the latter magnified the influence of the peasant revolts, peasants had their own cause and their protests had their own momentum. They were united in their hostility toward seigneurs, tithe-owners, and tax-collectors. This solidarity made the universal peasant uprising possible in 1789.

The important factor that gave a great stimulus to the peasant revolution was the fear of brigands that swept over France in the summer of 1789. While aroused to hope by the calling of the Estates General, the peasants had suspected that the privileged classes would stubbornly defend their privileges. This suspicion was soon confirmed by the aristocratic opposition to the doubling of the Third Estate and to the vote by head. As the number of vagrants was increasing in the countryside, rumors spread that "the aristocracy was plotting to disperse the Third Estate by force of arms and to send an army of brigands to subdue the provinces."[7] An almost universal fear swept over France; everywhere peasants imagined that they were about to be attacked by brigands hired by a plotting aristocracy. In a way, the linking of the brigands with the aristocratic conspiracy reveals the peasant proprietors' desperate fear of the dangerous classes. Peasants with some land were afraid their property was threatened, especially when the harvest was near.[8] In reality, however, the vagrants were only unemployed workers and peasants driven to despair by hunger. But the peasants did not draw a fine distinction.

Their mentality was deeply anchored in the irrational, and in the precarious economic and social situation in which they lived, some minor incident was enough to spread panic over the whole countryside. As false reports passed from village to village, the peasants armed themselves and waited for the approach of the imaginary enemy. When they found no enemy, they turned their attack to the seigneurs. Thus the fear of brigands reinforced the hatred which fed the attack already launched against the seigneurial regime in the refusal to pay dues and tithes. By the end of July rural unrest was so widespread that "a major military operation would have been necessary to suppress it."[9]

On the part of the leaders of the National Assembly*[10], the violent intrusion of the peasantry onto the scene was as disconcerting as unexpected. Their principal concern was to draw up a constitution, by which they would abolish the juridical privileges of the aristocracy. For them the peasant uprisings seemed to produce a situation which threw

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* On the question of who was the bourgeoisie that played a leading role in the French Revolution, orthodox theory and Cobban's critique have different opinions as already shown in the Introduction (p. 2 and 6). To avoid confusion, it seems necessary to clarify in what sense I use the term 'bourgeoisie.' In this thesis I will use the term 'bourgeoisie' (or revolutionary leaders) as referring to the well-to-do people who enjoyed significant property and education but, because of non-noble status, were excluded from the privileges of the nobles and from powerful positions in the state, the army, and the church. They were beginning to be resentful of the inequity of the privileged structure of society, and to feel the necessity of social reform. Believing in liberty and equality before law, they fought for social and legal reforms to achieve this end. For other details, see note 10.

all their programs of reform into confusion.[11] However, they could not suppress the peasant uprisings, because they lacked the armed forces; the only forces available were royal troops which might easily be turned against the Assembly itself. Moreover, they knew too well that they could not afford to alienate the peasantry, being as they were at loggerheads with the court and the aristocracy. They saw that to save the situation they had to do something substantial to satisfy the rebellious peasants.[12] On the famous night of August 4, 1789 they declared the destruction of the feudal regime.

In fact, however, the peasantry did not get what it had demanded. The National Assembly declared by the decisions of August 4, 1789 that "it destroys the feudal system in its entirety." But this was far from exact. From the institutional and juridical point of view the feudal system was destroyed through the destruction of the privileged orders of feudal society. Civil equality was proclaimed, and there would be no more special rights, power, and privileges monopolized by the noble classes. But economically the feudal system was not entirely destroyed, because a great part of feudal rights survived by the decrees of August 5-11 which distinguished between the redeemable and irredeemable rights. Lefebvre himself admits that the men sitting in the National Assembly were exceedingly reluctant to attack feudal rights, which they regarded as private property.[13] They tried, as Kemp points out, "to uphold the sanctity of

private property by assimilating the old forms of land ownership to a general law of property based on the model of the Roman Law."[14] Thus they distinguished feudal rights into two categories; one which appeared to derive from compulsion or usurpation, such as mortmain, right of justice, or banalités, and the other which were regarded as part of the concession of land. The first was declared to be abolished without redemption, and the second to be redeemable, continuing to be levied until compensation was paid. (The tithe was suppressed without indemnity, but could be levied until further legislation was passed.) In principle, feudal rights were abolished but, in practice, they were far from dead at least until redemption was completed.

In this attitude of the Assembly Lefebvre and Soboul see the compromise of the bourgeoisie with the aristocracy. In Soboul's words, "Here was a significant limitation which in effect preserved the essential part of the aristocracy's prerogatives."[15] Cobban even goes further to argue that the leaders of the National Assembly opposed the abolition of seigneurial rights because by 1789 the latter had often passed into their hands and, therefore, their abolition would be harmful to their material interest.[16]

Theoretically, the distinction between redeemable and irredeemable rights was based on the origin of the rights; rights which could be shown to derive from compulsion or usurpation were swept away, while all others that were taken to have a contractual origin in the nature of a rent

were to hold good. Practically, however, it was almost impossible to distinguish between the two categories of rights, because many of them dated back to distant past. Even if the documentary evidence showing their origins still existed, it was, for the most part, in the hands of the seigneurs.[17]

The abolition of feudalism turned out to be an empty measure for most of the peasants. From the middle of August, 1789 onward there flowed into the Assembly a steadily increasing tide of protest and complaints. The ambiguity in the very opening words of the decrees of August added to the confusion. Taking the statement that "feudal system has been destroyed completely" at face value, the peasants neither could nor would understand anything of the fine distinction of the jurists between feudal rights. They refused to pay dues any more because, they maintained, feudalism was abolished.[18] Rural disturbances began to arise again and continued to grow in number throughout the autumn and winter when the rents fell due. From merely refusing to pay the peasants speedily passed to more violent action and rural France was drifting toward anarchy. Early in February, 1790 the matter was discussed in the Assembly, with the result of the decrees of March 15 and May 7, 1790. But they reasserted the principle of the previous decrees by elaborating the distinction between the rights of feudal lordship and the contractual feudal rights.[19]

The former consisted of rights which were presumed to

have been usurped from the central power or acquired by means of violence --such as honorific rights, rights of seigneurial justice, rights of mortmain, serfdom, personal labor services, tolls and market fees, banalités, hunting and fishing rights, exclusive rights to keep pigeons. These were abolished without indemnity. The latter consisted of the rights which were assumed to have originated from the concession of land --such as annual dues like cens, rentes, champarts, and occasional dues like lods et ventes. These rights corresponded to the bourgeois concept of property and, therefore, became redeemable by compensation.

By the decree of May 3, 1790 were provided the terms for the redemption of feudal rights. "The amount of compensation was fixed at twenty times the annual payment for dues levied in cash, twenty-five times for dues levied in kind, while occasional dues would be assessed in proportion to their value."[20]

For the peasantry who had been demanding complete abolition of feudal rights these measures represented no progress, and the edifice of feudal rights seemed even solidified. For the conditions for redemption were so harsh that the peasants could not hope to redeem their lands.[21] Above all, most peasants could not afford to make the required payments. According to Herbert,

> the economic system under which the peasant lived had worked to deprive him of any reserve of capital. Taxes, dues, tithes reduced him, most frequently, to the bare level of subsistence, so that an unfavorable season was sufficient to bring him to starvation and bankruptcy.[22]

For such a peasant, payment of twenty or twenty-five times the value of his annual charges was an impossibility. Other conditions of redemption provided by the decree of May 3 weighed very unfavorably against the peasant. If his land was burdened with both annual and occasional obligations, he had to redeem them all together; if he had any arrears due over the preceding thirty years, he had to pay them before redemption.[23] Even the burden of proving the illegitimacy of the dues fell on the peasants. Moreover, according to Soboul, only those who owned their land could benefit from the redemption, for they could pass on the cost to their tenants or sharecroppers.[24]

The ways open for the peasants were too harsh, either to remain under the feudal yoke or to fall into debt in order to pay redemption and finally to abandon their land to pay the debt.[25] Disappointment grew fierce again and the peasantry continued its struggle against redemption. Once more a steady stream of protest began to flow into the Assembly. During the summer months of 1790 the anti-feudal movement entered its most violent phase, but there was no improvement of the situation. In the spring of the following year there again occurred a succession of disturbances almost everywhere in the country.

However, the attitude of the revolutionary assemblies towards these incessant peasant revolts was all the more repressive as the latter became more violent. In June, 1791 the Constituent Assembly decreed that

> there is no more excuse for unjust refusal of payment and whosoever is guilty of such a refusal must expect to be considered by all as a rebel against the law, as a usurper of the property of others, as a bad citizen and a common enemy.[26]

Despite the hostile attitude of the Assembly there were few regions untroubled by the resistance, more or less violent, of the peasants to the maintenance of the feudal system. the early months of 1792 the peasant insurrections became more violent than most of those of the two preceding years. In almost every province revolts occurred the violence of which recalled the wild summer of 1789.[27]

Faced with the threat of foreign invasion, the Assembly began to realize that if France was to overcome the threats from without, first of all she had to avoid falling into anarchy within. For that purpose, it realized, some real concessions had to be made to the demands of the peasantry, whose support was indispensible to overcome internal and external threats.[28] By the decree of June 18, 1792 the Assembly made the burden of proving the feudal rights redeemable fall on the seigneurs. With the more radical turn of the revolution after the fall of the monarchy (August 10, 1792) peasant support became more indispensable to the new leaders.[29] By the decree of August 25, 1792 they went one step further to suppress without compensation the rights for which a specific legal title could not be provided by the seigneur. Compared to the decrees of 1790 which placed the burden of proving the illegitimacy of feudal rights on the peasants, these measures were a certain advance, if not

a solution.

During the great crisis of the summer of 1793, when France was at war with all the neighboring powers and when royalist insurrections were raging in Vendee, the Convention found it had to obtain the support of the peasantry at any cost for the defense of the Republic. By the decree of July 17, 1793 the Convention permanently abolished all feudal rights without compensation. Thus "peasants who held land subject to payments of some kind to the lord, except where they resulted from a contractual agreement --tenancy or métayage-- were now confirmed as full owners."[30]

It took almost four years for the feudal system to be destroyed completely since it was nominally abolished on August 4, 1789. As Soboul pointed out, "the terms of redemption turned the abolition of feudalism into a compromise heavily weighed in favor of the aristocracy."[31] For the amount of the indemnity at twenty to twenty-five times annual charges, apart from other conditions of redemption, meant that redemption was a practical impossibility for most peasants. During this period peasant revolts continued almost without interruption. Only in 1792 when the Assembly, faced with the threats from within and without, were in urgent need of the support of the peasantry, did it begin to make concessions to the peasants' demands. Finally the measure of July 17, 1793 gave satisfaction to the peasantry. As Cobban argues, as a result of their tenacity, the peasants liberated themselves from the feudal yoke. Revolutionary

leaders only sanctioned what the peasants accomplished.[32]

Then why were the men of the revolutionary assemblies so reluctant to comply with the demands of the peasantry? One possible reason may be found in the fact that some of them had become owners of seigneurial rights. This is the point Cobban argues when he refutes the orthodox theory. He argues that the passage of seigneuries from noble to non-noble hands was progressing on a considerable scale and that the revolutionaries, as owners of seigneurial rights, were naturally opposed to their abolition.[33] For Cobban, their addiction to the distinction between the redeemable and irredeemable rights was "an attempt to save what could be saved from the wreck of seigneurial fortunes."[34] But he did not provide specific evidence to support his argument.

Rather, the reason why the revolutionaries were so reluctant to abolish feudal dues without compensation was because the peasants' demands were contradictory to the bourgeois concept of property. They regarded some feudal rights as private property, whose sanctity should be respected. Hence they adhered to the principle of distinguishing between rights that originated from compulsion and those with contractual origins. They tried to preserve the property right of the second type of feudal rights, whether they were owners or not, until the last moment, when they were forced to give up their principle by force of circumstances.

CHAPTER III

NOTES

[1]Davies, p. 39.

[2]Lefebvre, The Great Fear of 1789, trans., Joan White (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 40.

[3]Doyle, Origins of the French Revolution, p. 199.

[4]Herbert, p. 93.

[5]Doyle, op.cit., p. 201.

[6]Lefebvre, "La Revolution française et les Paysans," p. 342.

[7]Lefebvre, The Great Fear of 1789, x.

[8]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, p. 42.

[9]Cobban, "The Myth of the French Revolution," in idem., Aspects of the French Revolution (New York: George Barziller, 1968), p. 97.

[10]Since Cobban raised a critism of the orthodox theory, studies have been made on the nature of the bourgeoisie that played a leading role in the revolutionary assemblies. George Taylor's article "Non-capitalist Wealth and the Origin of the French Revolution" (American Historical Review, 72, 1966-67, 469-496) actually confirms Cobban's main point that the revolutionary bourgeoisie was not a bourgeoisie of industrial capitalists, industrial entrepreneurs, and financiers of big business. Taylor estimates that more than 80% of French private property was in the form of the proprietary wealth --land, buildings, office, rentes, and, therefore, capitalism was still in a nascent stage (p. 486). He argues that "what the emerging data have made impossible is to equate the identifiable leadership of the upper Third Estate--the "revolutionary bourgeoisie"-- with a social class that played a common role in the relations of production, or, more precisely, owned the instruments of production in an emergent capitalist economy." (p. 495)

I agree with Cobban and Taylor in rejecting the meaning of bourgeoisie as implying the industrial capitalists. For my definition of "bourgeoisie", see page 39.

[11]Herbert, p. 101.

[12]Davies, p. 39.

[13]Lefebvre, "The Place of the Revolution in the Agrarian History of France," p. 32.

[14]Kemp, p. 85.

[15]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, p. 63.

[16]Cobban, The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution, pp. 43-44.

[17]Herbert, p. 113.

[18]Ibid., p. 117.

[19]Albert Soboul, The French Revolution 1787-1799, trans., Alan Forrest and Colin Jones (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 187. The following paragraph about this distinction is based on Soboul's explanation in this book.

[20]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, p. 64.

[21]Herbert, p. 147.

[22]Ibid., p. 139.

[23]Ibid., pp. 138-140.

[24]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, p. 64.

[25]Herbert, p. 141.

[26]Ibid., p. 174.

[27]Ibid., p. 188

[28]Ibid.

[29]Kemp, pp. 85-86.

[30]Ibid., p. 86.

[31]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, p. 64.

[32]Cobban, The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution, p. 53.

[33]Ibid., p. 46

[34]Ibid., p. 41.

CHAPTER IV

THE IMPACT OF THE REVOLUTION ON COLLECTIVE RIGHTS

The final abolition of feudal rights without any compensation was a hard-won victory of the peasantry over the reluctant leaders of the revolutionary movement. From it all the peasants, whether landowner or not, benefited and got satisfaction. Another important agrarian question --collective rights of the rural community-- can also be seen in terms of a clash between two different mentalities of the peasantry and the revolutionary leaders. While the majority of the peasantry wished to keep the traditional agricultural system which, in effect, curtailed individual property rights,the revolutionary leaders remained faithful to their ideal of the sanctity of private property. Throughout the revolution these two mentalities clashed, interacted, and brought about a result, which became a foundation of the French rural physiognomy of the following centuries.

Since time out of mind the collective life of the peasantry, based on collective ownership of common land and exercise of collective rights, had formed the foundation of the traditional agriculture.[1] This was something which provided the peasants with a sense of identity and stability. As pointed out before, however, at the end of the Ancien Régime

this collective aspect of the rural society was undergoing an attack launched by the agricultural policies of the royal government. By this most small peasants and day laborers were being deprived of important resources. In the peasant uprisings most small peasants not only attacked the seigneuries but also attempted to reimpose the observance of collective obligations.[2] They stubbornly called for the maintenance of collective rights, often resorting to violence by demolishing enclosure. They also demanded that communal regulations of farming be preserved, and opposed any changes by innovative individuals. In short, they wanted to keep the traditional system of agriculture, "not only because it was the way of life to which they had been accustomed but also because the new agriculture threatened their very conditions of existence."[3] This peasant mentality, based on "the concept of a less than absolute right of private property," together with the demand for dividing up of large farms rented to agricultural entrepreneurs, formed the essence of peasant ideals.[4] In a way, it is interesting to note a contradictory tendency in the peasant desires. They demanded the abolition of feudal rights, which they regarded as an obsolete burden on their private property. On the other hand, they wanted to uphold the traditional agricultural system, which imposed limitations on the private property of others. It should be emphasized here that not all the peasants shared the same ideals. The social differentiation of rural society on which most historians

agree should not be forgotten. Among the rural population large-scale and better-off peasants hated the restrictions which were imposed on their property by the rural community.

On the other hand, the men of the revolutionary assemblies were educated and enlightened people who believed in the principle of liberal economy and the sanctity of private property. They proclaimed the total right to property "a natural and imprescriptible right" according to both the 1789 and 1793 Declarations of Rights. In agricultural terms, this meant an individual's freedom to enclose, thereby to do away with communal obligations on his property; it meant freedom to cultivate his land as he liked, thereby to take away communal regulations of cultivation exerted by the rural community.[5]

Based on this principle, the agrarian legislations of the assemblies authorized enclosure for all France, suppressed collective rights and compulsory crop rotation, and permitted the division of commons --in the same direction as those of the royal government at the end of the old regime. In this respect, a continuity from the past in the French Revolution --which De Tocqueville found in the political aspects-- can also be found in the rural affairs. The revolution achieved at greater speed developments which were already going on. It did away with legal obstacles to free cultivation and individual initiative. Thus Lefebvre argues that

> the agrarian evolution of France continued in the direction it had already taken in the eighteenth century. In this respect ..., the revolution

> promptly and energetically undertook, almost without realizing it, the implementation of the measures the monarchy had timidly outlined.[6]

These agrarian reforms of the revolutionary assemblies, by creating the legal framework for a modern, progressive, and capitalist agriculture, benefited better-off peasants who were producing for the market. But they did not give satisfaction to the mass of small peasants and day laborers. The suppression of their collective rights helped to subvert the very basis of their existence, making them more dependent on large-scale farmers. The men in the revolutionary assemblies may have thought that one could succeed in improving production by appealing to individual energy, once it was liberated from communal restrictions, and thereby could better the existence of all men. But this very recourse to individual egoism precipitated the dissociation of the peasant community.[7] Even the Montagnards who allied with the urban popular masses remained indifferent to the demands of the small peasants asking the break-up of large farms and maintenance of traditional regulation of farming and collective rights.

Lefebvre points out that had the peasants been united in these demands, as they were in opposition to feudal rights, they could have made themselves felt politically. But he also emphasizes this was impossible because the conditions of the peasantry varied considerably.[8] The peasantry shared common hostility toward feudal exploitation but it did not share the same opinion about other agrarian

problems.

The conflict of economic interest among the peasantry appeared, in particular, over the division of common lands which was authorized by the decrees of August 14, 1792 and later June 10, 1793. Large and better-off landowners and tenant-farmers who were producing for profit welcomed the division because it would bring an increase in the size and output of their land. On the contrary, laboureurs were resistant to the division. For them the extra land they would acquire was insignificant, compared to the loss of the valuable pasture for their cattle provided by common lands.[9] For the small peasants and the day laborers with no or insufficient land, it was true that the division of commons would restrict their grazing ground which was so important to them. But the division was also welcome for them, since they could become proprietors when they got their share of the divided common lands. Except in the mountainous regions where the division of alpine pasture would simply decrease the area of pasturage without making peasants owners of arable land, small peasants and day laborers welcomed the division of commons.[10]

Considered in this way, Cobban's criticism of Lefebvre concerning collective rights does not contradict Lefebvre's argument as Cobban supposes it does. Cobban argues that it was not the better-off but the poor peasants who demanded the division of commons, contrary to Lefebvre's argument that the poorer were attached to collective rights, while

the better-off peasants were hostile to them. Cobban seems to think that if the poor peasants were deeply attached to collective rights as Lefebvre argues, then they would have wanted to keep common lands rather than to advocate its division.

Cobban's problem arises because he fails to distinguish collective rights --right itself-- from common land. The former included several kinds of rights that belonged to all members of the community --for instance, free pasture, glanage, picking-up of wood and so on. As far as collective rights were concerned, better-off peasants tended to be hostile toward them because they inflicted certain obligations on their private properties, whereas they were important resources for the poor peasants who had not enough land for self-sufficiency.[11] Common lands were land itself, such as forest, wasteland, marshland, belonging to no private owner but to the whole community. Some collective rights were exercised on private lands as well as common lands. Even if common lands disappeared, the peasants could still exercise their collective rights on private lands. Thus while the poor peasants clung to their collective rights, they wanted the division of common lands with the hope of owning land.[12]

Regardless of who wanted or opposed the division of common lands, this measure, together with other agrarian policies of the revolutionary assemblies --suppression of collective rights and of any regulations of the community,

and authorization of enclosure-- was bound to further the disintegration of the rural community which had already begun to appear under the old regime. In this case, however, the clash between bourgeois ideas and the collective mentality of most of the small peasants did not bring about a sweeping result, in contrast to the abolition of feudal rights. In other words, the revolutionary leaders did not succeed in destroying completely the traditional forms of agriculture and thereby giving free rein to the development of capitalist agriculture.

Although enclosure was authorized, enclosure in the English sense was difficult unless scattered fields were consolidated into a compact holding, which would mean a complete redistribution of land.[13] According to Bloch,

> in England every deed of enclosure prescribed a redistribution of properties.... This procedure was natural enough in a country where very few tenures had achieved perpetuity; but in France any such coercion was quite inconceivable.[14]

Peasants were opposed to the redistribution of lands, for a good number of them would have lost the part they had secured and, if acquired, they would have nothing to gain by exchanging their holdings for the possibly inferior plots which a general redistribution would procure for them.[15]

Thus the revolutionary leaders were not successful in bringing about enclosure --a prerequisite of agricultural development. "The most they could do," according to Kemp, "was to make it legally possible for the individual peasant

to choose his method of cultivation and to withdraw his land from the collective servitudes...."[16] Enclosure was rare still in the nineteenth century, and most of the open fields have remained so until well into the twentieth century. This is why the autonomy of the small producers lasted so long in France.

The poor peasants, on the other hand, did not get the restoration of the rural community as they had desired. But it was not destroyed completely; communal land and collective rights were not suppressed completely. Both lasted throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth century. For instance, the custom of collective grazing on the harvested fields long survived in the regions of open field, especially where the fields were long.[17] In the late nineteenth century the maintenance of collective rights found its legal basis by the law of 1892, still in force, that made the abandonment of common pasture depend on the consent of the village peasantry.[18]

CHAPTER IV

NOTES

[1]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, p. 24.

[2]Lefebvre, "The Place of the Revolution in the Agrarian History of France,"p. 38.

[3]Davies, p. 40.

[4]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, p. 26.

[5]Davies, p. 40; Lefebvre, "The Place of the Revolution in the Agrarian History of France," p. 40.

[6]Ibid., p. 41.

[7]Lefebvre, "La Revolution française et les Paysans," p. 356.

[8]Ibid., pp. 361-364.; "The Place of the Revolution in the Agrarian History of France," p. 33.

[9]Bloch, p. 227.

[10]Ibid., p. 225.

[11]Lefebvre, "La Revolution française et les Paysans," p. 348.

[12]Davies, p. 32.

[13]Bloch, p. 232.

[14]Ibid., p. 233. About the difficulty of the redistribution of land, Lefebvre, in his "La Révolution française et les Paysans," traces the origin of the problem to the feudal structure of land under the old regime. According to him, the lords' main source of revenue was the feudal rights which were attached to the existing leaseholds. For them, to reorganize their scattered fields while keeping their feudal rights was practically impossible. For details, see Lefebvre's "La Révolution française et les Paysans," pp. 352-354.

[15]Bloch, p. 233; Lefebvre, The Coming of the French Revolution, p. 135.

[16]Kemp, pp. 88-89.

[17]Bloch, pp. 239-240.

[18]Albert Soboul, "The French Rural Community in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," Past and Present, 10 (1956), 91.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

As seen so far, the peasant revolution was an autonomous movement with its own origin and its own aims. On the eve of the revolution the conditions of the majority of the peasantry were worsening. Feudal burdens to which almost all the peasants were subject were becoming heavier by the so-called "feudal reaction." Most of the small peasants were being deprived of their collective rights, the very basis of their existence, by the new trends in agriculture supported by the agrarian policies of the royal government, while the size of their land holdings was becoming smaller because of the population growth.

Finding themselves almost alone in bearing various burdens of taxes, tithes, and feudal dues, the peasants were becoming indignant against aristocratic privileges and against urban wealth invading the countryside. To the growing peasant grievances the economic crisis caused by the harvest failure of 1788 --food shortage and rising prices of food-- added a crucial momentum. In this situation, the political debate generated during the election of the deputies and the drafting of the cahiers led the peasantry to enter abruptly the political scene.

Where does the autonomous peasant revolution fit in the whole context of the French Revolution, especially in connection with the attitude of the bourgeois revolutionaries? An answer to this question seems all the more necessary because the leadership of the revolution remained in their hands throughout the revolution.

The peasants revolted against feudal rights and their struggle against redemption which continued for almost four years finally brought them what they had demanded. In this struggle the revolutionary leaders were exceedingly reluctant to concede to the demands of the peasantry, partly because some of them were owners of feudal rights, but mainly because they regarded feudal rights which could be proved to have originated from a concession of land as a kind of private property. Only when they were faced with the internal and external threats, and therefore became in need of the peasant support, only when they had no choice but to accept the demands of the peasantry, did they give in.

The peasants also revolted against the encroachment on their collective customs and traditional agricultural system authorized by the old regime and the revolutionary assemblies. In this latter struggle the peasantry did not get what it demanded, for it was not united on this issue because of a deep cleavage in the rural society. However, the bourgeois leaders could not succeed completely, either, in their attempts to free agriculture from the communal restrictions. These attempts could have succeeded only on the basis of an

entire redistribution of land, to which most peasants were opposed. The result, in a way, was a compromise between the peasantry and the bourgeoisie.[1]

These two important aspects of the peasant revolution show well the relation between the peasantry and the bourgeoisie. In terms of policy-making, the bourgeois leaders were in an active position, and the peasantry in a passive one. However, in the process of making decisions the peasantry could put pressure on the bourgeois leaders to achieve its demands. This was possible because the bourgeois leaders had to make concessions to the demands of the peasantry in return for the latter's support. In other words, the bourgeois leaders were, in a sense, forced to come to terms with the peasantry at every crucial stage of the revolution.

Considered in this way, both Lefebvre and Cobban are partially correct in their explanation of the peasant revolution in relation to the whole French Revolution. Lefebvre can never be denied his contribution to the historiography of the French Revolution, establishing that the peasant revolution was an autonomous movement. His work shows that the peasant revolution holds a crucially important place in the revolution and without it the French Revolution could have succeeded only with great difficulty.[2]

But the problem with Lefebvre is that while he emphasizes the autonomy of the peasant revolution, he still clings to the theory of an essentially bourgeois revolution.

How can these two conflicting ideas coexist? The second idea of his explanation needs modification.

This problem becomes clearer in the argument of Soboul --a faithful follower of Lefebvre's theory-- that "the peasant revolution, by its obstinate refusal of any compromise, furthered the bourgeois revolution."[3] This argument is seemingly plausible but the problem seems to lie in the word 'further.' This argument gives the impression that Soboul assumes a priori the essential nature of the French Revolution, that it should be a bourgeois revolution and that the peasant revolution was important as an extra factor furthering the bourgeois revolution. If the bourgeoisie was always seeking a compromise with the aristocracy, at least before July 1793, as Soboul argues,[4] then the measure of July 17, 1793 should be regarded as a concession of the bourgeoisie to the peasant revolution, which means a step backward from the bourgeoisie's objective rather than a step forward. Even admitting that the peasant revolution helped in the end to strengthen the position of the bourgeoisie, by eliminating the economic basis of the aristocracy, the peasant revolution had its own aims and its participants forced the bourgeoisie to accept them. While the peasant revolution played an important role in bringing down the feudal regime as Lefebvre and Soboul emphasize, it should be given a place of its own in the history of the revolution.

Cobban, on the other hand, deserves credit for making us aware of the dangers lying behind a simple notion

of a bourgeois revolution. He stresses the need to write a social history based on historical facts not on the rigid patterns deduced from social theories of later days. His position becomes clear in his treatment of the peasant revolution. He argues that it was the obstinate peasantry, not the bourgeois revolutionaries, that abolished feudalism forever, for what might be called 'feudalism' at the end of the eighteenth century consisted of nothing but seigneurial rights.[5] His placing the peasantry in the central role in abolishing feudal rights is correct, but the problem with Cobban is that his equation of feudalism with seigneurial rights is oversimplified. Certainly, feudalism in its strict sense no longer existed in eighteenth-century France. But in the eyes of contemporaries,

> feudalism referred to, besides seigneurial rights, all those institutions of the old regime providing special rights, privileges or powers to the first two orders of the realm, or to privileged groups of commoners, including privileges in legal processes; exclusive access to careers in the church, military and the diplomatic corps; deferential rights to church pews; .... and perhaps most important, tax privileges, exemptions, and advantages.[6]

In this sense, the bourgeoisie also revolted against feudalism, for their main objective was to destroy the aristocratic privileges and to establish the society based on liberty and equality before law.

Cobban's criticism of 'the overthrow of feudalism by the bourgeoisie as a myth'[7] thus loses some ground. Both the bourgeoisie and the peasantry revolted against feudalism, with different targets. For the bourgeoisie the target was

inequality and privileges of the feudal society, and for the peasantry economic exploitation under seigneurial system. The merger of the peasant revolution with the revolution of the bourgeoisie touched off the revolutionary explosion, resulting in the final abolition of feudalism. Both the bourgeoisie and the peasantry should be accorded their own roles in destroying the old regime and what was left of the feudal structure. In this sense, the peasant revolution was interwoven with the revolution of the bourgeoisie, complementing one another. It might be therefore correct to place the peasant revolution parallel to the revolution of the bourgeoisie in the whole French Revolution, rather than to put it tangential to the bourgeois revolution, vertically as an extra phenomenon subsumed under the framework of the bourgeois revolution, as the orthodox theory supposes.

CHAPTER V

NOTES

[1]Soboul, "The French Rural Community in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," p. 91.

[2]Lefebvre, The Coming of the French Revolution, p. 131.

[3]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, p. 65; idem., "A Propos d'une thèse récente Sur le Movement Paysan dans la Révolution française," Annales Historique de la Révolution française, 45 (1973), 86.

[4]Soboul, A Short History of the French Revolution, p. 64.

[5]Cobban, "The Myth of the French Revolution," pp. 95-97; idem., The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution, pp. 35 and 53.

[6]Gilbert Shapiro, "Class in the French Revolution: A Discussion," The Social Origins of the French Revolution, ed. Ralph W. Greenlaw (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1975). p. 237.

[7]Cobban, "The Myth of the French Revolution," p. 95.

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