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1 Urban protest

Protest was a distinctive feature of life in seventeenth-century French cities.[1] It took a variety of forms ranging from isolated grumblings to clandestine threats, gatherings of angry citizens, harassment of targeted scapegoats, rock throwing, pillaging, seizures of public places, armed forays through the streets, expulsions of purported traitors, sometimes mutilations or murders. Such activity was not experienced every day, but it was frequent enough to represent an ubiquitous danger in the minds of authorities who knew full well that small incidents lay on one end of a spectrum leading to full-scale insurrection. In this sense genuinely popular protest constituted a significant aspect of the everyday political landscape. Its place in urban life was further complicated by the fact that not all protest was genuinely popular in origin. Some public demonstrations were actually factional quarrels generated by elites. Thus the overlapping of people attacking authorities and factions fighting other factions formed a complex pattern which calls for close examination.

Each case comes to us as a story involving a confrontation. When many such stories are read in succession, a picture begins to emerge of the possibilities and limits of popular politics in an urban setting under absolutism. Public disturbances expressed relationships. They were dialogues about power: how it was held, how it could be challenged, how it ought to be used. These dialogues were especially important in the seventeenth century because social equilibrium was built upon the ritual interaction between the symbolic authority of magistrates and the collective pride of popular groups. Each confrontation thus tells us something

[1] The most intelligent surveys of this phenomenon are Robin Briggs, "Popular Revolt in its Social Context," in *Communities of Belief: Cultural and Social Tension in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 106–77; and Christian Jouhaud, "Révoltes et contestations d'ancien régime," in André Burguière and Jacques Revel (eds.), *L'état et les conflits* [vol. III of *Histoire de la France*] (Paris, 1990), pp. 21–99. The Soviet book that inaugurated the study of French popular protest was Boris Porchnev, Les *soulèvements populaires en France de 1623 à 1648* (Paris, 1963). The counterattack by Roland Mousnier and some of the subsequent discussion are well presented in P. J. Coveney (ed.), *France in Crisis 1629–1675* (Totowa, NJ, 1977).

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about the boundaries of community solidarity and the nature of community conflict. Studied as a body of experience, these incidents chart the limits of practical authority and the possibility of rebellion, the prospects for popular-elite collaboration and the possibility of class conflict.

Argenteuil, 1644

But the stories have to be reconstructed from one-sided narratives filled with repetitive situations and stereotyped judgments.[2] Here is one example. On 29 July 1644 Hierosme Regnard, a Parisian process-server, was sent on a mission to the town of Argenteuil some ten miles north of the capital.[3] His task was to enforce payments owed for the *greffe des notaires*, a royal office attributing special fees to notaries that had been created by the king in 1640 as a money-raising expedient. Large numbers of these *greffes* had been authorized on paper and the right to peddle them or collect their fees had been sold to cartels of financiers who subcontracted out these rights in each district of France. Regnard's task was thus to make tangible to the people of Argenteuil the effects of a deal struck between the state and its financial backers by collecting fees they owed. Although just a process-server, he was powerfully connected. He carried in his sack a variety of papers relating to the affairs of important tax farmers, agents of royal ministers, and local people, including a roll of sums totalling 1,200 livres to be collected for another tax, the *amortissement*. Thus although his superiors are not identified in the documents, he was a functionary doing legal work for Parisians of some importance.

Regnard set out with two sergeants, Hemard de Hedin from the bailliage of Fort Levêque and Jean de Foy from Paris. They worked vigorously for two days in Argenteuil, issuing warrants to some eighty residents and sequestering many items of property. These men must have been highly visible in their judicial regalia as they rapped on doors and read lengthy legal pronouncements to each offender. Some residents barred their entry or made threatening remarks, but they still accumulated a considerable body of confiscated property which they left in the custody

[2] On interpreting popular discourse, see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987); Arlette Farge, *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France*, tr. Rosemary Harris (University Park, PA, 1994); Clay Ramsay, *The Ideology of the Great Fear: the Soissonnais in 1789* (Baltimore, 1992), pp. 123–55.

[3] BN Ms. fr. 18432, fol. 3: procès-verbal 1 August 1644. Argenteuil was a substantial town with a population of 1,020 hearths in 1709, according to Jacques Dupâquier, *Statistiques démographiques du bassin parisien 1636–1720* (Paris, 1977), p. 415.

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Figure 1 France in the seventeenth century: provinces and towns.

of neighbors, pending sale at auction. Much of it was deposited with the local innkeeper, Pierre Gentil, whose establishment also served as a base of operations. Satisfied with a job well done, the three were settling in for the night when they were accosted at the door of the inn by Denis Pernet and several other unidentified local men. "You bloody extortionists [*bougres de maltôtiers*]," growled Pernet, "you've been having a fine time these last two days but tomorrow . . . you will be nicely awakened and thrown in the river, even if I have to ring the tocsin myself." Night was falling and it was too late to return to Paris.

Sure enough, Regnard and his assistants awoke to trouble. Before they

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could pay their bill, two messengers from the community barged in and addressed them ceremoniously as if the drama that was to follow required a formal prologue. "Mordieu, bloody extortionists," they cursed, "your bodies are about to be degraded: here come more than five hundred persons to cut you to pieces." Then a large crowd came pouring out of the church. The innkeeper and his wife, fearing that their building would be burned down, urged Regnard to escape out the back, but it was too late. The house and garden filled with men shouting "Kill! Kill!" or "Drag him to the river!" while Regnard and his assistants barricaded themselves in their room. Even as Regnard attempted to reason with his assailants through the locked door, he could hear the sound of their axes smashing it down while another contingent chopped a hole in the wall and a third started tearing up the beams in the attic overhead. Rushing to the window, Regnard saw "4,000" angry citizens massed in the street, some pelting his window with rocks, others looking for fire to burn down the building.[4] Then the besiegers poured in and started pummeling the three victims with clubs. Finding the large sack in which Regnard carried his legal documents, the pillagers threw it out the window to the people below, who tore up the papers and scattered them about, saying "Here is the sack of the *maltôte*: it must be burned with the extortionists [*maltôtiers*] who own it."

Both sergeants were dragged down the stairs and out into the street by their hair. Hedin fell to his knees, pleading for mercy: "Messieurs, save my life, please forgive me, I will pray to the Lord for you, I promise I will never return here"; but the crowd shouted "Drag him! Drag him! Throw him in the river: at least that will teach others not to come to this place with the maltôte!" He was rescued when a group of soldiers lodging nearby took pity on him. Foy was similarly dragged and beaten until he broke away from his captors and darted into a pastry shop where the master pastrycook and his apprentices tried to hold the door shut while he escaped out the back. He was recaptured and knocked down; then he pretended he was dead and escaped into some vines when the crowd wasn't looking. After hiding out until midnight, he staggered out of town and hitched a ride back to Paris on a merchant's cart.

Meanwhile back in his room, Regnard was being manhandled by the ringleaders of the attack, who tore his clothes, demanded his money and weapons, and reminded him sanctimoniously of the purpose of their visit: "Didn't we promise you yesterday evening that you wouldn't want to live?" Their dialogue, as reported by Regnard, has a ring of folklore about it:

[4] A crowd of 4,000 would have approximated the entire population of Argenteuil.

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REGNARD My dear brothers, I beg you to save my life. I assure you that I am a man who can serve you just as easily as I can retaliate against you for the "pleasure" you have given me in this situation.

ASSAILANTS You bugger, you're pretty brazen and insolent to come to this *pays* and collect for the *notifications*. Don't you know that they will never be paid and whoever comes here will be killed?

REGNARD Brothers, if it hadn't been me who came here it would have been someone else. But I promise you I will never come back.

ASSAILANTS Don't you know that you're never going to leave this *pays*, because twelve of the richest men from here promised us ten pistoles to drag you into the water, you and your companions. But if you want to give us [the money], we'll leave you here.

Regnard's captors then took his 55 livres, he claimed, along with swords, sheets, handkerchiefs, hats, and Hedin's coat, and left.

As soon as they were gone Regnard climbed out a window with the help of the women of the house who urged, "My poor man, save yourself, they are coming back and this time they'll kill you." He mounted a ladder to a neighbor's attic and hid for several hours while the angry crowd returned. Then he made his way through vineyards to a neighboring village, while off in the distance he heard a large crowd searching for him in a nearby mill. In the end, all three agents made it back to Paris, where they drew up their reports and the two sergeants were examined by a surgeon, who found them "badly beaten."

What can this story, insignificant in itself, tell us? Regnard was an unimportant agent who had to assert a modicum of authority against inhabitants of an insignificant place who didn't want to obey. People did not always resist in this way. If they had, government under absolutism would have been impossible. In fact, we would not even know about Regnard if his report had not been filed in the papers of Pierre Séguier, chancellor of France. Thus on the one hand the case was unusual enough to warrant the attention of the royal government, but on the other there were probably many other Argenteuils that never produced this fortuitous documentation.

In a different way, however, as a piece of a larger picture, Argenteuil is important. Regnard's account gives us a rare insider's view of an experience that happened to a great many authority figures – messengers, judges, tax collectors, magistrates, intendants, hoarders of grain. He was treated to a performance that was classic in its simplicity, that resonated with the expression of popular values and tactics. The real confrontation was between a complex of social and financial special interests protected under the mantle of royal legitimacy and a group of townspeople indignant to the point of rage at the actions of an interloper. The protestors' responses were also characteristic. The formal warnings and curses, the

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siege of the inn, the ritual of dragging victims through the streets and dumping them in the river, the attempt to purge the community of an outsider who at the same time was to serve as an example so that "nobody would come to this place with the maltôte," the destruction of legal papers – all these were elements repeated in thousands of other independent situations.

Violence was real and significant, but also limited. People in French communities did sometimes pillage, dismember, and murder persons who directly represented the interests of the powerful, and this was a reality faced by every agent, one which we struggle to understand. At the same time the action was improvised and collective and governed by complex unwritten constraints. We sense in Regnard's account a combination of forces. There was a circle of instigators – leading citizens who, if the account is truthful, promised bounties to less fortunate neighbors to intimidate the invaders. But the movement was broader and more spontaneous than an arranged assassination. There was real popular mobilization: a growing indignation after two days of observed offenses, a meeting in the church, a crowd of sympathetic demonstrators who shouted, surrounded, attacked, and pursued without much evident organization. But there was also support for Regnard from citizens who received sequestered goods, issued sympathetic warnings, and helped the offenders to escape. The community was in no sense unanimous. Not everyone joined the lynching party, whether because of fear, indifference, or vested interest. The unspoken restraint is the most interesting aspect of the affair. Despite the intense hatred expressed by the crowd and the clear intent to do harm, the actual confrontation was anti-climactic. The angry citizens seemed disorganized and reticent about going all the way, and the victims escaped with only cuts and bruises.

Why did a potential lynch mob end up administering nothing more than a stern warning, and why did the three process-servers not end up at the bottom of a well like some of their compatriots? The answer can only be found by studying other instances which extend the evidence of possible actions and outcomes. Comparison makes it possible to delineate a spectrum of options and to construct a typology of the culture of protest despite the limited evidence in any given instance.

Approaching urban protest

There are many ways to study popular protest, and my approach is based on a particular set of choices that should be made clear from the outset. This is a study of "culture" in the sense that every confrontation entailed repetitive forms of behavior. In the clash between the two or more sides

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we see a range of gestures, tactics, slogans, and beliefs that had meaning for the participants because they were drawn from a repertory of similar actions undertaken in parallel circumstances. It is by pondering and comparing those responses that I attempt to understand how people mobilized, how they conceptualized their actions, and what their interaction tells us about governance and class relationships in the city. Since all information derives from the reports of the authorities, it is necessary to delineate their position very carefully, as I do in chapters 4 and 5. But my primary concern is to bring the people of French cities onto the stage and give them their due, without condescension but also without romanticization, as important participants in this very human drama.

Historians have used many approaches in studying revolts, all of them valuable. The first, which might be called conjunctural analysis, focuses on the incidence of revolt as a way of determining its nature. By plotting the frequency or the geographical distribution of disturbances, one can find correlations to factors such as grain prices, tax levels, wars, or the chronology of state development. One can also plot the time of day, the time of year, and the site within the city as indicators of the patterns of disturbance in relation to cycles of work, cycles of festivity, residential patterns, and so forth. This technique, used extensively by Yves-Marie Bercé and René Pillorget, is frequently invoked also by synthesizers who seek to find meaning in the pattern of revolt over time.[5]

The second approach, especially associated with Bercé and the many who adopt his conclusions, classifies crowds in terms of their objectives: religious purification, opposition to taxes, regulation of prices, reassertion of community values, protest against soldiers.[6] Its merit is the ability to classify and simplify; its limitation is that it separates crowds into distinct compartments, obscuring aspects that were common to several kinds of riots and losing sight of crowd methods and underlying beliefs. A variation is the attempt by historical sociologists like Charles Tilly to link the purposes of crowds to broad changes like the rise of the state or the rise of

[5] Yves-Marie Bercé, *History of Peasant Revolts: the Social Origins of Rebellion in Early Modern France*, tr. Amanda Whitmore (Ithaca, NY, 1990), which is an abridgment of *Histoire des Croquants: étude des soulèvements populaires au XVIIe siècle dans le sud-ouest de la France*, 2 vols. (Geneva, 1974); René Pillorget, *Les mouvements insurrectionnels de Provence entre 1596 et 1715* (Paris, 1975). Of course most authors use more than one approach.

[6] In Bercé, *History of Peasant Revolts*, pp. 169–243, this typology is explicit. For the dissemination of such ideas, see Pierre Goubert, *The French Peasantry in the Seventeenth Century*, tr. Ian Patterson (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 205–19. On types of riots, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), pp. 152–87; Cynthia A. Bouton, *The Flour War: Gender, Class and Community in Late Ancien Regime French Society* (University Park, PA, 1993); François Hincker, *Les français devant l'impôt sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1971).

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capitalism by tracing a historical transition from one type of crowd to another and seeing the forms taken by crowd action as a reflection of the changes taking place in society.[7]

The third approach is to analyze the sociology of the participants. Who were the rioters, where did they live, what were their occupations, their income levels, their titles, their citizenship status, their links of family and patronage, their common membership in organizations? This technique, closely associated with George Rudé and utilized by many practitioners, requires better evidence than most seventeenth-century archives can provide, and raises methodological problems. Historians are increasingly wary of systems of social stratification because the "boxes" they put people in are arbitrary, and there is not always a connection between an individual's label and his or her social identity.[8]

The fourth approach, crowd psychology, views the group of demonstrators as an organism with an irrational life of its own that transcended the independent will of the participants, or drew them into patterns of behavior that they would not have chosen as individuals. When treated in the manner of Gustave Le Bon and his modern successors, this approach has very little relevance for early modern crowds.[9] But when the group of demonstrators is analyzed anthropologically in terms of the meaning of their collective attitudes towards violence, ritual, and belief, in the manner of Natalie Davis or Robert Muchembled, the process is much more fruitful, though still subject to methodological challenge.[10] It then merges into a fifth, more ideological approach which measures crowds against an ideal form of consciousness or sees them as manifestations of a particular set of social relationships. Here we have on the one hand Roland Mousnier and his "society of orders" and on the other the "class

[7] The classic example is Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge, MA, 1986); another is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "Révoltes et contestations rurales en France de 1675 à 1788," *Annales ESC* 29 (1974), 6–22.

[8] George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959) and many other works. A sophisticated analysis of the sociology of a single community is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, tr. Mary Feeney (New York, 1979).

[9] On the Le Bon tradition, see Serge Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd: a Historical Treatise on Crowd Psychology* (Cambridge, 1985). For a critique, see Anthony Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1973); Clark McPhail, *The Myth of the Madding Crowd* (New York, 1991). A recent sociological synthesis is Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge, 1994).

[10] Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule," in *Society and Culture*, pp. 97–123; Robert Muchembled, *La violence au village: sociétés et mentalités dans la France moderne, 16e-18e siècle* (Paris, 1989); Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, pp. 289–324; Steven G. Reinhardt, *Justice in the Sarladais 1770–1790* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1991); Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu: la violence au temps des troubles de religion (vers 1525–vers 1610)*, 2 vols. (Seyssel, 1990).

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conflict" of Boris Porchnev or the more nuanced and "cultural" class analysis of E. P. Thompson and his many admirers.[11]

My approach borrows from all of these methods but privileges certain elements and downplays others. By focusing on behavior during revolts and thus on the cultural interaction between protesters and authorities, I highlight forms of social solidarity and conflict in the context of the functioning of the political process. I concentrate on urban revolts because of their intrinsic interest. Peasant movements lasted for weeks or months, mobilized large numbers of communities, and generated regional assemblies with broad sets of demands. As a result they have made a greater impression on historians.[12] By contrast urban disturbances tend to seem like colorful diversions with no long-term significance except in the aggregate. They appear episodic, attack only selected targets, and last for brief periods of time. Nevertheless urban revolts provide a rich window on urban society. They challenged resident political authorities directly and stirred up issues of political rivalry, civic loyalty, and class consciousness. In the narrow streets of the city it was common for many constituencies – guild masters, militia companies, neighborhood leaders, priests, local judges, women, children, the poor, municipal magistrates, sovereign court judges, intendants, governors – to confront one another face to face and also to interact. These multiple layers of authorities were unique to the city, as were the tribunals, grain depots, hôtels de ville, townhouses, and shops that were often targeted. I have drawn no artificial line between urban and rural; nor have I hesitated to use evidence from smaller places when it seemed appropriate, as I have just done with Argenteuil. But this book is about town life, not peasant armies.

Another choice involves coverage. I set out initially to locate a wide range of well-documented cases without following any rigorous principle of selection. It was more important to find well-documented cases which provided narratives from several perspectives than it was to achieve an ideal chronological or geographical balance. I ended up doing research in about twenty provincial cities and adding scattered materials from other places as well. I did not tackle Paris, where the sources are extremely dispersed and the situation in the capital was arguably unique. My time

[11] E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (Feb. 1971), 76–136; reproduced with a new commentary in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York, 1993); for Mousnier and Porchnev see note 1, along with Roland Mousnier, *Peasant Uprisings in France, Russia and China*, tr. Brian Pearce (New York, 1970) and Madeleine Foisil, *La révolte des Nu-Pieds et les révoltes normandes de 1639* (Paris, 1970).

[12] For example, J. H. M. Salmon, "Peasant Revolt in Vivarais, 1575–1580," *French Historical Studies* 11 (1979), 1–28; Bercé, *Les Croquants*; Mousnier, *Peasant Uprisings*; Yvon Garlan and Claude Nières (eds.), *Les révoltes bretonnes de 1675* (Paris, 1975).

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period, ranging from the 1590s to the end of the reign of Louis XIV, was also informally chosen. It represents an era in the history of power structures, but probably not a distinct phase in the history of popular culture.

Once in the archives, I searched as widely as possible. I explored municipal council records, often for many years on either side of the crucial events. I looked as far as possible into the parallel sessions of law courts, the correspondence of governmental agents, memoirs of eyewitnesses, criminal proceedings, and anything else that looked promising. Thus I used all the main sources that describe who did what and how the authorities responded. However, my coverage was not exhaustive. After the richest lodes of material had been mined, there were still notarial archives, tax records, and parish registers, any of which could have yielded additional facts about the material background of individual participants, their family relations, and their connections to one another. I did not explore these sources systematically. A specialist studying one city or one revolt can always glean additional insights from such material, but the student of the culture of popular protest rapidly faces diminishing returns.

In work of this kind the construction of "what happened" becomes critical, and establishing an informed narrative is half the battle. The evidence is always contradictory because the eyewitness narrators had their own axes to grind and because they were not very precise about matters that seemed of no importance to them such as where the crowd went first, what they said when, and who fired what weapon. But such details can be crucial to understanding the significance of a confrontation. The analyst has to decide which version to believe concerning each individual aspect by evaluating each reporter's consistency, degree of detail, source of knowledge and motivation and by factoring in a developing personal sense of the way such incidents unfolded. It is perfectly possible for good historians to disagree on these judgments of detail, and the choices they make are inevitably influenced by their priorities.

When we turn to secondary accounts, the problem is even more acute. Many of the revolts I discuss have been written up before, but careful examination demonstrates that such narratives, even the best of them, contain chronological condensations and interpretive choices that obscure essential clues. For this reason I followed a policy of going directly to the sources of each major disturbance studied, leaving out even famous cases if I could only approach them through secondary writings.[13] The accounts that follow represent a scrupulous reconstruction of what I

[13] Thus I do not discuss the Nu-Pieds of Normandy (1639) despite the importance of this revolt.

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