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978-1-107-08279-3 - Non-Violence and the French Revolution: Political Demonstrations in Paris, 1787–1795

Micah Alpaugh

Excerpt

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Introduction

On May 31, 1793, tens of thousands of Parisians came together for one of the Revolution's most serious *journées*, calling for the removal of twenty-two hated Girondin legislators. Utilizing political methods and collaborative relationships developed over the Revolution's course, protesters made an orderly demonstration from the city's eastern suburbs to the National Convention, France's national legislature. Gaining entrance with the aid of their Jacobin allies, the march's leaders – speaking not just for their own followers but for a broader “public opinion” they claimed to personify – demanded the deputies' expulsion. Legislators promised to “examine” the request, but took no immediate action. Protesters left the hall to occupy the area outside, dispersing that night but bringing demonstrations again each of the next two days. Finally, through a mixture of popular solidarity, intimidating denunciations of their opponents, fraternal exchanges with legislative allies, and refusing to cede control of the space around the Assembly, protesters pressured the Convention into decreeing the Girondins' arrest. “[O]ne cannot help but admire,” wrote the Paris Commune in its justification of the insurrection, “a revolution operating without the effusion of blood.”¹

Protest in Paris during the French Revolution has almost always been remembered for its violent moments. From the Réveillon Riots to the September Massacres to the final insurrection of Vendémiaire Year IV, historiographical attention has focused on the outbreak and causes of bloodshed. However, the Revolutionary development of the relatively non-violent forms of protest that would become pervasive in modern France and throughout much of the world has been almost entirely overlooked. During this period, a new focus on radical inclusion, fraternal spirit, and growing collaboration with political elites led to an enhanced

¹ Anon., *Adresse des parisiens à leurs frères des départements* (Paris: Patis, 1793), 6; for a more detailed description of the movement's development, see Chapter 5.

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divide between physically violent protests and more conciliatory means of approaching power. This book focuses on what is likely the most influential of these new modes of protest, the political demonstration, and its development during the French Revolution.

In the age of the “social movement society,” in which global waves of protest and democratization – including the “Velvet Revolutions” of 1989–91, the “Color Revolutions” of the last decade, and 2011’s Arab Spring – commonly advance using tactics honed during the eighteenth century, the innovations of Paris’ popular movements may well be one of the French Revolution’s most important legacies.² Featuring participants with little previous experience in overtly political protest, groups of Parisians banded together for movements that overthrew two regimes, and helped define a model of popular participation that would become inseparable from movements for democratic change worldwide. Such Revolutionary campaigns did not predominantly develop through violent street fighting, but rather typically utilized more peaceful options such as mass meetings, banquets, petition-campaigns, and – central to this book – political demonstrations. By such means, activist Parisians and their radical legislative allies helped define the New Regime as one built from and encouraging popular participation. With the right of “resistance to oppression” enshrined in 1789’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, collective action could become justified if popular demands were ignored. Popular sovereignty and democratization together provided powerful justifications for a new relationship between protesters and governmental leaders.

French Revolutionary political demonstrations, the most visible and in many respects most influential of the era’s new forms of collective protest, did not look fundamentally different from their heirs today. In such actions, by my definition, politicized actors brought together large numbers of participants to march along symbolically important routes to publicize demands and/or present their grievances before those in power.³ Both then and now, demonstrators commonly sang anthems, carried banners and props, targeted sympathizers and/or opponents, and broadly developed political performances to attract public attention along their way. Certain elements, especially Revolutionary demonstrators’

² David S. Meyer and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *The Social Movement Society: Contentious Politics for a New Century* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997); J. Craig Jenkins, Michael Wallace, and Andrew S. Fullerton, “A Social Movement Society? A Cross-National Analysis of Protest Potential,” *International Journal of Sociology* 33.8 (2008), 12–35.

³ Much of this definition is borrowed from Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 214.

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tendency to carry weapons, may look strange to some contemporary sensibilities, though the presence of arms was closely tied to marchers' intent of making a show of strength and also to defend against very real threats of governmental repression.⁴

Perhaps the most striking and unexpected element of the 251 demonstrations identified in Paris between 1787 and 1795 is the large portion that remained physically non-violent. Indeed, only 7 percent of these identified marches ever descended into bloodshed (see Table 1). Given the myriad opportunities for physical confrontation in virtually any demonstration, that 93 percent avoided corporal violence suggests that Parisians usually had other, more conciliatory goals in mind. This trend applies almost as strongly to Revolutionary group street protests in general, defined as those featuring a dozen or more persons participating in overtly politicized and contentious behavior (including stationary events as well as marches), which remained physically non-violent 88 percent of the time – in 666 of 754 documented cases (Table 2; see Appendix for the full list of events).⁵ In examining Parisian strategies, rhetoric, and actions – as used by both radicals and conservatives – protesters much more commonly looked to build fraternal dialogue with Revolutionary elites rather than simply to overpower them. While intimidation remained part of most protests, such displays were tempered by protesters' realization of the need to persuade Revolutionary authorities to accept their demands. Protesters found conciliation, collaboration, and fraternal dialogue needed to be more central to their campaigns than violence.

Historiography: political demonstrations, French Revolutionary protest, and the presumption of violence

Asserting the importance of political demonstrations and accompanying forms of non-violent action challenges reigning orthodoxies about popular protest during the French Revolution. Although Revolutionary historians from Alphonse Aulard's classic 1913 *Histoire politique* to David Andress' *The Terror* have occasionally used the term *manifestation* (demonstration) to describe the era's marches, the influential sociologist-historian Charles Tilly and his followers posited that such activities

⁴ While the boundaries between Parisian popular movements and government-inspired activities often remained fluid, and while local governing bodies (first known as “districts” and then “sections”) organized many demonstrations, the emphasis here will be upon the considerable number of demonstrations functioning outside, and addressing, the central Revolutionary state.

⁵ Political demonstrations as well as stationary protests were counted as “group protests.”

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	1787	1788	1789	1790	1791	1792	1793	1794	1795	Total
Physically non-violent demonstrations	1 (100%)	3 (40%)	37 (86%)	24 (100%)	21 (91%)	52 (92%)	56 (100%)	18 (100%)	27 (90%)	233 (93%)
Physically violent demonstrations	0 (0%)	3 (50%)	6 (14%)	0 (0%)	2 (9%)	4 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (10%)	18 (7%)
Total	1	6	43	24	23	56	56	18	30	251

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	1787	1788	1789	1790	1791	1792	1793	1794	1795	Total
Physically non-violent protests	8 (67%)	23 (77%)	87 (86%)	94 (95%)	101 (86%)	123 (87%)	110 (96%)	44 (88%)	76 (86%)	666 (88%)
Physically violent protests	5 (33%)	7 (23%)	14 (14%)	5 (5%)	16 (14%)	19 (13%)	4 (4%)	6 (12%)	12 (14%)	88 (12%)
Total	13	30	101	99	117	142	114	50	88	754

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emerged in France only around the mid nineteenth century.⁶ This book, however, argues that Revolutionary protesters developed a new paradigm of democratic contentious politics in France, many of whose forms remain prevalent today. While politicized demonstrations occurred sporadically under the Old Regime, only during the Revolution did protesters employ such marches as part of concerted campaigns to build active and ongoing dialogues with governing elites. This emphasis on predominantly non-violent action runs counter to continuing scholarly emphasis on Revolutionary protester violence. Gaining traction from the work of George Rudé to that of François Furet, Simon Schama, Colin Lucas, Arno Mayer, and D. M. G. Sutherland, Revolutionary violence has become such a runaway theme that scholars have paid little attention to the more peaceful aspects of Revolutionary movements.⁷ This book counters by examining the prevalence of alternatives to violence in Parisian protester practice, and how such actions influenced the development of Revolutionary politics.

In attempting to classify demonstrations and other forms of protest within their historical milieu, Tilly developed the concept of a popular protest “repertoire,” describing the corpus of methods protesters employ in a given society at a given time. French contention, in his view, divided sharply between an early modern and a modern set of practices, with 1848 presented as the fulcrum of transition. But while Tilly argues that political demonstrations would not achieve a major place in Parisian protest until the 1880s, my analysis of French Revolutionary *journées* suggests this form of protest was both substantially developed and regularly deployed nearly a century earlier.⁸

⁶ Alphonse Aulard, *Histoire politique de la Révolution française: Origines et développement de la démocratie et de la République (1789–1804)* (Paris: Colin, 1913), 187; David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 178; and Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁷ George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959); François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Foster (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989); Colin Lucas, “Revolutionary Violence, the People and the Terror,” in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, Vol. IV: *The Terror*, ed. Keith Michael Baker (Oxford: Pergamon, 1994), 57–79; Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton University Press, 2000); D. M. G. Sutherland, *Murder in Aubagne: Lynching, Law and Justice during the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁸ Tilly, *The Contentious French*, William Sewell, Jr. has debated this periodization’s validity for violent insurrections in “Collective Violence and Collective Loyalties in France: Why the French Revolution Made a Difference,” *Politics & Society* 18.4 (1990), 527–52. Sidney Tarrow attempts rebuttal on the basis that “structural” change had not yet arrived in France, in “Modular Collective Action and the Rise of the Social Movement: Why the French Revolution Was Not Enough,” *Politics & Society* 21 (1993), 69–90.

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As also seen in Vincent Robert's subsequent work on French demonstrations, which focuses even more strongly on Third Republic-era changes than Tilly's, the study of French protest has remained under the long influence of Modernization Theory.⁹ Marxist scholars such as Rudé, E. P. Thompson, and Eric Hobsbawm, writing in the 1950s and 1960s, attempted to distinguish "pre-industrial" and "industrial" crowds, with the former characterized by a local, particularistic consciousness closely tied to notions of a "moral economy" motivating their collective action. Tilly's early work developed around this paradigm.¹⁰ Yet such views considerably oversimplify early modern protest: overtly politicized collective action can be found throughout much of France's history, and the movements of 1787–95 dramatically reveal the potential power and scope of politics in pre-industrial society. Indeed, Revolutionary protest appears exceptionally creative because of the complexity of its historical moment, with protesters embracing elements of both early modern and modern "repertoires": continuing to employ rituals tied to the Old Regime's "moral economy," but also deploying new methods to influence a democratizing political landscape.

An alternative to emphasizing industrialization as the key to changing forms of protest may be a model situating such changes in the rise of democratization across the eighteenth-century Atlantic World. In this conception, French Revolutionary crowds formed part of a wider pattern of regime-altering protest campaigns. Indeed, in his later writings Tilly adopted a much earlier chronology for how protest changed in Great Britain, citing the emergence of demonstrations, broad petitions, mass meetings, and accompanying methods in the "Wilkes and Liberty" movements of the 1750s.¹¹ Demonstrations also served as a central tactic in the colonial American protest movements of the 1760s and 1770s,

⁹ Vincent Robert, *Les chemins de la manifestation, 1848–1914* (Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1996). No detailed work has been undertaken on Parisian demonstrations prior to the Third Republic. For the later period, see Danielle Tartakowsky, *Les manifestations de rue en France, 1918–1968* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1997); and *Manifester à Paris, 1880–2010* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2010).

¹⁰ Rudé *The Crowd*; E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present* 50.1 (1971), 76–136; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld, 1962). On Tilly's identification with Modernization Theory, see especially Charles Tilly, "The Modernization of Political Conflict in France," in *Perspectives on Modernization: Essays in Memory of Ian Weinburg*, ed. E. B. Harvey (University of Toronto Press, 1972), 50–95.

¹¹ Tilly, *Popular Contention*. Robert Shoemaker argues for the same period that popular violence in London appeared to be declining, as "many forms of male violence became increasingly 'unacceptable' in public," in "Male Honor and the Decline of Public Violence in Eighteenth-Century England," *Social History* 26.2 (2001), 190–208.

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particularly the Stamp Act campaign of 1765–6.¹² Political club networks growing alongside, from the Sons of Liberty to Britain's Association movement to early international antislavery, spread new revolutionary cultures and sponsored direct action, from lobbying to mass petitions to street actions.¹³ With the spread of democratizing ideas and conceptions of citizenship into France, protesters – oftentimes in dialogue with international veterans of prior movements – quickly developed altered methods of interacting with the new and increasingly powerful elected officials claiming to carry out the will of the people. Even as elites in all three countries continued to decry “excesses of democracy” across the period, protesters continued to push for governments more directly responsive to the broad populace.¹⁴ Especially given the era's limited suffrage, which excluded most of the population on bases of class, race, and gender, public displays for those denied direct influence became the chief means to interact with the new political system.

The lack of attention paid to demonstrations is part of a larger marginalization of popular protest in recent French Revolutionary scholarship. Reacting to the long Marxist hegemony among French historians, François Furet and his many followers sought to minimize social history's importance in favor of discursive analysis. Within this interpretive paradigm, popular movements have been largely ignored or minimized. Indeed, one recent book has even argued that the Revolution was a period of marginalization for popular political involvement, while another major study declares the campaigns “orchestrated” by a small number of Enlightened elites.¹⁵ Over five decades after its publication, Rudé's classic *The Crowd in the French Revolution* remains the most prominent work in a subfield that subsequently entered precipitous decline. However, Rudé's focus concerned violent protests, a phenomenon he linked to bread prices and broader economic concerns – an explanation

¹² Russell Bourne, *Cradle of Violence: How Boston's Waterfront Mobs Ignited the American Revolution* (New York: Wiley, 2006), x, 91–3, 114, and 138; Dirk Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765–1780* (New York: Academic Press, 1977).

¹³ Walter H. Conser, Jr., Ronald M. McCarthy, David J. Toscano, and Gene Sharp, eds., *Resistance, Politics and the American Struggle for Independence, 1765–1775* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1986); Ian R. Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform* (London: Macmillan, 1962); Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Joanna Innes and Mark Philip, eds., *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750–1850* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750–1790* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 15.

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now unconvincing for much of the Revolution. A renewed examination of popular protest's contributions to Revolutionary political culture appears long overdue.

Yet while recent French Revolutionary scholars have generally marginalized the role of social movements, their emphasis on violence has become perhaps the field's most unifying and common theme. Furet asserted the centrality of violence to the Revolutionary experience, seeing an exclusionary, retributive message at the heart of radical rhetoric and protester action in 1789 that expanded and then exploded as the Revolution approached the Terror.¹⁶ Schama pushed the model even further, declaring in his bicentennial bestseller that “violence *was* the French Revolution.”¹⁷ Lucas described the era's principal events as a “chronology of violence.”¹⁸ Mayer's *The Furies* enlarged such arguments into a general revolutionary model, arguing “there can be no revolution without violence and terror.”¹⁹ Sutherland's recent microhistory *Murder in Aubagne* continued the trend, seeing Jacobin politics' rise as “perforce aggressive and violent.”²⁰ The widespread emphasis on Revolutionary violence, however, may obscure as much as it illuminates. This book rather focuses upon how French Revolutionaries, though vindictive towards those they believed to be trying to crush their program, also developed – and much more commonly utilized – collaborative strategies for political change. Such conciliatory measures, featuring calls for unity and dialogue between protesters and elites, existed alongside and greatly outnumbered Revolutionaries' more violent efforts against their enemies.

In many respects, the recent emphasis on violence is not new, but rather an outgrowth of a 225-year debate between conservatives decrying the old order's “violent” overthrow and radicals exulting the New Regime's achievements. This dialectic has endured from the opening eighteenth-century salvoes of Thomas Paine (in favor) against Edmund Burke, through nineteenth-century contestations between Jules Michelet and Hippolyte Taine, to the mid-twentieth-century debates of Albert Soboul and Richard Cobb, and the bicentennial battles between Michel Vovelle and Furet.²¹ The prominence achieved by Furet and his followers

¹⁶ François Furet, “Terreur,” in *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française*, ed. Furet and Mona Ozouf (Paris: Flammarion, 1988), 156–69. For a similar interpretation of the interplay between protester and elite action, see Colin Lucas, “The Crowd and Politics between ‘Ancien Régime’ and Revolution in France,” *Journal of Modern History* 60.3 (1988), 421–57.

¹⁷ Schama, *Citizens*, xv. ¹⁸ Lucas, “Revolutionary Violence,” 58.

¹⁹ Mayer, *The Furies*, 4. ²⁰ Sutherland, *Murder in Aubagne*, 87.

²¹ Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (New York: Gardener's, 2008); Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992); Jules Michelet,

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since the 1980s, however, has resulted in significant distortions. Parisian protest has widely been castigated as a dark episode of bloodshed, while Revolutionaries' emphasis on civil liberties, participatory democracy, and the power of collective action for social change has largely been ignored. The now-common "Post-Revisionist" emphasis on elite fear needs to be complicated through exploring the fraternal sociability and new methods of interaction developing between elites and popular activists.

French Revolutionary popular democracy, though assailed by Furet, Patrice Gueniffey, and others for its intolerance of pluralism, remains indispensable for understanding the Revolution's political process.²² Never before – and rarely since – has Parisian politics featured such widespread and diverse political mobilization through local governing assemblies, clubs, popular organizations, and neighborhood solidarities, all of which would significantly impact municipal and national decision-making. These trends were not limited to Paris: as John Markoff has shown in his studies of rural contention, protesters developed a "dialogical process" for influencing Revolutionary elites, that would radicalize both peasant demands and legislative action.²³ Yet Parisian protesters would build the closest political relationship with legislators, with their movements advantageously possessing close geographical proximity to national power. Behind justifications of popular sovereignty and democratic rights, protesters of the early-to-mid Revolution would build increasingly direct dialogues with political elites.

Such a prevalence of non-violent protest trends should not be viewed as a Revolutionary anomaly, but rather part of a wide movement also

Histoire de la Révolution française, 2 vols. (Paris: Laffont, 1979); Hippolyte Taine, *Les origines de la France contemporaine*, 3 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1880); Albert Soboul, *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II: Mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 2 juin 1793–9 Thermidor an II* (Paris: Clavreuil, 1958); Richard Cobb, *The People's Armies: The armées révolutionnaires. Instrument of the Terror in the Departments: April 1793 to Floréal Year II*, trans. Marianne Elliott (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987 [French original 1961–3]); Michel Vovelle, *Combats pour la Révolution française* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 1993); Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*.

²² Furet, esp. François Furet, *La Révolution: De Turgot à Jules Ferry, 1770–1880* (Paris: Hachette, 1988); Patrice Gueniffey, *Le nombre et la raison: La Révolution française et les élections* (Paris: Editions de l'école des hautes études, 1993). For more positive interpretations, see Maurice Genty, *Paris 1789–1795: L'apprentissage de la citoyenneté* (Paris: Messidor, 1987); and Michel Biard, ed., *La Révolution française: Une histoire toujours vivante* (Paris: Tallandier, 2010).

²³ John Markoff, "Violence, Emancipation and Democracy: The Countryside and the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 100.2 (1995), 360–86; *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords and Legislators during the French Revolution* (State College: Penn State University Press, 1996). Markoff in turn builds from many studies, especially Anatoli Ado, *Paysans en révolution: Terre, pouvoir et jacquerie, 1789–1794* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 1996 [Russian original 1987]); and Peter M. Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).