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A liberal voice and a Fabian: Alfred Cobban

Pamela Pilbeam

Introduction

- 1 Professor Pierre Serna's suggestion that I talk about Professor Alfred Cobban as *une voix libérale* at a conference he organised at the *chateau de Vizille* in September 2019 was apposite, if tricky, given the vagueness of 'liberal' and its different meanings in France and Great Britain. Before we embark on his liberal characteristics, I will start by sharing with you another important aspect of Cobban's philosophy which has been totally unknown until now, that he was a Fabian Socialist. His biographer, who knew him and his family well, was unaware that he had been a Fabian Socialist.¹ He joined the movement in London in 1919, and was an associate in the main London society until 1931, contributing what was a not insubstantial annual fee, initially of ten shillings, and later twenty (£1).² What attracted a working-class Cambridge undergraduate to become a Fabian Socialist? There is no French equivalent of the Fabians, so I will introduce them. They were started in 1884, mainly by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, who also founded the world-famous elite university, the London School of Economics. The Fabians were, and still are, the philosophical think tank of the British Labour Party, which they helped found in 1900. The *New Statesman*, which became a leading Labour Party journal, was also inspired by the Webbs and financed by them and other Fabians. Its first edition sold over 2,000 copies.
- 2 Fabians were, and still are, highly-educated intellectuals, nearly all middle-class, distinct from the far more numerous trade union worker element in the Labour Party. Their aim was to transform Great Britain from a very elitist into an egalitarian society. They opposed private ownership of agricultural and industrial property. They expected economic and social reform to be achieved through consent and parliamentary legislation. They were totally opposed to revolutionary means and to revolutionary Marxism, which some members of the trade union group within the Labour Party

claimed to espouse. They were convinced that an equal society could better be achieved through radical reform legislation voted by an elected parliament. Their motto was 'Educate, Agitate, Organise'. All members had to sign the *Basis of the Fabian Society* (1919) which aimed for the extinction of private property in land and the sharing of industrial concerns. Beatrice Webb's 1909 *Minority Report to the Commission of the Poor Law* became the basis of the modern welfare state after the Second World War. Fabians were radical left-wingers and almost all were opposed to the totalitarianism and anti-Semitism which developed between the two world wars in Italy and Germany, and in Britain, through Moseley's Black Shirts. A few leading Fabians dallied with racist and anti-Semitic views. Leading member, George Bernard Shaw, even considered Mussolini a good thing at first.

- 3 In 1923, when all adult males and all women over thirty were enfranchised for the first time, more than twenty Fabians were elected to parliament. Five served in Ramsay MacDonald's first Labour cabinet, including Clement Attlee, who was to be Prime Minister in 1945. The Labour Party remained a minority partner in government in 1929, when they secured eight million votes in the general election, compared with thirteen million for the main parties. The impact of the Wall Street Crash and the world depression reversed their fortunes when capitalists and many of the middle class rallied to oppose all forms of socialism. Property owners feared that capitalism might be on the verge of collapse. The surge in votes by which the Communists became the third largest Party in Germany, where the Socialists (SPD) were the majority party in government, seemed to some to indicate the danger of a revolution similar to the takeover in Russia by the Bolsheviks in October 1917. In 1931, in the British General Election, the Labour Party lost one million votes and 215 seats, while the recently-created Anti-Socialist Alliance secured sixteen million votes. Sidney Webb analysed this worrying result, noting that this was the first election when all women over twenty-one could vote. Above all, he observed that the defeat showed the strength of capitalism and the governing class.³ In 1931 the New Fabian Research Bureau was founded by G. D. H. Cole, a socialist philosophy professor at Oxford University who followed the ideas of Robert Owen, founder of guild socialism. The Research Bureau's ideas were to have a major influence on the 1945 Labour government, which, like the post-1945 French left-wing coalition government (between the MRP and the socialist and communist parties), implemented radical state socialism reform through parliamentary legislation. Fabians also became leaders of independence movements in the British Empire and Fabian ideas inspired policies of post-1945 independent states, particularly in India and Singapore.

The appeal of Fabianism to Cobban

- 4 The Fabians started in central London and local groups developed later, especially during the Second World War. There were 120 groups by 1945.⁴
- 5 The Fabians have always been an elite society with never more than 8,400 members. Most Labour MPs have always been members, as they still are, always including leading figures in the party. As an associate member in London—prior to his moving presumably joining the Northumbrian Fabians in Newcastle in 1931—, Cobban would have been close to the heart of the Labour Party and in touch with its leaders. Knowing that he was a Fabian Socialist helps to explain many of his views: his passionate

rejection of totalitarianism, as demonstrated in the four major books he wrote in the late 1930s and early 1940s; his lifelong belief in egalitarian humanist reform, apparent in all of his books; and especially his philosophical rejection of French Marxist explanations of the 1789 Revolution. Cobban was best known in France for his arguments with the then dominant Marxist historians of 1789 and, as a consequence, had sometimes been thought to hold a conservative philosophy. For the first time, with this paper, the full extent of his reforming ideas, his Fabian Socialism, can be seen as more fundamental to his philosophy of life and history than liberalism. He never discussed his personal beliefs, the *egohistoire* being a very new idea in his generation, despite the insistence of E. H. Carr in his 1961 study, *What is History?*, that to understand history we must first know the historian. It is impossible to expand further on his ideas on Fabian Socialism except speculatively. As far as I can discover, he did not discuss Fabianism or write for, or about, the Fabians. When he died, he gave his private papers to his daughter, Lucinda, and Professor Olwen Hufton quoted them when she wrote her short biography of Cobban in 1968, but I have been unable to contact Lucinda, or indeed to discover whether she is still alive. She does not seem to have donated them to any academic institution; the most obvious would be University College, London, or Gonville and Caius, Cambridge. They are not there, so we can only infer conclusions about his attitudes from his published work and his teaching.

- 6 What made me suspect that he was a Fabian was the introduction he was invited to write to a new edition of Édouard Dolléans' *Le chartisme* in 1949. This introduction offers an indication of Cobban's own philosophy of history and is worth quoting, particularly as Cobban wrote and published little in French. The first edition had appeared in 1914 with an introduction by Fabian founder Sidney Webb. That Cobban wrote the new introduction indicates his continuing sympathy with Fabian Socialism, which favoured social reform through education and legislation. Cobban compared Chartists and Jacobins: "Jacobins et Chartistes étaient des parlementaires, des révolutionnaires constitutionnels, avec une base d'idées libérales." He described Chartism as "l'un des succès les plus réussis de l'histoire." Their charter was important for the subsequent success of democratic socialism. Cobban's conclusion summarised his philosophy about the role of the historian:

Ce n'est pas la tâche de l'historien de juger ces questions fondamentales ou de s'embarquer sur les mers orageuses des controverses contemporaines. On doit plutôt imiter l'esprit d'impartialité joint à une sympathie fine et sensible, dans lequel Édouard Dolléans a écrit l'histoire des Chartistes [...]. Nous avons voulu indiquer, derrière la question historique, l'existence d'un problème actuel d'une importance capitale, qui aujourd'hui donne à cette étude du chartisme une portée supérieure à celle qu'elle pouvait avoir quand cette œuvre a paru pour la première fois.⁵

- 7 Cobban left this question—what made Dolléan's study even more relevant in 1948 than in 1914—in the air. Was he thinking of the changing role of workers in 1948, given the massive expansion of nationalisation and social welfare in France and Britain? Or was he referring obliquely to the removal of the PCF from the French government in the spring of 1947? We can only guess. Cobban delighted in asking questions and it is unlike him to leave one unanswered. Dolléans' conclusion was that Chartism was a determining formative stage in the emergence of the proletariat of which Marx and Engels took cognisance.

Cobban's Academic Career

- 8 Because he died prematurely in 1968, Professor Cobban's name is perhaps little known among younger French historians, so a brief biography is needed. Cobban was unusual among historians of his generation, coming from neither a wealthy, nor an academic, background. Alfred Bert Carter Cobban was born in 1901 in Colet Gardens, a humble street in Chelsea the son of a working man, a furniture salesman.⁶ He won a scholarship to a prestigious fee-paying senior school, Latymer Upper. His intellectual capacity gained him a scholarship to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, where he was awarded First Class Honours. Unlike most academic historians at the time, he went on to write a doctorate. He studied Edmund Burke, supervised by the distinguished, decidedly conservative, diplomatic historian, Harold Temperley, who published British documents on the First World War. He was appointed a lecturer at King's College, Newcastle. In 1937 he was made Reader in French History at University College, London. He remained Reader until 1953, well past the top of the salary scale, despite his numerous impressive publications and visiting professorships in the USA. Every year, he asked his Head of Department and Provost (Head of College) for promotion, supported by a fast-growing list of distinguished publications. That he was a Fabian Socialist, wrote an introduction to a new edition of a Fabian-edited history book, and that his most outstanding doctoral student, George Rudé, was known to be a member of the British Communist Party and had been forced to resign as a master at St Paul's, a prestigious private school in west London in 1951, may have delayed his promotion to professor. This was, after all, the start of the Cold War. Financial, not political, reasons were always recorded in official correspondence as the reasons for the delay in his promotion. Cobban was always conscious that he was totally dependent on his academic salary and needed an increase to support his wife (who, as was the norm at time, was not employed) and two daughters. His final home was a pleasant house in Gordon Road, not far from where he was born. He left the modest sum of £ 11,600 in his will. Universities often assumed lecturers had private incomes and another London College, Bedford, paid annual, not monthly, salaries until after the Second World War. Cobban did not have to fight for a monthly pay check, but promotion was a real battle in which he engaged with determination. There was a vacant Chair in French History and Institutions at the University. This and another in French Literature were two of twelve endowed by the London County Council at the University of London in 1912.⁷ Sir John Neale, Head of Department at UCL, said he was keen to promote him, but had a reputation of avoiding promoting his juniors.⁸
- 9 As Reader in French history, Cobban had a more than full teaching programme. He taught two specialised undergraduate courses, a special subject on the French Revolution (1787-94) and an optional subject on French constitutional history from 1714 to the Present, both of which would always have the maximum number of students allowed.⁹ He supervised doctoral students and, from 1947, ran a French history seminar at the IHR which soon attracted excellent doctoral students from Britain and North America. His list of publications in political ideas and French history grew rapidly, as did his reputation as the outstanding specialist in French history in Britain. He was always consulted on French history posts at British universities. He was visiting professor at Chicago in 1947 and then at Harvard. He refused a tenured Chair at Chicago, apparently reluctant to leave Britain. He was finally made Professor of French

History at UCL in 1953, a post he was to hold until his death in 1968. He served as Head of the History department until 1966, edited the journal *History* and served on a large number of boards and committees and as external examiner to other universities. He received numerous offers to visit prestigious US and Canadian universities. In 1964 he was invited to Johns Hopkins, Washington DC, Austin, Yale, Dartmouth College and Brandeis.¹⁰ He was always careful to fix timings so he missed the minimum of his UCL teaching or rearranged his teaching to do it before he went. In 1966, he received a substantial number of such invitations including Berkeley, but was diagnosed with stomach cancer. After surgery at UCH, he was moved to Guys. He refused further surgery. When he came out of hospital for the second time at the end of November 1967, he wrote to the Provost that he would resume his teaching, particularly for his research students, who were very important to him. He encouraged them to visit him in his hospice, where he died in April 1968.

Cobban as a liberal in his publications

- 10 To return to Cobban's ideas as a Fabian and a liberal, I will first touch on the themes of some of his major books and then his contributions as a teacher. Cobban was as much a political philosopher as a historian. His first books dealt with the ideas of two leading writers in the modern western world: Edmund Burke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.
- 11 In *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century. A Study of the Political and Social Thinking of Burke, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey*, published in 1929, he developed the theme of his doctorate. Cobban traced Locke's legacy to Burke, analysed Burke's definition of a theory of nationality, and described the uniqueness of his interest in, and hostility to, the French Revolution. He extended this theme to analyse how the ideas of the Lake Poets changed from initial enthusiasm for the liberal, egalitarian, parliamentary revolution of May 1789, to horror at the totalitarian violence of the Jacobin government.¹¹
- 12 What encouraged Cobban to quote poetry and literature as sources, somewhat unusual among British historians in these years, who were mostly preoccupied with political and diplomatic material? Eileen Power, professor of Economic History at LSE, was also unusual in using artistic and literary sources, first with *Medieval People* (1924)¹². Her approach recalls the French *Annales*, notably Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, who urged historians to expand beyond archival sources and small time periods to probe a much wider range of sources, including literary, artistic, archaeological, psychological, geographical, etc. She and her husband, Cambridge economics Professor Michael Postan, knew Marc Bloch, who gave talks for Postan. There is no direct evidence that Cobban associated with the *Annales*, other than his admiration for Bloch, that his private library included a not insubstantial number of their books and that Cobban encouraged his own students to read their works, especially Bloch.
- 13 Cobban's second book, *Rousseau and the Modern State*, was published in 1934¹³. He dedicated it to his wife, Muriel, who organised ordinary life so effortlessly that he was able to devote himself totally to writing, to teaching and to shaping and managing his study of history. His most significant study of political philosophy, which also best illustrates a broad liberal attitude, was *In Search of Humanity: The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History* (1960).¹⁴ He was drawn to the topic "both for the understanding of the historical development of the modern world and in a particular

sense for us today.”¹⁵ It focussed less on the ideas of the *philosophes* than on their legacy, and how this legacy came to be forgotten. This forgetting seemed to be the inspiration for this volume. For Cobban, enlightened writers were primarily optimistic utilitarian reformers, confident in the power of education, strongly influenced by advances in science and with some sympathy for emergent republicanism, French Benthamites. What mattered was their commitment to humanity, their search for ethical standards. Cobban noted that the influence of enlightened writers persisted throughout the nineteenth century. For Cobban, as for Marc Bloch, a historian could only understand the past in the context of the present. He was deeply concerned that his generation was experiencing unprecedented turbulent, violent and inhumane times. This was reflected in his next three books—*Dictatorship in Theory and Practice* in 1939, *The Crisis of Civilisation* in 1940, and *National Self-Determination* in 1945—, as well as in his history of Vichy France published in 1954 in Toynbee’s *Hitler’s Europe*¹⁶. Cobban’s disgust at the rejection of democracy and humanity in Nazi Germany and his own reforming humanism shine through all of these volumes.

- 14 In 1943, he was awarded a Rockefeller scholarship which enabled him to undertake research on the 1848 Revolution in a number of French departmental archives centres. Passing on these notes to me after his death, his wife Muriel said he intended to write a major study on 1848. Perhaps he planned a book to commemorate the centenary of the revolution. He published two scholarly articles but the book was never completed, although he wrote thirteen other major books and numerous scholarly articles. Perhaps his national and international lecturing commitments intervened, but more likely because he began a prolonged debate with leading Marxist French historians on the 1789 Revolution. His best known later books and articles are detailed critical analyses of the research of leading scholars in French universities on 1789. He questioned their arguments and conclusions, but was always careful to allow their voices to be heard, whether he agreed with them or not.
- 15 His most remembered and influential contribution to history was his interrogation of the social significance of the 1789 Revolution. In his inaugural lecture as professor of French history in 1954, attended by the French ambassador, “The Myth of the French Revolution,” and later in *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (1964), his most influential book, Cobban asserted that, although the 1789 Revolution radically changed France politically, her complex social structures were far more difficult to change. “The social history of the revolutionary period has suffered because historians have adopted a sociological theory based in circumstances of a later age and have used the events of a mere year or two in the revolution for their analysis.”¹⁷ Cobban’s rejection of what was at the time an accepted Marxist interpretation of 1789 provoked considerable criticism from Soboul and other French historians, but his views gained the backing of leading liberal historians in France, particularly Professors François Furet and Emmanuel Le Roy-Ladurie. Professor Georges Lefebvre and his colleagues were shocked by what they saw as the negativity of Cobban’s “myth” of 1789. Very few of his books were translated into French, although most exist in English editions in the *Bibliothèque nationale* catalogue. A translation of *Social Interpretation Consequence* finally appeared in 1984¹⁸, with a sympathetic introduction by Professor Le Roy-Ladurie, but it seems never to have received much attention in France.¹⁹ Professor Serna pointed out to me that, despite these disagreements, Professor Ernest Labrousse retained all of Cobban’s books and articles in his library, a collection which can be seen at the domaine de Vizille.

- 16 Undoubtedly the argument over 1789 confirm Cobban as a liberal. However the extent to which his liberal views coincided with his French colleagues, such as Furet and Leroy-Ladurie, is hard to assess because none wrote directly on this aspect. They would not have known that Cobban was, or had been, a Fabian Socialist. As a Fabian, Cobban might have been expected to hold more precise and structured views on the desirability of social change, more equal distribution of property and the development of an egalitarian society than a liberal. But, as he never explained what drew him to the Fabians and the extent to which he shared all their views, we cannot know. We can be sure that he believed in democratic institutions, totally deplored totalitarianism, favoured egalitarian social change and worked tirelessly to promote education for the less well-off and women. Cobban's belief that gradual, legal, reform in France was more likely than revolution to secure egalitarian reform, and his rejection of Marxist theories of revolution, are indicative both of his Fabianism and his criticism of Albert Soboul and other French Marxists' belief that egalitarian change was best secured through revolution.
- 17 Although leading French scholars rejected Cobban's views, their own doctoral students wrote doctoral theses which revealed the complexity of local society. Think of the work of Maurice Agulhon²⁰ on the Var department and Alain Corbin on the poor in the Limousin, and many others. Their theses, twenty years in the making, transformed social history in France. François Furet, who was outstanding in changing approaches to 1789 in France, agreed with Cobban's claim that 1789 had very limited social impact, and this view predominated in celebrations of the bicentenary of 1789.²¹
- 18 Cobban encouraged his own PhD students to pursue detailed departmental social research on similar, if more modest, lines to Agulhon, Corbin and others. Olwen Hufton²² was very impressive on Bayeux and later on the poor and on women. Clive Church concluded that the Directory was no *bourgeois* social revolution. My own thesis denied that 1830 was a *bourgeois* revolution. George Rudé was the most influential analyst of social change in his lucid and highly influential *The Crowd in the French Revolution*²³ and *The Crowd in History*.
- 19 Cobban was keen to introduce French history to a wider public. His *History of Modern France*,²⁴ first published by Penguin in 1957, began with the year 1715. It was first a two volume, then a three volume history, completed in 1965. This masterly and highly readable account addressed and captured the interest of a broad readership.

Cobban as a supervisor of doctoral students

- 20 Cobban's doctoral teaching was absolutely central to his work and contributed to establishing his reputation as the leading historian of France outside France. His focus was his doctoral seminar, which met at the Institute of Historical Research on Monday afternoons after his Special Subject. PhD topics ranged from the wars of religion, through aspects of Louis XIV's reign, to 1789 and the nineteenth century. In the 1950s and 1960s, Cobban was the leading supervisor of French history doctoral students in Britain²⁵, attracting students not only from the UK, including Oxford and Cambridge, but also from North America, particularly from Canada. Cobban was already known in North America from his visits to universities and conferences (*French Historical Studies* 1958 where he gave one of the eight papers).²⁶ His first Canadian student was John Bosher (later York University, Canada), who came to London keen to study French

history and was introduced to ‘Cobbie’ by a colleague at Queen Mary. Boshers’ enthusiasm for the knowledgeable personal supervision Cobban provided encouraged him to recommend him to other Canadians, reluctant to embark on the prolonged and rather distant doctoral training offered in the USA at the time. Next came Harvey Mitchell (UBC Canada). They were followed by another generation of their students, including David Higgs, (University of Toronto), Tim Le Goff (York, Ontario) and Don Sutherland (University of Maryland, USA, the author of the *Oxford History of the French Revolution*,²⁷ which has gone through several editions). Cobban undoubtedly encouraged the growth of profound interest in the history of France in Canada’s leading universities, including British Columbia, Toronto and York (Ontario), where his doctoral students made their careers. I was lucky enough to be invited by them as a visitor to those three universities.

- 21 Cobban would supervise about eight doctoral students at a time. He took all teaching and especially doctoral supervision very conscientiously and seriously, unlike some other supervisors at that time. He never missed his teaching appointments and was always fully prepared to give helpful advice. He was realistic, taking no more students than he could place in university posts. He was a very practical supervisor. He always stressed that a PhD was simply an apprenticeship for a university post that had to be based on archives—he failed Eugène Weber’s Cambridge PhD on the *Action Française*, supervised by David Thomson, because it had no archival base. He would often suggest a topic that led on from his own work. We would each spend at least one of our three years working in archives in France. If he had no direct knowledge of relevant archives, he would introduce a student to an expert, who would then serve as external examiner. Cobban would meet with us individually, about twice a term. Cobban’s IHR seminar was a close community. We met weekly and we were expected to make brief regular oral reports on our research to the group, as well as a full paper shortly before we had completed. It was a real postgraduate seminar, unlike the seminars at the IHR today. Occasionally, Cobban would invite outside speakers, including Richard Cobb from Oxford. The students regularly went for a Chinese meal after the seminar. At the end of the summer term, Cobban would invite us to enjoy Muriel’s superb cooking and their wine. When we finished our doctorates, we tended to keep in close touch, and still do.
- 22 In the 1950s and 60s, few women did PhDs. Cobban supervised nine women during that time.²⁸ All but one of these women went on to a lifelong university career. No other doctoral supervisor equalled this number. Eveline Cruickshanks (1926-2021) completed a thesis (and later a book) with Cobban in 1956 on court factions at Versailles during the reign of Louis XV²⁹. In the same year Joan Bedale wrote a doctorate on Rousseau which she later published as a book³⁰. In 1958, Winifred Edington completed a study of Lisieux³¹. In 1959, two of his female students completed doctorates: Nora Temple wrote on eighteenth-century Yonne and was appointed to Cardiff University³², while Nicola Sutherland contributed a study of Catherine de Medici while working for the History of Parliament and was later appointed lecturer at Bedford College. He supervised two Canadian ladies: Cynthia Dent (née Goulden) wrote on Louis XIV’s church and went on to a permanent post at York (Ontario). Olena Heywood, who worked on 1848, completed her thesis after Cobban’s death. Olwen Hufton was the most illustrious, with visiting Chairs at Harvard and finally Merton, Oxford and a Dameship. I became a Professor of French history at the University of London. For fun, Richard Cobb used to say Cobban looked out for working class girls who researched the poor. Olwen was raised in a

council flat in Oldham and my father was a blacksmith in the steel works in the Potteries. Very few girls from worker backgrounds went to university in the 1960s and almost none did doctoral theses and became lecturers. Cobban's own humble background may have encouraged him to have sympathy for students from similar origins. This might be seen as an aspect of his liberalism. His seminar was very unusual in its large number of women, but competence and employability were Cobban's prime criteria in selecting students. He may have given classes for the Workers' Education Association and the Extra-Mural Department at the University of London, although there is no precise evidence.

Cobban as a liberal voice/Fabian socialist

- 23 Cobban's research and published writing inspired a lasting interest in the history of France in universities and the wider world. The stimulating, questioning approach of his writing and his constant quoting of detailed research encouraged young scholars to question established views and interrogate the past. He was totally committed to his teaching and writing. He never stopped. He gave a paper at a conference organised by Professor Roland Mousnier in Paris in 1967 immediately after his first cancer surgery.³³ He inspired and educated a numerous and above all genuinely altruistic community of scholars, who have had a marked impact on how the history of France is understood and whose own students now teach in universities in Britain, Canada, USA, Japan, etc. In the 1950s and 60s, French history was regarded as a prime area to be studied in Britain, Australasia and North America especially. The 1789 liberal tradition seemed vitally important in a world that had suffered two world wars and horrific social and political collapse. The French experience seemed to offer a tiny bit of hope for humanity. Cobban reflected that belief and he committed himself to reinforcing it. Cobban was certainly a liberal voice in his writing and teaching. Significantly we now have evidence that he was a Fabian socialist.

NOTES

1. Olwen HUFTON, 'Cobban, Alfred Bert Carter (1901–1968),' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, online 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/56344>
2. Fabian Membership Lists, LSE. I am very grateful to Indy Bhullar, from the LSE library, for this information recorded on the original 5x3 record cards. Cobban resigned from the London branch on 2nd February 1931, perhaps to join a local branch nearer Newcastle where he was teaching, although Pat Hobson, who ran the Northumbria branch from 1940, and generously responded to my query, was unable to direct me to relevant evidence as the records of this group have disappeared.
3. Sidney WEBB, *What happened in 1931*, London, The Fabian Society, 1932, 16 p. (Fabian Tracts): <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/collections/fabiansociety> I am very grateful to Kate Murray, Editorial Director, Fabian Society (<https://fabians.org.uk/>) for advice on accessing the digital catalogue of Fabian tracts at LSE.

4. Fabian Society, our history: <http://www.fabians.org.uk>
5. Alfred COBBAN, "Introduction" [1948], Édouard Dolléans, *Le chartisme, 1831-1848*, new revised edition, introduction by Mr Alfred Cobban, Paris, Librairie Marcel Rivière et C^{ie}, 1949, p. vii-xii.
6. Olwen HUFTON, "Cobban,...", *op. cit.*; also "The Legacy of Cobban, the IHR and UCL as a Strategic Site for French History," Round table, Society for the Study of French History annual conference, Leeds, 2019—with Dr. John Harvey on North American links, Professor Pamela Pilbeam on Cobban, Professor William Doyle on Richard Cobb; chair Professor Malcolm Crook. Papers by Harvey, Pilbeam, Crook and one by T.J.A. Le Goff published as "Forum, The Legacy of Alfred Cobban," *French History*, vol. 34, no. 4, December 2020, p. 512-560.
7. Professor Lavissee was on the appointments committee. When the committee met, they decided unanimously to dispense with advertising and to offer the Chair to a French scholar, Paul Mantoux (1877-1956). The post was not attached to a specific college; teaching was to be done at UCL or the LSE. Mantoux held the post until 1921, but never taught or lived in Britain. He served as translator for the British government during World War One and in 1921 was appointed secretary of the new League of Nations, where he helped found the Rockefeller Research Institute. He was replaced as professor in London by Paul Vaucher (1923-32), a specialist in French history who intermittently held sparsely-attended research seminars at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, between 1923 and 1929 and was listed as a teacher at the LSE. In 1933-4, a little-known French historian, Arsène Alexandre, held one meeting at the IHR with one student. I am grateful to Dr John Harvey, University of St Cloud for his informations about the Chair and University of London archives.
8. UCL Archives, Alfred Cobban, professional files. Thanks to William Mooney, Special Collections, UCL, for providing information on relevant files.
9. I was an undergraduate and postgraduate student of Professor Cobban. I took his two specialised BA courses. In 1965, after three years of research, I completed a PhD under his supervision. I am very grateful to Professors Pierre Serna and Alan Forrest for giving me the opportunity to speak about Cobban at the conference "Cosmopolitismes et patriotismes au temps des Révolutions," annual meeting of the Institut historique de la Révolution française (IHMC-IHRF) at the Domaine de Vizille, *musée de la Révolution française*, 25-27 September, 2019. I am also very grateful for the comments of better-informed colleagues, especially Professor Peter McPhee, which have encouraged me to modify my remarks to make it clear that Cobban was committed to a social-reforming agenda! Many thanks to Alan Forrest for advice on revising this talk for publication.
10. UCL Archives, Cobban to Provost, 27 January 1964.
11. Alfred COBBAN, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century. A Study of the Political and Social Thinking of Burke, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey*, London, Routledge, 2021 [1929].
12. Eileen POWER, *Medieval People*, London, Methuen, 1924.
13. Alfred COBBAN, *Rousseau and the Modern State*, London, G. Allen and Unwin, 1934.
14. For an astute commentary, see John F. BOSHER, "Alfred Cobban's view of the Enlightenment," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture. The Modernity of the Eighteenth-Century*, vol. I, 1971, p. 37-53.
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19. Thanks to Professor Tim Le Goff (York, Canada) for this information.
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21. François FURET and Denis RICHTER, *La Révolution française*, Paris, Fayard, 1965; François FURET, *Penser la Révolution française*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978 ; ID., *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981. A brief summary of arguments around the bourgeois revolution in Pamela PILBEAM, "The Bourgeois revolution 1789-1815," in ID., *The Middle Classes in Europe, 1789-1914: France, Germany, Italy, and Russia*, London, 1990, p. 210-234.
22. Olwen HUFTON, *Bayeux in the late 18th Century, a Social Study*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967; ID., *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-1789*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974; ID., *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992.
23. George RUDÉ, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959; ID., *The Crowd in History, a Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848*, New York; London; Sydney, J. Wiley & Sons, 1964.
24. Alfred COBBAN, *A History of Modern France*, Harmondsworth, Penguin books, 1957.
25. Indeed, John Harvey told me, in a recent conversation, that he had established that Cobban seems to have directed (or started before passing away) up to almost thirty dissertations, which would be more, in his opinion (and my own), than any other non-American anglophone historian of France, for the 20th or 21st century.
26. John HARVEY on North American links: "Forum, The Legacy of Alfred Cobban," *French History*, vol. 34, no. 4, December 2020, p. 512-560.
27. Donald SUTHERLAND, *France 1789-1815: Revolution and Counterrevolution*, London, Fontana Press-Collins, 1985.
28. John HARVEY on Cobban's doctoral students: "Forum, The Legacy of Alfred Cobban," *French History*, vol. 34, no. 4, December 2020, p. 558-560.
- John Harvey,
29. She developed an influential academic career as a contributor to the *History of Parliament*, the founder of the *Jacobite Studies Trust*, in which, under her encouragement, a substantial number of volumes were published.
30. Joan Edna Bedale (MacDonald), *The influence and interpretation of the political ideas of Rousseau in France up to 1791*, 1956.
31. "Administrative Study of the Implementation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in the Diocese of Lisieux," 1958.
32. "Town Administration in France in the eighteenth century with special reference to a group of towns in the department of l'Yonne".
33. Published in Alfred COBBAN, *Aspects of the French Revolution*, New York, George Braziller, 1968, p. 90-111. Thanks to Tim Le Goff for these details. Some of us, current and former students, invited Cobban for a meal in Paris on this occasion.

RÉSUMÉS

Cet article traite des convictions libérales d'Alfred Cobban et va aussi révéler pour la première fois qu'Alfred Cobban était un socialiste fabien. Cobban a été professeur d'histoire française à l'University College de Londres de 1953 jusqu'à sa mort en 1968. Cobban était remarquable à la fois par ses enseignements, ses nombreuses publications sur l'histoire moderne de la France et sa supervision d'un nombre impressionnant de doctorants, en particulier de doctorantes, qui allaient par la suite à la fois publier et devenir des professeurs dans des universités britanniques et canadiennes. Les plus importants ouvrages de Cobban sur Rousseau, sur les Lumières et particulièrement sur la Révolution, et ses études incontournables sur la politique contemporaine illustrent son libéralisme, sa croyance en la liberté individuelle, la démocratie et le changement par des réformes graduelles. De manière plus significative que son libéralisme, Cobban a rejoint les socialistes fabiens alors qu'il n'était qu'étudiant. Jusque-là, son Fabianisme était inconnu. Les fabiens étaient opposés au changement par la révolution, n'avaient aucune affinité avec le marxisme et défendaient l'idée qu'une société socialiste pouvait voir le jour au travers de réformes parlementaires. De telles opinions correspondaient aux idées de Cobban sur 1789, ce en quoi il était en profonde désaccord avec certains des principaux historiens de la Révolution française, comme le professeur Ernest Labrousse. Les historiens libéraux français, dont les professeurs François Furet et Leroy-Ladurie, partageaient avec Cobban l'idée que 1789 était principalement une révolution politique.

This article discusses Alfred Cobban's liberal beliefs. It also reveals for the first time that he was a Fabian socialist. Cobban was Professor of French History at University College, London, from 1953 to his death in 1968. Cobban was outstanding both for his scholarship, his numerous publications on modern French history and his supervision of an impressive number of doctoral students, particularly women, who went on both to publish and to become professors in universities in Britain and in Canada. Cobban's outstanding books on Rousseau, on the Enlightenment, in particular on the French Revolution, and also well-known studies of contemporary politics, display his liberalism, his belief in individual freedom, democracy and change through gradual reform. Cobban joined the Fabian socialists when he was an undergraduate. Fabians were hostile to change through revolution, had no time for Marxism and argued that a socialist society would emerge through parliamentary reform. Such views correspond to Cobban's ideas on 1789, in which he was in profound disagreement with leading French revolutionary historians such as Professor Ernest Labrousse. French liberal historians including Professor François Furet and Professor Leroy-Ladurie shared Cobban's views that 1789 was primarily a political revolution.

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