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7. Historical Materialist Sociology and Revolutions
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One of the fundamental issues of historical sociology since its origins in historical social theory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been that of a transition between medieval and modern forms of society. There have, indeed, been so many variations on this basic theme that it would scarcely be possible to enumerate them all. What all have in common is the delineation of two contrasting historical social epochs, comprising specific sets of social characteristics as distinctive forms of society, accompanied by some conception of systematic social change from one to the other.

The older form of society may not be conceived specifically in relation to the European middle ages, but such a fundamental transition is in every case identified as culminating in, coinciding with, or occurring in the course of a European modern period that opened roughly five hundred years ago. The social forms involved in this transition have been variously described in terms of such as oppositions as ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’, Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, ‘feudal’ and ‘capitalist’, ‘agrarian’ and ‘commercial’, ‘simple’ and ‘complex’, and ‘aristocratic’ and ‘bourgeois’. The historical process of change itself has been identified with increased rationalization, desacralization, urbanization, and/or commercialization; development of the division of labour; the rise of a bourgeois class; the growth of capitalism; or some broad amalgam of these and related processes conceived simply as ‘modernization’.

This transition has most typically been understood as part of a larger historical process of ‘progress’, a protean concept that has underpinned much social thought during the modern era [Comninel, 1987: 61-74; Wood, 1995: 6-8; Meek, 1976; Butterfield, 1931]. It is not, however, necessary to conceive history as a universal and unilinear whole, leading inexorably from the remote past to modern capitalism, in order to recognize the dramatic contrast between contemporary and pre-modern societies. And, with or without a narrative of historical progress, this inescapable contrast has been powerfully associated with the idea of revolution, and above all with the great French Revolution of 1789. Indeed, as exemplified in Eric Hobsbawm’s classic Age of Revolution [1962], since 1789 the idea of social revolution has been caught up with that of epochal social change: a profound transformation of politics, the state, and social institutions coinciding with or corresponding to a vast transformation of social and economic life. As at least an element in the transition to modern society, and often as its pivotal moment, the French Revolution has figured both as impetus to, and a prime subject of, historical sociology.

The French Revolution and Historical Sociology

In the first place, among the central elements of social change identified in all such conceptions of transition is the development of nationally integrated societies with effective state apparatuses. This development of the modern state is understood to involve a profound shift from the former political ascendancy of privileged, hereditary, rural and agrarian, regional feudal lords, to a more egalitarian, rational, urban and
commercial, national political society. The classic formulation of this transformation has been as ‘bourgeois revolution’ – a historically progressive class of capitalist bourgeois taking political power from an outmoded landed class of feudal aristocrats – an idea directly derived from the French Revolution. While the transformation has been said in some instances to have been mediated or attenuated, perhaps drawn out through decades or even centuries, or to have been carried out ‘from above’ by a dominant aristocracy, the model generally postulates a distinct political revolution [Comminel, 1987: 8-17, 24; Anderson, 1974b: 431]. Besides France, cases have been made for one or another example of bourgeois revolution in most states pre-dating the First World War, such as the English Civil War, the American Revolution, or the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837.

Secondly, the French Revolution not only serves as archetypal model for the idea of bourgeois revolution within historical sociology, it is widely recognized to have played a crucial role in the development of sociological theory, as such. Theodore Zeitlin has offered perhaps the clearest statement of this idea:

> Following the French Revolution, there occurred a Romantic-Conservative Reaction against the Revolution and its intellectual antecedents. It was in this context that the earliest concepts, theories, and methods of sociology crystallized. [Zeitlin, xi]

Other theorists would characterize it differently [Seidman], but there is broad agreement that the crucible for modern social theory was the aftermath of the Revolution. Whereas, it is said, the ideology of the Revolution emphasized equality and individual rights and liberties with respect to religious, economic, political, and other social relationships, the ‘counter-Enlightenment’ emphasized order, harmony, and coherence, shifting intellectual attention from the individual to the social whole. Moreover, the Revolution brought with it a profound awareness of history itself, as well as the potential for epochal social change, with lasting impact on social thought. As Karl Marx then developed his own ideas in critical response to both the Revolution and the counter-Enlightenment, the essential elements for modern historical social theory might well be said to have been in place [Comninel, 2000b].

In addition, since the era of French Revolution the experience of revolution, as well as its idea, has occupied a central position in social and political thought generally, and historical social theory in particular. Both the liberalism and the radical Jacobin republicanism of the Revolution persisted in the nineteenth century politics of France, where revolutions erupted in 1830 and 1871, in addition to the revolution of 1848 that swept across Europe. Across the globe, revolutions and revolutionary ideology were if anything even more central to the major social and political developments of the twentieth century. And not only did the theory and practice of revolution remain alive, but the ideology and political example of the French Revolution of 1789 continued to have particular salience.
On the one hand, powerful political forces stood in fundamental opposition to the Enlightenment principles of the Revolution, as in the fascist regimes of Italy, Germany, Spain, and Portugal, as well as in reactionary parties that figured importantly elsewhere, as in France itself. On the other hand, socialist revolutionaries both saw themselves building upon the historical advances made in 1789, and generally conceived proletarian revolution to be analogous to ‘bourgeois revolution’ in terms of class dynamics. It is unsurprising, therefore, that links between the great revolutions of France and Russia have been claimed on all sides, and that the legacies of both loomed large in the theory and practice of politics down to the collapse of the Soviet Union. When, in 1972, Henry Kissinger asked Chinese Premier Chou En-lai his opinion on the significance of the French Revolution, he replied ‘It’s too soon to tell’.

Finally, the idea of historical social change, and especially variations on the idea of progress, raise the question of ‘to what end?’ The idea that history moves through distinct and successive stages tied to fundamental economic differences dates to the middle of the eighteenth century, but it was particularly with the French Revolution that the idea emerged that historical social development reached a culmination in modern society [Meek, 1976; Chill, 1971]. This idea of ‘the end of history’ has figured prominently in modern liberal social theory, both in optimistic form, as when Hegel conceived of the ‘end of history’ in his own time in terms of the consummation of human potential [Hegel, 1956: 442, 457]; and in rather bleaker form, as when Weber conceived of the self-containment of human energies in an ‘iron cage’ of modern institutions [Wood, 1995: 176-7].

Against this view that modern capitalist society marks the end of human history, Marxists, anarchists and others have held out the conception of continued social development to a further, qualitatively different form of society. By far the most developed social theory along these lines has been offered by Marxists, albeit in a very broad range of historical materialist formulations. All such ideas, however, raise the question of some further social and political revolutionary transformation, both as a concrete objective and as the subject of historical social theory. The persistence of the idea of revolutionary change from modern society into something new does not meet with universal approval, of course: most liberals and other non-revolutionary thinkers fear this would lead to bureaucratic authoritarianism rather than the withering away of the state (or to chaos, should the state disappear). Whether revolution is possible or desirable therefore remains a vital issue for social theory as a whole, making it necessary for it to come to terms with the revolutions of the past and whatever relevance they might have for the future.

**Bourgeois Revolution and Modes of Production**

For all of these reasons, the nature of the French Revolution as a historical event, and its relationship to modern capitalist society, looms large within historical sociology. The idea of a conjunction between political conflict and epochal social transformation found its classic expression in the idea of bourgeois revolution. While the idea figures centrally in
Marx’s work, especially The Communist Manifesto, and found its strongest expression in the work of Marxist historians [Hobsbawm, 1962; Lefebvre, 1947; Soboul, 1974], it was in fact broadly accepted by all but the most conservative historians for more than a century [Comninel, 1987; Doyle, 1980].

Indeed, given the significance that the idea of bourgeois revolution would come to have in Marxist theory, as well as its apparent vindication of the historical role of class struggle, it was not often noted that Marx and Engels themselves gave credit for this concept to generations of liberal historians who had preceded them [Samuel, 1980]. A full account of the Revolution in these terms had been published when Marx was a child [Mignet, 1913], and a history of the English Civil War as bourgeois revolution before he was born [Thierry, 1851]. The concept itself first emerged during the Revolution, in the ideology of progress with which the revolutionaries defended their project, building on ideas that dated back to Locke [Comninel, 1987: 72, 115-17]. During the Restoration that followed Bonaparte’s defeat, the idea of historical progress led by a rising bourgeoisie, compelled by circumstance to challenge outmoded aristocracy, came to be nearly universally accepted by liberals and radicals [Mellon, 1958]. Perhaps the greatest spokesperson for this view was the historian Guizot [1972], and the extent of the success of the concept might be said to be mirrored in Guizot’s own rise to become chief minister of the liberal Orleanist monarchy established after the July Revolution of 1830.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, therefore, an ideological justification of the Revolution itself came to be accepted as a central tenet of historical social theory by virtually all – liberal, radical, or socialist – who sided with the cause of the Revolution. Linking a conception of history moving through distinct stages, culminating in commercial society, with the idea that modern civilization emerged through the rise of town life out of the rural society of the barbarian Dark Ages, this view cast an urban ‘middle class’ – the bourgeoisie, which did not labour with their hands, but did not enjoy aristocratic privileges – as heroes in a sweeping historical narrative. Even Marx, in calling for a further class revolution to overthrow capitalist society, gave full credit to the prior accomplishments of this ‘heroic’ bourgeoisie [Marx and Engels, 1976: 486-9].

If what Ellen Meiksins Wood has described as the ‘bourgeois paradigm’ [Wood, 1991: 1-19] has had a pervasive influence on modern social thought, nowhere has this influence been greater than in Marxist theory. At the core of Marxist thought is the idea of historical social development impelled by the contradictions of class exploitation and class struggle. Drawing on the idea of economically-defined historical stages, articulated by Adam Smith and others as successive ‘modes of subsistence’, Marxist historical analysis has been formulated in terms of class exploitive ‘modes of production’. Marx’s central concept of class struggle became closely associated with the example of bourgeois class revolution, the French Revolution standing as an enduring model and inspiration, as well as constant point of reference.

Bourgeois revolution was understood to be the decisive moment of transferring ruling class political ascendantcy in the historical transition from feudalism to capitalism. The
struggle of the capitalist working class – the immense majority – was in turn conceived to culminate in a transfer of political ascendancy through a ‘proletarian revolution’. Lacking the ‘particular’ interests of previous ruling classes in private ownership of the means of production, and having no other class to exploit, the proletariat would use their ascendancy instead to bring an end to class society, as such, and with it an end to the state as instrument of power and oppression. The history of class struggles detailed by the liberal historians, therefore, was conceived really to have its end not in capitalism, but in classless communism.

Beyond these overall structural links between bourgeois and proletarian revolution, there were a number of direct links as well. To begin with, the bourgeois class that achieved ascendancy in the former was understood in fact to be the same capitalist class that would be defeated in the latter. The gains realized (or at least attempted) by bourgeois revolution – such as the end to privilege, overcoming superstition, transcending the horizons of local society, bringing rationality and efficiency to complex social life, establishing individual liberties, promoting education, and liberating women and slaves – would moreover be preserved and extended by the proletariat. Indeed, far from being diametrically opposed, in Marx’s conception there was profound continuity between bourgeois and proletarian revolution, so much so that he came to the view that where the former had not been carried through successfully or completely, tasks associated with the idea of bourgeois revolution might instead have to be carried out by the proletariat [Draper, 1978: 229-49]. This idea, reaching fullest expression in Trotsky’s idea of a ‘permanent revolution’ that might begin with the agenda of bourgeois reform but carry through to the victory of the proletariat in communism, has continued to serve as an enduring link between the two forms of revolution for many Marxists [Trotsky, 1931; Anderson, 1974b: 431].

The concept of mode of production acquired a special theoretical significance in the Structuralist Marxism that emerged in France after the Second World War. Largely concerned with political issues, most Marxists had long tended merely to rely upon the historical analyses provided by Marx himself, and to apply in various ways the modes of production he offered as a means of dealing with historical contexts he never addressed [Hobsbawm, 1965: 59-65]. Such analysis tended to become quite mechanical in the period of Stalinism, generally taking ad hoc forms that were entirely subordinate to political considerations.

Even more problematic than such ad hoc judgments were the strict limitations on social and political analysis allowed with respect to forms of society which Marx did address, and particularly capitalist societies as they appeared in the 1950s and 60s. As Marxist social thought found a new venue in university settings, new issues of culture and philosophy – and new social phenomena, like the growth of a white-collar ‘middle class’ – called out for more sophisticated and flexible terms of analysis than that provided by the reductionist economic determinism of ‘war horse’ Marxism.

Structuralist Marxism filled this need by emphasizing the rigorous theoretical formulation
of the historical modes of production, but asserting that no society was composed of any single mode. Instead, societies were 'social formations' which comprised more than one mode of production [Anderson, 1974b: 22]. While one mode would be dominant, observable social relations would reflect the 'articulation' of more than one mode in the social formation. Most importantly, while it was agreed that the 'economic base' of a social formation was determinant, as was expected by established Marxist thought, because of the articulation of modes of production it was now said to be determinant only in 'the last instance' [Althusser, 1970: 111-13, 212-13].

In opening up avenues for greater flexibility in Marxist theory, however, the structuralist approach insisted, as a condition, that theory have precedence over empirical evidence, and especially over what was broadly conceived to be 'historicism' [Althusser, 1970: 12]. The observations necessary to the development of theory were said to have been made by Marx; his theoretical categories adequate to all problems of analysis, through articulation of modes of production. As a result, this social theory was not merely informed by the key elements of the 'bourgeois paradigm' – the historical succession of modes of production leading to bourgeois revolution and ultimately proletarian revolution. Instead, those elements became fundamental not only to historical analyses, but to all contemporary social analysis as well.

Yet, particularly in retrospect, it is clear that many substantial problems remained in any effort to translate the short historical sketches of the history of class society offered by Marx from the abstract to the concrete. To begin with, two of Marx's most important works were long virtually unknown: the 1844 Paris manuscripts were only published in 1932, and the Grundrisse only published in full in 1973. Coupled with the general deficiency of Marxian historical analysis throughout the Comintern period, these texts were difficult to reconcile with much of what passed for Marxist theory. Moreover, as Eric Hobsbawm argued at length in his Introduction to the sections of the Grundrisse dealing with pre-capitalist societies (the Formen) first published in 1960s, the modes of production and their order were anything but certain.

Recalling the modes of production offered in the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Hobsbawm asserted

This does not mean that we are obliged to accept Marx's list of historical epochs as given in the Preface, or in the Formen. As we shall see, few parts of Marx's thought have been more revised by his most devoted followers than this list – not necessarily with equal justification – and neither Marx nor Engels rested content with it for the remainder of their lives. The list, and a good deal of the discussion in the Formen which lies behind it, are the outcome not of theory but of observation. The general theory of historical materialism requires only that there should be a succession of modes of production, though not necessarily any particular modes, and perhaps not in any particular predetermined order. [1965: 19-20]
Moreover, even where the modes of production and their order were not seriously open to question – as in considering the uniquely important transition between feudalism and capitalism in Europe – Hobsbawm made clear that much remained uncertain. In the debate over this transition opened by Dobb and Sweezy in the 1950s, and resumed with additional participants in the 60s, the crucial issue came to be identified in terms of a ‘prime mover’ that would explain the particular evolution of capitalism from feudalism, especially in terms of ‘the internal contradictions of feudalism’ [Hobsbawm, 1965: 45]. A close reading of this debate, which continued into the 1970s, reveals the extent to which some of the finest Marxist theorists and historians of the day could be reduced to running in circles by the daunting task of constructing a complete and coherent historical materialist account of even the most widely accepted idea in Marx’s history of class societies [Hilton et al.,1976].

**Perry Anderson’s Synthesis**

It was precisely through confronting these problems – the identity of and relationship between historical modes of production; the nature of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in particular; the specific historical dynamism that gave rise to capitalism in Europe; the relationship between, and relative strengths and weaknesses, of Marx’s various historical observations – that Perry Anderson came to brilliantly synthesize Marxian theory with the history of European pre-capitalist societies [Anderson, 1974a, 1974b]. In Anderson’s work, the idea of bourgeois revolution enjoys a special place. His early work particularly argued that as a result of the precocity of English social development, its seventeenth century Civil War failed to be fully realized as a bourgeois revolution, yielding a mediated and less than complete transformation of state and ruling class, which in turn had enduring negative effects on British capitalism and the development of class politics [Anderson, 1964]. His two sweeping volumes on pre-capitalist class society then broke off specifically at the point of the final crisis of feudal Absolutism, with the promise of a third volume on ‘the great chain of bourgeois revolutions’ [1974a: 11]. That volume, however, has not appeared, and the very theoretical premises that would have informed it have, as will be seen, been called into question. Nonetheless, Anderson’s clarification of issues and arguments within Marxian historical social theory with respect to the history of class society leading towards capitalism remains a signal achievement. His work has, indeed, proved to be of lasting significance to historical sociology, particularly with respect to understanding feudalism and the Absolutist State.

At the core of the Anderson’s work, informing its historical sweep of millennia, and its geographic encompassing of the planet, is the concept of a unique pattern of historical social development in Europe. The first unique element – crucial, in his analysis, to the eventual development of capitalism – is said to have been a ‘slave mode of production’ in the ancient Mediterranean, to which Anderson attributes the precocious urbanism of the classical city-states [1974b: 19-22]. In his analysis, the development of extensive urban civilization depended, in the absence of a properly urban manufacturing economy, directly upon the wholesale exploitation of slave producers [24]. Since the slave supply
depended upon war – and especially wars of expansion – there was an inherent limitation to the capacity of this mode of production to reproduce itself. Rome, after encompassing the whole of Western Europe to the margins of Scandinavia and Britain, a good part of settled Germany, Africa south to the Sahara, and across the Near East into the hotly contended reaches of central Asia, acquired an empire to defend; it lost, in Anderson’s analysis, the influx of slaves necessary to maintain its urban character [76-8].

In Anderson’s account, the collapse of this precociously urban civilization was accelerated by the intrusion of displaced Germanic peoples (the ‘barbarian’ invasions), leading to a fusion of pre-urban social relations with the surviving elements of classical civilization based on the slave mode of production:

The feudal mode of production in Europe... was the result of a fusion of elements released from the shock and dissolution of two antagonistic modes of production anterior to it: the slave mode of production of classical antiquity, and the primitive-communal modes of production of the tribal populations on its periphery. [1974a: 417]

Addressing the theoretical ‘inflation’ of the concept of feudalism into a nearly universal experience across the globe, noted by Hobsbawm, Anderson offered two enormously valuable points of analysis, grounded in an unprecedentedly insightful reading of Marx combined with the best work on medieval history.

To begin with, building upon an observation brought forward in the original Marxist debate over the transition from feudalism to capitalism [Hilton, et al., 57-61, 70-1], he noted the emphasis given by Marx to the ‘extra-economic’ character of surplus appropriation in pre-capitalist modes of production, in contrast to the peculiarly economic surplus appropriation of capitalism itself:

All modes of production in class societies prior to capitalism extract surplus labour from the immediate producers by means of extra-economic coercion. Capitalism is the first mode of production in history in which the means whereby the surplus is pumped out of the direct producers is ‘purely’ economic in form – the wage contract: the equal exchange between free agents which reproduces, hourly and daily, inequality and oppression. All other previous modes of exploitation operate through extra-economic sanctions – kin, customary, religious, legal or political.... The ‘superstructures’ of kinship, religion, law or the state necessarily enter into the constitutive structure of the mode of production in pre-capitalist social formations. They intervene directly in the ‘internal’ nexus of surplus-extraction, where in capitalist social formations, the first in history to separate the economy as a formally self-contained order, they provide by contrast its ‘external’ preconditions. [1974a: 403]

Although this point is drawn from Marx’s third volume of Capital [Marx, 1959: 790-2], the
saliency of its opposition between capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production had not previously been posed in this way.

Anderson went on to argue that

> A scrupulous and exact taxonomy of these legal and political configurations is thus a pre-condition of establishing any comprehensive typology of pre-capitalist modes of production. It is evident, in fact, that the complex imbrication of economic exploitation with extra-economic institutions and ideologies creates a much wider gamut of possible modes of production prior to capitalism than could be deduced from the relatively simple and massive generality of the capitalist mode of production itself.... The possibility of a plurality of post-tribal and non-slave, pre-capitalist modes of production is inherent in their mechanisms of surplus extraction. [1974a: 404]

Identifying, a unique sequence of modes of production in Europe leading first to the distinctive social form of feudalism, and then to the development of capitalism, he challenges the theoretical proliferation of ‘feudal’ and ‘semi-feudal’ societies in the rest of the world, inviting original historical materialist analyses of non-Western societies instead. There were, he argues, many different ways in which surplus could be appropriated from peasants by agrarian lords:

> Virtually any post-tribal social formation that did not rest on slavery or nomadism, revealed in this sense forms of landlordism.... It was their specific organization in a vertically articulated system of parcellized sovereignty and scalar property that distinguished the feudal mode of production in Europe. [1974a: 408]

The assertion that pre-capitalist modes of production have existed which never were identified by Marx is a little noticed aspect of Anderson’s work. There is, in fact, a major theoretical contribution in his recognition that a broad range of pre-capitalist modes of production might exist based on different systems of lords exploiting peasants – and that only one specific form corresponds to feudalism proper.

In identifying parcellized sovereignty as the specific basis for feudalism as a mode of production, Anderson made a second contribution that is more widely recognized. Still, the extent to which this observation directs attention to a particular transformation of social relations between the tenth and eleventh centuries is not sufficiently appreciated. Medieval historians have indeed identified the direct appropriation of sovereign political power by local and regional lords in the wake of the decomposition of Carolingian royal power as the basis for a specifically ‘feudal’ transformation of Europe in this period – lords became increasingly dependent upon locally levied taxes, legal charges, and grants of monopoly for the bulk of their revenue [Comninel, 2000a]. Notwithstanding the theoretical attention devoted to feudalism in the transition debate, none of its participants
identified parcellized sovereignty as the basis for surplus appropriation by lords.
Recognizing the specificity of this particular form of supposedly ‘superstructural’ political power in constituting the mode of production was a major contribution.

At the same time, Anderson’s conception of the synthesis of slave and Germanic modes of production postulates a basis for the development of towns within the framework of feudal society – laying the foundation for the rise of a bourgeoisie. Turning the observation offered in the transition debate that towns developed in the ‘interstices’ of feudalism into an inherent aspect of the mode of production, he further set the stage for a classically structuralist Marxist conception of the Absolutist State. Arguing that the general European crisis in the century following the Black Death (1350-1450) particularly undermined the position of feudal lords as holders of parcellized sovereignty, he posits that as a class they reconstituted their position with respect to extra-economic coercive power by turning towards and taking positions within growing national monarchies, characterized broadly as the ‘Absolutist State’.

While opening the possibility of new modes of production outside Europe, Anderson restricts his analysis of European historical development to Marx’s terms. It is, indeed, in these terms that he offers what may be his most widely recognized contribution to historical sociology, conceiving the Absolutist State to be ‘a recharged and redeployed apparatus of feudal domination’ [1974a: 18]. Rather than directly possessing parcellized sovereignty, the feudal ruling class comes to occupy – and particularly to own as property – offices within a state ultimately based on the feudal claims of the king as overlord. In response to the chaos of the feudal crisis, and the strengthening of peasant positions relative to their lords, the rise of Absolutist States is said to have ushered in an era of increasing central taxation, increasingly effective central state power, and increasing dependence upon the state for the preservation of ruling class interests. The extra-economic surplus appropriation of feudal lords as direct possessors of sovereign political power therefore gives way to the many forms of their involvement in the complex privileged structures of political institutions, while they continue to draw substantial income from the ownership of estates and a variety of residual feudal obligations on their tenants [29-42].

Simultaneously, however, the Absolutist State is said in structuralist Marxist terms to be ‘overdetermined’ by the continued growth of town life and the bourgeoisie as a class, to which it contributes [39]. In Anderson’s analysis, therefore, the French state in the ancien régime constituted both a bulwark for the feudal nobility, and an agent promoting the development of what would eventually be a rival ruling class. The continued growth of the Absolutist State heightened the underlying contradictions to the point where a cataclysmic settling of accounts became inevitable

The rule of the Absolutist State was that of the feudal nobility in the epoch of transition to capitalism. Its end would signal the crisis of the power of its class: the advent of the bourgeois revolutions, and the emergence of the capitalist state. [1974a: 42]
The Historical Materialist Challenge

Anderson’s accomplishment is truly impressive. He sorts out the issues of pre-capitalist modes of production (his treatment of the ‘Asiatic’ mode of production is beyond the scope of this chapter), comes to terms with the unresolved issues of the transition debate, and integrates a refocused account of the European modes of production into a sweeping body of historical literature. In these first two volumes of a planned series, he set out to reformulate rigorously the terms in which Marx’s familiar overview of the history of European class societies are expressed, forging a clear account of their unique social development, culminating in the modern capitalist societies established through bourgeois revolutions, to which he proposed to turn in a third volume. A fourth and final volume would then return to the issue of different national historical developments within capitalism, as raised in his early work [1974a: 11].

Yet, shortly after the appearance of the first two volumes, a fundamental challenge to the very bourgeois paradigm that was central to Anderson’s conception emerged from within Marxian historical materialism itself. Beginning with two seminal articles, Robert Brenner rapidly called into question both the widespread supposition that capitalism emerged in towns and through trade, and the near-universal belief that all of Western Europe developed through the same historical processes to arrive at a common transition to capitalism [Brenner, 1976; 1977; 1982]. Targeting recent, essentially demographic explanations of the rise of capitalism in the wake of the feudal crisis at the end of the Middle Ages, as well as explanations tied to commercial growth that dated back at least to Adam Smith, Brenner marshalled substantial historical evidence to show that despite substantially similar patterns of growth in population and trade, divergent paths of social development emerged not only in Eastern versus Western Europe, but even between England and France. Indeed, he argued that capitalism developed in England uniquely, through a historically specific transformation of agrarian class relations that had nothing to do with an urban bourgeoisie. In France, by contrast, the rise of the Absolutist State constituted a fundamentally different line of social development which had nothing to do with the emergence of capitalism.

Brenner’s work therefore stands in fundamental challenge to one of the most basic presumptions of modern social theory, both Marxist and non-Marxist: that of an essentially common historical path of development to modernity in Western societies. It further challenges the very possibility of bourgeois class revolution. A widespread challenge to the long-established social interpretation of the French Revolution had already emerged from a range of non-Marxist ‘revisionist’ historians, and rapidly gained broad acceptance [Comininel, 1987: 18-25]. A large and growing body of research, initially inspired by the idea of bourgeois revolution, instead revealed ever more clearly that the French bourgeoisie could not be considered a capitalist class, nor could any systematic class difference be drawn between the forms of wealth and income enjoyed by the bourgeoisie and the supposedly feudal nobility.

Ironically, the very conception of the Absolutist State as a class mechanism for
appropriating surplus from peasants in the form of centralized taxation that Anderson advanced provides the most compelling grounds for challenging his account of class contradictions, since the overwhelming majority of the bourgeoisie were themselves owners of state offices, or lawyers – and most of the rest were rentiers. It was not a difference in class interests that led to a struggle between aristocrats and bourgeois in France, but their common economic interest in the state. The ruling class of the ancien régime comprised both nobles and bourgeois. The source of the conflict that emerged between these status groups within the class was itself directly political, but tied to a state that (as Anderson argued) was directly implicated in pre-capitalist extra-economic surplus appropriation: aristocrats had an interest in preserving and extending the political privileges of noble status within the state, which the unprivileged bourgeois had an interest in limiting or reducing.

The French Revolution was essentially an intra-class conflict over basic political relations that at the same time directly touched on relations of surplus extraction. It was a civil war within the ruling class over the essential issues of power and surplus extraction. The focus of the struggle was the nature of the state, giving the conflict its specifically political form, because the fundamental social interests at stake were directly tied to state relations. While private rent relations constituted the preponderant basis of class exploitation, the offices of the state played a key role: they were of extraordinary importance to the maintenance of the wealth of the aristocracy, essential to any hope for advancement by the lesser nobility, and at the same time the basis of the major part of bourgeois careers. [Comninel, 1987: 200]

Notwithstanding the efforts of many revisionist historians to claim that in disproving the so-called ‘social interpretation’ they have discredited Marxism as such [Comninel, 1987: 21-4], a historical materialist analysis of the ancien régime and Revolution therefore does readily sustain a class interpretation – but one leading to very different conclusions than those towards which Anderson was working.

The historical materialist challenge to the idea of bourgeois revolution is not restricted to the French case. Where both major parties to the French Revolution belonged to a non-capitalist ruling class, both major parties to the English Civil War instead belonged to a ruling class of capitalist landlords and merchants [Comninel, 1987: 203-4; Brenner, 1993: 638-59]. Indeed, since by the terms of Brenner's analysis England is the only society in which capitalism arose indigenously, and it emerged there in the countryside under the dominance of a specifically capitalist, landlord ruling class, the presumptive basis for bourgeois revolution – a capitalist class rising against the ruling class under whose domination they developed – simply does not apply to any historical case. In retrospect, recognizing that the concept emerged directly from the ideology of liberals who sought to defend the radical political project of the Revolution as necessary to ‘historical progress’, it should not be surprising to find that it does not fit the facts. The unilinear progressivsim of the ‘bourgeois paradigm’ must, therefore, be rejected, and
its pervasive influence on social theory critically reconsidered. Far from having parallel 
histories, England and France (after Rome) were probably never more similar than in the 
years just following the Norman Conquest, and never more dissimilar than in the late 
eighteenth century [Comninel, 2000a]. The histories of Italy and the Netherlands, may be 
contrasted with both, and with each other as well. There were, indeed, a number of very 
different historical paths out of medieval Europe. It was not until the industrial form of 
capitalism that developed in England began to spread across Europe in the nineteenth 
century – the original, specifically agrarian form of capitalism did not spread, aside from 
its imposition on Ireland by the English – that a powerful force promoting social 
convergence appeared.

As Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood have argued extensively, this has profound 
implications for the whole range of non-Marxist forms of social theory inspired by Adam 
1995: 146-78; 2002]. At the same time, the challenge of this historical materialist analysis 
is just as profound with respect to most expressions of Marxist theory. Indeed, at the 
core of this analysis there is the recognition that Marx himself, in coming to terms with 
the whole of the history of class society while being primarily focussed upon the 
specifically capitalist form which was the subject of his critique of political economy, 
incorporated many specifically liberal ideological conceptions [Comninel, 1987: 140-66; 
Brenner, 1989]. Marx’s original contributions to social theory – formulated specifically on 
the basis of a critique of liberal social theory in both its political and economic form – 
must be distinguished from the many instances in which he simply adopted prevailing 
liberal historical conceptions, which expressed liberal versions of both class analysis and 
materialism. Indeed, not only are there two strains of thought to be found in Marx’s work, 
but ironically it is the strain informed by liberal ideas which, as a result of resonance with 
non-Marxist accounts, tends to be most widely accepted. This was most clearly the case 
with the idea of bourgeois revolution.

While this implies that many forms of previously established Marxian historical 
interpretation must be called into question, it certainly does not challenge the historical 
materialist principles upon which Marx developed his original social thought [Comninel, 
1987: 133-40; 166-76; Brenner, 1989]. Contrary to the presumptions of the historical 
revisionists, the fact that the idea of bourgeois revolution must be rejected does not 
mean that there can be no class-based interpretation of either the English Civil War or 
the French Revolution. Similarly, historical materialist analysis has revealed that there is 
no historical foundation for the concept of a ‘slave mode of production’ in the ancient 
world – yet this does not mean that there is no basis for a class interpretation of politics 
and society in Greece and Rome [Wood, 1988]. Class interests can be identified behind 
all of the fundamental historical social and political developments and conflicts of 
European society, indeed, if not it the forms taken for granted by conventional 
expressions of Marxist theory, or the even more widely established approaches of liberal 
materialist theorists like Max Weber [Wood, 1995: 146-78] Such class analysis might well 
be guided by Marx’s central contribution – that class societies are shaped by social 
relations of exploitation:
The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element.... It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers... which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state. [Marx, 1959: 791]

The practice of historical materialism involves a fresh approach to history in terms such as these, unimpeded by the presuppositions of unilinear progressivist social theories.

The historical materialist challenge to the idea of bourgeois revolution has one further significant implication: the French Revolution cannot be taken as a model of one class consciously rising in challenge to another and seizing political ascendancy. It is not that there was no basis for the Revolution in the contradictions of class, but that there was no class-conscious capitalist bourgeoisie rising up against a feudal class of lords. The epochal effects of the French Revolution as a social revolution must therefore be understood in quite different terms.

Fortunately, despite the attention usually devoted to the statement of the 'social interpretation' which opens his work, there is an excellent account of the Revolution as a complex social revolution in Georges Lefebvre's classic work The Coming of the French Revolution [1947; Comminel, 1989]. Lefebvre recognized that it was the aristocracy that opened the revolution through their challenge to the monarchy. The bourgeoisie opened their phase of the revolution not as a capitalist class, but through growing opposition to the threatened dominance of the aristocracy, especially with respect to state offices. The political conflict between these social groups in turn created the space for the people of Paris to become politicized, as they came to see the aristocracy as opponents to ‘the Nation’, and instead identified with the bourgeois leaders of the Third Estate as its advocates. When, in July 1789, the urban crowds rose up and seized the Bastille while searching for arms with which to ‘save the Nation’, they not only thrust the bourgeoisie unexpectedly into power, but sent shock waves across France. In the weeks that followed, the final social group of participants – the peasantry – rose up in their own local attacks upon the symbols of aristocratic privilege, and the obligations imposed by them.

There is much to be learned from this account of social revolution. In the first place, it fits very well with idea that the Revolution opened as a sort of civil war within the dominant class. It is not a difference in class interests that divides the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, but their status difference as it may (or may not) relate to their common social interests. In this conflict, the bourgeoisie as a group did not gain ascendancy over the advocates of privilege on their own, but only through the involvement of the popular social groups in both Paris and the countryside. The popular movement, particularly in Paris, did not merely support one of the two sides in the political struggle, but came increasingly to identify its own interests and objectives in the form of affordable
subsistence and the practice of direct democracy. The political course of the Revolution, then, follows from the complex interaction between these different social groups, each with its own agenda. The radical course of the Revolution emerges from the conjunction of interests between successively more democratic and republican bourgeois politicians and the popular movement. With each spasm of popular uprising, the revolutionary leadership moved to the Left, increasingly narrowing the shared basis of their social interests until the Jacobins in power can be recognized as essentially professional politicians and administrators, and having driven away successive waves of bourgeois more readily identified with property interests. In the end, however, not even the incorruptible Robespierre shared the interests of the popular radicals, and the people did not rise up to save him when the leadership swung back to the Right in Thermidor.

Recalling that the revolutionary struggle in England also had the form of a civil war within a dominant class, the striking parallels between these two revolutions – so often attributed to the character of bourgeois revolution – can now be seen to lie instead in the similarity of the complex politics created by the opening of a political space for popular radicalism by contending groups within the dominant class. Social revolutions, then, might be seen to result from the capacity of the common people of a society – whatever its specific class character – to advance their own ideas and interests as a result of a fundamental political conflict dividing the dominant class. Where one part of the dominant class is willing and able to use popular support as a means of coming out on top, it will generally be on the basis of sharing more points of common interest with at least some among the people than the other part of that class. And it should hardly be surprising that the part of the dominant class that has less in common with the people will generally be more concerned about their political mobilization, and more intent upon maintaining ‘order’.

In 1640, the great majority of the English parliamentary gentry had been opposed to the use of royal prerogative to evade financial restraints imposed by Parliament, as well as to the general direction of royal policies in religion and international affairs. The king’s chief ministers were convicted and executed with little opposition. Yet, after a year of growing polarization between the crown and radical Puritans, in which the London crowd increasingly came to figure [Brenner, 1993: 352-63; 688-99], the relatively mild Grand Remonstrance passed in Parliament by only eleven votes. The resort to popular support as a means of defeating the crown not only became an issue in its own right, but in some ways the defining issue of the Civil War. What made the subsequent Revolution of 1688 (more or less finally resolving the same underlying issue between Parliament and the crown), seem ‘Glorious’ by contrast might readily be seen to be the comparative lack of reliance on popular mobilization.

The idea that there is much to learn about the political dynamics of class from the experience of the French Revolution and other great social revolutions of the past is not, then, incorrect. Once freed from the restrictive yoke of unilinear social theory, the specific historical experiences of these struggles reveal new patterns, teach other lessons. The failings of both Marxist and non-Marxist historical sociology have unfortunately caused
many thinkers to turn away entirely from the effort to understand historical social development systematically. It is to be hoped that, again inspired by issues of the French Revolution and the transition to capitalism, ongoing original research and analysis will both renew historical sociology, and restore to it a central position in contemporary social theory.
1. The whole of the Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie was published in Moscow between 1939 and 1941, but given the timing it understandably remained virtually unknown. Editions appeared in Berlin and Italy in the 1950s, but the complete work remained unavailable in French until 1968, and in English until 1973.

Guizot, François (1972) Historical Essays and Lectures. Chicago.
Mignet, François (1913) History of the French Revolution. From 1789 to 1814. London:
G. Bell