BRITISH CONFLICTS, 1828-1831

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Shall We Stone the Giant?

When approaching a giant of an historical question, most of us would love to play David to its Goliath, smiting it square in the forehead with a single well-aimed stone. Given imperfect pebbles and uncertain aim, however, it is often more prudent to sneak up on the overgrown brutes, in hopes of catching them napping. Just such an oversized question in British history runs something like this: in the sixteen years from the 1832 Reform Bill to the 1848 collapse of a national Chartist movement, how close did Britain come to revolution? In this early report of a continuing research effort, I will try to sneak up on the question from behind.

Not that we lack models for a direct attack. In his review of Guizot's Pourquoi la révolution d'Angleterre a-t-elle réussi?, written in 1850, Karl Marx himself laid down the challenge: The new industrial bourgeoisie, declared Marx:

> became so omnipotent that, even before it gained direct political power as a result of the Reform Bill, it forced its opponents to legislate in its interests and in accordance with its requirements. It captured direct representation in Parliament and used this to destroy the last remnants of real power left to the landed proprietors. Finally, at this moment, it is busy completely demolishing the beautiful edifice of the English constitution before which M. Guizot stands in admiration. And while M. Guizot compliments the English on the failure of republicanism and socialism -- those base, tumorous growths of French society -- to shake the foundations on an infinitely beneficent monarchy, class conflicts in English society have reached a pitch unequalled in any other country: a bourgeoisie with unprecedented wealth and productive forces is confronted here by a proletariat which equally has no precedent in power and concentration (Marx 1973/1850: 255).

With the advantage of hindsight, today's historians find it easy and convenient to point out that the landed classes had more staying power than Marx imagined, and that as Marx wrote the English proletariat was turning away from the open challenge of Chartism toward less dramatic demands for change. Nevertheless, most historians retain a sense of the period from 1830 to 1848 as decisive for the containment of revolutionary potential.

In his cautious assessment of nineteenth-century conflicts, for instance, John

Stevenson declares that "broad cultural factors conditioned the development of a more 'orderly' society in which protests were transmitted through organisations and a relatively harmonious relationship achieved between different groups without the need for a vast repressive apparatus." Hence, according to Stevenson, "England did not experience revolutionary upheaval or counter-revolutionary violence to the degree experienced by many other societies in this period, in spite of the stresses imposed by urbanisation, industrialisation, and the transition from oligarchic government to the beginnings of mass democracy" (Stevenson 1979: 323). England passed the cape, Stevenson tells us elsewhere, as she entered the 1850s.

If we can plausibly date the end of the critical transition with the debacle of the Chartist movement in 1848, we can credibly mark the acceleration of change at the new mobilization for Reform around 1830. To be sure, such a dating requires some confidence that the 1832 Reform Bill mattered as a signal of change, as a stimulus to change, or both. Historians differ, as is their wont and right, on the significance of the 1832 Reform. They divide among minimizers, maximizers, and middlers.

Among the minimizers we find Norman Gash, who insists that the popular mobilization for Reform went off like a blank cartridge -- plenty of light and noise, but little impact. Speaking of the Bill itself, Gash declares that "the continuity of political fibre was tough enough to withstand the not very murderous instrument of 2 Wm. IV, c. 5" (Gash 1971/1953: x; see also Gash 1979). In a similar vein, Philip Hamburger and many others have insisted that the conflicts surrounding Reform were far too diverse, and the working classes far too fragmented, to constitute the revolutionary threat that middle-class leaders of the time sometimes attributed to them.

Among the maximizers, on the other hand, we may place Keith Thomas; he speaks of a "revolutionary crisis" in 1831-32, and considers the crisis to have been

"resolved by the passage of the first Reform Act, which conciliated the middle classes but left the proletariat unenfranchised" (Thomas 1978: 70). Near that same position stand a generation of historians shaped by E.P. Thompson's work, and believing to various degrees in the availability of a relatively unified and conscious working class.

In between the minimizers and the maximizers, we may locate the standard view of 1832 as a display of the British genius for survival by means of middling muddling. "It is impossible to say," reflects Michael Brock on the spring of that year,

> how near Britain was to revolution and civil war during either phase of the May crisis. England escaped from violence in 1832 because the city of London, the commercial world, and more than half the House of Commons wanted the Reform Bill passed as quickly as possible by the only government from which the political unions would accept it. It can be argued that the struggle was certain to end in the reformers' favour before blood had been shed. Nothing could have kept the Reform ministry out of power for long. The parliamentary moderates were becoming more alarmed about the popular agitation with every day that passed (Brock 1973: 307).

Brock adds that there was "an absence of the will to resist in the citadels of power which corresponded to the dislike of unconstitutional methods felt by the leading agitators" (Brock 1973: 308). Brock's analysis says, in essence, that no one with significant power over the outcome was prepared to back an extreme action; those in the middle therefore won.

In any of the three views -- minimizing, maximizing, or middling -- the crisis of Reform revealed the essential character of British nineteenth-century politics, and shaped Britain's subsequent political possibilities. In a wide variety of perspectives, then, the two decades from 1830 to 1850 reshaped British popular politics, and the Reform agitation played an important part in beginning the transition. But how close that transition brought Britain to revolution remains very much an open question. Goliath still stands.

Should we therefore play David? The direct, Davidic approach to the question of Britain's revolutionary potential involves arguing -- preferably by means of a single body of new and striking evidence -- that by the time of Reform the British (or perhaps just the English) working class was or was not unified, class-conscious and ready for militant action; that the struggles over Reform and Chartism produced or failed to produce a viable non-revolutionary compromise; that such events as the 1830 "Swing" rebellion revealed or did not reveal Britain's deep revolutionary potential. Those arguments address profound historical problems. To the extent that they rely on solid evidence, they command our attention. They should and will continue. Nevertheless, we have good reason to try sneaking up on this particular giant.

Changing Forms of Conflict

One circuitous path to the giant's blind side passes by the analysis of changing forms of conflict in Britain. The path runs through heavy underbrush, and sometimes has only faint markings. But the path is interesting, all the same. Over the longer run, it allows us to follow the continuous alterations in the means people used to forward or protect their collective interests. For the very routines of conflict and collective action underwent a deep transformation from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. The transformation occurred, I believe, as a result of a great concentration of capital and a substantial augmentation in the power of the national state. More specifically, the growth of large, capital-concentrated firms and the increasing importance of national officials (and therefore, to some extent, of national elections) to the fates of ordinary people generated threats and opportunities that in turn stimulated people to attempt new sorts of defense and offense: to match association with association, to gain electoral power, and so on. Through a long, strenuous interaction with authorities, enemies, and allies, those ordinary people fashioned new ways of acting together on their interests.

Think of the various forms of collective action that any population knows how

to carry on as constituting a _repertoire_ of performances. By analogy with the various improvisational performances known to a jazz ensemble or a troupe of strolling players (rather than, say, the more confining music read by a string quartet), people in a given place and time know how to carry out a limited number of alternative collective-action routines, adapting each one to the immediate circumstances and to the reactions of antagonists, authorities, allies, observers, objects of their action, and other persons somehow involved in the struggle. In contemporary Britain, for example, most people have a general idea how to form a pressure group, how to demonstrate, how to send a delegation to authorities, plus a number of other routines for stating complaints or demands; many Britons, furthermore, have actually joined in performing some of these routines. The alternative routines constitute their collective-action repertoire.

During the eighteenth century, the British repertoire was different. The prevailing forms of open conflict above a very small scale included food riots, toll-gate atttacks, disruptions of ceremonies or festivals, group poaching, invasions of land, orderly destruction of property, and similar events. We might characterize the eighteenth-century repertoire as "parochial" and "patronized". It was _parochial_ because most often the interests and action involved were confined to a single community. It was _patronized_ because ordinary people recurrently addressed their demands to a local patron or authority, who might represent their interest, redress their grievance, fulfill his own obligation, or at least authorize them to act. Thus the food riot, _grosso modo_, stated the claim that local authorities should act to keep food in the community at a price poor people could afford, while the breaking down of enclosures stated the claim that landlords and authorities should maintain the rights of community members to glean, pasture, gather, or otherwise use unplanted land to their advantage. The parochial and patronized eighteenth-century repertoire likewise included a good deal of ceremonial, street theater, deployment of strong

visual symbols, and destruction of symbolically-charged objects.

Although some of these "eighteenth-century" routines survived well into the nineteenth century, they rapidly lost their relative prominence among the means of righting wrongs. Instead, demonstrations, strikes, rallies, public meetings, and similar forms of action came to prevail during the nineteenth century. As compared with their predecessors, the nineteenth-century forms had a "national" and "autonomous" character. They were national in referring to interests and issues which spanned many localities or affected centers of power whose actions touched many localities. They were autonomous in beginning on the claimants' own initiative and establishing direct communication between the claimants and those nationally-significant centers of power.

We should resist the temptation to label one of the two repertoires as more efficient, more political, or more "revolutionary" than the other. The division between "pre-political" and "political", between "backward-looking" and "forward-looking" forms of action once helped George Rudé and other pioneers in the historical study of collective action to dramatize the facts that crowds act coherently instead of impulsively, that the character of crowd action altered visibly during the nineteenth century, and that the alteration linked to the changing struggle for power. When so many historians had fallen into a portrayal of crowds and protesters as irrational, and ultimately insignificant, historical actors, the facts needed underlining. But many a distinction that works well as a first approximation works badly as a basis of sustained analysis. So it is here: We must recognize that repertoires of collective action are sets of tools for the people involved. The tools will serve more than one end, and their relative efficacy depends on the match among tools, tasks, and users. A new repertoire emerged in the nineteenth century because new users took up new tasks, and found the available tools inadequate to their problems and abilities.

Neither the new tasks nor the new forms of action were intrinsically revolutionary. After all, the English had managed two revolutions in the seventeenth century with the old repertoire, but never managed to make one in the nineteenth or twentieth century with the new.

In order to think through the likelihood of a nineteenth-century revolution, we need a distinction between a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary outcome: A revolutionary situation exists if the population subject to a given government divides into two or more fragments, each of which is making claims to control of the government which conflict with the claims of another fragment, and each of which commands the allegiance of some significant fraction of the population. A revolutionary outcome occurs if an actual transfer of power takes place. The mark of a revolutionary situation, as I see it, does not appear in the prevailing forms of action, the character of the groups involved in collective action, or in the population's state of mind. It appears in the extent to which people are using the available forms of collective action to press claims which, if realized, would overturn the existing structure and exercise of power. In general, the claims become more serious, and the revolutionary situation more intense, to the degree that the people who press claims:

1. have close connections;

2. act on behalf of similar interests;

3. commit themselves to leaders or organizations having the capacity to operate the state in question;

4. include people who are part of the existing structure of power.

A long-term theory of revolution, then, should state the general conditions under which these particular circumstances arise.

In the short term, this description of a revolutionary situation permits us to use evidence about the ebb and flow of collective acvtion to judge whether revolution

is close or far. Given claims which, if realized, would overturn the existing structure and exercise of power, the sheer volume of action pressing such claims provides a crude indication of proximity to a revolutionary situation. Similar presumptions have led George Rudé to carry on a general survey of the ways of British and French crowd protests, John Stevenson to follow English "disturbances" from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, and John Bohstedt to undertake a massive inventory of "riots" in England around the end of the eighteenth century. If we add to the study of crude activity levels some information about the structure of relations among the people who make claims, we approach an assessment of the possibility of revolution.

In hopes of better understanding the struggles of the nineteenth century. my research group has undertaken a careful study of conflict and collective action in Britain during the years from 1828 to 1834. (We have also undertaken a parallel examination of the London region during selected years from 1758 to 1834. That work makes it possible to speak with more confidence about the change of repertoires from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, and about crises preceding the struggles of Reform. But it bears less directly on the problem of the revolutionary potential in Reform.)

In general, we are trying to trace how the changing organization of production, the changing structure of power, and the struggles over both of them interacted to alter the ways in which ordinary people strove together to defend or enhance their lives. Like Rudé, Stevenson, and Bohstedt, we concentrate on open conflicts that make those strivings visible; unlike them, we also examine thousands of routine, non-violent assemblies during which people collectively made claims on others -- emphatically including the government.

Here is the nub of our procedure: We catalog, describe, and analyze thousands of "contentious gatherings" which occurred in England, Wales, or Scotland during those seven years. A "contentious gathering" (CG) occurs, for our purposes, when ten or

more people assemble in a publicly-accessible place and visibly make claims on others which would, if realized, affect the interests of those others. A series of further rules and procedures makes the enumeration of CGs from standard historical sources quite reliable. CGs include almost all events that historians normally call riots, disturbances, demonstrations, and the like, plus a wide variety of non-violent meetings, public ceremonies, and other occasions on which people collectively offer demands, complaints, or affirmations of support.

"Contentious gatherings" include many events that were not excessively contentious. They include decorous meetings that issued pious petitions, banquets at which the diners swore their support for a policy or an official, and ponderous public rituals in the course of which cheers or jeers clearly signaled the spectators' solidarity or opposition. I call them "contentious" because all of them express shared preferences with respect to the exercise of power, because every one of them contraries the interests of some other set of people (even if those people are neither present nor articulating their own claims), and because it would be inconsistent to include statements of opposition without including statements of support. In any case, the point is emphatically not to sweep these varied forms of action into a single quantum called "contention". It is, precisely, to see how different groups of people choose their means of acting together on their interests, and how those means vary over time, place, and group. The catalog consists of every event meeting the definition of "contentious gathering" mentioned in any issue of seven national periodicals -- Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, the Mirror of Parliament, Votes and Proceedings of Parliament, Gentleman's Magazine, the Annual Register, the Times, and the Morning Chronicle -- appearing during the seven-year period and six months beyond.

When the enumeration is finished, it will probably include on the order of eight thousand contentious gatherings. Although the catalog of events comes exclusively

from the seven periodicals, for purposes of description, comparison and verification we draw extensively on Home Office correspondence, regional and labor periodicals, and published historical works. Once we have prepared a dossier on each event, including photocopies of the sources used to describe it, we produce a machine-readable description of the CG, largely by sitting at a computer terminal with screen and keyboard, then typing plain-language answers to a questionnaire stored in a distant computer and presented on the screen. The description includes several segments:

1. an overall description of the CG;

2. a description of each formation -- each individual or set of people acting distinguishably -- participating in the CG or serving as the object of a claim;

3. a description of each successive phase of the action, with a new phase beginning each time any formation arrives, moves, leaves, or somehow changes its relationship to the claims being made;

4. a description of each place in which some portion of the CG's action occurred, including a precise location keyed to the British national grid-square system;

5. a description of each source consulted in the preparation of the dossier;

6. a set of free comments on special features of the event or the sources, including conflicting or unclear reports;

7. a general report on the assembly of the dossier and the coding of the event -- who did them, when, and so on.

We lodge these dossiers, along with considerable additional information such as population sizes for places mentioned, in a large data-management system. The system permits us to draw on the file selectively for a wide variety of descriptions and analyses. The tables, graphs, and maps accompanying this paper illustrate the simpler varieties of material that we produce routinely from the file.

At this writing, we are completing the cleaning of the file for 1831, and entering information for 1832. The full evidence for 1832 will not be ready for some months. (In fact, more than once in 1982 we will undoubtedly be answering the

computer's questions about a CG one hundred and fifty years to the day after the event occurred.) As a consequence, this provisional report takes us up to the eve of the Reform Bill's passage in the spring of 1832, then leaves us to wait for further news. That cutoff has one advantage: it requires us to say what 1832 should look like if one analysis of Reform or another is correct -- before the evidence is in -- and therefore reduces our ability to marshal the findings tendentiously on behalf of my (or our) favorite theories.

In order to shield myself from the inevitable barrage of accusations and misunderstandings, let me make a few declarations of unfaith. I do not believe national periodicals of the 1820s and 1830s contain complete, unbiased enumerations and descriptions of all sorts of conflict. I do not think that "contentious gatherings" exhaust or represent all the means of collective action that were available to British people back then. I do not pretend that one can sum food riots, parades, mass meetings, machine-breaking incidents and demonstrations into a single number somehow indexing the quantity of anger, disturbance, or militancy prevailing in a whole complex country. I do not imagine that platoons of machine-readable data, vigorously disciplined, will line up in neat rows and shout out unexpected but true answers to great historical questions. I do not suppose, finally, that the forms of contention in Britain, or anywhere else, fall into a natural progression from traditional to modern, from simple to sophisticated, from expressive to instrumental, from ineffective to effective.

Yet I do believe some things. I think it possible, for example, to identify and correct the biases in the sources we consult. Preliminary comparisons with other sources suggest, unsurprisingly, that our periodicals overrepresent events from the London region and events which involve explicit references to national politics, while underrepresenting local labor disputes and run-of-the-mill brawls. The over- and under-representation, however, do not disguise significant differences from one region

to another or from one sort of event to another. As compared with the general and county correspondence series of the Home Office -- the most obvious rivals to our periodicals as sources for the kind of inventory we have undertaken -- our sources report many more events, especially of the more routine and nonviolent varieties. And the general sense of the ebb and flow of contention conveyed by our sources is worthy of some confidence.

A comparison of Figures 1 and 2 will help make that clear. Figure 1 represents the number of formations (individuals or sets of people reported as acting distinguishably) involved in "Swing" rebellion CGs reported in our sources, day by day from August through December 1830. Figure 2 presents parallel information from Hobsbawm and Rudé's Captain Swing. The Hobsbawm-Rudé events include hundreds of cases of arson and threatening letters, while ours exclude all instances in which we lack a definite indication that ten or more people assembled in the same place. Despite the difference, the two graphs bear an astonishing resemblance to one another. (The product-moment correlation coefficient between daily numbers of events from the two series runs from +.87 to +.91, depending on the set of days included.) Since Hobsbawm and Rudé drew their enumeration chiefly from archival material, the resemblance increases my confidence in the utility of our periodicals as sources for the study of contention.

The work also requires other acts of faith. I believe that the events we call "contentious gatherings" comprise a significant part of popular collective action, that changes and variations in their character generally correspond to variations in a wide range of individual and collective action, and that the systematic study of contention provides an effective means of examining the issues, intensities, forms, participants, and outcomes of day-to-day struggles for power. In the case of Britain on the eve of Reform, the study of contention sheds light on the extent and timing of popular mobilization around national political issues, and on the nature of the struggles to

which that mobilization was connected.

Methodologically, this research falls into the tradition of collective biography. The value of collective biography almost never lies in the totals or in the distributions of single variables. In a collective-biographical analysis of social mobility, for example, the absolute number of people moving up, down, or sideways is a rather uninteresting number, especially since methodological choices tend to affect such numbers very strongly. What kinds of people move where, and how, is a much more important problem -- and, fortunately, one whose answer is less vulnerable to methodological choices. In the study of collective action, how many events appear to have occurred reflects the practical definition of "event" and the character of the sources used. Consulting many sources and/or broadening the definition inevitably increases the count. In the long run, furthermore, the point is not to identify the timing of all events, the geography of all events, the personnel of all events, and so on, each separately; it is to identify the recurrent patterns associating a given kind of person with a given combination of issues and actions. It is, ultimately, to reconstruct the chief alternative forms of action open to different kinds of people, and the circumstances in which different kinds of people acted. Nevertheless, the aggregates and the single variables provide contexts for the pursuit of real-life patterns. The evidence reviewed here consists mainly of totals and distributions, and proceeds through types of events, types of issues, and so on, separately, with little effort at recreating the wholes from which those types come.

Timing and Types of Contention

The incomplete evidence at hand portrays a Britain in which, from 1828 to 1831, conflict was frequent, increasing, and strongly responsive to national politics. It reveals a remarkable orientation of local contention to issues which were currently occupying Parliament's attention. It displays a world in which many organizers were adopting the forms of the social movement: the sustained challenge to existing power

structures in the name of an unrepresented population. It records a veritable fever of meeting, rallying, and petitioning, with the temperature rising as the mobilization for Reform proceeded. It suggests the possibility that the campaigns for Test and Corporation repeal and for Catholic Emancipation contributed models and experience to the campaign for Reform. Yet amid all the meeting and nationally-oriented organizing, the evidence also shows a wide range of very different contention, including the marching, burning, machine-breaking, and wage demands of 1830's "Swing" rebellion. The descriptive material entering the portrait includes time-lines of contentious gatherings, maps of the distribution of contention concerning different issues, and tabulations of the forms, issues, and actions involved in contention. Let us move quickly through the material.

Figure 3 graphs the number of contentious gatherings in Great Britain as a whole for each month from January 1828 through October 1831, the current end of our reliable machine-readable file. The curve reveals an irregular but decisive rise in the frequency of contention during the four years. (Although the height of the curve depends heavily on our definitions and sources, the trend is much less strongly affected by our procedures.) It also displays four distinct peaks: around March 1828, March 1829, November 1830, and March 1831. The 1830 peak obviously represents the most active moment of the Swing rebellion. But why March for the other three? Because March falls in the midst of a normal Parliamentary session, and a large share of all CGs consist of meetings in which the participants explicitly take positions on questions currently under deliberation in Parliament. The three peaks correspond to attention-getting Parliamentary debates concerning the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, the enactment of Catholic Emancipation, and legislation for Reform. As Figure 4 shows for 1828 and 1829, an enormous welling up of meetings -- and particularly meetings of named associations -- during Parliament's sitting accounts for the correspondence. Figure 5 complements that result by

displaying how the flow of petitions to Parliament, as dated by the days on which they were voted or dispatched, depended on the rhythm of Parliamentary debate; the curve for 1828 reveals two distinct peaks for the debates over Test and Corporation repeal and Catholic Emancipation, while 1829 gives us the even greater peaking of petitions, both pro and con, during the final successful struggle over Catholic Emancipation.

Maps 1 and 2 show the distribution of CGs by county in 1828 and 1829, corrected for population. Although in both years London led the list and the Southeast as a whole had more than the average concentration of events, reports of conflict came in from almost everywhere except coastal Scotland and interior North Wales. The reporting may have been selective, but it does not appear to have excluded any major region of the country.

Table 1 presents a crude taxonomy of contentious gatherings by the nature of the activity which first brought the people together. It sums up the types separately for 1828, 1829, 1830, and the first ten months of 1831. The first news to emerge from the table is the overwhelming predominance of regularly-called meetings as the contexts for contentious gatherings: 78, 68, 57 and a full 82 percent of all CGs in the successive intervals. The percentage drops a bit in 1830 as a result of the "Swing" events, but rises to a new height in 1831 with the intensifying campaign of agitation for Reform. The only other category to capture a significant share of the events in any year is "other violent confrontations," which include machine-breaking, other collective attacks on property, and a small number of group fights in public places; that category likewise shows the strong influence of Swing on the activities of 1830. All other types of events were relatively few in number.

What was at issue? At one time or another, every significant interest knowingly shared by a substantial group of people somewhere in Britain became the focus of a contentious gathering. In 1831, for example, major issues of individual

gatherings included free trade with China, local gambling, the alleged cannibalism of an old woman, slavery, Irish tithes, mercy for the "Swing" rebels, the pilgrim tax in India, road repairs, wage reductions, and the hiring of blacklegs, not to mention the staple taxes, elections, and Reform. If we group these individual issues into categories, as in Table 2, they combine to show the great salience of the pressing questions in national and Parliamentary politics: Test and Corporation, Friendly Societies and Catholic claims in 1828, Catholic claims alone in 1829, elections and Reform in both 1830 and 1831. Other issues also fluctuate, with labor disputes prominent in 1829, distress salient in the first half of 1830, and the installation of the New Police in London concerning one contentious gathering in twelve during the last six months of 1830. The events of the Swing rebellion show up with a characteristically different profile: machine-breaking and wage disputes alone constitute a fat majority of the Swing events.

Yet the most dramatic change was the rise of Reform as an issue. From 0.3 percent of 1828's events to 1.21 percent in 1829, Reform increased to become a full 55 percent of all the CGs we have identified from January through October of 1831. The continuation of that time-line into 1832 will undoubtedly identify Reform as the most prominent single issue of the entire period from 1828 to 1834. Of an estimated 8,000 CGs in the completed seven-year catalog, over 1,000 will probably concern Reform directly; the inclusion of election-linked gatherings in which Reform figured significantly will probably add several hundred more. All in all, the figures describe an unprecedented mobilization of British people around a national political issue.

Unprecedented? Therein lies a fascinating problem. Since the eighteenth-century struggles around John Wilkes and Lord George Gordon, British activists had been putting together the elements of the national social movement: the creation of voluntary associations dedicated to the public pursuit of specific issues, the drafting and circulation of petitions for thousands of signatures, the ceremonious presentation

of those petitions to Parliament or the king,the public marches and rallies which displayed a combination of numbers and determination, the deliberate statement of demands and programs on behalf of an unrepresented population, the display of symbols and slogans identifying people with the cause, the recruitment of followers, the intimidation of opponents, the deliberate staging of confrontations with the authorities. By the end of the 1820s, one might reasonably argue that the entire apparatus of the social movement, more or less as we know it today, was already in place. With the 1828 campaigns for and against repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, a national movement got underway. As Map 3 shows, the majority of British counties (especially outside the Celtic areas) produced meetings and other CGs concerning Test and Corporation repeal. In Figure 6, furthermore, we see that for the brief period in 1828 when Parliament was considering repeal, CGs dealing with the issue constituted the great majority of all CGs in Great Britain.

Catholic Emancipation came later, and generated even more activity. As Maps 5a and 5b reveal, the abortive consideration of Catholic Emancipation stimulated many CGs in England, if not in Scotland or Wales. For the most part, the supporters of direct Catholic representation in government organized the activities of 1828. It was different in 1829: the opponents of Catholic Emancipation -- organized, among other ways, through the Brunswick Clubs -- came out in large numbers, and waged a counter-campaign of meetings, marches, and petitions. Although they failed to block Parliamentary action, they raised the stakes. Through the contestation, most sections of Great Britain again became involved in a national political issue. Figure 7 records a parallel with the Test and Corporation agitation of 1828: CGs centering on Catholic Emancipation came for a brief moment early in 1829 to constitute almost the whole of British contention. Parliamentary action completed, the issue again disappeared. The tuning of contention to the activities of Parliament is of course perfectly comprehensible, once we observe the deliberate organization of displays of support

and opposition. But it is only comprehensible on the assumption of widespread local involvement in national politics.

That brings us back to Reform. By the 1830s, the issue of Parliamentary reform already had behind it a half-century of unsuccessful campaigns. Nevertheless, the campaign of 1830 to 1832 was not only the first successful campaign; it was also the largest by far. Since the evidence now ready for analysis stops short in October 1831, for the moment we cannot follow the campaign through to its denouement, or look at its geography. Figure 3 traces its timing through October 1831. As in the cases of Test and Corporation and Catholic Emancipation, we observe peaks of activity which came close to constituting the whole of contention throughout Great Britain, and which corresponded closely to the ebb and flow of Parliamentary action. Behind the peaks we can again discern strenuous organizing activity: meetings, rallies, demonstrations, petition marches aimed at providing public testimony of support for one position or another. One can reasonably claim that the Places, Hunts, O'Connells and Dohertys of Reform continued and perfected social-movement strategies that the campaigns over the Test and Corporation Acts and over Catholic Emancipation had already brought into effective use.

Next Steps

Does such a conclusion tell us how close Britain came to revolution in 1831? No, it does not. Remember the distinction between a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary outcome: A revolutionary situation exists if the population subject to a given government divides into two or more fragments each of which is making claims to control of the government which conflict with the claims of another fragment, and each of which commands the allegiance of some significant fraction of the population. A revolutionary outcome occurs if an actual transfer of power takes place. Evidence on contention from 1828 to 1831 remains impossibly distant from the question of revolutionary outcomes; that question depends on tactics and contingencies little

predicted by the frequency and character of day-to-day contention. The evidence merely provides some hints as to the possibility of a revolutionary situation.

Recall the key questions concerning a revolutionary situation: Are many people using the available forms of collective action to press claims which would, if realized, overturn the existing structure and exercise of power? Are they closely connected? Are they acting on behalf of similar interests? Have they committed themselves to leaders or organizations having the capacity to operate the state? Do they include people who are part of the existing structure of power? My preliminary evidence falls pitifully short of answering any of these crucial questions. All it shows is a) widespread mobilization around the issue of Reform, a mobilization resembling previous mobilizations around related issues, but surpassing all of them and b) a clustering and coordination of displays of support and opposition that we can reasonably call a social movement -- a sustained challenge to the existing structure of power in the name of an unrepresented constituency. I believe the claims, the connections, the interests, the commitment, and the ties to power were sufficient to make revolution possible in 1831 or 1832. Given the bourgeois-worker coalition making the claims, one might imagine a moderate constitution-making revolution of the nineteenth-century continental variety, and one might well suppose that the merchants, masters, and manufacturers would have been as quick to dump their working-class partners in revolution as they were in the absence of revolution. But these speculations wander far beyond the evidence at hand.

The social-movement basis of the mobilization for Reform does, however, set some limits on the debate over revolutionary potential. On the one hand, the scale and timing of contention bespeak widespread involvement in the issue, and effective organization throughout much of Great Britain. On the other hand, the prominence of meetings, associations, petitions and other well-planned activities belies the notion of a welling up of uncontrolled anger. The rough parallels among the campaigns

Test and Corporation repeal, Catholic Emancipation, and Reform itself suggest either widespread familiarity with the apparatus of social movements, direct learning from one movement to the next, or both. The next steps, then, are to break down these clumsy aggregates, reconstruct the connections among issues, participants and actions, examine local variations, follow the interactions among challengers, their competitors, and authorities. Once we are able to pursue these processes past the enactment of 1832's Reform Bill, we should have a much clearer idea of the risks and opportunities created by the vast mobilization for Reform.

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