

II.1.

What is a Sans-culotte?

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Keywords: Paris; Parisians; popular politics; sans-culotte

The figure of the heroic, aggressive, plebeian sans-culotte has been an unchallenged part of the landscape of understanding the French Revolution for a long time. Its implicit acceptance coloured many other works – for example Darnton’s ‘Great Cat Massacre’ – that might otherwise have struggled to take a bearing on the significance of events. (Darnton, 1985) However, the image of the sans-culotte has in fact been under challenge for several decades. By the end of the 1980s, ample material was available from the research of Michael Sonenscher and Steven Kaplan to disprove a range of foundational assumptions about the interplay of socio-economic status and political culture in the artisanal world of the late 1700s. (Sonenscher, 1987, 1991; Kaplan, 1985-6) Without the solidity of paternalistic workshop structures behind it, Albert Soboul’s vision of the master-artisan class as effective and acknowledged leaders of a wider plebeian sphere crumbled – so much so that Richard Andrews was able provocatively to propose that the sans-culotte image functioned more as a means of control over workers by masters than as a symbol of their unity. (Soboul, 1958; Andrews, 1985-6)

At the same time, however, David Garrioch complicated our image of the Parisian ‘crowd’ by examining neighbourhood life in closer detail. Where George Rudé found evidence of bourgeois revolutionary ideas falling on an essentially passive population and raising them to revolt, Garrioch instead suggested, along with Arlette Farge, that ordinary Parisians were sophisticated spectators, commentators and participants in at least semi-politicized collective life long before 1789. (Garrioch, 1986; Rudé, 1959; Farge, 1993, 1994)

While a majority-Anglophone historiography has tugged strongly at some of the foundations of the sans-culotte, it is noteworthy that some Francophone currents have continued and reinforced its underlying assumptions. Work on the ‘acculturation’ of the common people to Revolutionary politics often fails to ask what politics such people had before, and whether they were more than passive recipients of pre-packaged radicalism from educated ‘porte-parole’. While a few scholars, notably Haim Burstin, have engaged with the complexities of individual and collective adoption of sans-culotte identities, others, such as Sophie Wahnich, have gone down the road of simply naming ‘the people’ as a collective participant in radicalization, without feeling the need for further specificity. (Burstin, 2005; Wahnich, 2008)

The historiographical connection between the idea of the sans-culotte and actual popular participation in the French Revolution is therefore at an impasse, one that can only be resolved by a willingness to dissect in much finer detail the implications of that idea. My own research into the street-life of Paris shows quite clearly that one can find men and women of the popular classes between 1789 and 1791 occupying every imaginable political position, with almost-indigents and semi-respectable people alike speaking up for Marat and the Cordeliers on one side, and the urgent need for social discipline to contain brigandage on the other. Prostitutes could speak the language of liberty against the revolution’s own new laws, while National Guards deplored the authorities’ unwillingness to tackle gambling-dens and other nests of counter-revolutionary corruption. In the middle there was a seething mass of opinions such that tumult seemed constantly to threaten – yet never from any truly consistent direction. (Andress, 2006)

If one leaps ahead to 1793 it is possible to say that there was no sans-culotte ‘popular movement’ that could reasonably lay claim to that name except through the jargon of self-aggrandising ‘porte-parole’. Soboul’s own evidence suggests that the presence of a popular rank and file was heavily tempered by the leading role of a solid cohort of the educated and propertied. Morris Slavin has provided excellent illustration of this in his research showing that the *Comité central révolutionnaire* that planned the 31 May–2 June rising included four lawyers, five men of letters and a series of others linked to either rentier income or entrepreneurial activity, including one former noble – but no wage-earners or working artisans. (Slavin, 1986)

Looking at the great ‘popular’ insurrections and *journées* of sans-culotte Paris, it is notable that the most successful were those clearly planned by radical leaderships in advance – such as the purge of the Girondins, or indeed the fall of the monarchy. When great events seem to have begun as relatively spontaneous agitations – such as 20 June 1792 or 5 September 1793 – they were either, as in the first case, stymied by a lack of political follow-through, or as in the latter, swiftly co-opted into a parade of institutional elite spokespersons, and a legislative agenda that did very little except strengthen the hand of the state. When popular agitations came too close to explicitly crossing the agendas of power, as in the foodriots of early 1793, or even when certain spokespersons presented an agenda too disruptive to the circuits of power, as with the *enragés* of the summer of that year, these events were struck down by verbal force, or anathematised in words and sometimes, as with the fate of Jacques Roux, deeds as well.

How, then, can research move on from here? I think there are three routes: 1) figure out how to think about the deep ingraining of street-level political awareness against and across the currents of top-down ‘acculturation’; 2) reimagine ‘the people’ of 1793 as having been there for what went before, and what several years’ experience of upheaval really meant to them; and 3) think about what it might mean to interpret the surviving language of ‘popular’ discourse in the absence of retrospective definitions of class and assertions of collective purity. We might look for a rich ‘local’ history of Paris in the mould of a book like Donald Sutherland’s about Aubagne – where the labels of the factions, and the jargon they spouted are all visible, but so too very clearly is the personal engagement, the contextual history and the gritty complexity

of individual motive. If we did all that we might be clearer on what is, and is not, a sans-culotte. (Sutherland, 2009)

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