

## A Socialist History of the French Revolution



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Jean Jaurès

Abridged and Translated by Mitchell Abidor  
Introduction by Henry Heller



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# 1

## Introduction

*Jean Jaurès*

We want to recount the events that occurred between 1789 and the end of the nineteenth century from the socialist point of view for the benefit of the common people, workers, and peasants. We view the French Revolution as an immense and admirably fertile event, but we don't see it as something eternally fixed that leaves the historian with nothing else to do but explain its consequences. The French Revolution indirectly prepared the advent of the proletariat. It realized the two essential conditions for socialism: democracy and capitalism. But at its heart it signified the political advent of the bourgeois class.

The economic and political movement, large-scale industry, the growth of the working class in both number and ambition, the uneasiness of the peasants crushed by competition and besieged by industrial and merchant feudalism, and the moral fears of the intellectual bourgeoisie whose delicate sensibilities were offended by a brutal mercantile society—all of this gradually set the scene for a new social crisis, a new and more profound revolution by which the proletariat would seize power in order to transform property and morality. And so it is the march and the interplay of social classes since 1789 that we want to recount. Though it's always somewhat arbitrary to delineate clear borders and divisions in life's uninterrupted and finely shaded progress, we can nevertheless distinguish with a certain amount of precision three periods in the last century in the history of the bourgeois and proletarian classes.

First, during the period 1789–1848, the revolutionary bourgeoisie emerged victorious and established itself. It used the force of the proletariat against royal absolutism and the nobility, but the workers, despite their

formidable activity and the decisive role they played in certain events, were only a subordinate power; one might say a historic supporting player. At times, they inspired real horror in the bourgeoisie, but since they lacked a radically different vision of society the proletariat essentially worked for them. The communism of Babeuf and his few disciples was only a sublime convulsion, the final spasm of the revolutionary crisis before the tranquility of the Consulate and the First Empire. Even in 1793 and 1794, the proletariat was intermingled with the Third Estate: they lacked a clear class consciousness and the desire for, or notion of, any other form of property. They hardly went beyond Robespierre's impoverished ideas: a democracy politically sovereign but economically stationary, made up of small peasant owners and an artisanal petite bourgeoisie. They had none of socialism's marvelous life juices, which create wealth, beauty, and joy. On the most terrible days, they burned with a dry flame, a flame of wrath and envy. They were as yet unaware of the beauty, the powerful sweetness of this new ideal.

And yet, bourgeois society had barely begun to establish itself and peacefully function when the socialist idea made its presence felt. In the years between 1800 and 1848, Babeuf was followed by Fourier, Saint-Simon, Proudhon, and Louis Blanc, and then, under Louis-Philippe, the workers' uprisings of Lyon and Paris. The bourgeois revolution had hardly emerged victorious when the workers asked, "Where does our suffering come from and what new revolution must be made?" They saw the reflection of their worn-out faces in the waters of the bourgeois revolution, waters that were at first foaming and wild, then calmer and clearer, and the workers were seized with horror. But despite all the socialist systems and working-class revolts, bourgeois domination remained intact before 1848.

The bourgeoisie didn't believe it possible that power was escaping it and that property was being transformed. Under Louis-Philippe, it had the strength to fight against the nobility and the priesthood as well as against the workers. It crushed the Legitimist uprisings in the West as well as the proletarian revolts of the starving cities. It naively believed, with the pride of Guizot,<sup>1</sup> that it was the culmination of history, that it had

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1 François Guizot (1787–1874)—politician of the July Monarchy, overthrown by the Revolution of 1848.

historical and philosophical title to irrevocable power, that it synthesized the centuries-long efforts of France, and that it was the social expression of reason. For their part, the proletariat, despite the spasms of poverty and hunger, were not conscious revolutionaries. They barely glimpsed the possibility of a new order. It was primarily among the “intellectual” class that the socialist “utopias” recruited their followers. In any event, the socialist systems were strongly impregnated either with capitalist ideas, like those of Saint-Simon, or petty-bourgeois ideas, like those of Proudhon. The working class needed the revolutionary crisis of 1848 to achieve consciousness of itself, for it to accomplish, as Proudhon said, the final break with other social elements.

The second period, which ran from February 1848 to May 1871, from the provisional government to the bloody repression of the Commune, was troubled and uncertain. It is true that socialism was already asserting itself as a force and an idea, and that the proletariat was asserting itself as a class. The workers’ revolutions against the bourgeois order were so threatening that the ruling classes assembled against it all those forces of the bourgeoisie and the landowning farmers frightened by the red specter. But socialist doctrines remained indecisive and confused. In 1848, the communism of Cabet,<sup>2</sup> the mutualism of Proudhon, and the statism of Louis Blanc hopelessly clashed, and the mold of the ideas that should have given the working class form was inconsistent and incomplete. The theoreticians argued over the molten metal that came out of the furnaces, and while they argued reaction, led by the man of December,<sup>3</sup> smashed all of the unformed molds and cooled the metal. Even under the Commune, Blanquists, Marxists, and Proudhonians proposed divergent versions of working-class thought. It’s impossible to say just which socialist ideal a victorious Commune would have applied.

What is more, there was confusion and intermingling in both the movement and in ideas. In 1848, the revolution was prepared by the radical democracy as much as, if not more than, by working-class socialism, and during the June days, bourgeois democracy killed the proletariat on the burning paving stones of Paris. In 1871 as well, the Commune grew out of

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2 Etienne Cabet (1788–1856)—Utopian socialist.

3 Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, Napoleon III, who seized power on December 2, 1852.

an uprising of the shopkeepers angered by the law on payment of overdue rents and the harshness of the nobles of Versailles, as well as from Paris's patriotic frustration and republican defiance.

The socialist proletariat wasted no time in putting its revolutionary mark on this confusion, and Marx, in his powerful and systematic study of the Commune, was right in saying that for the first time the working class seized power. This was a totally new event, one of incalculable importance, but the proletariat benefited from surprise. The proletariat was the best-organized and most clear-sighted force in the isolated and enflamed capital, but it was not yet capable of bringing all of France over to its side. France belonged to the priests, the big landowners, and the bourgeoisie, of which M. Thiers was the leader. The Commune was like a knife tip, reddened by flames, that shatters against a large, refractory block. The proletarians had made enormous progress between 1848 and 1871. In 1848, the proletariat's participation in power was all but fictitious: Louis Blanc and the worker Albert were stymied in the Provisional Government, and a perfidious bourgeoisie organized against them the swindle of the National Workshops. The socialists platonically conversed at the Luxembourg Palace; they abdicated their role and resigned themselves to being nothing but a powerless debating society. Lacking the strength to act, they resigned themselves to making speeches. And then, when the deceived working class rose up in June, it was crushed before it was able to attain power for a single moment. In 1871, the sons of the fighters of the June uprising<sup>4</sup> held and exercised their power. They weren't a rioting mob; they were the revolution.

The proletarians thus raised to power were then driven from it. But they nevertheless gave new working-class generations signs of hope that were understood. The Commune closed the second period, in which socialism asserted itself as a force of great importance, though it was still vague and shaky. And yet it was the Commune that made the new period possible, the one we are now living through, where socialism is methodically proceeding to the total organization of the working class, to the moral conquest of a reassured peasantry, to the rallying of bourgeois intellectuals

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4 The June Revolution of 1848.

disenchanted with bourgeois power, and to the total seizure of power in order to establish new ideals and new forms of property.

Confusion is no longer to be feared. There is unity of thought in the working class and the socialist party. Despite conflicts between groups and superficial rivalries, all proletarian forces are united by one direction and working toward the same goals. If the proletariat were to seize power tomorrow, it would immediately use it in a defined and determined way. There would certainly be conflicts between factions: some would want to strengthen and advance the centralized actions of the community, while others would want to ensure the greatest possible autonomy to local groups of workers. In order to regulate the new relations within the nation, those of professional federations, of communes, of local groups, and of individuals, in order to establish both perfect individual freedom and social solidarity, an immense effort in the field of ideas will be required, and given the complexity of the issue there will be disagreements. But despite it all, a common spirit now moves the socialists and the proletariat. Socialism is no longer divided into hostile and powerless sects. It is an ever-stronger, living unity that is strengthening its hold on life. All the great human forces—those of labor, thought, science, art, and even religion (understood as humanity's taking control of the universe)—await their renewal and growth from socialism.

How, through what crises, through which human efforts and what evolution of things has the proletariat grown into the decisive role it will play tomorrow? This is what we socialist militants propose to recount. We know that the economic conditions and the forms of production and property are the very foundation of history. Just as for most people their work is the essential element of their life; just as, for mankind, it is the occupation which is the economic form of individual activity, that in most cases determines habits, ideas, sorrows, joys, and even dreams; in the same way, in every period of history, it is the economic structure of society that determines the political forms, the social customs, and even the general direction of ideas. And so in every period of this tale we will attempt to lay bare the economic basis of human life. We will attempt to follow the movement of property and the evolution of industrial and agricultural techniques. In broad strokes—as is appropriate in a necessarily

rough portrait—we will make clear the economic system's influence on governments, literature, and systems.

But we don't forget that Marx—too often simplified by narrow interpreters—never forgot that it is upon men that economic forces act. There is an enormous variety of passions and ideas among men, and the nearly infinite complexity of human life doesn't allow itself to be brutally and mechanically reduced to an economic formula. Even more, even though man is a fragment of mankind, even though he is affected by his environment and is a continuation of his social milieu, he also lives through his senses and intelligence in an environment even more vast than the universe itself.

In the poet's imagination, the light of the stars most distant from and foreign to the human system can only awaken dreams that are in conformity with the general sensibility of his time and the deepest secrets of social life, in the same way that the fog that floats over the prairie is formed by the moon from the earth's invisible dampness. In this sense, even stellar vibrations, however distant and indifferent they might appear, are harmonized and appropriated by the social system and the economic forces that determine them. Goethe, upon entering a factory one day, was seized with disgust for his clothing, whose production required so immense a productive apparatus. And yet, without the industrial growth of the German bourgeoisie, the Germanic world would never have felt or understood the magnificent impatience to live that caused Faust's soul to burst.

Across the semi-mechanical evolution of social and economic forces we will present the dignity of the free spirit, emancipated from humanity by the eternal universe. Even the most intransigent of Marxist theoreticians could not reproach us for this. Marx admirably wrote that until now human societies have been governed only by fate, by the blind actions of economic forms. Institutions and ideas have not been the conscious work of free men, but the reflection in the human mind of unconscious social life. According to Marx, we are still in prehistoric times. Human history will only truly begin when man, finally escaping the tyranny of unconscious forces, governs production by his reason and his will. His intelligence will no longer live under the despotism of economic forms

that he created and guides, and he will contemplate the universe with a free and unmediated gaze. Marx presaged a period of full intellectual liberty where human thought, no longer deformed by economic servitude, will not deform the world. But to be sure, Marx doesn't contest the fact that already, in the darkness of this period lacking in consciousness, great men have attained freedom. They are preparing the advent of a fully conscious humanity. It is up to us to grasp these first manifestations of the life of the spirit. They allow us a foretaste of the great, ardent, and free life of communist humanity which, freed from servitude, will take control of the universe through science, action, and dreams. This is like a trembling in the forest, which at first moves only a few leaves, but which foretells the upcoming tempest.

And so our interpretation of history will be both materialist with Marx and mystical with Michelet.<sup>5</sup> It was economic life that was the basis for and the mechanism of human history, but across the successive forms of social life man, a thinking force, aspired to the full life of the mind, the ardent community of the unquiet intelligence, hungry for unity and the wondrous universe. The great mystic of Alexandria<sup>6</sup> said, "The great waves of the sea raised my boat, and I was able to see the sun at the very moment it rose from the waters." In the same way, the vast rising waters of the economic revolution will raise the human boat so that man, that poor fisherman worn out by a long night's work, can salute from the highest point the first glimmer of the growing spirit that will rise above us.

Nor will we disdain, despite our economic interpretation of great human phenomena, the moral value of history. To be sure, we know that for the past century the noble words of Liberty and Humanity have too often served as a cover for a regime of exploitation and oppression. The French Revolution proclaimed the Rights of Man, but the wealthy classes included in these words the rights of the bourgeoisie and capital.

They proclaimed that men were free when property itself was the only form of domination they possessed, but property is the sovereign force that has all others at its disposal. The basis of bourgeois society

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5 Jules Michelet (1798–1874)—one of the great French historians, and author of a brilliant and influential *History of the French Revolution*.

6 Plotinus.

is thus a monstrous class egoism compounded by hypocrisy. But there were moments when the nascent Revolution united the interests of the revolutionary bourgeoisie with the interests of humanity, and a truly admirable enthusiasm often filled peoples' hearts. And in the midst of the countless conflicts unleashed by bourgeois anarchy, in the struggles of parties and classes, there were many examples of pride, valor, and courage. Rising above the bloody melees we will salute with equal respect all the heroes of the will: we will glorify the bourgeois republicans outlawed in 1851 and the admirable proletarian combatants who fell in June 1848.

But who could reproach us for being particularly attentive to the militant virtues of that insulted proletariat that over the last century so often gave its life for a still vague ideal? It's not only through the force of circumstances that the social revolution will be made; it is by the force of men, by the energy of consciousness and will. History will never exempt men from the need for individual valor and nobility, and the moral value of the communist society of tomorrow will be marked by the moral elevation of the individual consciousness of the militant class of today. Consider all the heroic fighters who, over the past century, had a passion for the idea and a sublime contempt for death as a revolutionary task. We will not mock the men of the Revolution who read Plutarch's *Lives*. It's certain that the great burst of inner energy Plutarch inspired in them did little to change the march of events, but at least the men of the Revolution remained upright in the storm, though their faces were twisted in fear under the lightning bolts of the great storms. Certainly no one would hold it against them if their passion for glory inspired their passion for liberty and their courage in combat.

And so, in this socialist history, which covers the period from the bourgeois revolution to the preparatory period of the proletarian revolution, we will omit no element of human life. We will strive to understand and interpret the fundamental economic evolution that governs societies, the mind's fervent aspiration for complete truth, and the noble exaltation of human consciousness defying suffering, tyranny, and death. The proletariat will free itself and become humanity by pushing the economic movement as far as it can go. The proletariat must thus become fully conscious of the role of economic activity and human grandeur in history. At the risk of

shocking our readers by the disparate nature of these great names, it is under the triple inspiration of Marx, Michelet, and Plutarch that we write this modest history, in which each of the militants who collaborates in it will add his own shade of thought, where all will be garbed in the same doctrine and faith.

## 2

# The Causes of the Revolution

### The Nobility and Feudalism

Under the *ancien régime* the nation was dominated by the nobles, the Church, and the king. As a result of the development of the French monarchy, the nobility had gradually lost the power it had had during the Middle Ages. They were now only quasi-sovereigns, and the greatest among them, formerly rebellious vassals, were nothing but the first among courtiers. But they still enjoyed great privileges.

Even though considerably reduced and repressed by royal justice, seigneurial justice continued to exist: the judges of the great fiefdoms were among the first dispossessed for the benefit of the royal judges; but in the smaller fiefdoms, in the small noble domains, justice was meted out by seigneurial judges. It is true that in those cases that had no direct relation to feudal rights they limited themselves to gathering information and certifying the existence of a crime, but the fact that they did so was important in itself. They also judged all cases involving feudal rights, and these were so varied, so complex, they were connected by so many tiny roots to the entire system of property and exchange that, in fact, the seigneurial judge had quite extensive powers. Imagine today's justices of the peace having in certain cases the attributes of county courts and one would have an idea of the place, on the eve of the Revolution, of the seigneurial judges.

Humble rural life, with its quotidian events, its petty and irritating conflicts, was almost entirely within their bailiwick and so within the bailiwick of the lords who named them. It can thus be said that the latter were sovereign judges in those feudal disputes to which they were party, and it was thanks to this sovereignty of justice that, particularly in the last third of the eighteenth century, the nobles were able to despoil the

population of the countryside of the property of the “communities,” what we would today call communal property. We see here how selfish and lacking in foresight the French monarchy was. It had dispossessed the nobles of their higher judges; it had destroyed those wider feudal jurisdictions that opposed the progress of royal power, and in doing so it had served the general interest of the nation as well as its own; but it had only suppressed seigneurial justice at its highest level, where it hampered royal power. It had left it in place at the lowest level, at ground level, where it oppressed and stifled rural life.

In repressing feudal justice, the crown had wanted to both extend its reach and defend itself. It had not for a moment thought to defend the peasantry, and they, in the immediate grip of seigneurial justice, languished like a poor harvest beneath the countless knots of a voracious plant. It would be the hand of the Revolution that would tear up the last roots of feudal justice. [...]

Feudal rights had extended their hold over all natural forces, over everything that grew, moved, or breathed: over the fish-filled rivers, over the flame that burns in the oven and bakes the miserable bread made of a mix of oats and barley, over the wind that turns the windmills, over the wine that spurts from the press, over the voracious game that came out of the forests and the high grass to ravage the vegetable gardens and fields.

The peasants can't take a step on the roads, cross the narrow river over a shaky bridge, buy a measure of cloth in the village market or a pair of wooden shoes without running up against rapacious and troublesome feudalism. And if they want to get around it, or simply defend themselves against new abuses, another form of game, that of the agents of the law attached to the seigneurial judge, the impudent clerks and half-starved bailiffs, attack with sharpened teeth what remains to them of their harvest and their courage.

How easy it is to imagine the anger that builds up in them. And how ready the peasants must be for a general uprising. They lack but one thing: confidence in themselves, the hope to free themselves. But soon the first thunder claps of the Revolution, striking with terror the gilded authorities who maintain privilege, will awaken peasant hopes. It will shake the peasants out of their centuries-long slumber and they will rise up with a