

# *The historiography of French economic growth in the nineteenth century*<sup>1</sup>

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During the second half of the twentieth century, the economy of France in the ‘long’ nineteenth century (1815–1914) and its growth have attracted a good deal of attention from economists and historians, not only in France, but also abroad, especially in Britain and in the United States. After the Second World War, what might be called the ‘retardation-stagnation’ thesis dominated. From the 1960s, ‘revisionists’ painted a more optimistic view. Recently, ‘anti-revisionism’ has revived gloomy ideas. New research has been primarily responsible for changes of view. The building of national income estimates—especially estimates of per caput income—bolstered the ‘revisionist’ argument, suggesting that the French performance had been rather good. Cliometric studies later supported this view. Work on the ‘great depression’ of 1873–97 stimulated anti-revisionism. However, scholars have also been influenced by the economic and political state of France at the time they were writing. The world depression of the 1930s and the disaster of 1940, the so-called ‘golden age’ from *c.* 1950 to 1973, the difficulties in the 1980s and 1990s, all reverberated upon historians’ perceptions of nineteenth-century France. The debate has also been somewhat politicized. This article attempts to describe each of these phases in the historiography of nineteenth-century French economic growth and to explore the influences which shaped its formulation, before providing a survey of the ‘moderate revisionism’ which now prevails.

## I

When it came to prominence after the Second World War, the ‘retardation-stagnation’ thesis of the late 1940s and 1950s already had a long historiographical tradition behind it. Such views had been formulated in the 1930s, when France suffered badly from the world depression, and in the years after the disaster of 1940. However, economic history was in its infancy in France until the 1930s. Politicians, publicists, and economists conducted these early discussions. Academic historians were not interested, with the exception of Henri Hauser, who worried about

<sup>1</sup> This article is derived from the Tawney Memorial lecture, given at the annual conference of the Economic History Society, in Birmingham, on 7 April 2002. The writer is grateful to Professor Pat Hudson, president of the Society, for her invitation to deliver this lecture and thereby to pay a tribute to the memory of R.H. Tawney. He also thanks Professor Ian Blanchard.

the French economy's lack of dynamism.<sup>2</sup> Most writers at the time had no interest in economic affairs and concentrated upon political and diplomatic history. Admittedly, the *Annales* School, which emerged in the 1930s, campaigned ardently in favour of economic and social history, but its leaders and most of their disciples worked in medieval or early modern history. An exception was Charles Morazé, then a rising star, who published in 1946 a brilliant essay on 'Bourgeois France'. Yet he merely stated that France had been reluctant to mechanize and was a country of petty bourgeois and backward farmers; and he continued to stress the conventional view regarding the major changes and the blossoming of capitalism, which had taken place during the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly also, after the Second World War, the enthusiastic oratory of Ernest Labrousse attracted many young scholars to economic and social history. Although one might agree with George Grantham that 'had the term then existed, Labrousse would almost certainly have called himself a Cliometrician',<sup>4</sup> it has to be said that he was mainly interested in short-term price and income fluctuations and in business cycles, and that economic growth (a new concept, moreover, in the 1940s) did not appeal to him. Work by his students generally followed the master's inspiration. He once gave a course of lectures on economic and social change in Britain and France from 1815 to 1880, but he made no detailed comparison between the two countries. The main idea was that the industrial revolution had been far less 'brutal' in France, where an 'ancien régime economy' had persisted up to 1850, than in Britain; but, if France had lagged economically, it had been ahead ideologically, as the mother-country of socialism!<sup>5</sup>

Owing to this general lack of interest by French academics, the problem of French 'backwardness' was set—and solved—by foreign scholars. In this context, an eminent Briton, Sir John Clapham, deserves to be mentioned first. In 1921, he published a classic, *The economic development of France and Germany, 1815-1914*, which launched the 'stagnationist' thesis.<sup>6</sup> The leading idea is simple: 'France never went through an industrial revolution. There was a gradual transformation', but it was slow and incomplete. 'In the first half of the century the movement is barely perceptible', and industrialization was 'almost ludicrously slow

<sup>2</sup> Hauser, *Les méthodes allemandes*, esp. pp. 1-14, 257-75; *idem*, *La nouvelle orientation économique*, pp. 103-28; also his foreword to Sée, *Histoire économique*, p. viii: one permanent trait of French economic history is that the French are 'a people of *rentiers*, of petty bourgeois, who are averse to risks'.

<sup>3</sup> Morazé, *La France bourgeoise*, esp. pp. 24, 59, 143-5, 179, 183. This book had actually been completed in 1943. Lucien Febvre wrote a foreword; he wondered whether France was suited to the new industrial civilization and why its social structure and mentalities were resistant to progress, especially to mechanization (pp. vi, viii-ix).

<sup>4</sup> Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', p. 372.

<sup>5</sup> Labrousse, *Aspects de l'évolution*, I, pp. 5, 11, 13, 24, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Quotations are from the fourth edition (1936), but the author mentioned in the preface to that edition that he had not modified his earlier 'general conclusions'. Ruttan, 'Structural retardation', p. 715, n. 4, has stressed the importance of Clapham's book: 'the structural retardation hypothesis in the English-language literature on French agricultural development dates at least to the first edition of J. H. Clapham.'

down to the forties'. Though Clapham conceded that an industrial revolution might have started around 1895, 'the transformation accomplished in a century was in many ways less complete than that which Germany experienced in the forty years after 1871'. Clapham also mentioned several of the symptoms and causes of backwardness, which later writers dwelt on.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to compare Clapham's book with the first economic history of France by a French historian, Henri Sée (1942).<sup>8</sup> Sée, like Clapham, noticed no marked changes in the French economy before 1840, but found in the second half of the century an 'astonishing progress in mechanisation and an extraordinary increase of industrial output', plus 'decisive changes' in agriculture. Sée also observed that 'national wealth' and incomes were increasing faster than population, and thereby, he anticipated the concept of per caput income. As Frenchmen were prone to save, their country had been, before the First World War, 'the world's banker'. On the other hand, Sée admitted that, in 1914, France remained 'basically an agricultural country' (but a rich one), that 'entrepreneurship seems less passionate than in countries like the U.S.A. or even England', that capitalism had not fully triumphed. But he stressed a view that was widespread: 'The balance which has been kept between agriculture and industry, this kind of economic harmony secure to her [France] a solid stability and an enviable situation.'<sup>9</sup>

Such complacency was, of course, destroyed by the Second World War and was not shared by American scholars who came to France either during the bad times of the 1930s, or the worse ones at the end of the war and shortly afterwards. They could not but be struck by the contrast between the wealth of America and the poverty, squalor, and decrepitude which prevailed in France. They were also impressed by what David Landes described in 1949 as 'one of the most important political phenomena of the last 150 years: the fall of France from hegemony under Napoleon to the position she holds today'. Or, as Grantham has put it recently: 'A long decline from the cultural and political grandeur of Louis XIV to the humiliation of Vichy'.<sup>10</sup> According to Rondo Cameron, the personal experiences of American scholars 'inevitably influenced their interpretation of contemporary French society and of French history as

<sup>7</sup> Clapham, *Economic development*, pp. 53, 233, 239-40. American textbooks of the 1930s did not give a more optimistic view of French economic development: Heaton *Economic history*; Clough, *France*.

<sup>8</sup> Actually, the book had been commissioned by a German publisher and published in Germany in 1936, but later in French in France. Volume II, which deals with the period 1789-1914, came out in occupied Paris in 1942. Sée, who had died before the war, was Jewish, as were Henri Hauser, who wrote the foreword, and Robert Schnerb, a younger man, who prepared the manuscript for publication as well as compiling the extensive bibliography. This is an interesting example of Nazi and Vichy regulations being circumvented.

<sup>9</sup> Sée, *Histoire économique*, pp. 108-9, 160, 246-7, 294, 303, 311, 330, 351, 365-6. Viallate, *L'activité économique en France* (a textbook of the 1930s), also stressed that France, unlike Britain or Germany, had preserved a harmonious economic structure, despite the progress of industry. But Morazé, *La France bourgeoise*, p. 189, dismissed such views: it was an error to consider as social equilibrium the artificial survival of small artisans, farmers, and petty bourgeois.

<sup>10</sup> Landes, 'French entrepreneurship', p. 45; Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', p. 369. The article by Landes and several others relevant to the theme of the present article have been reprinted in Crouzet, ed., *Economic development*.

well'.<sup>11</sup> They concluded that the decline of France, the disaster of 1940, and the distress and instability which were prevalent in the late 1940s resulted from the slow growth and backwardness of the French economy during the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, in the immediate postwar period, it continued to be widely assumed that French growth had been quite slow in the nineteenth century. Accordingly there was at this time a search for 'retardative factors in French economic development', this being the title of an article by S. B. Clough published in 1946. A. L. Dunham wrote, in 1951, about conditions 'which retarded the development of French industry'. He then published a book on the industrial revolution in France, in which he stressed its slowness and explained this by the French people's passionate attachment to the land and by their love of beauty, which made them hostile to mechanized mass production. None the less, he admitted that a lot of progress had been achieved between 1815 and 1848.<sup>13</sup>

Younger scholars also became interested in France. Among them were John Sawyer, who maintained that social tensions, which bedevilled French society, 'had killed the spirit of enterprise', and thus delayed industrialization; and Stanley Hoffman, who invented the idea that France was '*une société bloquée*' (a blocked society).<sup>14</sup> However, the most important and influential contribution was a masterly article, which Landes published in 1949, on 'French entrepreneurship and industrial growth in the nineteenth century'. Landes had been influenced by the sociologist Talcott Parsons and his interpretation was socio-cultural.<sup>15</sup> He held that France had performed badly because of poor entrepreneurship among its businessmen, who were conservative, timid, hostile to the new and unknown, and who 'lacked drive, initiative, and imagination'. These characteristics derived from the predominance of small family firms, which were necessarily cautious and from the hierarchy of status in French society, from 'a general atmosphere that can but be termed anti-capitalist'.<sup>16</sup> Twenty years later, in *The unbound Prometheus*, Landes was less scathing about the French economy.<sup>17</sup> However, during the late

<sup>11</sup> Cameron, 'L'économie française', p. 1418; also, *idem* and Freedeman, 'French economic growth', pp. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Fohlen, 'Entrepreneurship and management', p. 347.

<sup>13</sup> Clough, 'Retardative factors'; Dunham, 'Conditions which retarded development'; *idem*, *La révolution industrielle*, esp. pp. 377-81, 385-6, 388, 396 (the English version was published after the French one).

<sup>14</sup> Hoffman, ed., *In search of France*; Sawyer, 'Strains in the social structure'. The volume on *Modern France* edited by Earle, in which Sawyer's study was published, also contained articles on 'the dessication of the bourgeois spirit', and on the decline of the 'French *élan vital*'. See also Pitts, 'Bourgeois family', written in 1957.

<sup>15</sup> This influence is mentioned by Landes, 'French entrepreneurship', p. 54, n. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Landes, 'French entrepreneurship', p. 57 and *passim*; also *idem*, 'French business and the businessman'. Landes's views are discussed by Heywood, *Development of the French economy*, pp. 61-4.

<sup>17</sup> Landes, *Unbound Prometheus*, pp. 160-1; see also his 1963 article, 'New-model entrepreneurship', where he observed that the quality of enterprise and the mentality of entrepreneurs had changed during the spurts of growth in 1850-70 and 1896-1913; and in his 'Religion and enterprise' (1976), 'a case study in successful French enterprise', he praised the textile entrepreneurs of Roubaix-Tourcoing. *Unbound Prometheus* had been first published in 1965 as part of *The Cambridge economic history of Europe*, vol. VI.

1940s and 1950s, a dim view of its development prevailed in the US, in Britain, and also in France itself.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the provincialism of most French historians, the views of American scholars, which have just been mentioned, struck home in France, partly because they converged with ideas which were then widespread there. Since the 1930s, people had become conscious of the French economy's shortcomings or *faiblesses*. They were widely attributed to 'economic Malthusianism' (a term which soon became a cliché), by industrialists and the *bourgeoisie* as a whole; they were charged with having deliberately restricted investment and expansion, in order to preserve profits and to prevent the working class from becoming more numerous and powerful. American views, of French entrepreneurs as conservative and non-innovative, and of French society as suffering from an unhealthy and growth-restricting alliance between the upper class and the peasantry, fitted well into this outlook, which became popular at the time among historians of the left. They were glad to discover a new stick with which to beat the *patronat*, and desired to advocate and justify the large-scale nationalizations of the late 1940s, as well as *dirigisme*, extensive government intervention in the economy. In Grantham's words, 'the left had ... appropriated the right to define the history of post-Revolutionary France, and it placed a socialist narrative on that history.'<sup>19</sup> Thus it happened that debates about past economic growth were somewhat politicized—and they have remained so. An interesting example of the 'Malthusian' view is Guy Palmade's book on French capitalism (1961). This stressed that France modernized much more slowly than the other great powers and that its transformation was incomplete. French capitalism was partly responsible for this decline, because a 'Malthusian' tendency was one of its major aspects. This tendency had emerged early in the nineteenth century. As early as the prosperous years of the Second Empire, there were signs of sclerosis, which increased afterwards; and during the so-called *Belle époque*, French capitalism was ageing and 'getting out of breath' (readers could guess that socialism was bound to supersede it).<sup>20</sup>

However, economic historians, who were by no means radicals, also took a dim view of French economic performance. Charles Morazé stated in 1957 that the modest progress of France under Napoleon III could be compared neither with 'the English blossoming' nor with the genuine economic revolution which took place in Germany.<sup>21</sup> In 1960, Pierre Léon (who was then number two, after Labrousse, in modern French economic history) wrote that nineteenth-century France 'gave the

<sup>18</sup> This is stressed by Fohlen, 'Entrepreneurship and management', p. 350. See, for instance, Kemp, 'Structural factors' (1962) and *idem*, *Economic forces* (1971). It is typical that Kindleberger, *Economic growth* (1964) cleverly discussed the various explanations of French 'backwardness', which had been suggested, but postulated that France was backward; the national income series, which had been produced recently, were mentioned, but not used extensively.

<sup>19</sup> Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', p. 354; see also Caron, *Histoire économique*, pp. 155-6.

<sup>20</sup> Palmade, *Capitalisme et capitalistes*, pp. 75-6, 103, 186, 204, 239-44, 268-71.

<sup>21</sup> Morazé, *Les bourgeois conquérants*, pp. 253, 256-7, 261, 264, 375-8. Still he added that a strong attempt to modernize had started in the 1890s.

impression of a country where growth was relatively slow, almost behind-hand'; it was stalling and being overtaken by other countries.<sup>22</sup> Claude Fohlen, in his contribution to *The Fontana economic history of Europe* (1973), stated that France had undergone a gradual transformation and not an industrial revolution, and had developed a noticeable backwardness in comparison with other countries and 'steadily slipped back in the race'.<sup>23</sup>

In the absence, until the 1960s, of national income estimates, such views seem to have been confirmed by the few statistics which were then available, especially those which related to production in specific industries, such as mining, iron and steel, and shipbuilding. It was not realized at the time that, in adopting as their point of reference the classic industries of the British 'industrial revolution', historians were introducing a strong bias against France, where those heavy industries had played a smaller role than in Britain, Germany, or Belgium.

As will be appreciated, therefore, the 'retardation-stagnation' group of scholars continued to defend its position long after the 1960s, when new national income estimates posed a major challenge to it. This continuing adherence, in part at least, may have had something to do with the fact that in the US and in Britain, in particular, some writers who had belatedly in the 1960s and 1970s adopted the 'retardation-stagnation' view of the French nineteenth-century economy, continued to stick to their guns in their later writings. Among them were Charles Kindleberger<sup>24</sup> and the late Tom Kemp, who maintained consistent views in his successive works. Admittedly, in a 1985 article, Kemp observed that 'a remarkable process of revision' had taken place, and that his book *Economic forces in French history* (1971) would stand in need of extensive revision were it to be reissued.<sup>25</sup> However, this apparent concession was at once followed by a return to his earlier point of view. He stressed that it was necessary 'to exercise critical scepticism regarding the self-styled revisions', because 'an escape into numbers obscures the really evident facts'. And the basic fact was that 'the French *retard* still remains'; if 'stagnation cannot be ascribed to the French economy over the nineteenth century as a whole, "retardation" ... may still be a valid concept'. 'French industrialization not only proceeded differently, but it remained behind'; France and Britain 'pursued the same path with France consistently behind'. Kemp accepted that France had rates of growth which were 'respectable in comparative terms', but insisted that what mattered was structural change, which was necessary for industrialization and was less far-reaching there than in Britain and Germany. In 1971, Kemp had written that 'in 1914 France conserved many of the characteristics of an underdeveloped country'; in 1985, he compared France to 'a developing

<sup>22</sup> Léon, 'L'industrialisation en France', p. 164.

<sup>23</sup> Fohlen, 'Industrial revolution in France', p. 70.

<sup>24</sup> See his hostile review of O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*.

<sup>25</sup> Kemp added that his *Industrialization in nineteenth-century Europe* (1969) had been revised for its second (1985) edition.

country such as Brazil today'.<sup>26</sup> It was Clive Trebilcock, however, who in 1981 painted one of the blackest pictures of French economic development at this time. He mentioned 'the revisionist tactics'. But he asserted that they were 'passing out of style: the advocates of "fast and steady" growth subjected the plentiful jeremiads of the immediately post-war period, and frequently of American authorship, to intense statistical bombardment, only to find, when the smoke cleared, that they had been using blank ammunition'. The 'pessimistic assertion of "slow and continuous" advance was corroborated'. 'Palace revolutions in historiography may come and go, but the industrial revolution in France remains timid and spasmodic' (adjectives such as 'hesitant', 'languid', and 'modest' are also used about French growth).<sup>27</sup> 'After Britain, France was the first major nation to seek initiation into the industrial mysteries. Unfortunately, however, Gallic temperaments appear to have proved ill-suited to the experience.'<sup>28</sup> France 'could make industrial beginnings but could not build upon them'; as for inventions and innovations, 'opportunities were missed with almost professional consistency.... This was a story of unrealised potential and missed chances.' Trebilcock stressed two factors of this 'consistently low propensity to accept innovation'. First was the French Revolution, which was catastrophic and disruptive, so that 'whatever growth prospects France had accumulated by 1789 were largely dispersed by 1815. It is arthritis ... which is most evident in French attempts at "catching up".' The second factor was 'entrepreneurial deficiency'; this hypothesis 'has been tested, contorted, reviled, and, on the whole, has survived'; France had only 'miserable capitalists: a dearth of heroes', because 'the balance of value system was tipped towards the conservative'. As a consequence, the French economy of the nineteenth century was 'battered and tired', 'debilitated', and by 1900 France was clearly 'the economic laggard among the powers'.<sup>29</sup>

By the 1980s, however, these authors were crying in the wilderness, their increasingly intense rhetoric reflecting their isolation in an academic world which was passing them by. In the 1960s the new national income estimates had fundamentally challenged their position, laying the foundations of a new 'revisionist' view of French economic growth in the nineteenth century. Even in the late 1990s, however, their views remained a part of the ongoing debate. This caused adherents of what was by this time the new 'revisionist' orthodoxy to continue to respond to these earlier views. Dominique Barjot still found it necessary to describe such views, which prevailed in the immediate postwar period and after, as a 'black legend'. At the same time Grantham wrote that 'the historiography

<sup>26</sup> Kemp, 'French economic performance', pp. 473-4, 477, 479, 484-7; *idem*, *Economic forces*, p. 303. See also the critical remarks on Kemp's earlier writings in O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Trebilcock makes no mention of growth per caput, and O'Brien and Keyder's book is not in his bibliography.

<sup>28</sup> The return to the old concept of 'national' character is curious.

<sup>29</sup> Trebilcock, *Industrialization*, pp. 112, 125, 133, 135, 158-61, 163, 196, 198.

of French economic development ... is obsessed with failure'—and, one might add—with backwardness, obstacles, and hindrances to progress.<sup>30</sup>

## II

In the 1960s the publication of estimates of national income for France and for other countries—in particular, Britain—had made international comparisons possible and provided yardsticks to determine whether economic growth in any individual country was fast or slow relative to other economies which were deemed appropriate for comparison.<sup>31</sup> National income estimates were the main source of 'revisionism' about French growth, which will now be considered.

In the 1950s Simon Kuznets had received a large grant from the Social Sciences Research Council to finance the construction of historical income and product accounts for developed nations. In 1956 he subcontracted the work on France to a team of economists at the ISEA (Institute for Applied Economics), led by Jean Marczewski; Tibor Markovitch and Jean Toutain were his right-hand men.<sup>32</sup> From 1961 onwards, they published a 'quantitative history of France since 1700'.<sup>33</sup> Though aggregate final figures for GDP (including services) only came out in 1987,<sup>34</sup> provisional results had been made available much earlier, through conference papers and articles. Of particular importance was an article published by Marczewski in 1965, which compared the growth of British and French commodity output.<sup>35</sup> Patrick O'Brien and Caglar Keyder passed the most sensible judgement on the work of the Marczewski team—and of Phyllis Deane and W. A. Cole on the other side of the Channel. 'For both countries ... with all their shortcomings, the estimates have been properly constructed and are the best available for the time being.'<sup>36</sup>

In France, however, the *Histoire quantitative* was severely criticized,

<sup>30</sup> Barjot, *Histoire économique*, p. 25; Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', p. 369; also Aldrich, 'Late-comer or early starter?', p. 91. Earlier (1973), Milward had criticized historians' concentration upon the 'supposed sluggishness' and 'weaknesses' of the French economy, and their 'doubtful assumption' that these constituted 'the central problem' of French economic history. 'Many of the explanations for the slowness of French development lose their force when France is placed in an European setting rather than compared with Britain and the United States': Milward and Saul, *Economic development of continental Europe*, pp. 311, 314, 361.

<sup>31</sup> Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', p. 376. Deane and Cole, *British economic growth* (1962). Some estimates for France had been published in the 1950s, notably Perroux, 'Prises de vue sur la croissance', but they were based upon calculations by nineteenth-century writers: Barjot, *Histoire économique*, p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> Marczewski, 'Some aspects', p. 369, n. 1. The ISEA had sponsored the work of Perroux in the 1950s (see previous note).

<sup>33</sup> Eleven volumes of *Histoire quantitative de l'économie française* were published from 1961 to 1969, and others later. 'Quantitative' was used in a restricted sense; see below.

<sup>34</sup> Toutain, *Le produit intérieur brut de la France*.

<sup>35</sup> Marczewski. 'Some aspects'; *idem*, 'Take-off hypothesis', in which he demonstrated that this hypothesis could not be applied to France; *idem*, 'Le produit physique'. Also Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', pp. 353-4, for this whole paragraph.

<sup>36</sup> O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*, p. 27.

distrusted, even dismissed as worthless.<sup>37</sup> Marxists disliked Marczewski and Markovitch as emigrés from socialist countries, and for their neo-classical approach. The assumptions, extrapolations, interpolations, and other statistical devices which had been used frightened traditional historians. Such methods seemed repugnant to established rules of scholarship. The traditionalists also objected to applying to the economy of eighteenth-century France categories and concepts of national accounts, which had been developed for studying twentieth-century economies. They further maintained that, for the eighteenth century and even for the nineteenth, sources were too rare and/or too unreliable, so that the margin of error in aggregate estimates of product and income was enormous (this scepticism has persisted in the views of some excellent scholars, up to the present). Some historians, especially Pierre Chaunu, had been offended by Marczewski's manifesto<sup>38</sup> which ignored many studies where quantitative data from archives were utilized, but not within the framework of national income accounts, so that they belonged to 'serial' rather than to 'quantitative' history.<sup>39</sup> Despite this hostility, several economic historians have dared to tread the same path as the Marczewski team and have produced their own series of GDP<sup>40</sup> for France and for other countries. Among them are Maurice Lévy-Leboyer, the late Paul Bairoch, O'Brien and Keyder, and Angus Maddison, intrepid *chiffrephile* (in his own words), in several books since 1964.<sup>41</sup>

It is striking that the rates of growth which can be calculated from all computations by the Marczewski team and its successors display only slight differences (of 1 or 2 decimal points), and on this base a new, 'revisionist' view of French nineteenth-century economic history has emerged. Admittedly, it is confirmed that French aggregate GDP grew more slowly than those of other western nations. But population growth was also much slower in France than in other countries—a major point of difference, which will be considered later. Consequently, the mediocre performance of French aggregate product did not prevent product per caput from growing at a rate which is not markedly different from those of other West European countries. The French figure is of the same

<sup>37</sup> Le Roy Ladurie wrote in 1968 a devastating review of the volume on eighteenth-century agricultural production, which, to many people, brought (unjustified) discredit upon the venture as a whole: 'Les comptes fantastiques de Gregory King'.

<sup>38</sup> Marczewski, 'Histoire quantitative'; *idem*, *Introduction à l'histoire quantitative*.

<sup>39</sup> Chaunu answered vehemently in 'Histoire quantitative ou histoire sérielle' (esp. pp. 24-7); he sharply criticized the statistical material which the Marczewski team had used for the eighteenth century, but admitted that their enterprise was valid for the nineteenth. He declared unacceptable the contempt which had been shown for the vast amount of quantitative work done by historians. See also, for the marxist view, Vilar, 'Pour une meilleure compréhension'.

<sup>40</sup> Sometimes by using the ISEA material.

<sup>41</sup> Lévy-Leboyer, 'La croissance économique en France'; Lévy-Leboyer and Bourguignon, *L'économie française au dix-neuvième siècle*; Bairoch, 'Europe's Gross National Product', tab. 5, p. 283; *idem*, *Commerce extérieur et développement*, tab. 51, p. 156; O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*; Maddison, *Economic growth in the West*, tabs. 1-1 and 1-3, pp. 28, 30; *idem*, *Monitoring the world economy*, tab. 3-2, p. 64; *idem*, *World economy*. Kuznets' *Modern economic growth* (1966) is not mentioned, as its data for France (tab. 2.5, p. 65) cover the period 1841-50 to 1960-2. Toutain, 'Comparaison', has discussed the various estimates of French GDP.

order of magnitude as the British rate and very close to the average rate for advanced countries.

The most recent international comparison is that published by Maddison in 2001.<sup>42</sup> His rates of growth of product per caput for the period 1820-1913 are:

	% <i>p.a.</i>
France	1.1
Britain	1.0
Germany	1.3
12 West European countries	1.2

Only Germany, Belgium, Denmark, and Switzerland did better than France. By 1913, French GDP per caput was 71 per cent of the UK figure, 96 per cent of that for Germany, 94 per cent of that for the 12 European advanced countries.<sup>43</sup> Maddison also calculated—but only for the period 1870-1913—the growth rate of GDP per hour worked, and found that France had one of the highest in Europe, well above the German and British rates.<sup>44</sup>

These international comparisons definitely eliminated any idea that the French economy had stagnated during the nineteenth century inasmuch as it did not possess the same opportunities and potential for growth as some of its competitors,<sup>45</sup> and the view that French growth had been abnormally slow was also destroyed. As the late Sidney Pollard put it in one of his last writings, the French rates of growth of national income and industrial output ‘were respectable rates, comparing well with those of the continent. They look better still in per capita terms.’ And he added: ‘It is clear that no other nation (apart from Britain) could have assembled the resources to build the Suez Canal.’<sup>46</sup>

Rates of growth were not the only factor of ‘revisionism’. In France, a decisive stage was the publication, in 1964, of Lévy-Leboyer’s book on industrialization in Western Europe—and especially in France—during the first half of the nineteenth century. He was the first writer to stress that Britain and France had followed different paths to industrialization, and that the British model was not the only paradigm possible. The French path had been different, because of objective factors, not because of vague socio-cultural values. By 1815, France was handicapped by the economic disasters of the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, and by an unfavourable factor endowment. Coal and iron were more expensive there than in Britain or Belgium; wages in France, while lower than in

<sup>42</sup> Maddison, *World economy*, tab. 2-22 b, p. 96. These rates are based on ‘hybrid estimates’ of GDP at PPP, using the work of Toutain and Lévy-Leboyer for France, and that of Deane and Cole and of Feinstein for Britain (pp. 135-7, 144).

<sup>43</sup> Calculated from Maddison, *World economy*, tab. A1-c, p. 197.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, tab. E-8, p. 370. According to Lévy-Leboyer, ed., *Histoire de la France industrielle*, p. 17, French industrial product was superior in value to the British in 1830 and 1860; by 1913, it had become smaller, but by 15-20% only. A recent calculation by Prados, ‘International comparisons’, puts the British per caput GDP in 1913 only 9% ahead of the French.

<sup>45</sup> This is stressed by Asselain, *Histoire économique*, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> Pollard, ‘Europeanisation’, p. 61.

England, were higher than in Germany and Switzerland. The only comparative advantages of France were some capital resources and the skills of part of its labour force. The French adapted to this factor mix and successfully developed the production of labour-intensive, quality, fashion and luxury goods (silks and worsteds, for instance, rather than cheap cottons as in Lancashire). Later, they integrated backwards to develop and modernize their basic industries. Altogether, France had an industrial revolution, despite unfavourable circumstances.<sup>47</sup>

Lévy-Leboyer also demolished some clichés, by proving that Parisian merchant bankers had supported industry (a view which other works confirmed),<sup>48</sup> and that French industrialists had been innovators, but in their own way, by inventing new products and new fashions, rather than new machinery. And he denied that the French *patronat* had been 'Malthusian'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the image of French entrepreneurs improved greatly during the 1970s. In 1978, Fohlen concluded a study of them thus: 'The nature and evolution of French enterprise seems to be very similar ... to that in any capitalist country during the nineteenth century. The great majority of French businesses were family affairs, but this characteristic cannot explain a presumed lack of the spirit of enterprise.... It is rather the contrary impression, which emerges; some family firms had actually been 'remarkable for the foresight and vigour' of their leaders, while 'the family framework in no way acted as a brake upon the growth' of some firms, which became quite large. Therefore, 'it is not at the level of the enterprise or the entrepreneur that the problem of assumed lags in French industrial growth is to be explored'. Louis Bergeron criticized the 'classical image' of French nineteenth-century industrialists, saying that it was based upon some norms which were arbitrarily postulated as universal but did not fit the French case. Though the aggressiveness of French manufacturers had been uneven, family enterprise had been flexible and vigorous.<sup>50</sup>

In an article published in the early 1970s, I reviewed and discussed the various quantitative estimates of French growth which were then available. I concluded: 'From the point of view of product per capita, which is the genuine criterion of economic progress, the French performance during the nineteenth century was certainly not brilliant, but quite creditable.' However, I also suggested that revisionism had to be moderate: 'The legitimate reaction against the excessive pessimism which was fashionable some years ago, must not be carried so far as to overlook the weak points in French nineteenth-century economic development.'<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Lévy-Leboyer, *Les banques européennes et l'industrialisation*, passim.

<sup>48</sup> Lévy-Leboyer, Chs. IV, V, VI, in bk. 1 of Braudel and Labrousse, eds., *Histoire économique et sociale*, volume 3/2; also Cameron, *Banking*; Gille, *La banque en France*.

<sup>49</sup> Lévy-Leboyer 'Le patronat français'; *idem*, ed., *Le patronat de la seconde industrialisation*.

<sup>50</sup> Fohlen, 'Entrepreneurship and management', pp. 354, 361, 373, 380-1. See also the papers (including Landes, 'Religion and enterprise') in Carter et al., *Enterprise and entrepreneurs*; and Bergeron, *Les capitalistes*, pp. 97, 125-6, 129.

<sup>51</sup> Crouzet, 'French economic growth', pp. 170-2 (quotation from this English version; the original French article had been published in 1972). Aldrich, 'Late-comer or early starter?', p. 90, wrote later that this article tended 'sometimes to accentuate the negative'.

Among English-speaking scholars, revisionism made great strides. Admittedly, Deane and Cole, in *The Cambridge economic history of Europe* (1965), were surprised by the results of quantitative research, including their own. 'The evidence suggests that, despite the relative backwardness of French industry, *average* real incomes have increased by roughly the same amount in both Britain and France.'<sup>52</sup> However, some American writers, in particular the late Rondo Cameron, went much further. After several articles, which deviated somewhat from current views,<sup>53</sup> he published in 1961 his *France and the economic development of Europe*. This stressed the important part which French entrepreneurs and French capital had played in the development of many European countries during the nineteenth century, a conclusion which contradicted clichés about the lack of French entrepreneurship.<sup>54</sup> In 1967 Cameron pointed out that, on a per caput base, French growth was not bad. In 1970 he wrote: 'The French economy has had a chequered history of alternating progress and stagnation', but its 'historical record ... is not nearly as black as it has frequently been depicted'. Eventually, he radicalized his position and in 1983 he wrote, with Charles Freedeman, an article with the telling title: 'French economic growth: a radical revision'. This can be summarized by one of its sentences: 'In fact, the French economy performed very well in comparison with other industrializing nations.' And the authors added that 'the debate over the causes of French economic backwardness was unnecessary—a waste of scholarly resources and effort.'<sup>55</sup>

Actually, revisionism had made significant progress in the 1970s, with some papers on French agriculture,<sup>56</sup> and an important article in 1976 by Richard Roehl, who came to an extreme position. He took up one by one the criteria of backwardness which Alexander Gerschenkron had laid down, and demonstrated that none of them (for instance 'the big spurt') applied to nineteenth-century France; he drew the conclusion that France had passed into the industrial age earlier. Far from being a laggard or a latecomer, France had been an early starter—the first country to experience modern economic growth, probably earlier than Britain. This is not a convincing argument, and the most appropriate response is to say that Gerschenkron had been wrong in fixing his criteria.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Deane and Cole, 'Growth of national incomes', pp. 11-12 (italics in original); they added that the reasons for this situation were obscure.

<sup>53</sup> For instance Cameron, 'Economic growth and stagnation' (1958); he contested the view that the causes of stagnation were 'in the capacities, habits and attitudes of the French people, including, of course, the entrepreneurial group'.

<sup>54</sup> *Idem*, *France and the economic development of Europe*.

<sup>55</sup> *Idem*, *Banking*, p. 101; *idem*, 'L'économie française', pp. 1424-7; Cameron and Freedeman, 'French economic growth', p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> For instance Hohenberg, 'Change in rural France', who stressed in 1972 that the latter 'was not static' and 'underwent more change than appears on the surface', pp. 219, 229; Newell, 'Agricultural revolution' (1973), who put the beginnings of the French agricultural revolution in the 1820s, much earlier than previous writers. Grantham started to publish on French agriculture in the late 1970s.

<sup>57</sup> Roehl, 'French industrialization'. This paper was criticized by Locke, 'French industrialization'; Crafts, 'Economic growth', pp. 56-7, 59; Kemp, 'French economic performance', pp. 475-8; Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', pp. 376-7.

Quite different is the most elaborate work in revisionism, O'Brien and Keyder's, *Economic growth in Britain and France, 1780-1914* (1978). They carefully recalculated British and French commodity output at purchasing power parity exchange rates using Deane and Cole's and Marczewski's data. Their objective was to compare the levels of product and productivity in both countries, whereas previous writers had concentrated upon growth rates. One conclusion was that: 'Expressed in per capita terms, the rates of growth of commodity output in the two countries are not so very different.' From this point of view, 'the long-run performances of the French and British economies appear to be too similar to warrant the derogatory adjectives usually applied to France'. Average consumption levels were roughly 15 per cent higher in Britain than in France, but this gap was 'unexpectedly small'. This difference in material welfare emanated from an import surplus which the British were able to run, thanks to large sales abroad of services, which resulted from Britain's victory in the Second Hundred Years War, i.e. from massive investment in naval power. This was no reason to say that France was backward, retarded, or underdeveloped.<sup>58</sup> O'Brien and Keyder made two other important contributions, which had a strong impact.<sup>59</sup> First, as their subtitle—'two paths to the twentieth century'—implies, they questioned the assumptions that there is 'one definable and optimal path to higher per capita incomes', and that 'this path can be identified with British industrialisation as it proceeded from 1780 to 1914'. There was a French path of development, which was different, but not obviously inferior to the vaunted British model; it was shaped by real constraints, set by natural endowments and military defeats, not by an irrational failure to innovate.<sup>60</sup> The second point was to take into account the quality of life, to recall that nineteenth-century observers had been horrified by the living conditions of the British working classes, and to suggest that France had a more humane and perhaps a no less efficient transition to industrial society.<sup>61</sup> In a recent textbook, Dominique Barjot has written that during the pre-1914 *Belle époque* France was a happy country (*une France heureuse*).<sup>62</sup>

Some exogenous factors helped the rise of 'revisionism'. The fast economic growth and the increasing prosperity which prevailed in France during the postwar golden age—the 'thirty glorious years' (1950 to 1980), as they say in France—diverted attention from the 1930s depression and the 1940 disaster. They also suggested that French society was not completely inflexible and unsuited for a modern industrial economy, and somewhat discredited the socio-cultural approach. As far as France is concerned, the progress of 'revisionism' was made easier by a change of

<sup>58</sup> O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*, esp. pp. 11, 22-3, 62-3, 66, 68-75, 191, 196-7. The authors had stuck by commodity output, because evidence about services was too dubious (pp. 29-30). Other writers have been less cautious.

<sup>59</sup> Their views were diffused in France by their 1979 article: 'Les voies de passage'.

<sup>60</sup> O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*, pp. 18, 179, 190, 196. Coal was a major geographical constraint, and most revisionist writers have also rehabilitated the 'coal factor'.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186-8, 197-8. This view has been contested by Kemp, 'French economic performance', p. 478.

<sup>62</sup> Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 637.

mind among left-wing historians. They gave up denouncing the 'Malthusianism' of French capitalism, in favour of a much more rosy view. One reason was that an optimistic view of French development during the nineteenth century was needed to reply to some writers who had maintained that the French Revolution had negative and protracted effects upon the economy.<sup>63</sup> For instance, Denis Woronoff stated that the revolution, by keeping large numbers of peasants on the land, had created an original path of development, through proto-industrialization, which was by no means archaic, but rational and well-adapted. Rural labour could be 'mobilized' into industrial work, without having to move. Change was slower, more gradual than in Britain, but also less harsh.<sup>64</sup> A second reason was a more or less conscious attempt to justify the collectivist and *dirigiste* policies which have been followed in France since 1981, by praising the statist tradition which had prevailed there. Left-wing historians argued that state intervention—far from having unfortunate consequences, as right-wingers had maintained—had been necessary and beneficial; as French elites were indifferent, even hostile to industrialization, the state had to impose, organize, and regulate industrial development. They were thus bound to assert that French economic performance had not been at all bad, and had proceeded along a path that was specific to France.<sup>65</sup> Jean Bouvier wrote in 1987, just before his death: 'France was never either inferior or superior to any other nation to which it can be legitimately compared....<sup>66</sup> Like any nation and any state, France was naturally different from its neighbours.... Each nation has always done what it could do, according to a bundle of specific conditions and constraints, of potentialities and capabilities, of dynamism and inertia.' And he concluded that: 'As regards the fate of the French social and economic formation, we have moved from a rather pessimistic to a rather optimistic view.' Those quotations come from Bouvier's introduction to a collection of essays—several of them by his former students—under the title: 'French capitalism, nineteenth-twentieth centuries: hindrances to and dynamism of economic growth'; it contains excellent pieces of left-wing revisionism.<sup>67</sup>

Jacques Marseille has carried the latter far in recent years. In 1999, he published a short book entitled *C'est beau la France* (this could be

<sup>63</sup> Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', p. 354: 'The findings by Crouzet ... and Lévy-Leboyer ... that a quarter century of revolution and war had probably slowed down the growth of the French economy were widely taken as right-wing attacks on the revolution itself.'

<sup>64</sup> Woronoff, *Histoire de l'industrie*, pp. 224, 343, 632. In Marseille, ed., *Puissance et faiblesses*, Woronoff wrote the first chapter, with the title: 'Was the revolution an economic catastrophe?' The answer, of course, was that it was not, but Woronoff honestly admitted that it had some negative consequences.

<sup>65</sup> Marseille, *Puissance et faiblesses*, pp. 10-11, 25; also Bergeron and Bourdelais, eds., *La France n'est-elle pas douée pour l'industrie?* (Is it true that France has no gift for industry?), which suggests that it would have been better if the state had intervened more during the nineteenth century.

<sup>66</sup> This alluded to my *De la supériorité de l'Angleterre sur la France*; Bouvier did not catch the nuance of irony in this title, and wrote that it derived from 'ideological passions'.

<sup>67</sup> Fridenson and Straus, eds., *Le capitalisme français*, pp. 13-14. Marseille, *Puissance et faiblesses*, p. 9, described Bouvier's introduction as the 'manifesto of the revisionist school'; this only applies to left-wing revisionism, as revisionism had started in the 1960s (see above).

translated: 'France is beautiful'). He was only half joking, and he maintained that France had combined economic performance, social welfare, good living, and intellectual brilliance. He mocked writers for whom the French economy is always lagging, and posited that it had never lagged and had been 'just different'—rarely first, but never an also-ran. In 1997 Marseille edited a book of essays on the strong and weak points of industrial France. He again stressed that France always had a 'specific model': during the nineteenth century, it did not follow 'the royal way' of coal, steam, factory, but its own path, and eventually it had rates of growth, on a per caput basis, 'almost identical' with those of its competitors. Its moderate and quiet growth was more creditable than Britain's sudden and forced mutations.<sup>68</sup> This was echoed by Patrick Verley, for whom the French path 'managed to avoid the enormous social cost of British industrialization'.<sup>69</sup>

A very different and more sophisticated brand of revisionism had been developed by cliometricians, from the 1970s onwards and mainly in America but with some British and French contributions. Grantham wrote, in 1997, a long review article entitled 'The French cliometric revolution', as the cliometric contribution, in his view, has 'worked a true revolution in scholarly assessment of France's economic performance in the age of industrialisation'. His conclusion about the situation in 1913 is worth quoting: 'in per capita terms, French income was probably gaining on Britain, and French living standards were still well above those in Germany. Looking ahead, French industrial performance during the First World War belies all charges of backwardness; despite the loss of her most important industrial region, France was able to supply her soldiers with munitions as effectively as Germany' (and, one can add, to supply artillery and aircraft to France's Russian ally and to the Americans when they came in).<sup>70</sup>

Many of these cliometric studies have dealt with factors which, according to the arguments of the 'retardation-stagnation' school, were traditionally supposed to have slowed French growth. For instance, excessive protection. John Nye found that, during the first half of the nineteenth century, tariffs were, on average, lower in France than in Britain; Grantham concluded that French development was not seriously distorted by barriers to trade imposed by France. Nye again, and Pierre Sicsic, showed that firms were not notably smaller in France than in Britain or even in Germany: everywhere in Europe, family and entrepreneurial firms were numerically dominant. As returns to scale were low, most firms would not have gained much in efficiency by being larger, so that small scale

<sup>68</sup> Marseille, *C'est beau la France*, passim; *idem*, *Puissance et faiblesses*, pp. 8-9, 11; he even praised the dynamism of family firms, which 'technocrats used to lampoon'.

<sup>69</sup> Verley, *Nouvelle histoire économique*, pp. 25, 117.

<sup>70</sup> Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', pp. 353, 371; there is, on pp. 396-405, a long list of articles and books which are relevant to that 'revolution'; Grantham has written a dozen of them!

did not damage industry's performance.<sup>71</sup> Altogether, cliometric studies are said to 'demonstrate the essential rationality of French economic agents', and show that social norms, mentalités, and culture did not seriously affect the allocation of resources. Further, the idea that French industrialization 'was significantly retarded by the agrarian structure has not been cliometrically confirmed'. For instance, 'industrial expansion was not limited by the cost of recruiting workers from agriculture'; the size of the rural-urban wage gap, though it was smaller than in Britain, 'does not support the view that agricultural retention of labour' inhibited industrial development. The French rural labour force was by no means immobile and it responded to market signals. As for total factor productivity in French agriculture, Grantham has found that it grew, from 1815 to 1914, at a mean rate of growth of 0.85 per cent per annum. This is comparable to the British and American rates (but he admitted that a gap therefore persisted between Britain and France).<sup>72</sup>

'Revisionist' views have slowly made their way into general works and textbooks. They are not prominent in the large-scale economic and social history of France which Fernand Braudel and Ernest Labrousse edited in the 1970s and early 1980s. Labrousse, as one would expect, displayed, in his contribution, little interest in economic growth and wrote almost exclusively about prices and crises. Pierre Léon was more optimistic about French industry than in an earlier work, mentioned above.<sup>73</sup> However, in the 'general conclusions' (1982), Jean Bouvier wrote: 'We have had to come to a revisionist view of our so-called industrial curse'; 'many observers have long been blinded by the British model of industrialization. *Britannia first*, therefore French *retard*. This is probably nonsense', as the growth of product per caput over three centuries had been about the same in France as in Britain, Belgium, and Germany.<sup>74</sup> Gradually, therefore, a consensus prevailed, in the 1980s, on what can be called 'moderate revisionism' because most of its supporters admitted that there were *faiblesses* in the French nineteenth-century economy.

### III

However, periods of consensus among economic historians are usually short-lived, and in the years since 1983 a revision of revisionism has taken off—a wind of change from optimism to pessimism, about French

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 379-80; Nye, 'Myth of free-trade Britain'; *idem*, 'Firm size and economic backwardness'; Sicsic, 'Establishment size'. Moreover Cassis, *Big business*, pp. 27-30, 232, has shown that by 1913 France had quite a number of large firms, and that 'on the whole French big business has been closer to the German model than is often assumed'.

<sup>72</sup> Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', pp. 381, 389-90; Sicsic, 'City-farm wage gaps'. See also Heywood, 'Role of the peasantry', which absolves French peasants from the blame for not doing what English farmers had done; Ruttan, 'Structural retardation', p. 721, which finds them 'highly rational'. Price, 'Recent work', pp. 425, 428, is less optimistic about the performance of French agriculture; Poussou, 'L'enracinement', considers that rural labour mobility increased only gradually during the nineteenth century.

<sup>73</sup> Braudel and Labrousse, eds., *Histoire économique et sociale*, vols. 3/1 and 3/2, esp. Chs. 1 and 2 of the second part of 3/1, pp. 241 ff., and Chs. 1-4 of 3/2.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4/3, pp. 1735-7.

economic growth. As early as 1984, N. F. R. Crafts had written an article on 'Economic growth in France and Britain, 1830-1910', which can be described as moderately anti-revisionist. He accepted that the French pattern of growth was markedly different from the British model, but he stressed that the latter was most unusual and that, 'on the whole, France was rather closer to the European average than was Britain'. 'Structural transformations in France and Britain were indeed different', and so different that 'comparisons are liable to mislead'. However, he considered that revisionists 'exaggerate French achievements'. 'It is true that French economic performance looks substantially better than was once thought', but 'in per capita income terms, France's growth is respectable but not outstanding' (these two adjectives are well chosen). 'In 1910, France ranked only seventh among European countries for per capita income and was considerably behind Britain.'<sup>75</sup>

At about the same time in France, this anti-revisionism was generally not radical and consisted mainly of qualifications to revisionist views. Work by Lévy-Leboyer has again been influential, especially the book he published in 1985 with François Bourguignon on *The French economy in the nineteenth century*, which is the first large-scale attempt to apply cliometrics to a period of French economic history.<sup>76</sup> At the heart of this book lies the last third of the nineteenth century, when French economic growth slowed down markedly, with the 1880s as the worst decade. Agriculture was badly depressed, and the French path to industrialization, through a dual model, with a sector of skilled labour-intensive production, which Lévy-Leboyer had found successful earlier in the century, came to a dead-end. Some traditional industries collapsed, because of competition from countries which had cheaper labour or a higher level of mechanization; several regions de-industrialized; export markets were lost. France thus suffered most severely from the great depression, while Germany, the US, and some 'small' countries (including Sweden) were fast growing, particularly thanks to new industries, which France failed to develop on a large scale. Albert Broder, who co-edited in 1997 a book on 'the long stagnation in France' from 1873 to 1897, has also stressed this last point. He pointed out that in France the newest industries (chemicals, electricity, and so on) became dependent upon foreign technology; when electrification spread, it was to the benefit of German and American makers of electrical equipment. Broder, like Lévy-Leboyer, also stressed the relative decline of French exports during the great depression: they fell from 13 per cent of world exports in 1860 to 7 per cent in 1913. Furthermore,

<sup>75</sup> Crafts, 'Economic growth', esp. pp. 51-2, 56, 59, 66-7; see also *idem*, 'British industrialization'. Crafts is critical of O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*.

<sup>76</sup> Lévy-Leboyer and Bourguignon, *L'économie française*; English translation (1990): *French economy*. Lévy-Leboyer had already written in 1971 on 'the deceleration of the French economy in the second half of the nineteenth century'. Mokyr and Nye wrote a long and critical review: 'La grande quantification'. They considered the authors' model unsuited to explain long-term economic growth, and they deplored that the debate on 'French backwardness' was almost absent from the book, as well as the issue of comparative economic performance, so that 'the work as it stands will have only limited impact on the debate', and would not strengthen the anti-revisionist position. Another long review is by Straus, 'Econométrie et histoire économique'.

the burden of the state upon the economy increased, because of the war indemnity to Germany, but also as a result of public works which were intended to revive the economy but had no positive effect.<sup>77</sup> Admittedly, the most pessimistic conclusions of Lévy-Leboyer applied to the great depression, and he qualified them, by observing that this had only delayed the industrialization process and that 'the myth of French stagnation has thereby lost much of its originality and credibility'.<sup>78</sup> However, this pessimism reverberated upon the overall view of French performance, particularly because the French model of dual industrialization, which had apparently been successful up to 1860, was later a failure. J.-L. Asselain had stressed, in 1984, the exceptional intensity of the great depression in France, but also emphasized that there had been no collapse or stoppage of the industrializing process and that the dynamism of industry had been maintained. In 1991, he was more pessimistic: 'in the 1880s, France is an old capitalist country which has remained predominantly rural'; it was also an 'old industrial country', but in the context of Western Europe, it resembled 'a semi-industrialised and largely under-urbanised country', with a narrow home market. The traditional contrast with Britain had been aggravated; it was not a lag, but 'a lasting, nay permanent split'.<sup>79</sup> In the same volume J.-J. Salomon stressed that 'the periods of adaptation to technical transformations have always been longer in France than in the other industrial powers'. He wondered 'why the scientific and technical talents of France' did not give the same results as in other countries and blamed the French education system, which neglected research, for the 'constant French lags in innovation'.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, though admitting that in the late nineteenth century France 'lost the game' in the international competition, and that French firms had difficulties with the new technical system, François Caron remained more optimistic, especially because of the fast growth and modernization during the *Belle époque*.<sup>81</sup>

Anti-revisionism has been pushed furthest by a young economic historian, Jean-Pierre Dormois, who has analysed productivity differentials between Britain and France on the eve of the First World War. According to his meticulous calculations, productivity of labour and income per caput in France were then markedly lower, relative to advanced countries, than previous estimates had suggested. The gap with Britain was roughly

<sup>77</sup> Breton et al., *La longue stagnation*, especially Chs. 1, 6, 11. Broder locates the downturn later than Lévy-Leboyer: in the 1870s or even in 1882, rather than in the 1860s. Some writers extend the depression up to 1905.

<sup>78</sup> Lévy-Leboyer and Casanova, *Entre l'état et le marché*, p. 190. Lévy-Leboyer, *Histoire de la France industrielle*, pp. 16-17, 19. In these recent writings (1991 and 1996), Lévy-Leboyer has rejected the concept of French *retard*; he only admits some lags during periods of acceleration in technical progress. To him, the point unique to France is the long depression of the late nineteenth century, which broke the continuity of growth and delayed modernization. Moreover, his most recent estimate of growth in income per caput is not significantly lower than the earlier ones: 1.3% p.a. from 1840 to 1912, almost exactly the same rate as for Britain.

<sup>79</sup> Asselain, *Histoire économique*, pp. 152-3; *idem*, 'La stagnation économique', pp. 199-200.

<sup>80</sup> Salomon, 'La capacité d'innovation' pp. 15, 17, 20, 25-9.

<sup>81</sup> Caron, *Histoire économique*, p. 98; *idem*, in Lévy-Leboyer, *Histoire de la France industrielle*, pp. 232-3, 235-6, 240. See also, in the same work, Cayez, 'La décélération industrielle', pp. 178-81.

35 per cent, rather than 20 or 30 per cent. Dormois denied that France followed a specific path to industrialization; French industries were just more traditional and less efficient than those of Britain. And he concluded that nineteenth-century France was 'a backward country, which never modernised'.<sup>82</sup>

Just as fast growth during the 'golden age' encouraged 'revisionism',<sup>83</sup> the bad performance of France during the past twenty years (1981-2002), which has made it one of the poorest countries in the European Union, has stimulated 'anti-revisionism' and a return to the view of France as a perpetual laggard. There is also the view, which has recently gained ground, of French history as tragic and unhappy, veering from catastrophe to disaster, and now in a downward spiral. Moreover, free-marketers and free-traders take a gloomy view of the economic history of a country where government has always meddled too much in the economy; they present France as a poor and backward country, a kind of North Korea of Europe!<sup>84</sup>

Once again therefore, as 'revisionist' views became the new orthodoxy in the 1980s and 1990s, these views were being challenged by a new 'anti-revisionism', which consisted mainly of qualifications to 'revisionist' views. It highlighted the late nineteenth-century deceleration in the economy and resultant widening of Anglo-French product and productivity differentials.

#### IV

The debate is certainly not closed: new research, new computations, and new developments in French economic and political affairs will make controversies rebound. Although it is possible to attempt a brief survey of opinions which emerge from recent textbooks or works of synthesis, they all stress the difficulty of drawing up a balance sheet.<sup>85</sup> The French economy of the nineteenth century is described as 'ambiguous', 'subtle', 'complex', 'elusive', 'contradictory', 'paradoxical'.<sup>86</sup> Historians also stress its diversity, the strong regional disparities in development, which make generalizations dangerous and account for conflicting views of performance, but are concealed by aggregates such as national product (and

<sup>82</sup> Dormois, *L'économie française*, passim. According to Maddison, French GDP per hour worked in 1913 was 67% of the British level: *World economy*, tab. E-9, p. 371. In manufacturing industry, Dormois found French productivity to be 81% of the British figure. Dormois' book has a laudatory foreword by Landes, who attacks revisionism.

<sup>83</sup> Indeed, some people now see the famed 'Thirty glorious years', 1950 to 1980, as an illusion or a plateau in a long decline.

<sup>84</sup> See almost any issue of *The Economist* or the *Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>85</sup> Asselain, *Histoire économique*, who has a balanced conclusion (pp. 189 ff.) on the strong and weak points of the French economy on the eve of the First World War; Bairoch, *Victoires et déboires*; Barjot, *Histoire économique*; Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*; Beltran and Griset, *La croissance*; Broder, *L'économie française*; Caron, *Histoire économique*; Heywood, *Development*; Lévy-Leboyer and Casanova, ed., *Entre l'état et le marché*; Lévy-Leboyer, ed., *Histoire de la France industrielle*; Verley, *Nouvelle histoire économique*.

<sup>86</sup> Caron, *Histoire économique*, p. 7; Beltran and Griset, *La croissance*, p. 4.

nowhere was diversity more the rule than in agriculture, which was a complex mosaic).<sup>87</sup>

Starting with positive developments, invention and innovation were not absent from nineteenth-century France. The French managed to learn British technology and adapt it to local conditions; the industrial revolution, which had started as a foreign transplant, was naturalized. Technological progress became indigenous, built in to the economy, so that French scientists and engineers made a considerable contribution in this field and France became at mid-century a centre of invention and diffusion for modern technologies. Admittedly, about 1840, France lost to Germany the rank of leader in science, and a lag between invention and innovation often occurred; but, despite some shortcomings, there were notable achievements during the 'second' industrial revolution.<sup>88</sup> Industrial production grew fairly quickly and regularly; the slowing down of 1875-95 was succeeded by a spectacular upsurge at the *Belle époque* and the rise of new industries, such as motor-cars and aeroplanes, in which France was the leader, while industry as a whole became more capital-intensive.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, France had many entrepreneurs who do not deserve the bad name given to French businessmen for a long time; they included both captains of industry and junior operatives on the lookout for new opportunities. The strong recent progress of business history in France has strengthened this new view. Admittedly, there were shortcomings in entrepreneurship, but these are currently explained by the geographical, demographic, and political environment, rather than by *mentalités* and social values. When owners of capital hesitated to invest, this was because investment opportunities were rare and risky, not because the individuals concerned were timorous.<sup>90</sup> Altogether, it is widely accepted that France followed its own specific path to industrialization, which was different from the British way, but not necessarily inferior. It is also possible to query whether the British path, which was exceptional, was open to follower countries. Lags in taking up some new techniques were not irrational, and, for instance, a system based on waterpower and wood remained viable during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>91</sup>

Even in agriculture, the picture is far from black. The 'backwardness' of this sector stemmed mainly from its low level of productivity in the eighteenth century, and it was never a subsistence, self-sufficient agriculture, but always market-oriented. It benefited from many improve-

<sup>87</sup> The importance of this diversity had been denied by Landes, 'French entrepreneurship', p. 46, as 'the development of a single, conscious nation has inevitably shaped the individual more or less to the common mold'.

<sup>88</sup> Caron, *Histoire économique*, pp. 8, 35-6, 39-41; Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 403, 631.

<sup>89</sup> Asselain, *Histoire économique*, pp. 171, 175, 183; Caron, *Histoire économique*, p. 74.

<sup>90</sup> Caron, *Histoire économique*, p. 8, 75, 80, 415; Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 384-5; Lévy-Leboyer, *Histoire de la France industrielle*, pp. 11, 158.

<sup>91</sup> Verley, *Nouvelle histoire économique*, pp. 6, 19, 27, 116; Woronoff, 'An economic catastrophe?', pp. 30, 33, 39; Asselain, *Histoire économique*, p. 9, has suggested that France, with an economy which was semi-agricultural, semi-industrialized, with a dual industrial system, was an intermediate between industrialized northern countries (Britain, Belgium, Germany) and the Mediterranean countries.

ments and from a fast growth from 1815 up to the 1840s (which boosted industrialization); it was then greatly stimulated by the coming of the railways (as Roger Price demonstrated) and had a golden age during the Second Empire. Admittedly it was struck by depression afterwards, production stagnated, prices and incomes fell, but there was no rigidity; depression brought about many changes and adaptation to new conditions.<sup>92</sup>

A last positive point is the financial system. Admittedly, France had lagged in the early part of the century as far as banking was concerned, but great progress was made at mid-century and a powerful and solid banking system was built up.<sup>93</sup> Thanks to a high propensity to save, it made France the second world financial power.<sup>94</sup> As long as the country was bi-metallist, it 'served as the arbitrator of last resort in gold and silver', co-ordinating exchange rates between these currency areas.<sup>95</sup> And above all, France was ranked second as an exporter of capital and first as far as investment in Europe was concerned. Contrary to a traditional view, those large capital exports did not harm the growth of industry.<sup>96</sup>

However, negative aspects have to be recognized also. An important one is the severe handicap which resulted from the French Revolution, from the Napoleonic wars and from the peace which ended them; and the burden of this handicap was felt for several decades. Among its consequences were the heavy loss of human capital, the widening of the gap in technology with Britain, and the consolidation by the revolutionary settlement of agrarian structures, which were not favourable to modernization.<sup>97</sup> Another burden, which has been recently pointed out by Eugene White, is the war indemnity which France had to pay after Waterloo; White has calculated that these were 'the largest reparations in terms of the burden on the economy that were actually paid, with a lasting negative impact upon growth'.<sup>98</sup> France again paid an enormous sum after the Franco-Prussian war, which moreover caused the loss of 8 per cent of French industrial capacity, in Alsace-Lorraine—and a high quality potential. Those indemnities may explain why France did not enjoy an economic miracle after its defeats of 1815 and 1871, as did Germany and Japan after 1945. Relevant in this context also is O'Brien's point that Britain captured, during the Napoleonic wars, a very large share of the world supply of international services, of which France never had

<sup>92</sup> The depression had some exogenous causes—free trade (according to some writers), phylloxera (which devastated the wine industry), etc. See Caron, *Histoire économique*, pp. 29, 416.

<sup>93</sup> This is disputed by Kindleberger, 'Financial institutions'.

<sup>94</sup> The financial system also allowed France to remain a great power, despite being less industrialized than the US, Britain, or Germany.

<sup>95</sup> Grantham, 'French climatic revolution', pp. 364-5; Flandreau, *L'or du monde*.

<sup>96</sup> Lévy-Leboyer, *La position internationale*, pp. 24-31; Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 381, 390.

<sup>97</sup> Barjot, *Histoire économique*, pp. 15-16, 18-19; Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 7, 91; Caron, *Histoire économique*, pp. 11-14. On the other hand, Lévy-Leboyer, *Histoire de la France industrielle*, p. 17, asserts (in contrast with his earlier views) that the impact of the disturbances and wars of the 1790s has been overestimated and that they did not destroy the country's vitality (as Trebilcock maintains, see above, p. 221).

<sup>98</sup> White, 'Making the French pay'.

more than a tiny slice.<sup>99</sup> This shows that the impact of political—including military—developments upon the economy has been too much neglected. Possibly what was wrong with France had more to do with its politics than with its economy.

It is also necessary to bear in mind that in the mid-nineteenth century the French industrial revolution was unfinished, incomplete, imperfect, and that by 1913 France had, of course, much industry, but was not an industrial or truly industrialized country. Regional imbalances had worsened and industry was concentrated in a few regions. Some branches of manufacturing—especially chemicals and engineering—were not sufficiently developed, while others were too large, as they were traditional and stagnating.

A third and major aspect is that France remained fundamentally a peasant-based rural economy. Only in 1911 did employment in industry overtake that in agriculture (and it is noteworthy that this happened in Germany at the same time). Despite the progress which has been mentioned, especially in productivity, the agricultural revolution was unfinished, farming remained labour-intensive and under-capitalized; agrarian structures had not changed, peasant farming, with many small owner-occupiers, still prevailed. L. A. Craig and D. Fisher have found that French business cycles were largely agricultural, even late in the century, so that France suffered more years of recession than did Britain; and agriculture has been held responsible for the great depression.<sup>100</sup> O'Brien has rightly pointed out that it is not realistic to contend that a faster redeployment of labour, on the British model, would have been beneficial for the French economy. Labour could not be reallocated by fiat; nineteenth-century France was not a command economy, where the peasantry could be 'liquidated' (as some historians seem to have wished) as happened in Stalin's Soviet Union. Caron has made the point that France could not be transformed at a stroke into the Middle West or Denmark.<sup>101</sup> Actually, all governments looked for support from the peasantry, and public opinion was proud of having a large peasantry, which was seen as the pillar of social stability and later of democracy.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, recent cliometric research has dismissed the idea that retention of labour on the land by outmoded institutions had delayed industrialization.<sup>103</sup>

The statist tradition and the fact that, even in the nineteenth century, intervention by government—and bureaucracy—in the economy was more widespread in France than, say, in Britain or the US, are also negative aspects. Such interventions either destabilized the economy or were 'conservative' to protect vested interests and small businesses. Mention of the

<sup>99</sup> Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 379; Broder, *L'économie française*, p. 94; Caron, *Histoire économique*, p. 97; O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*, pp. 63, 76.

<sup>100</sup> Craig and Fisher, *European macroeconomy*, pp. 218-19, 222, 324, 327; Caron, *Histoire économique*, p. 27.

<sup>101</sup> O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*, pp. 98, 189-90; Caron, *Histoire économique*, p. 9. Trebilcock, *Industrialization*, p. 166, writes that French governments ought to have reformed the inheritance system; this also is not realistic.

<sup>102</sup> Asselain, *Histoire économique*, p. 172.

<sup>103</sup> Grantham, 'French cliometric revolution', pp. 382-5, 388-94; and above, p. 230.

most flagrant example will make this point: subsidies were granted in 1892 to encourage the building of merchant sailing ships.<sup>104</sup>

Some writers consider French economic growth during the nineteenth century to have been regular and sustained ('a quiet industrialization', according to one of them), but others stress the contrast between the dynamic period up to the 1860s and the great depression which followed. This has led to the view that a characteristic of French economic history, from the late eighteenth century until the present is the alternation between periods of prosperity and relatively fast growth, and periods of slow growth or even recession, lasting two decades or more. The intensity of those medium-term fluctuations (rather than a protracted stagnation) is specific to France. Some writers stress the long depression. Others emphasize that France had two periods of fast industrialization (but the second is sometimes said to have been too short to allow catching up).<sup>105</sup> Either way, this alternation cannot be explained by any permanent features of the French national character or of French society, by any constant handicaps; one has to look for factors which are specific to each turning point.<sup>106</sup>

However, the most important negative aspect is demographic. The decisive argument of revisionists is that French GDP per caput rose, during the nineteenth century, at a rate which is close to the European average and not much lower than those of the most successful countries. However, the population of France increased far less than that of other countries: growth was slow in the early decades of the century, and after the 1860s it practically stagnated. This was the major point of difference, and the most important phenomenon in French nineteenth-century history (much more so than barricades, revolutions, or bad entrepreneurs). France was the first country to experience the 'demographic transition', a steady fall in fertility, resulting from birth control, which had started in the eighteenth century; however, mortality did not fall markedly before the late nineteenth. Family limitation was particularly widespread in the countryside, among small owner-occupiers. To sum up, it was through birth control that the French retained GDP per caput and standards of living close to the European average, and the price to be paid was that, as Caron put it, France 'became imperceptibly a small nation'.<sup>107</sup> It is obvious, indeed, that the slow increase in population, ending in zero growth, was responsible for the progress of aggregate GDP being slower in France than in countries with fast growing populations. These can be considered more dynamic than France, even though GDP per caput increased at the same rate on both sides. Some writers see no significant

<sup>104</sup> Caron, *Histoire économique*, pp. 47-8, 51, 415; Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 390-1, 393; Lévy-Leboyer and Casanova, ed., *Entre l'état*, p. 9.

<sup>105</sup> Aldrich, 'Late-comer or early-starter?', p. 94; Asselain, *Histoire économique*, pp. 11-13, 218; Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 379-81, 404; Verley, *Nouvelle histoire économique*, pp. 5, 11, 89.

<sup>106</sup> Asselain, *Histoire économique*, pp. 14-15, 218.

<sup>107</sup> Caron, *Histoire économique*, pp. 8, 19-23; Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 629-30; O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*, pp. 60-2. The population of working age grew faster than the total population, so that the participation rate increased.

correlation between population and GDP per caput. To others, the limited increase in demand which could be expected from the home market restricted businessmen's expectations, and discouraged large-scale mechanized production and also investment (especially in building). Moreover, a shortage of labour developed after 1860 and caused a rise in wages, which damaged exports. At the regional level, the progress of industrialization was correlated with demographic dynamism. Zero population growth has even been seen as the main cause of the depression in the late nineteenth century.<sup>108</sup> All this is plausible, but a thorough econometric study of this problem is needed. Meanwhile, a simulation can be tried. If the population of France had grown at the same rate as that of Britain, it would have been 100 million or more in 1914 (instead of 41 million). How would those extra 60 million French people—or at least those of working age—have made a living? Logically, they ought to have worked in industry and services as a large increase in rural population would have resulted in a very low standard of living, as happened in Russia. However, an increase in industrial employment, by a factor of three, would have demanded an equivalent rise in energy (coal) consumption. A rough calculation shows that a populous France would have needed to import in 1913 well over 100 million tons of coal (instead of 24 million). At this point the simulation collapses. So French couples were rational in practising birth control, through which most of them secured a mediocre but acceptable standard of living. But by doing so, they reduced their country from first to fourth or even fifth place among economic powers and they also reduced its military potential, with dire consequences in two world wars. Eventually, the French were without power, welfare, or security.

A final question to consider is whether the French (even with a stagnant population) might have done better, whether they missed opportunities,<sup>109</sup> failed to exploit potentialities for faster growth. France was not entirely devoid of competitive advantages, although the scarcity of coal is a constraint which must be kept in mind. This question has not been seriously investigated and one can only quote J.-J. Salomon's ironic remark that 'if one had to give a mark [to French economic performance]', one would say: 'Good, but could or ought to have done better'.<sup>110</sup>

In 1992, Colin Heywood suggested that it was necessary 'to strike the appropriate balance between the extremes of gloom and exaltation' which have been adopted by scholars.<sup>111</sup> This is sound advice, and a moderately revisionist position, tempering the optimistic with the pessimistic, appears best at present. In his last book, Paul Bairoch stressed that, from many points of view, France had constantly, since the late eighteenth century, been close to the European average, i.e. to an *honnête moyenne*. As this

<sup>108</sup> Asselain, *Histoire économique*, pp. 14, 211-13; Barjot, *Histoire économique*, pp. 67, 238, 292; Caron, *Histoire économique*, pp. 8, 29, 34, 95; Verley, *Nouvelle histoire économique*, p. 10; Hau, 'Comparaison des croissances'.

<sup>109</sup> As Trebilcock maintains; see above, p. 221.

<sup>110</sup> Salomon, 'La capacité d'innovation', p. 18, alluding to a standard French remark about a student's performance.

article has shown, recent syntheses stress both the strong and the weak points in the French economy, the positive and negative aspects of French development. It can be shown both that France did not do badly during the nineteenth century, despite severe handicaps, and that neither the growth of French income per caput over the century nor its level in 1913 were outstanding.<sup>112</sup> This conclusion is not dramatic and the result has been that, lately, 'France has been left out of international comparisons, losing with her backwardness some of her appeal to foreign, especially American, business historians and analysts.'<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Heywood, *Development*, p. 16.

<sup>112</sup> Bairoch, *Victoires et déboires*, 1, pp. 403, 405; Barjot, *Histoire économique*, pp. 287-93; Barjot et al., *La France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 630-2; Crafts, 'Economic growth', pp. 51-3, 55, 57, 59, 67; also Crouzet, 'France'; *idem*, 'La première révolution industrielle'.

<sup>113</sup> Cassis, *Big business*, p. 231.

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