
FRENCH PEOPLE'S STRUGGLES, 1598-1984

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A Little Violence

In the aftermath of the turbulent 1960s, the United States was not the only country to express its national anxieties via a commission on the causes and prevention of violence. In April 1976 French President Giscard d'Estaing, responding to public outcry, appointed a committee to study "violence, criminality, and delinquency." The committee included such luminaries as Jacques Ellul and Jean Fourastié. Its secretary, Roger Dumoulin, was a prefect. Before the committee finished work, its chair, Alain Peyrefitte, had become Minister of Justice. It was visibly a blue-ribbon committee.

During the fifteen months of its existence, the committee held sixty-five plenary sessions and seven seminars. Testimony during the committee's hearings came from Gaston Defferre, Pierre Mauroy, Raymond Aron, Pierre Chaunu, Stanley Hoffmann, Edgar Morin, Robert Badinter, Gisèle Halimi, and many other national figures. The CGT gave political standing to the proceedings by refusing to send a witness. The committee's staff organized distinguished professional task forces and commissioned detailed reports. In short, the government was calling for serious advice on the control of violence.

The rising sense of insecurity reflected in opinion polls and in protective behavior, said the committee, resulted from the spread of individual and collective violence. It was not the first time such a crisis had seized France. "Our country," they

wrote, "is periodically subjected to antisocial surges which plunge its people into anxiety, and even into anguish" (Peyrefitte et al. 1977: 43). Previous authorities had met those crises with repression and dissuasion; now, they suggested, was the time to worry about **prevention** of violence. To that end, they made a number of recommendations: building more integrated cities, reducing abuses of public power, moving capital to sites of underemployment, and so on. Their recommendations exuded cautious liberal good sense.

Peyrefitte's blue-ribbon committee made the classic distinction between violence and legitimate force. Among all uses of force, they tried to single out illegitimate abuses; those abuses qualified as genuine violence. The bulk of their effort dealt with individual violence, especially those that already qualified as crimes. The committee excluded war, political terrorism, and violent sports from their purview. Yet they identified part of the problem as collective and semi-legal. "In addition to criminal violence," ran the committee's general statement,

we have ordinary violence, as if life itself were becoming violent. A new aggressiveness marks personal and social relations. Attacks are multiplying. Insult, physical threats, taking captives, and bombing are joining the arsenal of conflict. Breaking and sacking, often petty and gratuitous, are becoming ways of expressing oneself

(Peyrefitte et al. 1977: 32).

In the world of work, they mentioned taking captives, sitdown strikes, and sabotage. "In other sectors of public life," the committee continued,

violence is establishing itself as normal operating procedure. To be sure, violent group reactions are nothing new. But they have recently become almost habitual means of "social dialogue." Occupational groups no longer hesitate to support their chief demands by violence (road barricades, blockage of ports, sacking of administrative offices, harassment of public employees . . .); the committee notes regretfully that in such cases violence often pays. Relations between offices and their clients sometimes take a violent turn. People challenge a department via its agents. These are intermittent events, but the more spectacular because ordinarily peaceful citizens take part. For others, violence is a means of attracting attention, in order to publicize cultural, moral, or religious demands; all this is evidence that violence threatens to become a normal form of social relations (Peyrefitte et al. 88-89).

Peyrefitte's committee could have gained from sharper definition of their subject matter. Sometimes they were analyzing collective action: the array of means people employ to act together on shared interests. Sometimes they were discussing the narrower band of collective action we can call **contention**: common action that bears

directly on the interests of some other acting group. Sometimes they were singling out the even narrower strip of **collective violence**: that sort of contention in which someone seizes or damages persons or objects.

The government's advisory committee did not argue that all contention was violent, or was becoming violent. They assumed that some forms of contention, such as electoral campaigns or the support of controversial programs by means of associations and orderly public meetings, deserved encouragement. Nevertheless, they fell into three quite debatable assumptions: 1) that violence is a coherent phenomenon with many interdependent variants, 2) that the use of one kind of violence tends to encourage the use of another, 3) that in the France of 1968 and beyond, violence was beginning to pervade public contention.

The history of French contention makes it tempting to identify popular collective action with violence. In looking back over four centuries of French domestic conflict, we tend to recall violent moments: the seventeenth century's great civil wars, the Parisian journées of 1789, the uprisings of 1830, 1848, and 1871, the stifled right-wing demonstration of 6 February 1934. In 1622, when Louis XIII's judges had the severed head of rebel leader Jean de Lescun displayed at Royan's gate, its sightless eyes facing la Rochelle, they deliberately called attention to the violent side of collective action. The same is true of the workers who, on 23 February 1848, loaded wagons with the corpses of comrades

massacred by soldiers of the Fourteenth Line Regiment, and wheeled their grisly advertisement through the city's streets for three hours. Both powerholders and rebels sometimes made death and vengeance seem central to the action.

Likewise, the sheer number of fatalities in contention occasionally approaches the level of disaster. The 950 people killed in the Three Glorious Days of 1830, the 1,400 or more who died in the June Days of 1848, and the likely 20,000 Communards of 1871 who perished stain popular contention with blood. Those numbers terrify.

To Die, Contending or Otherwise

Before linking contention and violence closely, however, we should consider three lessons of the long experience we have just surveyed. **First**, the vast majority of events involved no significant violence at all. If by "violence" we mean actual damage to persons or objects, then the usual seventeenth-century assembly to seek redress, the normal eighteenth-century charivari, the standard nineteenth-century strike, and the everyday twentieth-century demonstration all tended to pass with no more than occasional pushing and shoving. Over time, furthermore, French people have moved toward forms of collective action having less likelihood of generating violence. The expulsion of a tax collector or the invasion of an enclosed field starts closer to destruction than does a public meeting or a demonstration.

Second, professional soldiers and police did the great bulk

of the killing. The ratios of military to civilian deaths -- for example, the 163 military and 788 civilians reported killed during the successful Parisian rebellion of 27-29 July 1830 -- suggest as much. When insurgents failed, they usually suffered even higher proportions of the deaths. The actions of ordinary people were less violent than the casualties make it seem.

Third, even in violent contention the scale of violence remains, with few exceptions, relatively small. V. Ts. Uralnis estimates the French troops killed and wounded during seventeenth-century wars at more than 500 thousand (Uralnis 1960: 44). For the eighteenth century, his estimate is 1.4 million casualties, for the Napoleonic wars 226 thousand (Uralnis 1960: 63, 91). During the years from 1816 to 1980, Small and Singer count all interstate wars producing 1,000 battle deaths or more. By their counts, France led the entire world in number of wars fought (22) and proportion of time (3.71 months per year) at war during that period. Only Germany and Russia had more battle deaths; Small and Singer estimate France's battle deaths from 1816 to 1980 at 1,965,120, about 12 thousand battle deaths per year (Small and Singer 1982: 168).

These numbers dwarf the likely figures for casualties in France's internal struggles. The Small-Singer tabulation for civil wars involving 1,000 or more deaths (military and civilian alike) includes France's combats of 1830, 1848, and 1871. In that tabulation, France appears with 24,700 battle deaths (Small and

Singer 1982: 276). According to those figures, from 1816 to 1980 **eighty times** as many French people died in international wars as in major civil wars.

Why concentrate on deaths? We have good practical reasons for doing so. So long as a rough correlation exists between the number of deaths and the extent of other destruction, deaths provide one of the more reliable indicators of violence's general extent. Deaths are less ambiguous than injuries or property damage. They are also more likely to be reported with care.

Outside of rebellions and other forms of popular contention, violent deaths occur in the guise of war, legal execution, homicide, suicide, and accident. Assignments of deaths to one category or another always leave room for argument, but rough estimates exist for each of these categories back into the nineteenth century (Chesnais 1976, passim).

In 1830, for example, about 1,000 French people died in popular contention -- 950 of them in the Parisian uprising of 27-29 July. That year France was officially at peace; only the 400-odd troops killed in the conquest of Algeria weigh in the category of war. We lack homicide figures for 1830. But the official statistics include 1,756 deaths through suicide that year, and 4,478 from accidents. Popular contention -- including the killing of civilians by troops -- accounted for no more than one violent death in eight.

In 1848, when popular contention brought approximately 1,900

deaths (1,400 or so in the June Days alone), France was again officially at peace, and her recently victorious troops suffered negligible losses in Algeria. That year, by government report, 3,301 French people killed themselves. Another 8,218 died in accidents. Indeed, the 3,554 drownings in that total amounted to almost twice as many deaths as those caused by the conflicts of the revolution.

Reverse the picture; take a year with a war, but no revolution. During 1854 to 1856, France was very much at war in the Crimea. Just over 10,000 French troops died violent deaths in those three years. Another 85,000 died of cholera, typhus, lingering wounds, or some combination of the three. Meanwhile, the national statistics for the three years reported 11,700 suicides and 28,500 accidental deaths. During the Crimean War, under Napoleon III's tight control, metropolitan France saw little popular contention of any kind. Not one person died in a collective confrontation.

1871? More than 21,000 deaths -- probably France's all-time high -- in popular contention. Almost all of them occurred in the bloody liquidation of the Paris Commune. But in 1871 France also lost about 77,000 of its citizens to the Franco-Prussian war, not to mention about 4,000 suicides and 14,000 accidental deaths. Even the crushing of the Paris Commune did not bring the share of civil contention up to a fifth of all France's violent deaths.

Despite the rapidly increasing pace of strikes and

demonstrations, the twentieth century brought a decisive decline in fatalities from civil conflict. Yet war killed more than ever before. Some 1.3 million French people died in World War I and 600 thousand in World War II. The French lost about 26,000 troops and police in the postwar liberation struggles of Indochina and Algeria, plus thousands more in deaths outside of combat. As the automobile gained ground in France, road deaths alone rose from around 2,500 per year at the start of the century to their toll of around 15,000 per year in the 1970s. In short, thousands of French people died violent deaths during every twentieth-century year. In those same years, it was rare for anyone at all to die in popular contention.

Perhaps a significant share of the extraordinary 6,455 homicides in the Liberation year 1944 (compared with a "normal" level of 336 per year from 1946 to 1950) should count as outcomes of popular contention. If so, 1944 probably qualifies not only as France's all-time record year for homicide, but also as the twentieth century's most lethal year for contention among French people.

Similarly, the 1,009 homicides in 1961 -- second highest total between 1930 and 1972 -- surely include some settling of accounts concerning the French withdrawal from Algeria. 1961 was also a turbulent year for collective contention, with widespread farmers' movements, numerous demonstrations concerning North Africa, large brawls at rock concerts, and strikes including

occupations of mines. Yet during the year only 7 or 8 people died in collective confrontations. At the same time, official statistics reported 7,300 suicides, 11,000 traffic deaths, and 18,000 other people killed in accidents of various sorts.

During the vast mobilization of May-June 1968, at most a dozen deaths resulted directly from the thousands of strikes, demonstrations, and occupations. By adopting a fairly broad definition of "direct victim", Delale and Ragache manage to get these twelve people onto their death register (Delale & Ragache 1978: 230):

24 May 1968, Paris: A grenade hit Philippe Matherion, a housing manager, at a barricade in the rue des Ecoles.

24 May, Lyon: A truck pushed by demonstrators struck Rene Lacroix, a police officer.

30 May, Mont Pincon (Calvados): A gendarme fired a shell which struck Rene Trzepalkowski, a worker.

7 June, Grenoble: Someone shot Mathieu Mathei, a barkeeper, in the back; this may have been an underworld execution.

10 June, Flins: Gilles Tautin, a lycée student, drowned escaping a charge by riot police.

11 June, Sochaux-Montbeliard: Riot police shot Pierre Beylot, an automobile worker. The same day, Henri Blanchet, another automobile worker, fell to his death from a ledge during a grenade attack.

22 June, Martinique: An unnamed person died in an electoral brawl.

28 June, Vernon (Eure): A deserter from the Foreign Legion assassinated Jean-Claude Lemire, a delivery truck driver who had been a leading Katangais, or right-wing thug, at the Sorbonne in May.

30 June, Arras: Right-wing commandos killed Marc Lanvin, warehouse worker and Communist, as he posted election bills.

1 July, Guadeloupe: Molotov cocktails burned Gaetan Popotte and Remy Lollia as they were returning from an electoral rally.

A slightly tighter definition would reduce the roster to five or six of these deaths. In either case, the number is tiny by comparison with 9 million strikers and even more demonstrators who made the events of May and June 1968. The significance of these events clearly does not lie in the sheer quantity of violence they entailed.

How Contention Matters

Yet they matter. Somehow they matter more than the accidents that cost so many lives. They matter because French people -- of all political persuasions and powers -- themselves scanned contentious events for political messages. The deaths themselves were incidental. But people interpreted the readiness of participants to commit themselves and risk harm as signs concerning the probability of new struggles for power, or new outcomes to old struggles for power. Open contention produced information about the intentions and capacities of all claimants to power -- governmental authorities, opponents and rivals of the government, contenders for some particular interest, groups of ordinary people seeking just enough space to live their lives peacefully.

In any particular confrontation, existing powerholders tended to retain their power; existing inequalities and injustices were likely to stay in place. Yet in a significant minority of trials,

ordinary people made gains or avoided losses: the harassed tax collector actually left town for a while, the seizure of grain produced a modest increase in the local food supply, the sitdown strike exacted concessions from management.

For us, too, they matter. The record of popular contention provides us with one of our surer guides to the experiences of ordinary people who faced great changes. Did French people react to the massive proletarianization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Consult the poor cultivators of Languedoc who, in the waning eighteenth century, fought the private appropriation of forests and common fields. Ask the Parisian artisans and skilled workers of 1848 who demanded the "organization of work" to maintain a semblance of workers' autonomy and control.

Did the enormous growth of the French state make much difference to the lives of ordinary people? Consider the 5,000 citizens of the privileged Boulonnais who rose against the king's illegal "regularization" of their taxes in 1662. Reflect on the rebellion of some 100,000 people in Anjou and nearby regions against the revolutionary state during 1793. In the absence of surveys and elections, ordinary people speak their collective minds in contention. Even in the era of surveys and elections, popular contention sends political messages other channels do not carry.

Let us not exaggerate. Among people outside the great centers of power, not everyone has equal access to the microphone. When we look closely at "popular" contention, we repeatedly find

local leaders, agitators, animators, organizers. In general, with equal interests at stake, skilled workers are generally better prepared to act than unskilled workers, propertied farmers better positioned to pool their efforts than their migrant workers. Because collective action rests on organization and often costs plenty, furthermore, many people bear injustices, deprivations, and broken dreams with resignation or silent anger. The record of French popular contention brings us closer to the continuous experience of ordinary people than do the pronouncements of politicians and philosophers. Still it underrepresents the experience of those who mobilize least easily -- who are very likely those who suffer most. Within these limits, over the very long run the story of French popular contention broadcasts how much the growth of the state and the development of capitalism occurred at the expense of ordinary people.

What Happened in History?

Neither reactions to capitalism nor responses to the state remained constant, however. Although twentieth-century winegrowers demanded action and twentieth-century shopkeepers organized against taxes, during the twentieth century no events remotely resembling the Boulonnais' Lustucru rebellion of 1662 or Languedoc's eighteenth-century invasions of enclosed commons have occurred. If we look back from 1984 to 1598, we see a seventeenth century filled with struggles of Protestants and regional powerholders to maintain their autonomy in the face of an

aggressively expanding crown, battles of local people to resist the rising demands for resources of a warmaking state, and that interlocked network of conflicts we call the Fronde.

Later, we observe an eighteenth century replete with contests for control of food, of land, of labor. There, we find capitalists, who figured in seventeenth-century struggles largely as fiscal agents for the state, playing an independent part as accumulators of land and capital; at the century's close, we also discover a series of fights for control of the state that temporarily alter the whole tempo and timbre of popular collective action and permanently change the relative power of major social classes with respect to the state as well as the state's own penetration into everyday life.

Continuing, we witness a nineteenth century in which the divisions between labor and increasingly concentrated capital, as well as between those groups enjoying the state's protection and those the state held in check, became fundamental to a wide range of contention. In the course of that century, we follow a series of challenges to the national structure of power from shifting coalitions of bourgeois and organized workers. The challenges ended in the partial incorporation of organized workers into the national structure of power, and in the near-elimination of the Catholic Church from that structure of power.

We, the observers, live a twentieth century in which the involvement of national, politically active associations in the

pursuit of shared interests -- already visible in the nineteenth century -- has become overwhelming. Amid the incessant activity of organized workers and organized capitalists, beside the increasing tendency of people to organize their demands in national strike waves and social movements, we notice the widening activity of students, intellectuals, government employees, independent farmers, shopkeepers, and service workers. If the changing organization of capital and the expanding power of the state set the main terms of popular contention throughout the four centuries, the move from one century to the next certainly did not bring more of the same.

Bins labeled "seventeenth century," or "twentieth century," however, do not contain these many changes neatly. Considering the forms and actors in popular collective action, we can make out major accelerations of change around the Fronde and the Revolution of 1848, as well as secondary accelerations at the eighteenth-century Revolution and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Around the time of the Fronde, the regional powerholders who had long been crucial to popular collective action began to withdraw from popular alliances and to accept subordination (at a handsome price) to the crown; in the process, local assemblies lost importance as vehicles for popular collective action, mutinies of various sorts lost much of their efficacy, and urban or regional rebellions faded rapidly.

If we needed a single date to mark that transition, 1661

would serve even better than 1648; in 1661 the great statemaking duo of Colbert and Louis XIV took on the task of making the French state unchallenged in its own domain, and feared throughout the world. As Colbert's successors, in collaboration with great merchants and capitalist farmers, pressed to give national market and mobile capital priority over local claims to commodities, land, and labor, seizures of grain and related forms of resistance to the dominance of capital multiplied.

With the Revolution of 1789 and beyond, two contradictory changes occurred. On the one hand, the massive popular mobilization against the claims of capitalists and the state from 1787 to about 1793 churned out a remarkable set of innovations in popular collective action: committees, militias, assemblies, clubs, participatory festivals, parades, ceremonies, invasions of legislatures, symbolic destruction, people's courts; in one way or another, they acted out the idea of popular sovereignty.

On the other hand, the relatively small number of organized bourgeois who actually seized control of the state apparatus soon acted to contain and channel popular collective action; in so doing they first extended state structure into direct rule at the level of the individual community and then built a centralized apparatus of surveillance and control. The new state structure would have been the envy of any so-called Absolutist ruler. The state's reshaping checked the wave of collective-action innovation, and returned France to the forms of struggle that had

prevailed before the Revolution.

Around the Revolution of 1848 and Louis Napoleon's seizure of power in 1851, nevertheless, our four centuries' largest transformations of the forms and personnel of popular collective action worked themselves out. As capital imploded and state centralization speeded up, contention itself shifted toward national arenas. Local forms of resistance to capitalist claims such as the grain seizure and the collective invasion of posted forests virtually disappeared. Local mocking routines such as charivari and the tendentious Mardi Gras pageant lost their raison d'être. Popular judicial proceedings, destruction of toll gates, forced illuminations, attacks on machines, pulling down and sacking of private houses, and intervillage battles rapidly became antique. More slowly, but just as definitively, the community-wide turnout gave way to the firm-by-firm strike. Electoral campaigns, strikes, planned insurrections, demonstrations, and public meetings quickly came to dominate popular collective action.

Lesser transformations swung on the hinge of 1905-1907. With the displacement of the state church, the partial establishment of labor as an organized political force at a national scale, the national strike wave of 1906 and the southern winegrowers' mobilization of 1907, changes that had already emerged part way in the nineteenth-century transition appeared in full light: the great place of parties, unions, and other national associations in

the organization of popular collective action; the increasing prominence of wage-workers in large organizations as participants in contention; the deliberate creation of social movements spanning large regions or the country as a whole; the development of countrywide strike waves strongly involving agents of the state.

Has another transition come upon us? Three kinds of evidence might make us think so: 1) the heightened importance in recent decades of plant occupations, hostage-taking, urban guerrilla, hijacking, road blockades, crop-dumpings, takeovers of public buildings, collective squatting, mass picketing and other deliberate occupations of spaces and the people in them; 2) the extraordinary innovations -- internal assemblies, strike committees, graffiti etc. -- of May-June 1968; 3) the greatly increased use of mass media by all parties to popular collective action.

Especially since 1968, French observers have often claimed that new, post-industrial, or style-of-life forms have taken over. Alain Touraine, for example, declares that:

fresh upsurges are being felt, new thrusts forward, which have not yet been defined or which refuse to be defined by social relations: these include the rejection of an industrial society grown overwhelmingly crushing, the return to the lost great times of stability, the anguish of crisis and the fear of catastrophe, freedom movements of all kinds

for the assertion of identity but without clear definition of their opponents, and liberal or libertarian critiques of the state (Touraine 1981: 1).

Within the realm of industrial conflict, Pierre Dubois distinguishes between two types of radicalism -- explosive direct attacks on management, and planned assertions of workers' rights. The 1970s revival of explosive radicalism, he suggests, was temporary, while planned radicalism "is an entirely novel form that has some chances of being pursued" (Dubois 1978: 11). Worker takeovers of plants, such as the famous opposition to the closing of the Lip factory, and the deliberate, coordinated disorganization of production, serve as examples.

Looked at closely, however, almost all of the cases in point involve forms of action that already have their own histories. The novelty consists of different groups or different demands. Within industrial conflict, for example, the strike continues to dominate workers' collective action, but white-collar and high-technology workers become more involved, and some groups of workers demand a say in decisions concerning production and investment. Again, demands for regional autonomy, sexual rights, or freedom to pursue a distinctive style of life have become more prominent since World War II, yet the proponents of those demands have typically presented them by means of demonstrations, marches, and similar routines that were already prominent in the later nineteenth century.

Repertoires of Collective Action

The great change, then, occurred in the nineteenth century. It is convenient to call what happened a change in repertoire. Remember the meaning of the term. Any population has a limited **repertoire** of collective action: alternative means of acting together on shared interests. In our time, for example, most people know how to participate in an electoral campaign, join or form a special-interest association, organize a letter-writing drive, demonstrate, strike, hold a meeting, build an influence network, and so on.

These varieties of action constitute a **repertoire** in something like the theatrical or musical sense of the word -- but the repertoire in question resembles that of commedia dell'arte or jazz more than that of a strictly classical ensemble. People know the general rules of performance more or less well, and vary the performance to meet the purpose at hand. Every performance involves at least two parties -- an initiator and an object of the action. Third parties often get involved; even when they are not the object of collective action, for example, agents of the state spend a good deal of their time monitoring, regulating, facilitating, and repressing different sorts of collective action.

The existing repertoire constrains collective action; far from the image we sometimes hold of mindless crowds, people tend to act within known limits, to innovate at the margins of existing forms, and to miss many opportunities available to them in

principle. That constraint results in part from the advantages of familiarity, partly from the investment of second and third parties in the established forms of collective action. Although it may seem otherwise, even government officials and industrial managers of our own time generally behave as though they preferred demonstrations and strikes to utterly unconventional forms of collective action.

Our fullest accounts of French collective action dwell on its more discontinuous and public forms: striking, demonstrating, occupying, and so on rather than building influence networks or operating special-interest organizations. Although changes in continuous and private forms of collective action have also been profound, they are harder to document than are relatively discontinuous public forms.

The main reasons for that difference in documentation are simple and important: First, in most of the discontinuous and public forms of action the **point** is to make a statement of some kind. Deliberate public statements tend to leave behind more documentation than other varieties of collective action. Second, authorities generally monitor and seek to control discontinuous and public forms because of their implicit claims on the existing structure of power. Hence surveillance reports, instructions to spies and police, memoranda to interior ministers and the like fill the archives of former authorities.

What do those archives tell us? Some time in the nineteenth

century, the people of France shed the collective-action repertoire they had been using for two centuries or so, and adopted the repertoire they still use today. France's people did not complete a definitive shift to the new repertoire until the 1850s.

What was the difference? Broadly speaking, the repertoire of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries held to a parochial scope: It addressed local actors or the local representatives of national actors. It also relied heavily on patronage -- appealing to immediately available powerholders to convey grievances or settle disputes, temporarily acting in the place of unworthy or inactive powerholders only to abandon power once the action was done. For all their labeling as "riots" and "disorders", seizures of grain, invasions of fields, machine-breaking and similar actions had a common logic and an internal order. Figure 1 summarizes the characteristics of the older repertoire.

The repertoire that crystallized in the nineteenth century and prevails today is, in general, more national in scope: Although available for local issues and enemies, it lends itself easily to coordination among many localities. As compared with the older repertoire, its actions are relatively autonomous: Instead of staying in the shadow of existing powerholders and adapting routines sanctioned by those powerholders, users of the new repertoire tend to initiate their own statements of grievances and demands. Strikes, demonstrations, electoral rallies and

**FIGURE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REPERTOIRE OF
POPULAR COLLECTIVE ACTION IN FRANCE, ROUGHLY 1650-1850**

1. people's frequent employment of the authorities' normal means of action, either as caricature or as a deliberate, if temporary, assumption of the authorities' prerogatives in the name of the local community
2. common appearance of participants as members or representatives of constituted corporate groups and communities rather than of special interests
3. a tendency to appeal to power patrons for redress of wrongs and, especially, for representation vis a vis outside authorities
4. extensive use of authorized public celebrations and assemblies for the presentation of grievances and demands
5. repeated adoption of rich, irreverent symbolism in the form of effigies, dumb show, and ritual objects to state grievances and demands
6. convergence on the residences of wrongdoers and the sites of wrongdoing, as opposed to seats and symbols of public power

EXAMPLES:

seizures of grain = "food riots"

collective invasions of forbidden fields, forests, and streams

destruction of toll gates and other barriers

attacks on machines

charivari, serenade

expulsions of tax officials, foreign workers, and other outsiders

tendentious holiday parades

intervillage battles

pulling down and sacking of private houses

forced illumination

acting out of popular judicial proceedings

turnout

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS: PAROCHIAL AND PATRONIZED

similar actions build, in general, on much more deliberately-constructed organization than used to be the case. Figure 2 characterizes the contemporary repertoire.

The social movement, as we know it, came into being with the new repertoire. The social movement consists of a series of challenges to established authorities, especially national authorities, in the name of an unrepresented constituency. Its concrete actions combine various elements of the newer repertoire: public meetings, demonstrations, marches, strikes, and so on; they couple with an attempt by leaders to link the actions organizationally and symbolically, as well as to bargain with established authorities on behalf of their claimed constituency. Although it does not have the official standing of an electoral campaign or a petition drive, the deliberately-organized social movement occupies a recognized place in France's contemporary array of means for acting collectively. The vast, linked demonstrations of Languedoc's winegrowers in 1907 and the coordinated road-blocking and potato-dumping of Brittany's farmers in 1961 illustrate vividly the operation of social movements.

Those who claim to speak for the same social movements often divide and compete. They vary enormously in their actual relationship to the constituencies they boast. In the 1950s and 1960s, such closely-linked organizers such as Henri Dorgères and Pierre Poujade never could adjudicate who spoke for whom. Yet on public occasions, they often managed to put up a common front.

**FIGURE 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REPERTOIRE OF
POPULAR COLLECTIVE ACTION IN FRANCE, ROUGHLY 1850-1980**

1. the employment of relatively autonomous means of action, of a kind rarely or never employed by authorities
2. frequent appearance of special interests and named associations or pseudo-associations (e.g. Coalition for Justice, People United Against _____)
3. direct challenges to rivals or authorities, especially national authorities and their representatives, rather than appeals to patrons
4. deliberate organization of assemblies for the articulation of claims
5. display of programs, slogans, signs of common membership
6. preference for action in visible public places

EXAMPLES:

strikes

demonstrations

electoral rallies

public meetings

petition marches

planned insurrections

invasions of official assemblies

social movements

electoral campaigns

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS: NATIONAL AND AUTONOMOUS

Social movements focus, precisely, on manufacturing the appearance of unified, simultaneous challenge by means of disparate, shifting coalitions.

This complex of action was virtually unknown in western countries until the nineteenth century. Before then, although rebellions great and small occurred repeatedly, practically no one tried to combine seizures of grain, field invasions, turnouts, and the like into visibly sustained challenges to established authorities. Then the social movement became commonplace. On balance, its action was national in scope and autonomous with respect to powerholders.

The dichotomies parochial/national and patronage/autonomy simplify radically in two different ways. First, each cuts a genuine continuum into just a pair of categories. In fact, real strikes, demonstrations, and the like are more or less national and autonomous, not clearly one or the other. Second, the transition to more national and autonomous forms of action did not occur instantly and simultaneously. It was the net effect of many moves and counter-moves, occurring at different times for different places and types of collective action.

Turnouts, for example, were the routines by which workers in a given craft who had a grievance against the employers of their locality went from shop to shop within the locality, calling out the workers to join them in a march through the town, ended the circuit with a meeting at the edge of town, voted to make a

certain set of demands, sent a delegation to the employers, declared a work stoppage, and enforced it as best they could throughout the town until they reached an agreement with the employers. The turnout was relatively local in scope. It put pressure on nearby patrons -- both the employers and the local authorities.

The firm-by-firm strike, as we know it, covers a whole town, a whole industry, or even a whole country in exceptional circumstances. Yet the main action generally occurs within and just outside a single workplace. Larger French strikes, it is true, often incorporate a routine reminiscent of the turnout: a parade through all shops, sweeping up (if possible) workers who have remained at their posts. Yet that action aims at a single employer, not at the owners of the trade as a whole. Strikes also allow workers to state their grievances and hopes independently of conversations with their immediate employers; by striking, they can send messages to the government or to the citizenry at large.

On the average, although only on the average, routines in the newer repertoire such as strikes, demonstrations, and public meetings involve less dependence on existing powerholders and greater scope than routines such as turnouts, field invasions, and seizures of grain. That is the point of calling the "new" repertoire relatively **autonomous** and **national**. Figure 3 lays out the contrast and transition between the old and new repertoires.

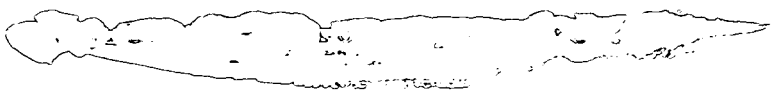
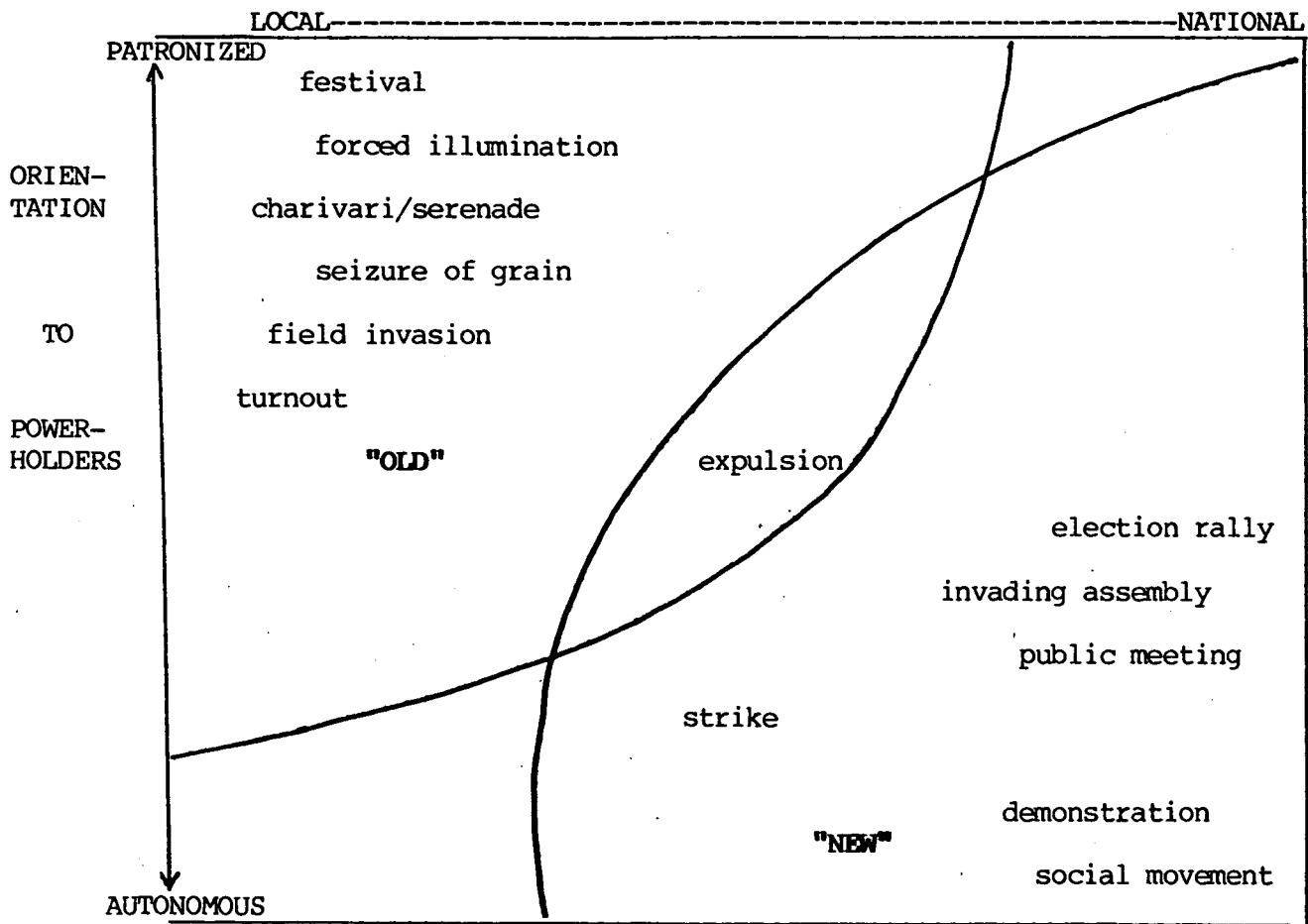


FIGURE 3: "OLD" AND "NEW" REPERTOIRES IN FRANCE

SCOPE OF ACTION



Why the prevailing repertoire of popular collective action underwent the change from relatively parochial and patronized to relatively national and autonomous is simple to state in principle and complex to show in practice. In principle, the shift occurred because the interests and organization of ordinary people shifted away from local affairs and powerful patrons to national affairs and major concentrations of power and capital. As capitalism advanced, as national states became more powerful and centralized, local affairs and nearby patrons mattered less to the fates of ordinary people. Increasingly, holders of large capital and national power made the decisions that affected them. As a result, seizures of grain, collective invasions of fields and the like became ineffective, irrelevant, obsolete. In response to the shifts of power and capital, ordinary people invented and adopted new forms of action, creating the electoral campaign, the public meeting, the social movement, and the other elements of the newer repertoire.

Although the shift in repertoires followed the logic of change in power and capital, each form and each actor had a particular history. The firm-by-firm strike took on its recognizable characteristics in concrete labor-management struggles as capital concentrated in locality after locality. Because the particular histories are quite different, the common processes creating the demonstration and the strike only appear in perspective, at a distance. Nevertheless, in case after case it

is clear that the common processes involved concentration -- concentration of capital, concentration of political power. That concentration altered the possibilities and forms of popular collective action. From the perspectives of individual actors, it altered their internal **organization** and their **opportunity** to act collectively.

Statemaking and capitalism did not merely shape organization and opportunity. They also dominated the fluctuating **interests** of different groups in collective action. The French state grew immensely in bulk and complexity; it grew in spurts such as the Revolution and the Empire, but it almost never stopped growing. Nor did it ever stop extending its power to coerce and extract. Great state-builders such as Richelieu, Napoleon and de Gaulle left no heritage more obvious than the state's enlarged capacity to enter the lives of its citizens.

The process of statemaking affecting French people's interests, and therefore stimulated popular collective action when organization and opportunity permitted, in three ways: 1) by making direct claims on valued resources, as when the revolutionary state seized church properties in 1791 and thereafter; 2) by competing with rival governments and quasi-governments, as when Richelieu, Mazarin, and Colbert squeezed out the liberties of cities and towns in the king's name; 3) by fostering competition among contenders for its favors, resources, and protections, as when employers and workers

simultaneously sought to bend the Popular Front government of 1936. Since the rhythm of these processes was uneven -- those who controlled the state were, after all, also responding to fluctuations in their own organization, opportunity, and interest -- popular contention in response to statemaking rose and fell like the waves in a narrow, wind-stirred channel.

The process that eventually produced today's state-mediated capitalism in France passed through many stages. Its master trends ran toward the concentration of capital, toward the proletarianization of the labor force, and therefore toward a sharpening polarization between capital and labor. The resulting conflicts of interest generated popular collective action in three different ways. **First**, there was the sharpening division of interest between capital and labor itself, as when nineteenth-century textile manufacturers cut wages to meet foreign competition, and workers fought to maintain their incomes. **Second**, there was the competition between capitalists and other claimants on commodities and on factors of production, as in the stimulation of grain seizures by merchants' attempts to ship grain to distant and profitable markets, or to withhold grain from local markets until the price was advantageous. **Third**, there was competition among participants in the same factor markets, as in the attacks of organized local workers on outsiders brought in to cut wages or break strikes.

Such conflicts of interest endure over long periods, but do

not produce continuous streams of open contention; contention comes in fits and starts. That is partly because organization and opportunity fluctuate as the parties to conflicts of interest lead their regular lives. It is partly because the parties constantly make strategic adjustments to each other's moves. It is partly because third parties -- for example, the state in management-labor conflicts -- likewise make moves that affect the organization and opportunity of the parties. It is also because **change** in the behavior of one of the parties has an exceptional power to attract response from another party. Although seventeenth-century French people avoided taxes whenever they could do so safely, they were especially inclined to band together for resistance when the monarchy or its tax farmers imposed a **new** illegal tax that would require yet another round of sacrifices and improvisations.

To resort again to a great simplification, the four centuries we have been examining break into two very broad phases of struggle. In the first, we find capitalist property being created as statemakers struggled to extract resources -- especially resources for warmaking -- and to quell their rivals. In that phase, the dominant issues of popular collective action were expropriation, imposition of state control, laying down of capitalisst control, and resistance to all of them.

In the second phase, within the framework of capitalist property and a strong state, we find major themes of popular

contention to be struggles between labor and capital, competition within markets, and collective efforts to control the state and its resources. Speaking very generally, the "old" repertoire belongs to the first phase, the contemporary repertoire to the second.

Five Regions Tell Their Stories

The Ile de France, Languedoc, Anjou, Flanders, and Burgundy all lived the growth of the French state and the development of world capitalism. All five regions underwent the great transformation of popular collective-action repertoires during the nineteenth century. All of them, in their ways, survived Louis XIII's military expansion, the Fronde, the struggles of Catholics with Protestants, the revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848, the formation of nation-wide strike movements, the Popular Front, the Occupation and Liberation, the days of May-June 1968. Yet the history of each region provides a different experiment in the interconnection of capitalism, statemaking, and popular contention.

In the Ile de France we witness the enormous work of concentration most directly. Throughout the four centuries after 1598, Paris remained the chief prize of French political struggle; unless rooted out quickly, those who mastered Paris controlled France. From the seventeenth century onward, the concentration of capital and of coercive power only increased the stakes.

Most of the struggle for possession of the capital pitted one

group of national powerholders against another. Nevertheless, from time to time a coalition of relatively powerless people with dissidents from the national power structure managed to seize the city, even to topple those who controlled the state. During the Fronde, the journees of 1789, the Three Glorious Days of July 1830, the February Revolution of 1848, the Revolution of 1870, the Commune of 1871 and (to a lesser extent) the general strike of May-June 1936 or the mass occupations of May-June 1968, national power balanced on popular collective action in Paris and the Ile de France.

We see changes: the Fronde was the last occasion on which a coalition of regional lords seriously threatened to wrest control of the national state away from its current holders. The threat of the Parlements in 1787 or 1788 pales by comparison. If the Parisian movement had been entirely independent and successful on one occasion or another, France might have had a government of great lords in 1653, of magistrates, merchants, master artisans and shopkeepers in 1788, of bourgeois, shopkeepers, and masters in 1793, of artisans, skilled large-shop workers, intellectuals, and professionals in 1848 or 1871, of organized large-shop workers, intellectuals, and professionals in 1936, of a similar set plus students and government employees in 1968.

Although from the eighteenth century onward Parisian workers mobilized with exceptional effectiveness, the contention of eighteenth-century shopworkers, with its reliance on

semi-clandestine craft guilds, wineshop gatherings, ceremonies, blacklists, and turnouts, bears little resemblance to twentieth-century negotiating among competing unions, government officials, political party executives, and half-organized factory workers having their own grievances and conditions for action. The main common properties are that in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries alike proximity to national powerholders and the ability, on occasion, to shut down the capital gave workers of Paris and vicinity leverage they shared with no one else. In the twentieth century, social-movement organizers from elsewhere in France recognized that primacy regularly: to cap their challenges, they brought demonstrators and symbols of distress from provincial capitals to Paris itself.

Languedoc certainly shared in national struggles for power: Louis XIII's steely insistence on the beheading of the rebel Duc de Montmorency in Toulouse, back in 1632, testifies to the importance of that province's rebellions. Languedoc also had its own distinctive existence. Big Languedoc contained several different kinds of economy, each of which experienced the state's growth and the development of capitalism in a distinctive way. In southwestern (Upper) Languedoc, we see the growth of agrarian capitalism during the seventeenth and, especially, eighteenth century. There, the division of the population into a few substantial landlords and a mass of smallholders or wage-laborers, the alliance and overlap of landlords with officeholders, the

containment of urban powerholders by the agrarian and official elites shaped popular politics for two centuries or more.

In northeastern (Lower) Languedoc, smaller-scale and less prosperous agriculture accompanied the proliferation of cottage industry centered on small but active commercial centers. The large Protestant population clustered disproportionately along the cottage-industry network, among poor rural outworkers and rich urban entrepreneurs. In Upper Languedoc, swings in the economic viability of textile manufacturing strongly influenced the rhythms of popular contention. The region's long, irregular deindustrialization meant that small entrepreneurs and workers were often on the defensive. The division between Protestant and Catholic added bitterness to many of Upper Languedoc's struggles -- especially when the national state undertook to protect, destroy, or disestablish one religious group or the other.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century growth of large-scale wine production further proletarianized the rural population, reshaped all Languedoc's social geography, and laid the basis for new varieties of popular politics. From the later nineteenth century onward, Languedoc became France's prime region of organized agrarian radicalism, as well as the source of repeated large challenges to national agricultural policy. Although the wage-workers on the capitalist farms in Paris' hinterland sometimes organized in alliance with national labor federations based in the capital, they never rivaled the scale of Languedoc's

agrarian collective action.

Anjou? In that small province the historic divisions operated on a smaller scale than in Languedoc. But the divisions were more tenacious. Through most of the four centuries after 1598, large landholders dominated the bocage and looked to Angers as their social base. Acting as rentiers rather than full-blown agricultural capitalists, they let substantial peasants generate their incomes from medium-sized farms with the help of smallholders and day-laborers. Meanwhile, with the rise of the slave trade small merchants built up an extensive rural linen industry; through many vicissitudes, household and small-scale rural manufacturing remain important sources of income for the region's people today. The Loire Valley and connected areas supported a very different economy; industrial crops and winegrowing sustained a dense population of smallholders, wage-workers, merchants and -- until the Revolution -- ecclesiastics.

Anjou's popular collective action reflected its enduring divisions. In a region long subordinated to the crown, there was little opportunity for urban rebels to garner support from local elites; the Fronde, with its divisions among the region's great powerholders, offered only a temporary exception. The artisanal and mercantile populations of Angers found few allies elsewhere in the region, but managed to act on their own. The people of the bocage raised a great rebellion against the agents of the

Revolution, then accepted the patronage of landlords who returned to their estates after the Revolution. That agrarian alliance underlay the region's resistance to the Catholic Church's disestablishment.

In the valley and adjacent areas, moderate and republican politics established a small base. As a result, clashes among people from the bocage, from the valley, and from Angers (not to mention the long-active quarry workers in Angers' hinterland) occasionally broke into Anjou's collective action. On the whole, however, during the twentieth century divided Anjou has stood out from the Ile de France, Languedoc, Flanders, and Burgundy for its people's relative inaction.

Flanders, on the other hand, remained hyperactive. Through the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, Flanders saw the construction and deconstruction of the French state through war far more often and more directly than the other four provinces. Beginning as Habsburg property, changing hands time after time, fortified and occupied over and over again, echoing repeatedly to the boots of marching armies, paying at least thrice -- in destruction, in confiscation, in taxation -- for every war, Flanders learned the connections between warmaking and statemaking first hand.

Flanders also became France's densest site successively for commercialized agriculture, cottage textile production, large-scale coal mining, and capital-intensive manufacturing. The

region served as a proving ground for French capitalism. Proletarian collective action, both rural and urban, reached greater heights there than in any of the other regions. With the twentieth century, we find Flanders fostering militant working-class politics and consistently joining the Paris region at the head of national strike movements. Lille, Roubaix, Halluin, Douai, Valenciennes and other cities of Flanders helped write the history of French working-class politics.

Burgundy stood aloof. On their own grounds, Burgundy's winegrowers acted repeatedly to defend their interests. During the nineteenth century, such wine centers as Beaune became hotbeds of republican politics. Workers of Montceau-les-Mines and Le Creusot connected well with national workers' movements. (Le Creusot, after all, organized its own Commune in 1871.) Yet with the steady deindustrialization of the Châtillonnais and other sections of Burgundy, workers in the isolated centers of capital-intensive production had few potential allies within the region. Nor did winegrowers maintain militancy into the twentieth century. As Languedoc's winegrowers were pressing their demands by the hundreds of thousands in 1907, those of Burgundy tended their vines.

Back to Burgundy

It was not always so. Think back to Dijon and Burgundy in the 1620s. City and province were prosperous enough to attract the interest of Cardinal Richelieu and Louis XIII. Their campaign

to reimpose royal rule on the cities and grandees of provincial France was succeeding; many Protestant strongholds of Languedoc, for example, had lost their near-autonomy. Now their plans were turning to the possibility of gaining ground in the great war involving their neighbor states. That would take even more money than their domestic military campaigns.

From 1628 on, the king's chief minister sought to raise royal revenue from Burgundy in two connected ways: by demanding direct grants for particular expenses such as maintaining troops in the province, and by substituting nicely cooperative Elections for the reluctant tax-gathering activity of the Estates. The Elections had the additional attraction, from the crown's point of view, of permitting the sale of a number of expensive offices. On the first count, individual communities pleaded repeatedly that having lodged, fed, and transported troops out of their own resources, they should not also be taxed. The Estates (with the cooperation of the Duc de Bellegarde, royal governor) put pressure on the communities. But they also tried to foil the demands for payment with legal maneuvers such as challenging the form of the request or the manner of its delivery.

On the question of Elections, the Estates cheered Louis XIII and Richelieu when they came to Dijon on 31 January 1629, but sought thereafter to block the impending royal decree. In February 1630 they were still, for example, insisting on having the original of the decree instead of a certified copy. They were

also calling for an assembly of Burgundy's cities to resist the installation of the Election. By that time, however, the decree's enactment looked imminent. Word spread that the new officials would impose a tax on wine.

Dijon's Mardi Gras celebration of 1630 went on in the midst of that contest between province and crown. On 19 February, the civic militia dispersed crowds that had gathered to complain about the impending increase in taxes. Dijon's people elected winegrower Anatoire Changenet (or Champgenet) their King of Fools. He led the festival. At the end of the celebrations, according to an eighteenth-century account,

On the evening of 28 February 1630 there began in the city of Dijon a sedition carried out by a troop of winegrowers who first smashed the main gate of a private house, then went away threatening to come back the following morning. On Friday 1 March, easily and without resistance, they attacked the houses of many of the King's officers, including that of the Parlement's First President, opened them up, burned the furniture inside and continued until the Parlement and the chief officials and burghers regained courage as they saw their own danger, and put down the rebels. They acted late, having long been able to foresee said sedition because they knew the plans of the rebels, and because they had received the warning of the previous night's attack (AMD I 118).

The "private house" people stoned and smashed on the 28th belonged

to a royal financial officer.


Changenet had worn his garish King of Fools costume into the fray. He and his subjects-for-a-day had marched to the offender's house with drums and sharpened vine-stakes. They had sung "Lanturelu" as they came. The following morning they had sounded the tocsin in working-class neighborhoods, and helped allies from outside the city to enter by climbing over the walls. Only then did the attacks on royal officer's houses begin. Later, the crowd went at the homes of city officials -- many of whom owned the vineyards in which the city's winegrowers worked. The authorities did, indeed, have ample warning that popular contention was taking a violent turn.

After the fact, Dijon's officialdom apparently worried about their tardiness; as soon as troops had put down the insurrection, they took measures to punish the culprits and to seek pardon from the king. Richelieu and Louis XIII, however, knew a good opportunity when they saw one. For the king's arrival to accept the municipality's apologies, the Duc de Bellegarde brought the following stipulations: 1) all the city's cannon would be locked up in the castle; 2) the city could not sound its bells at the king's entry; 3) the city could not send a delegation out to greet His Majesty; 4) royal troops, not municipal guards, would man the city's gates; 5) all winegrowers would leave the city.

Equally important, the royal decree establishing an Election went into effect almost immediately. From that point on, the

Estates sent delegations asking for the cancellation of the edict. Their negotiations got them nowhere until May 1631, when they finally arranged to buy back the decree for 1.6 million livres -- a tidy sum, at a time when a bushel of wheat sold for a livre and a laborer earned half a livre for a day's work. 1.6 million bushels of wheat would pay a lot of troops.

Meanwhile, royal agents sustained the pressure for revenues. On 17 August 1630, the Duc de Bellegarde refused to divert troops on their way to Piedmont from the province; he threatened to have them live on the land. The Estates promptly agreed to borrow 20,000 livres for the expenses of troops. That was a standard seventeenth-century negotiation, the Lanturelu an extreme case of a very common routine. The city's bourgeoisie did what they could do to shrug off royal demands, or pass them on to the poor.

Dijon's ordinary people  felt the pressure of royal aggrandizement directly. They acted against it when they could. Royal finance, provincial administration, city security, winegrowers' everyday life, and popular insurrection converged in a single event. That connection of the largest processes transforming France and the collective action of ordinary people exposes the fallacy of treating "violence", "protest", or "disorder" as a world apart, as a phenomenon distinct from high politics, as mere reaction to stress. There lies the most important teaching of popular collective action: It is not an epiphenomenon. It connects directly and solidly with the great

questions of power. ☺ That discovery gives us a good reason to search the archives for the contention of ordinary French people.

NOTE: I have adapted a few passages in this paper from material in my "Violenza e azione collettiva in Europa. Riflessioni storico-comparate," in Donatella della Porta & Gianfranco Pasquino, eds., Terrorismo e violenza politica. Tre casi a confronto: Stati Uniti, Germania e Giappone (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1983), and my "Speaking Your Mind Without Elections, Surveys, or Social Movements," Public Opinion Quarterly 47 (1984): 461-478. I am grateful to the National Science Foundation, the Horace Rackham School of Graduate Studies, University of Michigan, and the German Marshall Fund of the United States for financial support.

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