



The French Revolution: The Marxist Interpretation and the Revisionist Critic

Fransız Devrimi: Marksist Yorum ve Revizyonist Eleştiri

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ABSTRACT	ÖZ
<p>In this study, the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution and the Revisionist critic shall be compared. It shall be made use of categorical systematic content analysis through qualitative research method. The French Revolution, in this paper is the unique case that occurred in a certain period of the history. Marx and his followers investigated the roots of socialism in the French Revolution. This brought them to the economic dynamics of the revolution. Among these dynamics, the bourgeoisie is the dominant component. In the 1950's this approach was contested by the revisionists. Cobban, one of the most prominent revisionists, argued that the "Third Estate" which is claimed to represent the bourgeoisie in the "General Assembly" (Etats Généraux) does not have a bourgeois character. Furet, another revisionist, remarks that the political culture arising from the revolution makes more difficult its accurate analysis. He believes that the feudal system, contrarily to Marxist assertions was destroyed by the presence of the justice of royalty lost its function before the revolution. The economic mechanism of the feudal land was not sustainable by 1789. The impact of the revolution, from this point of view was limited to wipe out the last remains of the feudal world.</p>	<p>Bu çalışmada Fransız Devrimi'nin Marksist yorumu ve buna getirilen Revizyonist eleştiri karşılaştırılacaktır. Bunun için nitel araştırma yönteminde kategorik ve sistematik içerik analizine başvurulacaktır. Çalışmada Fransız Devrimi, tarihin belirli bir zamanında meydana gelmiş tek bir vaka olma özelliği taşımaktadır. Marx ve takipçileri sosyalizmin kökenini Fransız Devrimi'nde aramışlardır. Bu da onları devrimin iktisadi dinamiklerine götürmüştür. Bu dinamikler içerisinde burjuvazi baskın bir unsurdur. 1950'li yıllarda revizyonistler bu yaklaşıma itiraz etmişlerdir. Revizyonist yazar ve düşünürlerin önde gelen şahsiyetlerinden Cobban, "Genel Meclis" (États Généraux)'te burjuvaziyi temsil ettiği iddia edilen "Üçüncü Sınıf"ın burjuva bir karaktere sahip olmadığını öne sürmektedir. Bir diğer Revizyonist yazar, Furet, devrimle birlikte ortaya siyasal kültürün olayın doğru bir şekilde incelenmesini zorlaştırdığına dikkat çekmiştir. Marksistlerin iddia ettiğinin aksine feodal düzenin monarşi yargısının varlığı nedeni ile devrim öncesinde işlevini yitirdiğine inanmaktadır. 1789 yılına gelindiğinde feodal toprakların iktisadi mekanizması sürdürülebilir bir özellik arz etmemektedir. Devrimin, bu açıdan bakıldığında etkisi feodal dünyanın geriye kalan unsurlarını ortadan kaldırmakla sınırlı kalmıştır.</p>
<p>Keywords</p> <p>French Revolution, Bourgeoisie, Revisionist Critic, Marxist Tradition, Aristocracy</p>	<p>Anahtar Kelimeler</p> <p>Fransız Devrimi, Burjuvazi, Revizyonist Eleştiri, Marksist Gelenek, Aristokrasi,</p>

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1. Introduction

In the last quarter of the 18th century, the existing different classes in France, apart the king, can be regarded as the common people, the clergy and the aristocracy. With the reinforcement of the central administration, the degree of influence of the aristocracy on the common people remained limited to some regions far away from the centre. The competition between monarchy and aristocracy can be easily observed in the field of law. Royal prosecutors at the centre, the feudal lords in the back country were dispensing justice. The aristocracy, though losing some of his power, was maintaining his most important privileges in the rural area. This situation was making impossible any reaction that could save the labour from the feudal control. As it is known, autonomous reactions are extremely important as capitalistic components capable of disintegrating the remains of the feudal system. At the end of the 18th century, it is not possible to find such an autonomous power in France. The feudal system is still present and sovereign in the back country. At this point, the nature of the feudal system should be investigated. Does this sovereignty imply any conflict? Or on the contrary an express consent? The answer to the question is crucial. The sovereignty of the aristocracy on the common people is clear. However, it is also a fact that the peasant didn't accept this sovereignty by heart. The increase of productivity in the 18th century France was at a level to not be ignored. Nonetheless, this improvement in the productivity was absorbed in the last quarter of the century by the negative effects of the American independence war. Even when the crop reached its maximum, there was no possibility for the French peasant to make any saving. In the 18th century France, there were large provinces where the number of landless was greater than the number of farmers (Rozental, 1956:58).

Apart the landless laborers, the peasantry owning its land was for the most part smallholding. The feudal lords, furthermore, arbitrarily extended the scope of the drudgery. The non-respect of some peasant's rights created a disaffection towards the feudal lord. In order to arise from this discontentment a conflict, another class, different than these mentioned above was required. The French bourgeoisie, with the help of the mercantilist policies was increasing his wealth by the means of trade and production. Starting from the 15th century, they were having more and more economic power. It wanted to be the voice of the peasantry because the French bourgeois could get advantage from the decline of the French aristocracy. The bourgeoisie could not transform its economic power to political power. The corn crisis of 1775 was an opportunity to see explicitly the interest conflicts between different classes. This event, apart being an important crisis and making clear the conflicts between classes compelled the bourgeoisie and the peasantry to be allies. In this study, a discussion shall be done about which classes of the French society are the striking forces through the French Revolution? In the wake of the revolution, the liberal historians were aware of the economic aspect however they never gave priority to this aspect. French revolution had itself an impact on Marx's thought more than any other event in the world history could have. As Draper points it out, all the questions raised by the French Revolution are questions that Marx wanted to answer. For this reason, Marxist Orthodox and Revisionist perspectives shall be compared through this work. From this point of view, who is the driving force in carrying out of the French Revolution shall be investigated in this paper. Marxist and revisionists have both considered economic facts in a different way than the ne-classics who try to follow the rules of the natural sciences. For Marxists and revisionists, the circumstances are taken as facts in their social environments. From this point of view, this paper analyses the human economic behaviour within the social

context. By answering “Who drove the French Revolution?”, it shall be possible to find an answer to this question. Through this study, the Marxist and Revisionist interpretations shall be described. The Marxist theory argues that the French Revolution was carried out by the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, French Revolution is the source of inspiration for Marx who considers the relationship between the classes in terms of perpetual struggle. The second argument that shall be put into question is the Revisionist interpretation. Revisionists such as Cobban and Furet could not agree with the Marxists. According to the Revisionists, the French Revolution was carried out not by the bourgeoisie but by a more complex coalition of people who could not find its definition in only one class. In order to follow a consistent methodology within this conceptual framework, it shall be made use of qualitative research methods. Among the qualitative research designs, historical case study analysis shall be done. In the research, the investigation on “Who was the driving force in the French Revolution” shall be done by document analysis from the first degree and second sources. The literature related to this theory is reinforced with content analysis. In the next chapter, the methodology, it shall be discussed with which instruments the content analysis shall be done. After making clear this issue, the methodological consistency shall be ensured in the second chapter.

2. Methodology

In this study, it will be made use of the qualitative research methods because an investigation with hermeneutics¹ shall be conducted for investigating whether the bourgeoisie or the aristocracy was the dominant class during the French Revolution. The existence of the dominant class shall be questioned in the light of the Marxist and revisionist views consequently the conceptual framework that is adopted shall have the quality to test the theory. The case study that gives the possibility to collect deep and detailed information to the researchers by the means of information sources about the systems limited to some periods of time shall be selected among the qualitative research designs (Creswell, 2013:130). In this context, the French Revolution that is a historical case that occurred in a certain period of the history shall take its place as a sectional case design. Since investigations such as how and under which circumstances the factor that affected the development of the French Revolution, the definitions of the longitudinal subcases within the adopted design are not required in this study². The French revolution that is a unique case in a certain period of the history taken as a unique sectional case puts the adopted case design in the category of sectional sample case³. Rather than putting an emphasis on the literature that gives broadly account of the paradigms that are dominated by the Neo-classic view that the French Revolution created a totally new society in France, the documents of first- and second-degree sources that consider the revolution in its social context and that have an economic awareness. Some resolutions via categorical systematic content analysis among the qualitative research shall be done with the data obtained from the document review⁴. Within this study that grounds on an investigation

¹ According to Gadamer, hermeneutics *hermeneuieren* is the art of informing, acknowledging, translating and revelation (Gadamer, 1995:10-11).

² The definition of sectional subcases in the commonly used case study designs is a design referred to in the studies in which usually time process analyses are carried out (Gökçe, 2022: 41).

³ Jason and Rogers (2001) from Bal (2016); Kinds of sample cases can be categorized in 5; 1) *Spontaneous sample case*, 2) *Sectional sample case*, 3) *Fragmented sample case*, 4) *Ex ante ax post sample case* 5) *Comparative Sample Case*.

⁴ According to Siğrı; “..content analysis that is the fundamental data analysis for the qualitative research; is a technique of qualitative data analysis that aims to reach the concepts and ...” (Siğrı, 2021:276).

that questions which class dynamic is dominant in the unfolding of the French Revolution; there shall be a possibility to test the adopted conceptual framework. Some resolutions related to content analysis shall put into light the findings and their interpretations. Subcodes and subcategories shall not be determined. As a requirement of the categorical systematic analysis, the Marxist postulate that argues that the French Revolution is a bourgeois revolution and the revisionist postulate that doesn't agree with this hypothesis shall be subject to two-dimensional classification. The conclusions shall be put into light in the results and discussion section.

2.1. Systematic Categorical Analysis of the Marxist and Revisionist Views

In this section a single step categorical systematic content analysis shall apply. This analysis is constituted of a two-dimensional classification. Two categories shall be presented under two subtitles as the Marxist postulate (i) and the revisionist postulate (ii) concerning which was the dominant class during the French Revolution. In the results and discussion part, it shall go through the phase of resolution of categorical-systematic analysis that shall be done by establishing a relationship between the dimensions classified by splitting the categories.

2.1.1. *The Bourgeois Revolution: A Central Theme in the Marxist Tradition*

According to Draper (1986), Marx's thought deals with questions raised by the French Revolution. Marx defines the French Revolution as a bourgeois capitalist revolution. However, the bourgeois in the 19th century has a different meaning from the bourgeois of the Revolution. The bourgeois in The French Revolution is heroic while the bourgeois of the 19th century focuses on maintaining in his hands the private property. Despite this change, the bourgeois revolution remained an important aspect of the Marxist theory. According to Hobsbawm, the bourgeoisie was not the striking force of the French Revolution but succeeded to shape its final direction (Hobsbawm, 1996:63-64).

Though having a central importance in the Marxist tradition, the idea of bourgeois revolution originated with liberal historians. Marx, in his letter to Weydemeyer in 1852 confesses not be the first to use the idea of class struggle. Françoise Guizot, author of *Histoire de la Civilisation en France* (History of the civilization in France) was already teaching in the 1820's as a professor at Sorbonne that class struggle was based on property relations (He would be a couple of decades letter the French Prime Minister who expelled Marx from France under the pressure of the Prussian State). Jaurès gives for the first time a complete account of the revolution from the Marxist point of view in the first years of the 1900's. Jaurès is the first author who looked for a social phenomenon in the revolution. When in 1898 the bookseller and publisher Rouff proposed him to write that book, socialism was very popular in France. In the early 1900's in France, the most eminent professor on the French Revolution studies was Aulard at the Sorbonne University (Wolikow, 1991:431-432). Aulard was one of these republican bourgeois who struggled for the foundation of a secular and modern republic between 1875 and 1880 (Soboul, 1979: 445). Aulard considers the revolution as the coronation of the Enlightenment (Soboul,1974:141). The subtitle of Aulard's masterpiece, *Histoire Politique de la Révolution* (Political History of the Revolution) published in 1901 reveals this fact: *Origine et développement de la démocratie et de la République* (Origin and development of democracy and Republic). For Aulard, uniquely the bourgeoisie could lead the revolution and the common people were expected to follow this superior class. Jaurès, contrarily to

Aulard remarks in the introduction of *Histoire Socialiste* that the book is addressed to workers and peasants. This is not Jaurès who saw for the first time the economic dynamic behind the Revolution. The liberal historians did also an account of the economic dynamics having impact on the revolution. However, they considered the year 1789 as an interruption. According to Tocqueville (2010), 1789 gave birth to a new society. Guizot believes that the bourgeoisie created slowly the circumstances for the revolution. Barnave has the conviction that feudal aristocracy was a hint to the economic development of France before 1789. Institutions created by the landed aristocracy delayed the genesis of a new era (Jaurès, 1901:98). Barnave stressed that a new way to create wealth was forcing a new distribution of power in the society. Jaurès doesn't hide at all that he takes as reference Barnave in what concerns the economic theory of the French Revolution (Rébérioux, 1966:171-172). Barnave wrote the economic reasons of the revolution during the revolution (1791-92) although his work could be published only in the 1840's. Historians in the 1820's and 1830's didn't have access to this important document nonetheless it gave opportunity to Soboul to trace back the history of the bourgeois revolution to the period of the revolution Augustin Thiers in 1823 and et Mignet in 1824 committed to paper the history of the revolution under the same title: *Histoire de la Révolution française* (History of the French Revolution). Another common point in these books was the idea that the revolution was a battlefield for the struggling classes. In *Histoire Socialiste* there was for the first time an attempt to find economic reasons as the main cause of the Revolution. Albert Mathiez, the student of Aulard and the second scholar who held the chair of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne reedited *Histoire Socialiste* in the 1920's (Ellis, 1978:354). Georges Lefebvre, another important French Marxist historian following the reedition considered Jaurès as his master. For Jaurès, the Revolution is the result of a long economic and social process. Lefebvre and Mathiez are aware of the complexity of the transition to a new society. Following the revolution, the line of antagonism switched from one to another. The disintegration first occurs between the bourgeoisie and the popular mass then among different categories of the bourgeoisie itself. In 1924, under the effect of the revolution in Russia with his *Les Paysans du Nord* (The Peasants of the North), Lefebvre shows that there is also a distinct class of peasants having a certain autonomy and specificity. *La vie chère et le mouvement social sous la Terreur* (The expensive life and social movement under Terror) by Mathiez in 1927. The Marxist, called Orthodox or social classic view with the contribution of Albert Soboul in the 1950's continued to dominate the historiography of the French Revolution. Soboul made the most comprehensive work on the urban popular history of the French Revolution. Soboul's studies (1958) found their expression in his doctorat ès-lettres about the sans-culottes. His basic account about the sans-culottes reappeared in different versions. The sans-culottes should not be confused with the Jacobins. Sans-culottes are rather a movement than a political party. They are side by side with the peasants and the bourgeoisie in the first years of the revolution in the struggle against the landed aristocracy and the absolute government. They are enthusiastic about economic and social equality. It's hard to qualify sans-culottes as proletarian. They are a coalition of small size entrepreneurs and people who work for them.

2.1.2. Revisionist Critic

French Revolution historiography on which no more word could be said, it was thought, had witnessed one of its most controversial debates at the middle of the 20th century. The conference held in London on the 6th of February 1954 was certainly the opening scene of this debate (Lefebvre, 1985:1). Cobban through the conference argued that the Revolution was not

in itself maybe a myth however the dynamics told by the Marxist historians was not in conformity with the facts. According to Cobban, the Revolution was not at all anti-feudal or anti-aristocratic. There was no longer a feudal system prevailing at the time of the Revolution. Cobban to be the first, a group of scholars particularly in France and in the Britain called "revisionists" investigated the bourgeois character of the French Revolution (Heller, 2010:184). The revisionists considered the revolution as a part of a long process and not an interruption in the course of the history. The classic social interpretation of the French Revolution presupposes a connection between the Third Estate and the bourgeoisie. By bourgeoisie in Britain is meant the people involved in the industry, finance and trade. At least this is its meaning for the British example and so for Cobban. Manufacturers, merchants and industrials are at different size. Georges Rudé remarks that head physicians and liberal aristocrats could not be ignored in the group of people who were at the front line in the counter-revolution against the aristocracy in 1788 (Rudé, 1959:178-190). Cobban goes further and makes research about the professional carrier of the members of the Third Estate. He concludes that only %13 of the people elected in the Third Estate could be qualified as capitalist independently from the size of the capital (Lefebvre, 1985:4).

The two thirds of the Third Estate are involved in liberal profession. This is the reason why it cannot be argued that the Third Estate represents the French bourgeoisie. Among the 1539 members of the Third Estate, 629 were high-ranking officials. What must be noted here is that prior to the Revolution 289 were already commissioned with a high-ranking civil service (Lefebvre, 1985:5). From this point of view, even if we assume that the Third Estate corresponds to the bourgeoisie; his members were not totally excluded from the public services. Furet (1927-1997) is the pioneer of the revisionist critic in France (Baker, 2000:1. Furet is not only a revolution historian but also an important personality in what concerns the French political culture (Le Monde, 1997). According to Furet, the French Revolution is the consequence of the change not in the economic and social history but the cultural thought. Together with Mona Ozouf they prepared *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution Française* (Critique dictionary of the French Revolution) in 1988 (Heller, 2010: 186). At this point the revisionist critic gained some reputation among the scholars who approached the issue on the cultural side. Furet argued that this transformation in the mind of the people could not be restrained to its economic character. The feudal system is valid rather for the 11th century than 18th century (Chaunu, 1986:390). Even between the beginning and the end of the 18th century, there are differences about the validity of the feudal concepts. The concepts of sword and robe are less important at the end of the century. The lend rent is not as important as the Marxists argue. As Tocqueville mentioned (1985), the feudal rights were having a less negative impact on the peasants in France than its neighbours. The reason why the peasant of the 18th century is in worse condition than the peasant of the 13th century is the arbitrary judgement of the fiscal authority. The fiscal authority in question here depends on the royal administration. The peasant didn't have right to contest the decisions made by the royal tax officers. The feudal system's political fundamentals were not existing no longer in the last quarter of the 18th century. Its economic structure was not sustainable. The monarchy already destroyed politically the feudal system. The antagonism argued by the French Marxist historians simplifies the facts at the cost of diverging from the reality.

Kautsky (1901), an important thinker in the Marxist tradition qualifies the antagonism established between the two classes as an oversimplification. Kautsky indicates that the

approach of a struggle opposing the revolutionary mass and the reactionary mass is insufficient for explaining the social relationships that are not for sure as simple as that. According to Furet the French state destroyed step by step the vertical solidarity between the orders. The lack of political solidarity among the members of the nobility is due to Louis XIV and his policies to create concurrent aristocrats in the 17th century (Furet, 1971:274). On the other hand, it was possible to see a kind of non-official cooperation between the French bourgeoisie and the King because the merchants were hostile to the local authorities. This hostility more precisely was directed to any kind of people indifferent to the value of their commercial activities. The bourgeoisie, influent in some of the cities was not eager to accept the presence of aristocrats pushed to live in the countryside (Bloch, 1982: 264).

3. Conclusion

For Marx, the French Revolution is a bourgeois capitalist revolution. At the middle of the 20th century, it was thought that everything that could be said was already said about the French Revolution. The conference held in 1954 by Alfred Cobban considered the Orthodox Marxist explanation of the French Revolution as a myth. Some other objections were raised in France by François Furet. These people, called revisionists investigated the bourgeois character of the Revolution. Marxists do not mean that the Revolution was totally carried out by the bourgeoisie but that the bourgeoisie could give its final direction to the revolution. According to the Marxists, the bourgeoisie and the peasantry showed solidarity until the fall of the King. Consecutively the bourgeoisie turned against the peasantry. They suppose in this context that there was solidarity between the King and the aristocrats and among the aristocrats themselves. The bourgeoisie was represented by the Third Estate. The Marxist explanation argues that the revolution gave an end to the feudal system. Cobban first wanted to show that the bourgeoisie could not be identified with the Third Estate and that only between 10% and 15% of the Third Estate could be qualified as bourgeois when the structure of the British bourgeoisie is taken as model. Doctors and lawyers are more crowded in the Third Estate than merchants, traders or industrials. Even when assumed that the Third Estate represents the bourgeoisie, according to the Marxist antagonism bourgeoisie-aristocracy it is not expected to have bourgeois in high-ranking officials. 289 members of the Third Estate hold a high-ranking public office before the French Revolution. Another revisionist, Furet insists that the land rent does not mean exclusively feudal right. The feudal system was already destroyed by the monarchy by the time of the revolution. The feudal mode of production could not survive very long without the political pillar. The French Revolution didn't abolish the feudal system, but it removed the last residuals of the feudal world.

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