
THE ROUTINIZATION OF PROTEST
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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In the little merchant city of Cholet, south of Angers, Mardi Gras of 1826 brought the usual public skits and satires. One of the tableaux of that year contained enough liberal politics to alarm the prudent subprefect. "A feudal lord," he reported,

who took the name of Prince des Ténèbres, arrived with a large entourage. They all wore hats in the shape of candle-snuffers. They bore two signs. On the one was painted an ass bearing a torch covered with a snuffer; on the four corners were painted bats. On the other one read LONG LIVE THE GOOD OLD DAYS. Others carried nighthawks and a gallows. Finally the bust of Voltaire appeared.

The players of Cholet put on two scenes. The first was the lord's marriage, at which the crucial ceremony was the reading of a long list of his feudal rights. The second, the trial of a vassal for having killed a rabbit. The vassal hanged. And the royalists of Cholet were reported "unhappy" with this insult to their cause and to the Restoration regime (A.D. Maine-et-Loire 21 M 162).

Cholet's Mardi Gras tableau was quite ordinary. So far as I know, it aimed at no particular lord, and brought on no prosecution. The symbols -- the torch of liberty snuffed out by feudalism, and so on -- were clear and common. Similar skits, parades and displays of readily identifiable symbols were standard components of nineteenth-century popular festivals. Yet to eyes which have become accustomed to the concrete, disciplined protests of our own time, the play of metaphor in such nineteenth-century political statements is odd, rather folklorique.

As Alain Faure has recently reminded us, the folklore of

Mardi Gras survived the urbanization and industrialization of the nineteenth century. In 1830 and, especially, in 1848, Carnival and Revolution linked arms to dance in the streets. In the case of 1848, Faure recounts the parade through Paris streets of sixteen cadavers of citizens killed during the first street-fighting of February, the antic invasion of the Tuileries which ended with the parading of royal throne through the streets and its burning at the foot of the July column in the Place de la Bastille, and the hanging or burning in effigy of landlords who refused to delay collection of the second quarter's rent (Faure 1978: 114-121). Pageantry and metaphor were very much alive.

Nor did they die with Louis Napoleon's snuffing out of the Second Republic. Faure describes the washerwomen's colorful floats, with decorations, costumes and elected king and queen, which thrived with the growth of Parisian washhouses after 1850 and continued to grace the Parisian Carnival to the end of the nineteenth century. Then, however, they did disappear, despite the continuation of spectacular Mardi Gras parades. What happened? In essence, Faure argues that Parisian merchants and authorities appropriated the popular festival to make it safe and profitable for themselves, while parties and unions provided new opportunities for working-class collective action. The festival, he concludes

lost its feeling of being a special event, a solemn or scheduled gathering of the collectivity, an immense show without audience or actors, without staging or spectators, where each individual plays his role and social classes reveal their character (Faure 1978: 167).

The passage is reminiscent of Emile Durkheim's analyses of religious

ritual and of the passage from mechanistic to organic solidarity. It parallels Michelle Perrot's argument that during the last decades of the nineteenth century the strike surrendered its popular spontaneity and creativity to the demands of bureaucrats and organizers. Protest, they tell us, routinized.

For all its plausibility, Alain Faure's conclusion is not the only one possible. From the perspective of a superb connoisseur of the seventeenth century, for example, Yves-Marie Bercé has treated the decline of the festival as the result of a two-sided change: on the one side, the religious and civil authorities who wanted to impose decorous uprightness on the common people; on the other, the disintegration of the solidary rural community whose shared beliefs and daily routines served as bases for fêtes, for révoltes, and for both at once. Unlike Faure, what is more, he considers the twin processes to have been well underway during the eighteenth century. The nineteenth century, in his view, saw no more than survivals of the rich old customs, and those in the distant countryside. Despite a common belief (shared with Michel Foucault, Norbert Elias and other sages of our time) in the imposition of discipline by sour-faced authorities, then, Bercé and Faure disagree on the timing, locus and mechanisms of the popular festival's disappearance.

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1. Nor are these the only possibilities. To take only one more, Eugen Weber sees the disappearance of customary forms of celebration and daily practice in the nineteenth century as a consequence of the incorporation of many local peasant cultures into a common urban, national culture.

At the risk of appearing to be an incorrigible ditherer, I suggest that both and neither are right. The nineteenth century did, indeed, wreak a remarkable transformation of popular protest, a transformation which did involve a certain sort of routinization, and a separation of the forms of rebellion from the forms of celebration. An important source of that transformation was, indeed, the decline of small, loosely corporate, communities which had previously provided the chief frames within which ordinary people had formulated and acted on their grievances. Capitalists, officials and organizers did, indeed, collaborate in creating larger, more specialized, more predictable and more impersonal means of collective action. Yet these generalizations resemble the impressions of urban street life a traveler gets from a hovering helicopter: panoramic, and correct in many respects, but missing essential details -- especially those which tell us how and why the participants are getting into the action.

Not that I have access to materials, insights or telepathic communications which are not available to such sensitive chroniclers of la vie quotidienne as Faure and Bercé. I have only a method and a metaphor. The method consists of cataloguing and analyzing uniform series of different sorts of collective actions -- strikes, demonstrations, violent encounters, contentious gatherings, and others -- for large blocks of space and time. (The collection, still and perhaps eternally incomplete, on which this paper draws most heavily deals with five regions of France from 1600 to the 1970s.) The metaphor is obvious, once stated: any group who have a common interest in

collective action also acquire a shared repertoire of routines among which they make a choice when the occasion for pursuing an interest or a grievance arises. The theatrical metaphor draws attention to the limited number of performances available to any particular group at a given time, to the learned character of those performances, to the possibility of innovation and improvisation within the limits set by the existing means, to the likelihood that not only the actors but also the objects and the observers of the action are aware of the character of the drama that is unfolding and, finally, to the element of collective choice that enters into the events which outsiders call riots, disorders, disturbances and protests.

The eighteenth century had its own repertoire. The anti-tax rebellion, the movement against conscription, the food riot, the concerted invasion of fields or forests were its most distinctive forms of revolt. But a great deal of relatively peaceful collective action went on 1) through deliberate (although sometimes unauthorized) assemblies of corporate groups which eventuated in declarations, demands, petitions or lawsuits, or 2) via authorized festivals and ceremonies in the course of which ordinary people symbolized their grievances. As compared with other repertoires, this eighteenth-century array of performances had some special characteristics worth noticing:

- a tendency for aggrieved people to converge on the residences of wrongdoers and on the sites of wrongdoing rather than on the seats of power (Sometimes, of course, the two coincided.)
- the extensive use of authorized public ceremonies and celebrations for the acting out of complaints and demands
- the rare appearance of people organized voluntarily around a special interest, as compared with whole communities and constituted corporate groups

- the recurrent use of street theater, visual imagery, effigies, symbolic objects and other dramatic devices to state the participants' claims and complaints
- the frequent borrowing -- in parody or in earnest -- of the authorities' normal forms of action; the borrowing often amounted to the crowd's almost literally taking the law into its own hands

Note the political core of such apparently "non-political" or "pre-political" actions as riotous festivals. Access to land, control of the food supply, precedence among corporate groups, and payment of taxes were the sorts of issues about which the users of the eighteenth-century repertoire were typically aggrieved; they were the politics of the day. Crowd actions, furthermore, frequently aimed at the local or regional authorities, and usually took them somehow into account. The politicization of the Revolution was not so much a change in these characteristics as an increase in the directness of the connection between local collective action and national politics; for a time every food riot became an occasion for stating or using affiliations with political actors on a national scale. The eighteenth-century repertoire certainly differed importantly from the repertoire which emerged during the nineteenth-century era of national electoral politics. But it was only "pre-political" by a standard which dismisses everything but national politics as insignificant.

With regard to the routinization of protest in nineteenth-century France, the notion of repertoire is helpful because it permits us to see more clearly what changed, and how. At the end of the eighteenth century, much of the Revolution's popular collective action borrowed from the classic eighteenth-century repertoire: the price riot, the collective rejection of the tax collector, the invasion of fields or forests where use rights were contested, the ritual punishment (in effigy or in the flesh) of a malefactor, the turning of an authorized celebration or solemn assembly into an expression of popular support or opposition all

continued into the conflicts of the Revolution. To be sure, the Revolutionaries innovated. In terms of form, for example, the marches of various revolutionary militias against their enemies and the turbulent meetings of popular committees, societies and assemblies had few pre-revolutionary precedents. In terms of content, the parades, festivals and ceremonies of the early Revolution so altered the character of their old-regime counterparts as to constitute a new creation. Yet the durable contribution of the Revolution to the French repertoire of collective action was slight. Perhaps the main change in the repertoire from the 1780s to the 1820s was a general increase in the directness and explicitness of the connection between national politics and previously local forms of action such as the food riot and the charivari.

The charivari? Social historians of France have recently paid plenty of attention to the old custom. I need only remind you of its main elements: the assembly of a group of local young people outside the home of an accused moral offender; the whistles, catcalls, mocking songs and thumped pots and pans; the payment of some sort of penalty by the offender. The "young people" in question were often the same company of unmarried males which took responsibility for public celebrations such as lenten bonfires, and which exercised control over the courtship and marriage of local youths. The offenses were typically violations of rules concerning proper sexual behavior, correct husband-wife relationships and appropriate matches, although many a charivari began when newlyweds neglected to treat the local young people to a celebration. The penalties imposed normally took the form of payoffs to the assembled youths. But they could, in the case of grave moral offenses, extend to being obliged to leave town.

The charivari twinned with another widespread practice: the

serenade. The serenade was, in essence, an approving charivari; the same young people assembled outside the home of the object of their attention, but now they made a joyful noise, and asked no penalty. One could become the other, for if the targets of a charivari made proper amends, the occasion could well transform itself into a celebratory serenade.

As Eugen Weber remarks in his chapter on charivaris, "It is hardly surprising that they were also connected with politics" (Weber 1976: 402). He might have said the same for the serenade. Yet from an eighteenth-century point of view, the political use of the charivari comes as something of a surprise. Before the Revolution, the practice remained within the limits set by domestic morality. The heyday of the political charivari, so far as I can tell, ran from the 1820s to the 1850s, from the Restoration to the beginning of the Second Empire. Then it faded fast.

Let us look at a characteristic case or two. In April, 1830, Mme.

Lazerme, wife of a deputy, returned to Perpignan. The previous month, her husband had voted against the Chamber's address to the king; the Address had, you will remember, stated the majority's objections concerning the king's veiled threat to dissolve the Chamber and arrange the election of a group of deputies more to his liking. "Many young people of an extreme Liberal persuasion," wrote the regional prosecutor, imagined that Mme. Lazerme had gone to see her husband, and that she was bringing him back to town.

A charivari had been organized to punish him for voting against the Address. A large crowd went to his house. One heard innumerable rattles, bells, cymbals and whistles; for a long time they shouted wildly:

A BAS LAZERME, VIVE LA CHARTE, VIVE LA LIBERTE!

The local prosecutor and a royal judge who lived nearby tried to calm the crowd but, reported the regional prosecutor, "it was necessary to use threats and armed force to stop the charivari and break up the crowd" (A.N. BB¹⁸ 1183, letter of 22 April 1830). Two supposed chiefs of the gathering were arrested and committed for trial on misdemeanor charges. Two nights later, posters appeared in Perpignan, with tones of 1793: MORT AU TIRAN . . . PAIX AU PEUPLE . . . LIBERTE ET EGALITE . . . AU NOM DU PEUPLE FRANCAIS (A.N. BB¹⁸ 1183, letter of 24 April 1830). When the accused ringleaders were convicted on the 30th of April, some of their friends posted a notice in these terms:

SUBSCRIPTION. All the young people of the city of Perpignan, motivated by feelings which are both honorable and patriotic, and wanting to show their whole-hearted commitment to the cause which led to the conviction of their Comrades, have opened a subscription to pay their fines. You can contribute any amount, no matter how small; every offering placed on the fatherland's altar is of equal value. The time has come for our unjustly

insulted people to make known its feelings and the honor it bestows on those who make an effort to speed the complete development of our institutions and fulfill the great destiny of our beautiful country, orphan of its glory and widow of its liberties (A.N. BB¹⁸ 1183, enclosure in letter of 2 May 1830).

The local prosecutor's attempt to convict the organizers of that collection, however, disintegrated when the chief prosecution witness changed his story. The prosecutor consoled himself, and his superiors, with the soothing thought that

the prosecution must have had a good effect, Monseigneur, in the sense that the defendants and the huge audience that attended the trial saw clearly that justice is ever alert and that if its efforts did not have the most desirable results this time, they would another time, if a few demagogues should again take a mind to incite disorder, by whatever means, in contempt and hate of the royal government (A.N. BB¹⁸ 1183, letter of 30 May 1830).

This is the standard stuff of nineteenth-century political control. The opening event was unquestionably some sort of charivari, right down to its organization by the city's "young people". Yet the whole series was just as unquestionably an everyday sequence in which an opposition group states its position and shows its strength by means of a public gathering, the authorities use the crime-control apparatus to strike at the opposition group, and the opponents then mobilize around and against that attack on their position. In short, the charivari had become a means of conducting politics as usual in Perpignan.

Not far away, in Toulouse, a similar transformation was occurring. In late December, 1831, crowds gathered near the house of the deputy, Amilhau. "That riotous assembly (attroupelement)," wrote the prefect, "was the consequence of a plan for a charivari developed a few days ago when the news began to circulate that M. Amilhau was coming here." The prefect was confident that the "disorder" was "the result of incitement by radical hotheads; Amilhau was the subject of a violent article published yesterday in Le Patriote de Juillet. The participants came mainly from the faubourg St. Etienne" -- that is, from an old, comfortable inner-city area. (A.D. Haute-Garonne, 4 M 49). Again the deputy stayed away. Nevertheless, the crowd stoned the troops sent to disperse them, and the troops arrested three ringleaders. The next day the prefect was promising to prosecute any further offenders "with inflexible severity" (A.D. H-G 4 M 49).

Nothing more, to my knowledge, came of Amilhau's aborted charivari. During the next few years, however, the authorities of Toulouse were often busy snuffing out political charivaris. Political, or politicized: some began as standard moral confrontations, but rapidly became occasions for the statement of political opposition. A case in point happened in April 1833, when a widower of the Couteliers quarter remarried and began receiving raucous visits night after night. "Most of the people who took too active a part," reported the police inspector were sent to police court. But that sort of prosecution was not very intimidating, and did not produce the desired effect. The disorders continued. One noticed, in fact, that the people who got involved in the disturbances no longer came, as one might expect,

from the inferior classes. Law students, students at the veterinary school, and youngsters from good city families had joined in; seditious shouts had arisen in certain groups, and one learned that the new troublemakers meant to keep the charivari going until Louis Philippe's birthday, in hopes of producing another sort of disorder. It was especially on the evening of Sunday the 28th of April 1833 that the political nature of these gatherings appeared unequivocally. All of a sudden the song La Carmagnole and shouts of VIVE LA REPUBLIQUE replaced the patois songs that were usually sung. It was all the clearer what was going on, because the majority of the agitators were people whose clothing itself announced that they weren't there for a simple charivari (A.N. BB¹⁸ 1215).

It took police, National Guards and line troops to break up the crowds that evening. The unpopular wedding took place the next day, but on the day after (the 30th), the same people gathered at the Place du Capitole to jeer the fireworks set off to celebrate the King's birthday. Broken up by the police, they rushed to the Place St. Etienne, then sped to the Prefecture to demand the freeing of participants who had been arrested earlier. The police got the gates closed just in time to prevent the demonstrators from breaking in. The arrests made that night proved, according to the regional prosecutor, that Carlists and Republicans had joined together in the "seditious demonstrations": "Among six prisoners, there were three from each party" (A.N. BB¹⁸ 1215).

1833, as it happens, was a vintage year for political charivaris in Toulouse. By the end of June the police inspector was preparing for the arrival of three deputies in the city by organizing a "charivari

service" whose task was "to prevent both serenades and charivaris" (A.D. H-G 4 M 50). On the 30th of June, despite these precautions, a troop of students and workers marched through the streets of Toulouse, accompanied by musical instruments, singing the Marseillaise, and shouting VIVE LA REPUBLIQUE. "It is all the more urgent to repress these disturbances," the police inspector advised the mayor, "because they could link up with the charivaris and celebrations at the end of the month" (i.e. with the anniversary of the July Revolution: A.D. H-G 4 M 50). And, in fact, both the Carlists and the Republicans of Toulouse continued to promote their causes by organizing serenades and charivaris.

The charivaris of Perpignan and Toulouse were not Great Events. Their importance to us is twofold. First, they show us local people using familiar means to accomplish new ends, and transforming the means in the process; by pushing the existing repertoire to its limits, the people of Perpignan and Toulouse were helping to create a new repertoire of collective action. Second, the authorities themselves feel hampered by the partial legitimacy of the old forms; within limits, we hear them saying, people had the right to serenades and charivaris; the problem is to keep serenades and charivaris from becoming something else, something political. That constraint of the authorities, in its turn, became an invitation to charivariser instead of turning to riskier forms of action such as the full-fledged demonstration. The same sort of advantage encouraged people of the July Monarchy to take advantage of funerals, festivals and public ceremonies.

The nineteenth century's middle decades saw many more such occasions. At the time of resistance to the controversial census of 1841, another variant appeared in Caen. Guizot, then both Minister of Foreign Affairs and member of the Calvados departmental council, came to Caen to consult with his colleagues on the 23d of August. That night the colleagues held a reception for Guizot at the Prefecture. "For several days," reported the local prosecutor,

people had been spreading the idea of a charivari. Toward nine o'clock a number of groups crossed the square at the Prefecture, let out scattered whistles and shouted -- now and then when they were under cover -- A BAS L'HOMME DE GAND, GUIZOT A LA POTENCE. Then they sang the Marseillaise, Ça Ira, etc. Two persons were arrested shouting A BAS GUIZOT. They were Lecouvreur, a baker's helper, and Legout, student pharmacist in the shop of M. Decourdemanche. They were to be tried for "public outrage" (A.N. BB¹⁸ 1395A, letter of 25 August 1841). More crowds gathered in Caen's public squares the next two evenings, but the conspicuous stationing of troops around the city kept them under control.

What happened in Caen? Another banal encounter between the political authorities and the local opposition. This time, however, the prosecutor bemuses us by his adoption of the word charivari; we would be less surprised if he called the event a manifestation. After all, the young people gathered at a public building rather than a private house, left their rattles and pans at home, and failed to state either the offense or the penalty they had in mind. Now, it is possible that the prosecutor

wrote the word charivari in gentle irony. I suspect, however, that the word was deliberate and, in its way, accurate: this was, indeed, a charivari on its way to becoming a demonstration.

One more case will clarify the transformation that was going on. We move forward to 1860, and another letter to the Minister of Justice from a regional prosecutor based in Montpellier:

A regrettable demonstration (i.e. manifestation) occurred in the commune of Mayreville, arrondissement of Castelnaudry (Aude), on the 22d of July. About twenty people, professional marauders and poachers, got together at the news of the transfer of the communal game warden, the object of their dislike, and for good reason. They went through the streets of the village and stationed themselves in the main square, especially in front of the warden's house, singing the Marseillaise and other songs of seditious character, notably an anti-national and anti-patriotic patois hymn composed during the reaction of 1815 to celebrate the fall of the First Empire. They added verses stating a desire for the return of the Republic and making threatening references to the local authorities (A.N. BB³⁰ 423, letter of 2 August 1860).

No mention of the charivari in this account, yet some of the lineaments of the old form of reprobation are still visible. The celebrants take their places outside their enemy's home and sing proscribed songs to make their opposition unmistakable. Whether the participants were really professional poachers or simply run-of-the-mill village hunters, however, they now put their private hostility to the game warden into the idiom of national politics. If they had carried banners, signs or symbols of their political affiliation, in fact, we would have no trouble recognizing the event as a full-fledged political demonstration.

The demonstration belonged to a new nineteenth-century repertoire. Before the nineteenth century, ordinary Frenchmen had often stated grievances or demands by assembling in some public place and displaying their commitment to their cause. If that were all it took to make a demonstration, then a host of food riots, tax rebellions, invasions of fields, actions against conscription and, yes, charivaris would qualify as demonstrations. But the specific form of action known in France as the manifestation differed from any of these elements of the old-regime repertoire in several ways: happening in a symbolically important public place, growing from an assembly which was called in advance by the spokesmen of some special interest, explicitly identifying the affiliations of the participants, broadcasting demands and grievances by means of placards, banners, pamphlets and other written communications. Manifestants, in other words, rarely gathered at private residences or at the sites of protested evils, seldom acted in the course of authorized festivals and rituals, did not usually involve a whole community, and employed the colorful symbols and tableaux much less regularly than their eighteenth century predecessors. The new way of acting together showed some signs of crystallizing during the Revolution, but only became a significant and regular way of doing political business under the July Monarchy, and only displaced its eighteenth-century predecessors around the time of the Revolution of 1848.

The mid-century shift toward the demonstration paralleled the rise of other characteristic nineteenth-century forms of collective action: the strike, the electoral rally, the formal meeting, and others. Together, these changes constituted the creation of a new repertoire -- essentially the same repertoire of collective action which prevailed in the twentieth century as well. In this repertoire, self-selected special interests and

formal associations played a prominent part. The forms of action in the repertoire overlapped or mimicked the forms of electoral politics: stressing the numbers and the commitment of a cause's supporters, enunciating whole programs for change, rarely producing violence except when another party resisted the demands or attempted to block the show of strength. The authorities, in their turn, interpreted the actions in the repertoire in terms of electoral politics: anxiously scanning a demonstration, strike or protest meeting for signs of the involvement of major political blocs, counting the number of participants with care, maintaining voluminous dossiers on militants and ringleaders, attempting to divide the potential users of the emerging forms of action into acceptable and dangerous, into legitimate and criminal, and then to use force, espionage and the threat of prosecution to eliminate the unacceptable actors from the arena.

Is this routinization? Let me now admit that my title is a fraud. The old repertoire also had its routines, and the authorities recognized them. That is why, in a time when ordinary people were becoming increasingly involved in national politics, the charivari could serve for several decades as an instrument for political expression. The charivari was a weak political instrument which gave way rapidly to the demonstration, the banquet, the rally and other nineteenth-century means of showing support for a cause. The apparent routinization of the nineteenth century amounted to the emergence of a new repertoire, essentially the repertoire of collective action the French still employ today.

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