2 *Historians and the French Revolution*

So we come to the debate that has divided historians for the past 200 years – from the day when Edmund Burke, an Anglo-Irishman, first dipped his quill in vitriol to blast the Revolution at its birth. The debate has continued through various stages, raising new issues and sparking new conflicts as it went along. For example, during the first century of discussion – from 1790 to, say, 1900 – historians tended to consider the problems of the Revolution in largely political and ideological terms, without paying much attention to its social and economic foundations. Burke was no exception; he never made any serious attempt to study the society out of which the Revolution grew. Yet, flimsy as his evidence was, he found the old system by no means antipathetic: in fact, only a few minor adjustments were needed to put it right. The Revolution could not, therefore, in his opinion, be the outcome of a genuine and widespread desire for reform but was provoked rather by the ambitions and intrigues of a few. He cites, in particular, the clique of literary men and 'philosophers', who had long been sniping at the established Church, and the jumped-up moneyed interest, ever eager to settle accounts with the traditional nobility. And, in the wake of these, he argues, followed the 'mob' or 'swinish multitude', hungry for loot, given to crime and incapable of forming any judgements of their own. Thus the Revolution, having no roots in legitimate complaint, was the child of the conspiracy of a few.[1] This 'conspiracy thesis' has been taken up by many writers since that time: by the Abbé Barruel in the mid-1790s; by Hippolyte Taine, a liberal of the 1840s who became soured by the Commune of 1871; and, with different points of emphasis, by Augustin Cochin in the 1910s and 1920s[2] and J. L. Talmon in the early 1950s. In short, such an explanation has tended to find favour with many to whom the Revolution has appeared as an evil rather than as a good, and who have been inclined to fasten on to a variety of scapegoats in order to explain its origins and progress: whether freemasons, Jews, Committees of Thirty or disgruntled 'cabals' of unsuccessful lawyers or *literati*.

On the other hand, those who have favoured the Revolution, either in whole or in part, have naturally tended to explain it in somewhat different terms: either as a legitimate political protest against the

shortcomings of the *ancien régime* or as a social protest of depressed or underprivileged classes. The liberal historians of the Restoration – writers like Thiers, Mignet and Madame de Staël – saw it mainly in the former light:[3] and the motives that prompted them, in the 1820s, to demand a more liberal constitution, or charter, from Louis XVIII and Charles X were basically the same as those which, a generation before, had prompted the revolutionaries of 1789 to draft a Declaration of the Rights of Man and to draw up the liberal Constitution of 1791. Thus such writers saw the Revolution essentially as a political movement 'from above', promoted by the 'respectable' classes of the nation – the liberal aristocracy and bourgeoisie – for the redress of longstanding grievances and the reform of outmoded institutions. 'When a reform becomes necessary,' wrote Mignet, 'and the movement to achieve it has arrived, nothing can stand in its way and everything serves its progress.'[4] This liberal or Whiggish explanation, too, with its emphasis on an almost inevitable forward-looking progression in political ideas and institutions, has found plenty of adherents down to the present day. So we find Francis Parkman, the American historian of the British settlement of Canada, in a history written in the early 1920s, describing the French society of the *ancien régime* as an 'aggregate of disjointed parts, held together by a meshwork of arbitrary power itself touched with decay', which was 'drifting slowly and unconsciously towards the cataclysm of the Revolution'.[5]

Jules Michelet, the great French historian of the 1840s, also sympathized with the revolutionaries of 1789; but being a Republican and a democrat, he saw the Revolution as a far more drastic surgical operation than did Mignet or Thiers. In his pages the Revolution becomes a spontaneous and regenerative upsurge of the whole French nation against the despotism, grinding poverty and injustice of the *ancien régime*: something, in fact, like the spontaneous outbreak of popular hope and hatred portrayed by Charles Dickens in the opening chapters of *A Tale of Two Cities*. For Michelet, the common people – the peasants and city poor, who have suffered most from the cruelty and injustice of kings and aristocrats – are far from being a passive instrument manipulated by other groups; they are the real and living heroes of the piece.[6] This view of the Revolution as a spontaneous, angry outburst of a whole people against poverty and oppression has, until recent times, probably been more influential than any other.

Alexis de Tocqueville, writing a few years later, held other views. Being a provincial aristocrat with strong Whiggish inclinations, it was natural enough that he should share Michelet's taste for liberty,

but he firmly rejected his passion for equality and the 'people's' revolution. In fact, he wrote that the French Revolution 'was prepared by the most civilized, but carried out by the most barbarous and the rudest classes of the nation'. However, far from presenting the Revolution as an unfortunate break with a more glorious past (in the manner of Burke and the conservatives of the 1820s), Tocqueville stressed the continuity of institutions and ideas linking the Revolution and Empire with the *ancien régime*. 'The French Revolution', he wrote, 'will only be the darkness of night to those who merely regard itself; only the time which preceded it will give the light to illuminate it.'[7] And he goes on to argue that, while the Revolution and Empire strengthened the central authority, in terms of both the government and its agents, in doing so they merely added to or completed the measures already taken by their forerunners in the *ancien régime*. It was, in fact, in his opinion, little more than the logical sequel to the 'administrative revolution' launched by Louis XVI. He pointed to the extended powers that by the 1750s had been accorded to the Royal Council, the all-pervading activities of the Intendants, the progressive reduction in the independence of the local government and the *pays d'états**, the growing integration of the Gallican Church with the machinery of state, and the emergence of a whole new apparatus for the exercise of administrative justice. And not only that: France had the best roads in Europe; social welfare was being improved; torture was being abolished; and the system of issuing *lettres de cachet* ('sealed letters') to commit persons to prison without trial was falling into disuse (there were only 14,000 such 'letters' issued under Louis XVI, compared to the 150,000 under Louis XV). Moreover, the Bastille was being emptied of its prisoners, and only seven remained to be liberated in July 1789. But Tocqueville added with a remarkable flash of insight: 'The social order destroyed by a revolution is almost always better than that which immediately precedes it, and experience shows that the most dangerous moment for a bad government is generally that in which it sets about reform.' Thus it was not so much the absence of reform as the nature and tardiness of it which, in opening the eyes of men to better things, served to precipitate a revolution rather than to avert it.

Tocqueville adds a further dimension to the debate when he applies a similar argument in criticizing Michelet's notion of revolution as a spontaneous revolt of 'misery'. Was France, in fact, poor or becoming poorer? No, answers Tocqueville, her trade, her national income and the production of her industries and agriculture were rapidly expanding; the middle classes were becoming more

* Provinces recently attached to France.

prosperous; Paris was being rebuilt, largely by the enterprise of the wealthy bourgeoisie; and Bordeaux, on the eve of revolution, could outmatch the wealth and trade of Liverpool. The peasants, too, far from continuing to grovel in abject poverty, backwardness or unrelieved squalor, or to be bound by servitude to their lord's domain, were becoming literate and had already become proprietors of one-third of the land in France. Why, then, asks Tocqueville, was there a revolution in France and not in Austria, Prussia, Poland or Russia, where the people – and the peasants in particular – were far more impoverished and oppressed? It was precisely, he argues, because the middle classes were becoming richer and more conscious of their increased social importance and because the peasants were becoming free, literate and prosperous that the old feudal survivals and aristocratic privileges appeared all the more vexatious and intolerable. And he concludes, in a passage from which I have already quoted:

> It is not always from going from bad to worse that a society falls into a revolution. It happens most often that a people, which has supported without complaint, as if they were not felt, the most oppressive laws, throws them off as soon as their weight is lightened.... Feudalism at the height of its power had not inspired Frenchmen with so much hatred as it did on the eve of its disappearing. The slightest acts of arbitrary power under Louis XVI seemed less easy to endure than all the despotism of Louis XIV.[8]

Yet, for all his originality and brilliance and the respect he has won among later generations of scholars, Tocqueville left several questions unanswered, among them: if Louis XVI and his ministers were of so reforming a disposition, why did their reforms stop short – and *have* to stop short – of giving a more general satisfaction? And, more particularly, what were the actual circumstances – what was the spark or trigger – that provoked the outbreak; and how did a revolt of disgruntled and power-hungry magistrates and aristocrats – for this is how the floodgates were opened – become transformed into a revolution of the 'middling' and lower classes of town and countryside? (As the reader may remember, I have dealt with some of these questions in the previous chapter.)

But, meanwhile, the debate continued and other historians entered the fray, among them Alphonse Aulard, author of a four-volume *Political History* of the Revolution which appeared at the turn of the century. As Michelet's views were those of a Republican democrat and Tocqueville's of a liberal conservative of the 1840s and 1850s, and Taine in his turn reflected the views of an ex-liberal turned

conservative by the events of 1871, so Aulard was a typical radical of the Third Republic which immediately followed. Like Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime*, Aulard's *Political History* blazed a new trail and marked a turning-point in the study of the French Revolution. On the one hand, it ushered in a new era as a work of exact and scrupulous scholarship: Aulard was, in fact, the first French historian to apply a rigorously systematic and critical use of sources to a work of modern history, taking as his models the German school of Ranke and the French medievalist tradition established by the École des Chartes. But Aulard's *History*, as its title suggests, still follows the nineteenth-century pattern of arguing about the Revolution in political and ideological terms. Though his *History* exhibits the great objectivity of the scholar trained in the use of original records, it has by no means eliminated the political bias of the citizen who like Michelet has been reared in the democratic–Republican tradition. This bias and his general conception of the Revolution are evident enough from the preface he wrote for his first edition:

> I wish to write the political history of the Revolution from the point of view of the origin and development of Democracy and Republicanism. Democracy is the logical consequence of the principle of equality. Republicanism is the logical consequence of the principle of national sovereignty. These two consequences did not ensue at once. In place of Democracy, the men of 1789 founded a middle-class government, a suffrage of property-owners. In place of the Republic, they organised a limited Monarchy. Not until September 22nd [1792] did they abolish the Monarchy and create the Republic. The republican form of government lasted ... until 1804 ... when the government of the Republic was confided to an emperor.[9]

Yet, for all the deep differences of social origin and outlook and political attachment that divide them, these earlier historians of the Revolution have certain significant characteristics in common. For one thing, they all (even Michelet) treated the Revolution 'from above' – that is, from the elevation of the Royal Court at Versailles, or the National Assembly, the Jacobin Club or the national press. In consequence, the Revolution becomes as a battle of ideas or of rival political factions in which the main contenders for power are the King and the Court party, the Parlements and aristocracy, and the Third Estate with its middle-class and liberal–aristocratic leaders. Even with Michelet and Tocqueville the peasants hardly appear in any corporeal sense (or with any degree of substance) let alone the urban lower classes (or *sans-culottes*); and,

when they do, their thoughts and actions are merely made to mirror those of the aristocracy, the revolutionary bourgeoisie, or the orators and journalists of the Tuileries and the Palais Royal. This approach to the problem is as true of the liberal and radical historians as it is of the conservatives and monarchists – as true of Thiers, Michelet and Aulard as it is of Burke and Taine.

It is, in fact, this shift in focus from the predominantly political–ideological to the predominantly social and social–economic that has been the most significant innovation of the main school of revolutionary historians since Aulard's day. The peasantry and urban *sans-culottes* (particularly those in Paris, it is true) have been brought into the picture and studied in their own right – or 'from below' – as social classes and groups having their own identity, ideas and aspirations independent of those of the upper and middle classes. Accompanying this shift in focus is the tendency to present the conflicts of the Revolution in terms of a struggle of classes rather than of political ideas or ideologies. This reorientation of revolutionary studies clearly owes a great deal to Marx and to the spread of socialist ideas in Europe during the past hundred years, and to that extent it may be said to represent a new *socialist*, as well as a more generally *social*, interpretation of the French Revolution. But it is more than that, and it may perhaps be more accurately portrayed as a response to the new problems and social developments of the twentieth century which have widened the horizons of historians in general – such developments as universal suffrage, market research, the welfare state, working-class movements, mass political parties, the revolutions in Eastern Europe and Asia and the upheavals resulting from two world wars.

The first French historian to give this new direction to revolutionary studies was Jean Jaurès, the author of *L'Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française*, first published in four volumes in 1901–4. Jaurès was certainly a socialist, as the title of his work makes clear. But the book was by no means a party piece or a narrow political polemic, and Jaurès, as he acknowledged himself, owed as much to Michelet and to the narrative–biographical style of Plutarch as he did to Marx. Yet, in spite of this variety of influences, his *Histoire* is essentially an economic and social interpretation of the origins and course of the Revolution. In fact, he considered purely 'political' history to be 'a mere abstraction' and pointedly asked: 'How can [Aulard] fully understand the change that occurred during the Revolution from a bourgeois oligarchy to a democracy without conceiving of the social and political upheavals as intimately linked?'[10]

Jaurès' more particular innovation was to have probed far more

deeply than his predecessors into the evident divisions within the Third Estate, and to have begun the systematic exploration of the role played by the peasants and *menu peuple*. And this tradition, once established, was carried on, during the next sixty years and more, by his principal successors in the field: Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul. Mathiez dominated the study of the Revolution in the period between the two world wars, both at home and abroad; his main claim to fame for a long time rested on his rescue of Robespierre from the Chamber of Horrors in which the historians of the previous century (with some support from Aulard) had almost universally confined him. But, in the context of the 'social interpretation', his major achievement was probably his close scrutiny of the Parisian *sans-culottes* and their spokesmen and, in his *La Vie chère et le mouvement social sous la Terreur*, his clear distinction between the notion of 'freedom' held by the shopkeepers and merchants and that held by the small consumers or *sans-culottes*.[11]

No other historian of the Revolution, however, had an international reputation for scholarship equal to that of Georges Lefebvre, who was born in the same year as Mathiez (1874) but who long outlived him. His career also followed a quite distinctive course. In 1924 he published his great pioneering study *Les Paysans du Nord*, in which for the first time the peasants of the Revolution were presented not as a single undifferentiated class (as they had been by Tocqueville and others) but as a conglomeration of widely differing social groups. In spite of their common identity as a rural community, which enabled them to unite in a universal peasant rising in the summer of 1789, in more normal times they were deeply divided by conflicting interests within the village, which ranged small proprietors against landlords and speculators, and landless peasants and sharecroppers against large tenant farmers and what Lefebvre called the 'rural bourgeoisie'. These differences and conflicts were traced throughout the revolutionary years and measured in terms of social disorder, purchase of land, distribution of property and relations with government representatives 'on mission' and local authorities. But the Revolution, far from healing these differences by giving universal satisfaction, widened the breach and made them irreconcilable. For the 'rural bourgeois', both old and new, reaped substantial advantages both by shedding the burden of tithe and seigneurial levies and by the purchase of land at low prices, whereas the small and landless peasant, whose demand for controlled rents and the subdivision of properties went unheeded, remained poor and dissatisfied for generations to come.[12]

Lefebvre also broke fresh ground by making important studies of

the rural panic (the 'Great Fear') of 1789 and of the social attitudes and behaviour of revolutionary crowds.[13] But it was left to his closest disciple, Albert Soboul, to make the decisive contribution to the study of the urban *sans-culottes*.[14] For, in spite of the pioneering work undertaken by Jaurès and Mathiez, until the publication (in 1958) of Soboul's thesis on the Parisian *sans-culottes* there had been no fully documented study of their everyday activities and way of life, their composition and organizations, their social and political ideas and aspirations, and their forms of behaviour. The result has been to give this considerable part of the urban population – accounting in Paris for about three persons in every four – that distinctive identity that Lefebvre had given the peasants, to bring them to the front of the stage as a vital revolutionary force, and in so doing to shed new light on the political history of the Revolution in one of its most critical phases. Like Aulard, Mathiez and Lefebvre before him, Soboul went on to occupy the Chair of the French Revolution at the University of Paris; and, until his death in 1982, he was the most prolific and influential of the French historians writing on the Revolution in the Republican–Marxist tradition.

Of course, as we have seen, many of the older traditions – whether liberal, conservative or avowedly counter-revolutionary – lingered on and the new direction given to revolutionary studies by the practitioners of a 'social interpretation' did not hold the field entirely to themselves. But there is little doubt that the 'new orthodoxy' (as it has been called), with its long history and its succession of brilliant scholars, came to dominate the teaching and study of the Revolution in French schools and universities. For long the critics – and there were many – held their fire, possibly inhibited by the scholarly record of their opponents. The first serious criticism came from the left, from Daniel Guèrin, a Marxist and author of the Trotskyist-inspired *La Lutte de classes sous la première République*, published in 1946. Guérin thought that the period of Jacobin rule (1793–4) praised by the Jaurès–Lefebvre–Soboul school was a fraud that, far from advancing the popular interest, was a dictatorship directed against the *sans-culotte* militants or *bras nus* (workers).[15] But Guérin found few convinced supporters and his duel with his fellow Marxists ended in a guarded reconciliation. He and Soboul in particular agreed that the Revolution, despite their differences over the respective roles of Jacobins and *sans-culottes*, remained 'notre mère à tous' (our common heritage).[16]

Critics from the right – whether conservative or liberal – have mounted a more sustained and fundamental challenge. This has gradually gained ground and momentum, finding support not only

in France but in Western Europe, Britain and America. However, it was not in France but in England, soon followed by the United States, that the more serious phase of the assault began. After a preliminary skirmish in his *Myth of the French Revolution* in 1955, Alfred Cobban went on to publish his *Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* in 1964.[17] The book was written in a style characteristic of the author, as he laid about him with iconoclastic zest, slaying every would-be dragon or sacred cow that came within his sights. These included such time-honoured concepts as the overthrow of 'feudalism', the eighteenth-century 'feudal' or 'aristocratic' reaction, and a large part of the 'bourgeois' revolution as well; while the 'social interpretation' itself (he argued) was shot through with Marxist–Leninist political assumptions and so was virtually no 'social' interpretation at all. In so doing, Cobban virtualy denied the bourgeoisie any credit for the end of the seigneurial system in the summer of 1789, and he argued further that as a predominantly office-holding and landowning class the bourgeoisie could claim little credit either for the development of capitalism or, more specifically, for a capitalist industrial revolution. In fact, he insisted that the French Revolution, under the direction of its new landowning and ex-office-holding rulers, retarded this process rather than advanced it. In short, the Revolution was 'in essence a triumph for the conservative, propertied, landowning classes, large and small'.[18]

In France, Cobban's new thesis was at first ignored or met with scant approval; after all was *their* revolution that was at issue and not his! But in America, as in England, it drew a more enthusiastic response. Among American historians who accepted the new arguments with more or less unqualified praise were George Taylor, Elizabeth Eisenstein and (rather more reservedly) Robert Forster. Their views, or an important part of them, were published in the *American Historical Review* between 1963 and 1967. Taylor was able to show that a prosperous French bourgeois on the eve of revolution was as liable as any wealthy aristocrat or nobleman to invest his capital in 'proprietary' goods or 'conspicuous consumption', whether in the form of city *hôtels* or land or extravagant living. Forster argued, in a somewhat similar vein, that the provincial nobility (and he instanced, in particular, that of Toulouse) could claim as much, if not more, credit as the merchant or industrial capitalist for preparing the way for an industrial revolution. Eisenstein claimed that the 'bourgeois revolt' of 1788–9 was orchestrated by a committee whose members included more nobles and clergy than bourgeois.[19] And, in England, varying degrees of support have come from a number of scholars, notably (though not uncritically) from William

Doyle, of the University of Nottingham, whose *Origins of French Revolution* appeared in 1980. The title betrays the author's main preoccupation clearly enough, and he focuses rather on the Revolution's origins than on its course and its final results. He is doubtful about the term 'bourgeois revolution' (for, after all, weren't the more adventurous of the nobility also involved?) but he certainly does not deny that a combination of these Notables effectively destroyed, with the peasants' support, what remained of feudalism in late-eighteenth-century France. However, his major concern is to show that there was no settled *a priori* plan to do so on the part of any particular class or group; circumstances were, in fact, more powerful than any deliberate human agency in achieving the result. So he concludes his book as follows:

> Only now [he is writing about the last months of 1789] could France's new ruling elite begin to assess what they stood for and what they had achieved. As victors will, they soon convinced themselves that all had gone to plan from the start. But there was no plan and nobody capable of making one, in 1787. Nobody could have predicted that things would work out as they did. Hardly anybody would have been assured if they could. For the French Revolution had not been made by revolutionaries. It would be truer to say that the revolutionaries had been created by the Revolution.[20]

But more pointedly, he also concludes, after discussing the trends of recent research, that the 'old orthodoxies are not only dead but now in urgent need of burial'.[21]

By now, however, a more detailed and sustained attack on the school of 'social interpretation' had developed in France. Its principal and more prolific exponent has been François Furet, of the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. It began with a two-volume history of the Revolution published by Furet and Denis Richet in 1965–6. It was a relatively restrained and muted beginning and in fact owed little to the new arguments advanced by Alfred Cobban in England. Indeed, there is little in its exposition of the Revolution's origins and its outbreak in the 'three revolutions of summer '89' (those of the deputies, the peasants and the urban *sans-culottes*) that basically differs from Lefebvre's. Nor do they present the outbreak of war, the fall of the monarchy, the struggle between the parties for control of the Assembly, the fall of Robespierre, the Thermidorian 'reaction' or the rise of Napoleon in other than the most 'orthodox' terms. But there is one fairly important exception, yet one so relatively unobtrusive that to some it must have passed

unnoticed (though it was certainly picked up by Claude Mazauric, a vigilant critic):[22] it is the assertion that, with the fall of the monarchy, the Revolution (that is, the real or bourgeois revolution) was 'blown off course' and 'lost its bearings'. For it was now, as allies of the 'middling' bourgeoisie who took over control, that the *sans-culottes* were called upon to play a role for which, in the authors' view, they were singularly ill-prepared.[23]

Furet went on to mount a far more savage assault on the 'new orthodoxy' in 1971, when he published in the *Annales* in Paris an article entitled 'Le catéchisme révolutionnaire'. This time the attack, although implicitly directed against the 'Lefebvre school' as a whole, was more particularly focused on Soboul and Mazauric for being not only Marxists but Marxists of a special hue – 'neo-Jacobins', who based their assumptions (and here he follows Cobban) on a Marxist–Leninist philosophy compounded by the experience of the Jacobin government of 1793–4.[24] It was a bitter personal onslaught with few holds barred, which therefore temporarily slammed the door on any further serious debate.

However, by 1978, when Furet's next book appeared, some of the steam and venom had gone out of the attack. The bitter hostility engendered by dissensions within the left, expressed in 'desertions' involving Furet himself as well as Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie and several others, had, for the moment at least, abated; and this new atmosphere of a relative easing of tension was reflected in the publication of Furet's *Penser la Révolution française*.[25] In it he concedes that the French Revolution, by its very nature, was bound to inspire a variety of interpretations, ranging from left to right depending on the historian's political affiliation and therefore on the performances of actors in a drama that attracted or repelled him, for 'The French Revolution has its royalist, liberal, Jacobin, anarchist or libertarian histories'; and further: 'The event is so fundamentally rooted in contemporary French political consciousness that any attempt to consider it from an intellectual distance is immediately seen as hostility.' But Furet does not accept that such a variety of interpretations, while understandable, makes for universal rational enquiry; and here it is not the Marxist or 'social interpreter' that is most at fault, but the outright counter-revolutionary who closes his eyes not only to reality in terms of origins, but also to the nature of the actors and the sequence of events. But the Marxists, inevitably, do not escape unscathed. They are among those, for example, who fail 'to distinguish between the Revolution as a historical process, a set of causes and effects; and the Revolution as a mode of change, a specific dynamic of collective action'. More specifically, he adds: 'In examining the causes or the results of the Revolution the observer must go back far beyond 1789 on the one hand, and far ahead beyond 1794 or 1799 on the other. Yet the "story" of the Revolution is enclosed between 1789 and 1794 or 1799.' So there are two levels of analysis depending on the focus chosen. There is the short-term, mainly political, focus and the longer-term social and economic focus, and to confuse the two (as he charges the 'social interpreters' with doing) is to court disaster, or at least to invite a degree of ridicule.

> One may say, for example [Furet continues], that between 1789 and 1794 the entire political system of France was radically transformed because the old monarchy then came to an end. But the idea that between these same dates the social and economic fabric of the nation was renewed from top to bottom is obviously much less plausible.[26]

This confusion he attributes in large measure to the tendency of some historians to identify too closely with the actors in the 'event' who, through the intimacy of their experience, were inclined to endow it with a causal inevitability that it never possessed. The Marxist historian, mesmerized by October 1917, has in addition been inclined to see the bourgeois revolution in France as a stepping-stone to or a harbinger of the socialist revolution in Russia. So 'the Bolsheviks were given Jacobin ancestors and the Jacobins were made to anticipate the communists', as if the change in the historical setting were of scant importance.[27]

Yet, while accusing the 'Lefebvre school' of historians of allowing their political affiliations to warp their judgement, Furet concedes that their focus on the popular classes 'has brought advances in our knowledge of the role played by the peasants and urban masses'. So this, at least, is a bonus; and, for all the bitterness of the writer's earlier attacks on the Marxists, he now appears to believe that, with the advance of scholarship and the growing diversity of socialist beliefs, a certain 'cooling off' in the wrangles over the French Revolution may eventually come about.[28] And other scholars, too, less rigidly committed to simplistic interpretations, have expressed similar hopes that some new consensus may be found to bring the warring camps at least within measurable distance of a partial, if not a total, reconciliation.[29] Yet, as the Bicentenary of 1789 approaches, such hopes do not appear to be too rosy. While some daggers may have been less overtly displayed, others have been drawn afresh and threaten to stir up the embers into a more lively conflagration. A sign of the times is that one contestant from the right, Pierre Chaunu,

has even claimed the 'genocide' of half a million victims of the Terror in the west of France alone – a statement which, apart from its tendentious formulation, inflates beyond the bounds of credibility all previous calculations of the kind.[30] Such pronouncements, set in the wider context of frequent bitter exchanges on television (I am writing in early 1987),[31] do not augur well, to say the least, for that wider consensus or 'new synthesis' of opposing views to which some scholars – and, no doubt, many students too – have begun to look forward.