
CONFLICT AND CHANGE IN FRANCE SINCE 1600,

AS SEEN FROM A VERY SMALL PLACE

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A Place in Paris

A subway rider elbows his way out of the blue, rubber-tired train at the Hotel de Ville station. He climbs the littered stairs, blinks his way into the sunshine and exhaust fumes of a summer noon, and stands at the edge of a square half again as large as a football field. Taxis, buses, trucks, and motorcycles swirl around the oblong flower beds in mid-square, turning in from the Quai de Gesvres, which borders the Seine just to the south of the square, speeding west along the rue de Rivoli at the top of the square, or heading down toward the river from the rue du Renard. Many of the vehicles are tour buses -- German, English, Belgian, Dutch, Italian, sometimes French -- which stop momentarily while their occupants gawk out the windows. They have plenty of sights to see.

Our lonely pedestrian stations himself on the curb of the rue de Rivoli, facing south toward the river. There, an unceasing stream of shoppers, salespeople, and lunchtime strollers threatens to bump him off the sidewalk into the path of the fast-moving traffic. The strollers are passing between our observer and a large block of cafes and shops. Many of them are coming to or from the Bazar de l'Hotel de Ville, the big department store just up the street to his left. In that direction, he notices rows of offices, shops, and cafes lining the rue de Rivoli up to the point of its melting into the rue St. Antoine; further east, out of sight, he knows the road leads to the Place des Vosges and then to the Place de la Bastille. Over the rooftops of the rue St. Antoine, in fact, he catches sight of the winged figures atop the Bastille column.

Straight ahead, beyond the river and over the tops of six-storey buildings on the Ile de la Cité, our spectator sees the towers of Notre Dame. If he turns to his right, he can look up the broad avenue, past the Tour St. Jacques, toward the Louvre. He has only to walk thirty steps in that direction, stop at the corner of the rue du Renard, turn his back on the square, look north, and he will see the garish

blue, red, and green surfaces of the Centre Georges Pompidou. The huge exposition center is roughly the same 500 meters north that Notre Dame is south, the streets from one to the other balancing on the rue de Rivoli like a crooked teeter-totter.

Here at the square, the Pont d'Arcole and the stone walls of the riverbank occupy the far side. On the right sit two large blocks of office buildings, separated by a tree-shaded street. And on the left, to the east, looms the ornate mass of the Hôtel de Ville -- the Paris city hall. If it is a day of ceremony, the great building is decked with bunting, movable barriers stand ready for use, and a dozen policemen wait in clusters before the city hall's doorways. The traveler senses at once that the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville is a center of communication, ceremony, and command.

Habitues of Paris will fix our subway rider's view of the Place quite precisely in time: No earlier than 1977, for in that year the Centre Pompidou opened its doors. No later than 1980, when Mayor Jacques Chirac of Paris succeeded in banning motor vehicles from most of the square, and in starting the construction of a spacious pedestrian mall. Thus the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville began one more transformation -- this one a return to the pedestrian traffic that had prevailed over most of its history.

For the better part of its existence, the square was much smaller, and went by another name. The Place de Grève, Parisians called it. The name came from the beach, or grève, that was until the nineteenth century the chief port of entry for the city's waterborne food supply. The name has its own history: the French word for strike (likewise grève) may derive from the action of workers at the Place de Grève, who ordinarily showed up there in the morning for hiring. They gathered in bands near the river when there was too little work or when the offered price was too low. To stand apart from work was therefore to faire la grève; strikers became grévistes. At least so the story goes.

During the Revolution, the square was rebaptized Place de la Maison Commune,

to match the city hall's revolutionary title. That name never really stuck; it remained Place de Grève. In 1802, the old label officially gave way to the new: Place de l'Hôtel de Ville. Half a century passed before the new name began to catch on. In the 1850s, the old streets and houses which covered three quarters of the area vanished to realize the grand designs of Louis Napoleon's planner-prefect Georges Eugène Haussmann. From then on, the city hall faced an oversized, traffic-laden public square. The Place de Grève had disappeared.

The Hôtel de Ville itself served for centuries as the seat of the city's closest equivalent to a mayor and council: the prévôt des marchands and the échevins. As their names imply, they were simultaneously the executive officers of the merchant community and the chief persons responsible for the day-to-day policing and maintenance of the city. This overlap of mercantile organization and city government did not distinguish Paris from hundreds of other European trading centers; in those cities, the merchants usually ran things. The distinction of Paris -- aside from its sheer size and influence -- lay in the coexistence of the merchants with the chief agents of a powerful, expanding kingdom and with the dignitaries of a wealthy church. In the city, that church operated great sanctuaries, large monasteries, and a world-famous university. The city's geography gave a rough representation of the division: royal institutions concentrated on the Ile de la Cité and the western part of the Right Bank, church and university especially prominent on the Left Bank and on one corner of the Cité, mercantile and municipal institutions grouped on the central and eastern sections of the Right Bank. The Grève came as close as any spot in Paris to being the junction of royal, ecclesiastical, mercantile, and municipal activity.

Will you join me in a conceit? Let us pretend that we are four-hundred-year-old loungers -- badauds, of course, not clochards -- who have spent all those years at the Place de Grève. As we have whiled away our time in the square, we have noticed visible signs of the great changes France experienced after 1600. We have

observed the development of French capitalism. We have witnessed the growth of a powerful national state. We have noticed the changing ways in which ordinary people have acted together (or, for that matter, have failed to act together) on their interests. We have formed some ideas about how all these changes fit together. We have seen, for example, that where royal, ecclesiastical, mercantile, and municipal interests come together, conflicts of interest become visible; so long as the city and people of Paris remained a powerful independent force in French national life, the Place de Grève continued to be the scene of struggle, display, and retribution. But as the state became dominant over all other but major capitalist interests, the Hôtel de Ville and the Grève lost their significance in those regards. As a consequence, the early history of the square was often bloody, even grisly; from the later nineteenth century onward, however, mayhem there became less frequent.

Watching very carefully for four hundred years, we have also witnessed the declining importance of corporate structures such as guilds, organized communities such as the city's quartiers, and patron-client networks such as a great lord and his gens as bases of popular collective action. In contrast, we have remarked on the ever-growing influence of special-purpose associations such as parties, firms, and voluntary organizations. We have, in short, followed the interaction of capitalism, statemaking, and contention from 1600 onward. Like any good park-bench loungers, we have also noticed the everyday adventures and passing pedestrians of our particular corner. Let us review some of the things we have seen since 1600.

Meeting and Passing Through

In the seventeenth century, the Place de Grève served as a major meeting-place. Visitors to the city often entered through the nearby Porte Saint-Antoine, next to the Bastille, and proceeded down the rue Saint-Antoine to the Hôtel de Ville. That was the standard itinerary of ambassadors and princes. Royal troops customarily met them with ceremony somewhere on the road outside the capital, then accompanied

them through the walls, past the Hôtel de Ville, and into the presence of the king. The way from the Bastille led past imposing town houses.

The neighborhood -- the Marais -- was at one time the chief dwelling area of the grande noblesse. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, the kings of France themselves resided in the Hôtel Saint-Paul, then in the Hôtel des Tournelles, neither one far east of the Hôtel de Ville. Later kings lavished attention on the Place Royale (now the Place des Vosges), further out along the rue Saint-Antoine. During the 1650s, Catherine Bellier built the elegant Hôtel de Beauvais on the rue Saint-Antoine, near the Hôtel de Ville. Bellier was Queen Anne's personal servant. She was reputed to be both Anne's reliable aide in the Queen's affairs with Cardinal Mazarin, and the woman who ended the virginity of the Queen's son, Louis XIV. In seventeenth-century Paris, servitude and turpitude apparently had their rewards.

The Hôtel de Beauvais still graces the Marais, although nineteenth-century urban renewal renamed its section of the old main street the rue François Miron, for a great seventeenth-century prévôt des marchands. Not only the Hôtel de Beauvais, but also the imposing Hôtel Béthune-Sully, the handsome Hôtel de Sens and the spectacular Hôtel de Carnavalet now testify to the neighborhood's old grandeur. St. Gervais, just east of the Hôtel de Ville, was an aristocratic church in the seventeenth century; beginning in mid-century, a long line of Couperins served as its organists. Only toward 1700, with the exodus to Versailles, did the areas north and east of the Hôtel de Ville begin to lose their elite character.

The aristocratic neighborhoods contrasted sharply with the commercial and proletarian cast of the Place de Grève itself. The Grève hosted an important part of the city's wholesale trade, while the nearby St. Jean market supplied a good share of Parisian fruits and vegetables. Emile Magne offers a dramatic reconstruction of the Place as it looked in 1644:

On the left, beyond the stone cross with its Gothic shaft on a pyramidal

pedestal, the Wine Market brought together, all the way over to the bank of the Seine, tight ranks of wagons loaded with barrels, kegs, and demijohns. Around the licensed brokers and measurers, the master vendors begin the auction amid a great crowd of merchants and tavern-keepers, who compete stridently for Burgundies, Bourbonnais, Spanish wines, and Malmseys. Beggars in rags, mean-faced rascals, loafers, and pamphleteers wander from group to group looking for a handout, a purse to snatch, a piece of news to seize in flight. (Magne 1960: 10-11)

Further on, there are coachmen, petty merchants, water-carriers, servants, and errand boys. Through the middle of this human mass, in Emile Magne's tableau, march the solemn black-robed municipal officers. Seventeenth-century etchings likewise portray a Place de Grève teeming with travelers, peddlers, workers, merchants, officials, and spectators.

Workers of the Grève included plenty of casual laborers, hired by the day, but they also included a variety of established trades, each with its permanent claim on some corner of the neighborhood. Early in the eighteenth century, fifteen different officially-organized trades had their headquarters on the square or in its immediate vicinity: the bourelliers, boursiers, cordiers, ceinturiers, maîtres chandeliers, maîtres charons, maîtres cordonniers, maîtres corroyeurs, maîtres garniers, huissiers à cheval, marchands de vins, peaussiers, potiers de terre, maîtres tonneliers, and maîtres tourneurs (Constant 1974: 9). All of them, plus many more workers from the construction trade, met, drank, hired, organized, and debated their interests at the Place de Grève. For work, play, and politics, the square brought together people from all walks of life and all quarters of the city.

The coincidence of municipal power, commercial activity, and everyday gathering made the Place an ideal location for parades, ceremonies, and insurrections. Within Paris, the Hôtel de Ville and the Place de Grève were the foci of the Fronde.

Mazarin's seizure, and very slow payment, of bonds secured by the Hôtel de Ville's revenues turned many of the city's rentiers against the government, and precipitated a series of rebellious gatherings in 1648 and 1649. The rebel princes and princesses themselves lodged at the Hôtel de Ville in 1649. There the duchess of Longueville bore a son, baptized him Charles-Paris, and enlisted the city's magistrates as the boy's godfathers. When, in 1649, Morlot was sentenced to hang in the Grève for having printed a mazarinade (a handbill criticizing the beleaguered Mazarin), the crowd in the square freed the prisoner, breaking the gallows and its ladder in the assault. Later in the Fronde, when divisions opened up among the municipal officers, the bourgeois of Paris, and the great princes, control of the Hôtel de Ville continued to be a prime objective of the rebels. When the rebellion had lost definitively, the city brought the Fronde to its symbolic close, in July 1653, with a great festival celebrating the reestablishment of royal authority. It took place, naturally, at the Hôtel de Ville.

After the fright of the Fronde, the king himself avoided the Hotel de Ville for twenty-five years. But he did ride through the square. In August 1660, Louis XIV and his bride, the Spanish Infanta Maria Theresa, made their formal entry into the city: their gala procession moved through triumphal arches and past admiring throngs via the rue Saint-Antoine, the Place Baudoyer, and the rue de la Tisseranderie to the Place de Grève. Among the great lords and ladies on the balconies of the Hôtel de Beauvais, the newlyweds saw Queen Mother Anne of Austria, her aging friend Mazarin, Marshal Turenne, and Queen Henrietta of England. The procession moved from the Grève over the river to Notre Dame before finally making its way to the Louvre.

Waterborne voyagers took another variant of the same path. They often debarked at the Port Saint-Paul, just upstream from the Place de Grève. Then they passed through the square on their way to other parts of the city. When Restif de

la Bretonne wrote La paysanne pervertie, his eighteenth-century tale of the peasant maiden corrupted by Parisian life, he had his innocent Ursule arrive by water coach at the Port Saint-Paul, then proceed immediately to her decreasingly innocent encounters with the wicked city.

The Place was also the starting-point of many a procession, parade, and popular movement. The city's register of festivals and ceremonies for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries shows us, for example, the municipality assembling in the square each New Year's Day to pay a call on the king. Once the king built his splendid new castle in Versailles, that meant a long procession by coach to the suburbs. The minutes for 1 January 1783 list the major city officials:

. . . invited by warrant, they assembled in black robes at six A.M. at the Hôtel de Ville, where the first city clerk and two other clerks (likewise in black robes) and the colonel of the municipal guard (in dress uniform) had also reported. After hearing Mass, they left for Versailles at seven A.M. (A.N. [Archives Nationales, Paris] K 1018).

Toward the end of the same year the American war ended, and France celebrated the conclusion of the peace treaty. On the 23d of November, at 9 A.M., another procession left the Place de Grève. Led by fifteen inspectors and deputy inspectors of police, four companies of the municipal guard, two detachments of the city's Watch, clerks of the royal administration at the Hôtel de Ville, and finally -- exquisitely balanced, with seventeen royal officers on the left, seventeen municipal officers on the right -- the major officials of the city, their rears protected by horse guards and by another company of police inspectors.

From the Hôtel de Ville, the impressive parade went to proclaim the peace at the Carrousel of the Louvre, in the court of the Palais de Justice, and seven other locations scattered through Paris. For their last round they proceeded to the Place Maubert, to the Place Royale (now the Place des Vosges) and to the Place Baudoyer,

near St. Gervais. From there they returned -- no doubt footsore and thirsty from their ten-mile tramp -- to the nearby Hôtel de Ville. More celebrations occurred during the next few weeks: the singing of Te Deums, the illumination of the city, the fireworks at the Place de Grève (A.N. K 1018).

The square was, in fact, the standard locale for fireworks, and for public celebrations in general, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. St. John's Eve (23 June) meant fire and fireworks. It was the Christian successor of pagan Midsummer's Eve, a sort of Bastille Day avant la lettre. The huge bonfire and the display took place in the square. "In the midst of a pile of faggots," according to Augustin Challamel,

was planted a May Tree thirty meters high, graciously decorated with bouquets, crowns, and garlands of roses. On the 22d of June, three companies of archers, the guards of the Hôtel de Ville, the general staff and the authorities went in procession to present the official invitations. To the king belonged the honor of lighting the fire (Challamel 1879: 20).

Legend has it that sixteenth-century celebrants had the custom of hanging a cageful of cats on the May Tree, and watching them burn. By the later seventeenth century, that gruesome entertainment had disappeared, but fireworks and petards waited inside the woodpile to give the crowd its own spectacle de son et lumière. After the Fronde, the king abandoned the honor of lighting the bonfire to his deputy, the royal governor of Paris. Even after the monarch's withdrawal from the festivities, St. John's Eve continued each year to draw the rich (in carriages) and the poor (on foot) to the Place de Grève. Many other holidays drew them back.

The square likewise attracted spectators to its many public executions. From the fourteenth century onward, heretics had burned, gentlemen-rebels had lost their heads, and common criminals had hanged, all in public view at the Place de Grève. In his bawdy Histoire Comique de Francion, published in 1623, Charles Sorel says of a

thief, "They sent him to the Grève, where his head learned how much the rest of his body weighed." About the same time, the irreverent poet Théophile de Viau went to prison in the Conciergerie on the initiative of the Jesuits. When the troops came for him, he wasn't sure whether it was for decapitation or incarceration:

In the name of the King, people use
Both force and trickery.
As if Lucifer had undertaken
To give me justice.
As soon as I was in Paris
I heard vague rumors
That everything was set to do me in
And I rightly wondered
Whether these people were going to take me
To the Grève or to jail.

("Requete de Théophile au Roy", 1624)

Nor was the square's bloody reputation a mere literary expression. In 1610 Ravallac, Henry IV's mad assassin, was tortured, drawn, and quartered at the Grève. "Finally," runs a contemporary account,

the horses having tugged for a good hour, Ravallac gave up the ghost before having been dismembered. After the executioner had cut him into quarters, people of every class went at the four parts with swords, knives and staves. They took the pieces away from the executioner so eagerly that after hitting, cutting, and tearing the hunks of flesh they dragged them through the streets in all directions, so wild that nothing could stop them (Mercure françois, Vol. I, 457).

Then the crowds burned their shares of the battered corpse in different neighborhoods of the city.

During that same seventeenth century, the Greve saw Catherine Voisin and Léonora Galigai burned, the count of Montmorency-Bouteville, the count of Chapelles, marshal Marillac and the marquise of Brinvilliers beheaded, three rebel gentlemen of Poitou degraded by being hanged rather than beheaded, poets Durant and Siti broken and burned along with their seditious writings, the missing Joseph Palmier and Jean Antoine Jourdan (both profiteers of Agde) hanged in effigy, and dozens of other rebels, heretics, magicians, and ordinary felons executed - in the flesh or in effigy -- by one means or another. Montmorency and Bouteville lost their heads the day before the St. John's fireworks of 1627, thus providing the city with two holidays in a row. Late in the 1650s, the poet, murderer, and sometime pornographer Claude Le Petit wrote of that

. . . unhappy piece of ground
consecrated to the public gallows
where they have massacred
a hundred times more men than in war.

Claude Le Petit was unwittingly writing his own epitaph. On the 26th of August 1662, at the Place de Grève, he paid the price for lèse-majesté and écrits séditieux: right hand amputated, burned alive, ashes scattered to the winds, property confiscated.

"They" who massacred at the Grève were, in fact, the royal executioner, his family, and their employees. From 1688 to the middle of the nineteenth century -- and right through the murderous years of the Revolution -- that executioner ordinarily belonged to the family of Charles Sanson, a lieutenant from Abbeville cashiered from his regiment for his love affair with the daughter of Rouen's executioner, and thereby recruited into the separate world of the hangman. In Paris, it was usually a Sanson who set the sword, the noose, the wheel, the pillory or, eventually, the guillotine. For the most part, the Sanson did their killing at the Grève.

The eighteenth century brought its share of famous brigands, assassins, traitors, and rebels, although the quota of executions for impiety seems to have declined. The dead included Horn, Cartouche, Damiens, Lally-Tollendal, and Favras. All these executions were grand public spectacles. One time in the 1780s, Restif de la Bretonne went to the Grève to watch the breaking of three malefactors on the wheel. The spectators, he reported, "chatted and laughed as if they were attending a parade" (Restif 1930: 171). Under the Old Regime, the greater the victim, the more colorful the spectacle.

A Revolutionary Square

In 1790, however, the marquis de Favras -- convicted of conspiring to arrange the royal family's escape -- hanged like a common criminal. True, some features of the old-regime execution remained: the display of the marquis in a tumbrel, clad in a nightshirt, with a knotted rope around his neck and a sign reading CONSPIRATOR AGAINST THE STATE on his chest; the public repentance (honorable amende) to God, the Nation, the King and Justice before the doors of Notre Dame; the dictation of a long last statement in which the marquis continued to protest his innocence (Cleray 1932: 102-110). Still, Favras was one of the few nobles ever to hang at the Place de Grève. The early revolution leveled downward, hanging its noble enemies.

Later, the Revolution leveled upward, decapitating noble and commoner alike. The newly-invented guillotine took its first victim, in April 1792, at the Place de Grève. Although the major executions of the Revolution generally occurred elsewhere, public guillotining of felons continued at the Place de Grève until the Revolution of July, 1830. Then the government decided the blood of criminals should not sully a square that had played such a glorious part in the nation's recent revolutions.

During the Revolution, the customary separations among spectators, authorities and victims blurred, then shifted. The Place de Grève retained its symbolic

importance as a locus of public celebration and retribution, but popular initiative played a far larger role than before. Repeatedly, ordinary people took the law into their own hands.

The first major occasion of 1789 came during the so-called Reveillon Riots of April. After Reveillon and Henriot (manufacturers, respectively, of decorative paper and of gunpowder) had allegedly stirred up a local political assembly by making rash remarks about the desirability of holding down wages, knots of angry workers began to form in the streets of eastern Paris. The 27th of April was a Monday, a free day for most skilled workers. On that afternoon, a crowd formed on the Left Bank around a drummer and a marcher; the marcher carried a makeshift gallows bearing the cardboard images of two men. The crowd, according to the officer on guard at the Palace of Justice, were all "workers from the Faubourg St. Antoine, armed with sticks and clubs." Playing town criers, members of the procession announced a "decree of the Third Estate of the faubourg St. Antoine, which sentences Anriot and Revillon to be hanged" (B.N. [Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris] Joly de Fleury 1103).

After a certain amount of confrontation and maneuvering with the authorities, the workers arrived at the Place de Grève. "People said," reported bookseller Sebastian Hardy, "more than three thousand of them were there to set up the gallows that had marched with them so long" (B.N. Fr. 6687). There they did, as announced, hang and burn their effigies. The crowd then tramped up the rue Saint-Antoine, through the city gate, past the Bastille, into the faubourg beyond -- thus reversing the path of ceremonial entries into Paris. Unable to get through the troops who guarded Reveillon's house and shop, they went to Henriot's place. They sacked it. The next day a crowd of workers returned to the faubourg after another rendezvous at the Place de Grève. This time they managed to break through the troops; then they gutted the house and shop of Reveillon as well. In the battle some 300 persons, including a few soldiers and a great many demonstrators, died (Godechot 1965: 187).

At that point, by most definitions of revolution, the Revolution had not yet begun. Nevertheless, the popular assemblies that were to play so prominent a part in subsequent revolutionary events were already in action. One of the most important, the assembly of Paris' electors, met at the Hôtel de Ville. (Indeed, on the very day Reveillon's house was sacked, the assembly was electing him a member of its commission to draft a cahier for the Third Estate.) On the 13th of July it was at the Hôtel de Ville that the assembly responded to the crisis created by the king's firing of his minister Necker; the assembly created a Permanent Committee and declared the establishment of a citizen's militia.

From his Left Bank window, Hardy saw the hastily formed companies of milice bourgeoise marching to the Place de Grève:

A little after 7 P.M. yet another detachment of militia went up the rue Saint-Jacques. This one was composed of about 120 individuals, who were going to the Hotel de Ville three by three, and who made sure not to frighten anyone along the way, by announcing that it was the Third Estate that was going to the Hotel de Ville. One was surprised to see that a day which should have been a day of public mourning seemed to be a day of rejoicing, judging by the shouts and indecent laughter on every side, and by the shenanigans people were performing in the street, as if it were a day of Carnival (B.N. Fr. 6687).

Eighty members of the National Assembly joined the militiamen at the Hôtel de Ville, and thus gave a national meaning to the city's action. "The prévôt des marchands and other city officers," noted Hardy, "assured the electors of Paris that they would not budge from the Hôtel de Ville, so long as their presence was necessary to consultation on the means of remedying the current difficulties and securing public order" (B.N. Fr. 6687).

They had their hands full. The decision to create a militia was fateful, for a militia needed arms. Great crowds sought those arms at the Hôtel de Ville, at the

Arsenal, at the Invalides and, finally, at the Bastille. Jacques de Flesselles, the prévôt des marchands, had continued in his leadership of the city government by becoming head of the Permanent Committee. In that capacity, he distributed a few hundred muskets to the crowd in the Place de Grève and fended off their demands for more. As he temporized, a widespread belief in his treachery arose.

Flesselles paid for his new reputation the very next day. On the 14th, a crowd went to seek gunpowder stored at the Bastille, at the other end of the rue St. Antoine from the Hôtel de Ville. The powder-seekers broke into the fortress, took it over, and seized its governor, de Launey. Some of the official delegates from the Permanent Committee managed to march de Launey through taunting crowds back to the Place de Grève. But there, before de Launey's guards could get him into the building to face the Committee, members of the crowd bayoneted, sabred, and shot him. They then beheaded the corpse and displayed the severed head, as the heads of executed traitors had always been displayed. Soon after, Flesselles left the Hôtel de Ville and entered the Place de Grève. He, too, was shot and decapitated, his head paraded through the street.

The Place continued for some time to be the focus of revolutionary activity. The day after the taking of the Bastille, members of the National Assembly again symbolized the unity of the city and the nation by marching to the Hotel de Ville amid a militia escort. At the moment of their entry into the Place de Grève, the great bells of the city's churches rang out. On the 17th of July, when Louis XVI gave in to popular pressure and came to Paris from Versailles, his parade proceeded to the Hôtel de Ville. That was perhaps the king's last moment of general popularity. "They had eliminated the shouts of Long Live the King at the arrival of the monarch, reported Restif,

but at his departure from the Hôtel de Ville, the barriers of the heart broke.

All at once, every voice cried Long Live the King. The sound spread from

neighbor to neighbor throughout the city, and those who had stayed in the most distant quarters of the city repeated it. The women, the sick opened their windows and replied to people in the street: Long Live the King! (Restif 1930: 215).

Royalist enthusiasm did not last long. On the 22d, when the Parisian crowd massacred Berthier de Sauvigny (the intendant of Paris) and Foulon (his father-in-law, the king's councilor), it was in the Place de Grève that they did their deed, and that they began their dragging of the battered bodies through the city. Restif, who witnessed the botched execution of Berthier, returned home shaken and ill.

On the 5th and 6th of October, when the crowd of women set off to Versailles to fetch the royal family, they departed from the Place de Grève, and led le boulanger, la boulangère, et le petit mitron back to the Place de Grève. (By this time, the decreasingly democratic Restif was prepared to believe that those women in the crowd who were not actually armed men in disguise were mostly brothel-keepers rather than the rough but honest fishwives they claimed to be.) Throughout the second half of 1789 the Hôtel de Ville figured in almost every major revolutionary action.

No doubt 1789 marked the all-time high point of national significance for the Place de Grève. For a while the Hotel de Ville regained the centrality it had lost to the château de Versailles. As the Revolution nationalized, such public spaces as the Place de la Révolution (now the Place de la Concorde, and then as now an easy stroll -- or a quick march -- from the National Assembly) assumed greater importance. The last political executions at the Grève were the guillotining of nine emigre officers in October 1792. The Terror took its victims in other public places. The great parades of the later Revolution focused on those newly important spaces rather than on the Place de Grève (Ozouf 1971, 1976). City and square lost out to nation.

Exceptions still mattered. The Ninth of Thermidor, the great day of reaction, was exceptional -- and symbolically the more powerful -- in featuring an attack of the counter-revolutionary crowd on the Hôtel de Ville, where Robespierre and his few remaining allies had fled. Through the eighteenth century revolution, and again through the revolutions of the nineteenth century, the Place de Grève and the Hôtel de Ville were repeatedly settings for great moments in which sovereignty passed temporarily from the national government to the people of Paris and their representatives. What could be more natural for a place which was at once the seat of the city's government, the place of retribution, and the standard setting for public gatherings? The Place de Grève served for centuries as the locale par excellence of popular politics.

Of that, the authorities were perfectly aware. They concentrated their surveillance of workers' movements in the square, in the nearby streets, and in the many local wineshops that served, in effect, as working-class clubs. The prefectural surveillance report for 7 October 1830, for example, states that

For several days, the heads of the combination among the city's blacksmiths have been meeting in a wineshop at no. 6, quai de Gesvres. After agreeing on the means to their goal (the raising of salaries), they fanned out into different neighborhoods and entered every shop in their trade, seeking to turn out their comrades either by seduction or by threat. Since they were being watched, and were well aware that the authorities, who knew about their activities, were prepared to repress any disorder, they moved very cautiously (A.N. F 7 3884).

Nevertheless, the blacksmiths' leaders turned out several hundred workers, and got them to the Champ de Mars, before the National Guard and the cavalry herded the demonstrators back to the Prefecture of Police: "They did not resist; in fact, throughout the trip they continued to sing La Parisienne" (A.N. F 7 3884). The

strike, as we know it in the twentieth century, had not yet crystallized. This turnout-demonstration was then a standard way of concerting action within a trade. Movement after movement of this kind originated on the corners and in the wineshops at the Place de Grève.

Workers at the Greve

Well into the nineteenth century, the Place de Grève and the nearby Place du Châtelet were also the prime locations for the shapeup: the morning gatherings of workers seeking a day's employment on the docks, in other rough labor or, especially, in construction. By the early nineteenth century, and probably before, the authorities were regularly sending spies to mingle with the waiting workers and to report back on their concerns. Under the Restoration and the July Monarchy, the reports of the Prefect of Police included summaries of how many workers had shown up, how many had been hired, and what they had talked about. On 7 September 1831, for example, the report ran:

More than 500 workers assembled at the Place de Grève this morning. Not one was hired. They said they were going to go to the rue du Cadran [where a major labor dispute was underway]. Some said it was time to build barricades (A.N. F 1c 33).

Five days later, "About 600 workers gathered on the Place de Grève, the Place du Châtelet and the adjacent quais. At most thirty were hired. The others complained bitterly of their hard lot. Some said that since the government clearly didn't want to take care of them, the whole thing was going to turn bad" (A.N. F 1c 33, 12 September 1831).

Authorities could not dismiss such threats as idle grumbling. In July 1830, after all, crowds of workers had gathered in the square, broken into the Hôtel de Ville, overcome its defenders and called -- successfully -- for the regime's overthrow. Another provisional committee had then declared the July Revolution at the Hôtel de

Ville. Although the Place de Grève did not host another full-fledged revolution until February 1848, the insurrections and street-fighting of the 1830s and 1840s commonly involved the workers of the surrounding area, and often spilled into the Place itself.

Workers who dwelt nearby included a wide range of the city's skilled and semi-skilled. In the streets just to the east lived many craftsmen from Paris' large construction industry. The rue de la Mortellerie, which led to the back of the Hôtel de Ville, served for centuries as the headquarters of Paris' masons. Masons who worked farms in the Limousin during the winter, then tramped to construction work in Paris for the rest of the year, were prominent among them. When Martin Nadaud first walked to Paris from the Creuse in 1830, he and his father lodged with other workers from their region in a boarding house at 62 rue de la Tisseranderie. That was just behind the Hôtel de Ville, and just north of the rue de la Mortellerie.

Much of the masons' life pivoted on the Place de Grève, and much of their leisure went by in the wineshops of the neighborhood. Before the day's hiring, construction workers typically met to drink a glass together. If they were hired, they would take their wine breaks in the cabarets near the job. If they were not hired, yet still had money, they would often stay at the Place de Grève to drink and complain; it was then that the police spies picked up their choicest tidbits. If they were penniless, the Place de Grève still served as construction workers' headquarters. When Martin Nadaud returned to Paris in the spring of 1833, his friends told him the winter had been disastrous. When he went out the next morning:

That Place de Grève, the last vestige of the slave markets of Antiquity, was crowded with men who were pale and gaunt, but coped with their starvation without too much sadness. One saw them shivering with cold in their cheap smocks or threadbare jackets, stomping their feet against the cobblestones to warm themselves (Nadaud 1976: 77).

Nadaud himself was more fortunate, or more enterprising. He found work, and

returned to Paris from the Limousin year after year. Eventually, like many other seasonal migrants, he came to settle more or less permanently in the city.

As he became a skilled mason and a Parisian veteran, Nadaud became deeply involved in workers' organizations and republican politics. There, too, he resembled his fellows. During the repression of the June Days, the authorities compiled detailed dossiers on the roughly 12,000 persons charged with involvement in the rebellion. Those dossiers give a picture of the working-class activists in different sections of the city. In the quartier of the Hôtel de Ville, 272 people were arrested. A full 135 of them, including 94 masons, worked in construction. There were also 18 garment workers, 13 from retail trade, 11 from metalworking, 10 from transport and 85 from a scattering of other trades (compiled from A.N. F 7 2586). Workers from large-scale manufacturing were by that time out in more peripheral locations such as St. Denis, Belleville, and the faubourg St. Antoine. The Hôtel de Ville remained the center of a neighborhood of small-shop workers and petty tradespeople.

Nineteenth-Century Renewal

Two large changes of the 1850s shifted the center of working-class Paris away from the Place de Greve. The first was the accelerated growth of large-scale industry. That growth concentrated, as urban industrial growth usually does, in the areas of relatively cheap and open land near the edges of the city. Meanwhile, the small shops in the center stagnated or declined. Services and retail trade, on the other hand, prospered downtown. At the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville -- as the Place de Grève was finally coming to be called -- the opening of the great department store, the Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville, around 1860, epitomized both the shift of the central city away from manufacturing and the rise of big, capital-intensive organizations.

A second change was the national government's deliberate reshaping of the city's physical plant. Many called it Hausmannisation. Prefect Haussmann lived at the Hôtel de Ville, in a grand apartment at the corner of the quai and the Place de

Grève. One of his early projects for the renewal of Paris was the razing of whole blocks of nearby buildings. to expand the old Place de Grève into the vast Place de l'Hôtel de Ville we know today. There was more: a similar clearing of streets behind the Hotel de Ville to the east, alterations in the city hall itself, laying down the ostentatious rue de Rivoli -- that broad, nearly straight band which eventually led from the Place de la Concorde past the Tuileries, the Louvre, the Palais Royal, the Chatelet, and the Hôtel de Ville to the rue St. Antoine, and thereby to the Bastille. The rue de Rivoli now formed the northern boundary of the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, and linked it the more firmly to the other crossroads of Paris.

These combined changes in the Parisian economy and geography diluted the working-class character of the quartier and diminished its importance as a rallying-point for working-class activists. The Hôtel de Ville did not, however, lose its significance as the seat of Parisian government and, by extension, of popular sovereignty. Not yet, at least. In September 1870, when the left-wing crowd invaded the National Assembly from the Place de Concorde, it still made sense for Jules Favre to divert the invaders into a march on the Hôtel de Ville. There, a left-center coalition created a provisional government.

France's nominal government (or, sometimes, one of the country's two nominal governments) sat at the Hôtel de Ville for almost all of the next eight months. A whirlpool of reforms, expedients, and revolutionary experiments spun through the city, with its vortex at the Hôtel de Ville. "Revolutionaries were everywhere," wrote Louise Michel, herself one of the most prominent among them, later on. "They multiplied; we felt a tremendous life force; it seemed we were the revolution itself" (Michel 1970: I, 72). As the provisional seat of government, the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville again became a favored locale for rallies, demonstrations, delegations, and attempted coups.

The high point of activity was, to be sure, the Paris Commune. The Commune began, in effect, with the National Guard Central Committee's occupation of the Hôtel de Ville on 18 March 1871. It ended, in effect, with the evacuation and burning of the building on 24 May. In between, revolutionary activity and the defense of the city against the Germans and against the rival national government filled the old Place de Grève.

On 19 March, according to a participant in the Commune, "twenty thousand men camped in the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, their bread lashed to their guns (Lissagaray 1969: 121). On the 28th, after Thiers had declared that the misérables of the Commune could not win:

. . . two hundred thousand misérables came to the Hôtel de Ville to install their elected representatives. The battalions -- drums beating, flags topped with liberty caps, red tassels on the guns, augmented by infantrymen, artillerymen, and sailors who were faithful to Paris -- flowed from every street into the Place de Grève, like the tributaries of a mighty river. In the middle of the Hôtel de Ville, opposite the main entryway, stood a large reviewing-stand. The bust of the Republic, a red sash around her neck, gleaming with red trim, stood guard above. Huge banners on the facade and the tower mapped out their message of salvation to France. A hundred battalions presented glinting bayonets before the Hôtel de Ville. Those who could not get into the square spread out along the quais, the rue de Rivoli, and the boulevard Sebastopol. The flags grouped before the reviewing stand -- mostly red, some tricolor, all decked with red -- symbolized the presence of the people. While the battalions took their places, songs broke out, bands played the Marseillaise and the Chant du Départ, bugles sounded the charge, and the cannon of the 1792 Commune thundered on the quai (Lissagaray 1969: 151).

Later came such festivals as that of 29 April, when a great, colorful procession of

Freemasons marched gravely from the Louvre to the Hôtel de Ville in order to dramatize the previously secret society's adherence to the Commune. (After the ceremonies and speechmaking at the Place, the procession moved on to the Bastille, around the boulevards, and back to the Champs-Élysées. That later itinerary anticipated the large alteration in the geography of public ritual which was to occur after the Commune. But in this case the central encounter of citizens and authorities still took place at the Hôtel de Ville.)

The Hôtel de Ville served, finally, as the headquarters for the last vain defense of Paris against the troops of the rival government in Versailles. Versaillais artillery pounded the city, national troops fought their way into the city, and the Communards burned to cover their retreat. As Eugène Vermersch wrote from his London exile in September 1871:

Then all at once a gigantic fire, emerging
From amid the fearsome city, dwarfs
The great horror of the cannon and the mine,
Sending whole neighborhoods skyward in its bursts.
Walls shiver and fall to pieces
With the long roar of thunder.
Voices, tears, footsteps, war cries.
Leaping toward the startled stars
We see the great soul of the city that was Paris . . .
The pitiless flame is choking the Hotel de Ville!

As the Hôtel de Ville burned, the Commune turned to ashes.

From that point on, the Place de Grève/Place de l'Hôtel de Ville lost much of its old importance as a focus of Parisian and national political life. The government of Paris remained a significant force in the experience of France as a whole, but for most purposes the national state eclipsed it. The geography of ceremony and

confrontation recorded that change in the political balance. The Place de l'Hôtel de Ville became merely one of many way-stations in the city's center: a place for the prefect and council to greet visiting dignitaries, a break in a march up the rue de Rivoli, the logical location for a demonstration directed specifically at the city administration, but nothing to match the Arc de Triomphe, the Place de la Concorde, the Champs Elysées, the National Assembly, or even the grands boulevards.

The struggles of right and left in the 1930s, for example, generally bypassed the Hotel de Ville in favor of locations closer to the centers of power. The exceptions were such occasions as the municipal employees' strike of December 1936, when some four thousand demonstrators — with signs reading NOS SALAIRES and BLUM A L'ACTION — broke into the square through police barricades, and occupied the Place until their delegates reported they had gained a "favorable reception" from the authorities (Journal des Débats, 31 December 1936). In the great confrontations of workers and students with the state in May and June 1968, Paris streets filled with barricades and demonstrators as they rarely had in the previous hundred years. Yet the Hôtel de Ville saw only minor skirmishes, and the sidewash of workers' marches along the rue de Rivoli.

A new symbolic geography had taken over. When right-wing and Jewish activists staged separate protests of Brezhnev's visit to France in October 1971, a bit of action occurred at the Hôtel de Ville, but the chief clashes took place on the Champs Elysées. In 1974, when President Giscard d'Estaing sought to give the 14th of July a more popular flavor, he displaced the principal ceremonies from the Champs Elysées. But instead of choosing the Hôtel de Ville he moved the festivities to the boulevards between the Place de la Bastille and the Place de la République. When Giscard altered the itinerary again in 1978, the line of march returned to the Champs Elysées. François Mitterand's inauguration as Giscard's successor in 1981 included a brief stop at the Hôtel de Ville, but the main events took place on the Champs

Elysées and at the Pantheon. That has been the general pattern since 1958. As the relative importance of the municipal government declined, so did the prominence of the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville as a site for celebration or contention.

The Grève as Microcosm

The general significance of the Place de Grève/Hôtel de Ville in the history of French contention is evident. Another side of its experience is less obvious: The slowly-changing routine life of the square recorded major changes in the social structure of France as a whole. As we follow the ebb and flow of crowds in the Place de Grève, we detect the emergence of our own world: urban, industrial, commercial, bureaucratic, policed, oriented to rapid communication and quick consumption. Royal processions give way to popular demonstrations, weekly markets yield to department stores, carriages and sedan-chairs make way for buses and taxis, household workshops disappear with the rise of large commercial and industrial organizations.

One could not see all the major changes in France as a whole clearly from the Place de Grève. Through most of the period from the seventeenth century onward, Paris grew ever larger and ever more dominant in the affairs of the nation; a long-lived observer who stuck to the Place de Grève would have had trouble detecting that change. The commercialization of agriculture and the increase in scale of industry affected life in the Place profoundly, but only indirectly. One would have had to be very alert, there at the Grève, to catch the traces of the conquest and loss of a French overseas empire, the creation and decay of a great army, the building of a railroad network, the exodus from the countryside, the alteration of regional patterns of urban influence and prosperity. To see these changes in operation, we must travel from the Place de Grève to the edges of Paris, then out through the rest of the country.

Nevertheless, the two master processes of change in France as a whole

dominate the experience of the Place de Grève as well. Those processes are the growth of capitalism and the rising importance of the national state. The Place de Grève was already a locus of petty capitalism in the seventeenth century: small merchants and craftsmen made many of the important production decisions, and wage-workers may well have comprised a majority of the people who passed through the square on an average day. Yet in the subsequent three centuries the power of people who controlled capital multiplied, the concentration of capital increased greatly, and the proletarianization of work proceeded apace. These changes added up to the growth of a deeply capitalist economy.

From our vantage point at the Place de Grève, we also follow the rising importance of the national state. We see it in the shrinking scope of the municipal government, the nationalization of the police, the disappearance of the city's independent military force, the prefect's part in replanning the city, and a dozen other signs. French statemaking provided an example to all the world. The royal statemakers built armed forces, extended their tax power, created a big, durable national bureaucracy, acquired a near-monopoly over the making, adjudication, and enforcement of law, and formed a centralized structure that reached far into the individual life of every French person.

Ultimately, the master processes of capitalism and statemaking dominated and transformed the contention of ordinary people. From our bench at the Grève, we have not seen the great provincial rebellions of the seventeenth century, although the Fronde passed our way. We have not watched the rise and fall of the food riot, the tax rebellion, the revolt against conscription, the invasion of enclosed fields, the multiple changes of the French collective-action repertoire. Nor have we been able to detect the net shift of contention to big cities and the Paris region as power and resources have made that same journey. Having noticed the overshadowing of the Hotel de Ville by the structures of national government, we might even have reached

a mistaken conclusion in that regard. But we have seen the operation of the people's court, the emergence of the revolutionary committee, the development of the strike, the creation of the demonstration, the deployment of the mass march, and a number of other significant changes in the means of displaying and defending a shared position.

If we have watched and reasoned reflectively over our four hundred years of badauderie, we have begun to understand that the extension of capitalist property relations and the formation of a massive, centralized state incited much of that action, and altered the premises of the rest. Our prolonged leisure at the Place de Grève, then, has prepared our four-hundred-year-old eyes and legs for a more perceptive journey through the rest of a contentious country.

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