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Becoming Revolutionaries in the Streets of Paris

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Timothy Tackett suggested, in examining the deputies of the National Assembly in 1789–90, that during this period we can consider as “revolutionaries” those who concluded that French institutions needed to be completely reshaped.¹ If we adopt this definition, then it is hard to find any revolutionaries in Paris before mid-1789. By the end of that year, however, many of the district assemblies were ardently defending the principles of popular sovereignty and direct democracy. And they were applying these ideas not only to the making of local laws – in other words, to legislative power – but also to the exercise of executive authority, which as late as April the *cahiers de doléances* had universally agreed belonged to the king. This paper asks how this happened: how did significant groups in Paris become revolutionaries? In considering the revolutionary education of Parisians, historians have stressed the education afforded by the press, by discussion in the city’s district assemblies, and by political power struggles between the districts and Paris’ Municipality. All this was important, but I wish to point to another, less studied element: the lived experience of Revolution at the local level.

The category of “experience” has been the subject of some debate in the last decade. Lynn Hunt suggested, in 2009, that “experience” offers a new way of approaching the history of the Revolution, a way of moving beyond a dichotomy between economically pre-programmed political positions and discursively constructed ones. She singled out psychological and emotional responses to violence, on the one hand, and to visual material, on the other, as profitable lines of inquiry.² Timothy Tackett has long placed similar emphasis on the importance of individual and collective experience in explaining the course of the Revolution. His 1996 book concluded that

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¹ Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary. The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789–1790)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 7.

² Lynn Hunt, “The Experience of Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 32: 4 (2009): 671–8. See also Sophia Rosenfeld, “Thinking about Feeling,” *French Historical Studies* 32: 4 (2009), 697–706. David Andress, “Introduction: Revolutionary Historiography, Adrift or At Large? The Paradigmatic Quest Versus the Exploration of Experience,” in David Andress (ed.), *Experiencing the French Revolution* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013), 1–15; and Peter McPhee, *Living the Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

there were no pre-established programs or ideologies driving the work of the National Assembly in its first year, but that its responses were a product of the encounter between each deputy's presuppositions or expectations and the reality of dealing with concrete situations and with other actors. Tackett's study of the king's flight to Varennes similarly examined individual and collective responses to that pivotal event, and in his most recent book, *The Coming of the Terror*, he has cautiously given even greater weight to emotions – another significant aspect of experience – as an explanatory tool.³

We can never, of course, really understand the experience of people in the past, and it is even more difficult when the actors left no reflections of their own, as was the case for most of the French population. We usually have only their actions. We can, however, think about those in the context of the events to which they were responding. Alison Patrick used this approach in her superb article on revolutionary local government in the provinces. She stressed the enthusiasm of local officials, their hopes and fears, but above all the way that a new political culture emerged from the myriad pragmatic decisions of men thrust into positions for which little in their previous lives had prepared them; decisions made, furthermore, under intense pressure to act, with few resources and little guidance.⁴ I am using “experience” in a similar way, arguing that the day-to-day activity of district officials in Paris, which has received little attention from historians, provided them with a revolutionary education. I also wish to suggest that their actions conveyed messages to the wider population – received consciously or unconsciously – about the nature of the Revolution and the possibilities it opened up.

The Paris districts – created in the aftermath of 14 July – have been the subject of a number of valuable publications. The most comprehensive one, by Georges Garrigues, is invaluable but is in essence an institutional history. More recent authors have been interested primarily in the way the politics of 1789–90 prepared the way for the subsequent radicalization of the Revolution. The title of Barrie Rose's excellent study, *The Making of the Sans-culottes*, makes his focus clear. Other book-length works that cover the entire revolutionary period, take a similar approach. Haïm Burstin's detailed study of the entire south-eastern part of Paris, while documenting many aspects of daily life of the first year of the Revolution, is primarily interested in the social alliances this reveals and in the way local events and debates paved the way for subsequent developments. Maurice Genty's *L'apprentissage de la citoyenneté* sees the districts as the first step towards direct democracy, and both he and Rose focus on the debates within the district assemblies and on their disputes with the Municipality.⁵

³ Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003). Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2015).

⁴ Alison Patrick, “French Revolutionary Local Government, 1789–1792,” in Colin Lucas (ed.), *The Political Culture of the French Revolution* (Oxford & New York: Pergamon Press, 1988), 399–420.

⁵ Georges Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens pendant la Révolution française* (Paris: Spes, 1931). R.B. Rose, “How to Make a Revolution: The Paris Districts in 1789,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands*

The main exception to this interest in the districts only as a prelude to later events, and one of the few studies that does not focus on the district assemblies, is David Andress's article on the Saint-Roch District. It examines policing, and argues that in this domain there was more continuity than change in the transition from Old Regime to Revolution. It points out how closely and smoothly the former police *commissaires* worked with the District officers, an observation reinforced by Vincent Denis's recent work on the revolutionary police. The new system was, Andress suggests, as authoritarian as the old, and at Saint-Roch, at any rate, it represented more of a transfer of authority than a new philosophy of government. Nevertheless, Andress points out that there, too, the District reminded the central Communal Assembly, established to represent the districts and to advise the Mayor and the municipal administration, that the "constituent power" remained at the local level, and that the members of the Assembly consisted of simple representatives, with no administrative or legislative authority of their own.⁶ This was an enormous departure from the Old Regime, in which (in principle) sovereignty and the right to exercise authority resided with the royal authorities. It shows that, despite the continuities, the local leaders had – in Tackett's terms – become revolutionaries.

Before the elections to the Estates-General, which took place in Paris in April 1789, hardly anyone in the city was thinking about root-and-branch change to the country's major institutions. Significant institutional change was imagined only in two areas: the Church, and the arbitrary nature of administration. I say "administration," rather than "government," because there is little evidence of disaffection with monarchy per se, or even with authoritarian structures on principle. The utopianism of someone like Louis-Sébastien Mercier, one of the most influential opinion-makers in Paris in the 1780s, still assumes decision-making by a wise and powerful administrator. Vincent Milliot's recent analysis of the attitudes towards the police expressed by Mercier, and by

University Library of Manchester 59 (1977): 426–57. R.B. Rose, "The Paris Districts and Direct Democracy, 1789–90," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 61 (1979): 422–43. R.B. Rose, *The Making of the Sans-culottes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983). Haim Burstin, *Une révolution à l'oeuvre: le Faubourg Saint-Marcel (1789–1794)* (Seysse: Champ Vallon, 2005), 68–139, and see his one-paragraph summing-up of the districts' activity, p. 121. Maurice Genty, *L'apprentissage de la citoyenneté. Paris 1789–1795* (Paris: Messidor, 1987). See also Maurice Genty, "Pratique et théorie de la démocratie directe: l'exemple des districts parisiens (1789–1790)," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 57 (1985): 8–24. Morris Slavin, *The French Revolution in Miniature: Section Droits-de-l'Homme, 1789–1795* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Raymonde Monnier, *Le Faubourg Saint-Antoine (1789–1815)* (Paris: Société des Études Robespierriennes, 1981). Henry E. Bourne, "Municipal Politics in 1789," *American Historical Review* 11 (1906): 263–86.

⁶ David Andress, "Neighborhood Policing in Paris from Old Regime to Revolution: The Exercise of Authority by the District de Saint-Roch, 1789–1791," *French Historical Studies*, 29: 2 (2006): 231–60, quotation p. 237. Vincent Denis "Police et société en France, de l'Ancien Régime à la Révolution," habilitation à diriger les recherches, 3 vols, Université Paris 8, 2017, vol. 2, "Policiers de Paris. Les commissaires de police en Révolution, 1789–1799", 19–48. For the creation of the Communal Assembly and the politics surrounding it, see Bourne, "Municipal Politics."

the more conservative bookseller Siméon-Prosper Hardy, shows that both men, despite their different politics, condemned police arbitrariness yet saw strong measures as a necessary bulwark against social disintegration.⁷

When, in the late 1780s, Parisians condemned what they called “despotism,” by which they meant the arbitrary actions of government ministers, the police, the guilds, and other institutions, they saw the solution as lying in reform, not revolution. The recent past offered models, in certain domains, of what this reform might look like, notably the provincial assemblies that we find referred to in the general Paris *cahier*, drawn up to convey to the king the wishes of the population.⁸ With respect to the Church, it is clear that there was widespread hostility to the wealth and privileges of some of the clergy, at the expense of others. This critique was fueled in part by a deeply-entrenched Jansenist ethos, in part by a utilitarianism that again we can see in some of the Paris *cahiers*, where there were suggestions that monasteries full of “idle” nuns and brothers should be closed. Yet here too, it was a question of reform. The *cahier* of the Third Estate insisted that “the Catholic religion is the dominant religion in France,” offering no explicit challenge to the dominant position of the Catholic Church.⁹

Even so, by April 1789 many educated people were going further, demanding that the Estates be made permanent and be given legislative authority, either jointly with the king or subject to royal approval. We find this clearly expressed in fifteen of the surviving nineteen *cahiers* of the Paris Third Estate assemblies, and in all of the surviving noble *cahiers*, and it reappears in the general *cahiers* of both orders.¹⁰ All of them were quick to insist that the monarch should retain full executive authority, but such demands nevertheless represented a clear attack on unfettered royal sovereignty. They certainly reflect a view that the central institution of the kingdom needed to be changed, and in that sense were revolutionary, although ironically the realization of this transformation depended on royal assent and did not necessarily imply root-and-branch change of any other kind. It is impossible to judge how far such thinking was shared among the wider population of Paris.

A new and, in practical terms, far more important turning-point came in July 1789, when local assemblies and committees sprang up in response to the threat of military occupation of the city. Many of the electoral assemblies from April came together again on 13 July, and it is clear that the original voters were now joined by many, many others: there were 208 voters at the Petit Saint-

⁷ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *L'an 2440, rêve s'il en fût jamais* (London: n.p., 1771), 308–13. Vincent Milliot, “*L’admirable police*”. *Tenir Paris au siècle des Lumières* (Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2016), 13–18, 297–326.

⁸ Charles-Louis Chassin, *Les élections et les cahiers de Paris en 1789*, 4 vols (Paris: Jouaust et Sigaux, 1888), 3: 322.

⁹ Chassin, *Les élections et les cahiers*, 3: 351. Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 102–4. See also Timothy Tackett, “Paths to Revolution: The Old Regime Correspondence of Five Future Revolutionaries,” *French Historical Studies* 32: 4 (2009): 531–54.

¹⁰ Chassin, *Les élections et les cahiers* 2: 257–90, 409–76 and 3: 321, 322.

Antoine elections in April, but nearly 1,200 people turned up on 13 July.¹¹ Locally-formed committees began to organize militias and soon gave themselves a continuing role, not only in coordinating the new “National Guard” but also in ensuring supplies of food. Within days, they had become the district committees, and alongside them, in many areas, the enlarged electoral bodies began holding regular meetings, calling themselves General Assemblies. Late in July they were given formal recognition by the newly organized Municipality, which set out the suggested structure of each local committee and provided for each district to be represented in a Communal Assembly (*Assemblée des représentants de la Commune de Paris*) that would advise the mayor. By early September the districts considered themselves permanent and began adopting “constitutions” setting out their functions and powers, which often went well beyond those laid out by the new Municipality.¹² These were de facto expressions of the sovereignty of the “Nation”, and they helped to make the practical implications of such a change clear to all.

Historians have focused on the debates in the district assemblies, which were undoubtedly important in articulating and in disseminating new thinking. Yet many remained socially exclusive, some deliberately excluding working people. As late as September 1789, when the crucial question of the royal veto was being discussed – whether the king should be allowed to veto legislation passed by the National Assembly – meetings were often held on weekdays during working hours, making attendance difficult for most of the population. Even for elections, the numbers remained low.¹³

Far less historical attention has been given to the day-to-day activity of the district committees. Yet these were, together with the citizen militia, which was now transformed into the National Guard, the principal mechanism by which people in Paris experienced the new order. They gave a significant number of men administrative and political experience. Only a minority of the committees conformed to the rules composed by the Municipality, which provided for a maximum of twenty-five members. Most had over thirty members at any one time: the District des Barnabites had a committee of fifty-six, Saint-Roch one of forty-eight, and several others had more than forty members. Self-appointed initially, they were soon being elected by the General Assemblies.¹⁴ Not only were many men involved at any one time, but some of them deliberately aimed for a high turnover as well. The Prémontrés District was unusual in limiting the term of office to four weeks, but others stipulated three or six months.¹⁵ The Saint-Marcel District Committee implemented this principle in October 1789, with the explicit aim of preventing the re-establishment of the oligarchy

¹¹ Rose, *Making of the Sans-culottes*, 50.

¹² Burstin, *Une révolution à l'oeuvre*, 70–1, 102–4. Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 40–1, 45 note 14.

¹³ Even the radical Cordeliers General Assembly was meeting every day from 5 to 9pm. Only a few districts, certainly the Val-de-Grâce/Saint-Jacques and Saint-Marcel, seem to have met at weekends at that point. Bibliothèque nationale de France (henceforth BnF) naf 2671, fols 24, 25, 44, 33, 35, 84. On election numbers, see Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 22. Rose, *Making of the Sans-culottes*, 59–64; Genty, “Pratique et théorie de la démocratie directe,” 16.

¹⁴ Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 42–4. Andress, “Neighborhood Policing,” 237.

¹⁵ Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 45.

they associated with the old city government of Paris: what the citizens of Saint-Marcel called “l’esprit de corporation et d’aristocratie” and what those at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet simply termed “despotism.”¹⁶

A few of the district committees opened their meetings to the public, but their high visibility arose primarily from the tasks they undertook. Their role in organizing the National Guard was hugely important. The numbers enrolled varied greatly (over 600 at Saint-Marcel and at Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, for example, but only 160 at Saint-Victor, 357 at the Val-de-Grâce, 300 at Saint-Roch).¹⁷ But the process of recruitment, in August and September 1789, meant that the committee members came into contact with an important part of the male population. Each district devised its own system for dealing with exemptions, vetting volunteers and excluding men not deemed suitable. Female property-owners, as well as the old and the infirm (and in practice most wealthy householders), were allowed to pay for a replacement to serve in their place, and the districts levied fines on men who simply failed to show up.¹⁸ All this required the creation of a list of property-owners and of eligible men living in the district. Then, having recruited the guardsmen, the committees – sometimes a dedicated “military committee” and sometimes a single district committee that did everything – organized the rosters, found guard-posts, and over the winter organized firewood and candles.¹⁹

But there were other tasks that gave the committees and their members a high local profile. They drew up electoral rolls and delivered certificates of citizenship. Some districts organized poor relief over the winter of 1789–90. In the Jacobins-Saint-Dominique District and probably in others, committee members went from house to house collecting contributions, and they used the funds to establish soup kitchens and to employ surgeons for the poor. In January 1790, the Popincourt District solicited loans to help unemployed artisans, offering to refund the money once it had sold the objects thus produced.²⁰ Food supply was always a major concern, and in late 1789 the committees were keeping a close eye on the quantity and quality of bread in the bakers’ shops. At Saint-Marcel, they had the customs-post on the road out of the city rebuilt (it had been burned down early in July), so as to prevent food from leaving Paris. By 1790 the committees were licensing businesses, seeing to the maintenance of roads and buildings, and looking after street

¹⁶ BnF naf 2671, fol. 86. Burstin, *Une révolution à l'oeuvre*, 99.

¹⁷ Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 49. Burstin, *Une révolution à l'oeuvre*, 74–9. Andress, “Neighborhood Policing,” 250.

¹⁸ Dale Lothrop Clifford, “The National Guard and the Parisian Community, 1789–1790,” *French Historical Studies* 16:4 (1990), 849–78 (862–8). Andress, “Neighborhood Policing,” 248. Genty, “Controverses autour de la garde nationale parisienne,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 291 (1993), 61–88 (81–2).

¹⁹ Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 51–70. Dale Lothrop Clifford, “National Guard and the Parisian Community,” 861–2. Dale L. Clifford, “Can the Uniform Make the Citizen?: Paris 1789–1791,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34:3 (2001), 363–82 (370).

²⁰ Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 232–5. Rose, *Making of the Sans-culottes*, 67–8.

lighting and cleaning, traffic management, and public health measures.²¹ They also received many patriotic donations and, from the beginning, denunciations of counter-revolutionary plots – the Saint-Séverin District had a dedicated “register of secret denunciations” – some of which the committees also investigated, occasionally even going outside their own jurisdiction.²² Throughout the period, all of them printed posters that were put up on the walls of the houses, some simply containing information, others with the force of decrees, enforced if necessary by the National Guard. A German visitor to Paris in August 1789 described in amazement the walls covered in these large-format papers, each one with a crowd in front, “devouring in silence or aloud these posters whose contents they then discuss.” And, he added, “what most strikes the foreigner is the individuals of the lowest social ranks, for example the water-carriers...to see the burning interest that these people take in public affairs.”²³

Thus the district committees came to occupy a central role in the administration of the city. Assisted by the National Guard, they had taken over most of the policing functions of the old police, the *commissaires au Châtelet*. They checked weights and measures, monitored brothels, gambling venues, and lodging-houses, regulated the opening hours of shops and cafés and obliged them to close on major religious holidays.²⁴ They also dealt with criminal matters within their district, notably theft and violence. The National Guard routinely escorted those whom it arrested to the local committee, which had a representative on duty most of the day. Sometimes the committee members, who may or may not have had any legal knowledge, ordered the person to be either released or imprisoned, and sometimes they imposed fines. As Andress has shown, like the old police they even found themselves dealing with disputes between neighbors, employers and employees, and within families. At Saint-Roch, two members of the committee fined a husband for beating his wife.²⁵ As under the Old Regime, this activity was a response to demand from the population. Yet whether or not the specific decisions made by the district officials were welcome, the fact that these requests were now being directed to them shows that everyone in Paris was aware of the transfer of power that had occurred.

²¹ Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 73–4, 230. Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris (henceforth BHVP) 10065, no. 161, *District de Saint Marcel, extrait des registres de délibérations, du samedi 5 septembre 1789* (Paris, 1789). Archives nationales (henceforth AN) T932, report on health inspections, 30 June 1790. Rose, *Making of the Sans-culottes*, 66–9. Slavin, *French Revolution in Miniature*, 82–3.

²² Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 74. Rose, *Making of the Sans-culottes*, 67–9. Andress, “Neighborhood Policing,” 239–41. AN Y15867, 29 March 1790.

²³ Joachim Heinrich Campe, *Été 89. Lettres d’un Allemand à Paris* (Paris: Editions du May, 1989), 41–2.

²⁴ Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 67. Andress, “Neighborhood Policing,” 252. Rose, *Making of the Sans-culottes*, 66.

²⁵ AN Y11207B, 3 Aug. 1789. AN Y14484, 27 Dec. 1789. Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 66, 68, 73. Andress, “Neighborhood Policing,” 241–3. See AN Y11208A, 9 April 1790, where the Saint-Martin committee dismissed an accusation of theft.

Only in November 1789 did the National Assembly intervene to define – and limit – the policing powers of the district committees, recognizing their authority but trying to make them consistent across the city, to prevent abuses and bring them under central control. The decree directed the National Guard to take suspects to the former *commissaires* of the Châtelet rather than to the district, but it authorized the district committees to name two local citizens who would be present at every interrogation. This was already being done in many districts, aiming to ensure that no arbitrary decisions were taken by the *commissaires*, but the new rule was also a response to complaints of arbitrariness in the actions of district officials.²⁶ The other powers of the districts, however, remained intact.

Alongside the committees, and working closely with them, the operation of the National Guard was hugely important, although it too has been little studied. It effectively took over all the functions of the urban guard that had been run by the Old Regime police. It patrolled the streets, arrested thieves, vagabonds, and smugglers, assisted with policing the opening hours of shops and with measures to maintain public safety, such as crowd control in case of fire or riot. It accompanied shipments of grain, sometimes going outside the city, and helped to police the often-turbulent markets. It dealt with issues of public order, which might also be political, as on 21 October 1789 when the National Guard in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine arrested a worker from the Bastille for trying to mobilize a crowd to demand more bread. He was interrogated by Antoine-Joseph Santerre, then the commander of the local National Guard in the Enfants-Trouvés District, before being sent on to the *Hôtel-de-Ville* (City Hall). But much of the National Guard's work, like that of the old urban guard, involved routine public services. It took bodies to the morgue, picked up drunks and abandoned children, enforced public health measures, and intervened in neighborhood disputes.²⁷

At the same time, the National Guard was clearly a major vector for the spread of ideas and for the practice of direct democracy. Its officers were elected, and the scant evidence suggests that these elections mobilized more voters than those to the Communal Assembly.²⁸ As noted earlier, a large number of men served in the Guard, and thanks to the system of employing paid replacements they were drawn from all but the richest and the very poorest strata of the population. In October 1789, the battalions of the central districts and of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine thus included quite a large number of journeymen and laborers, even if the majority were shopkeepers and master artisans. Although some historians have seen the cost of the uniform as excluding working men, Dale

²⁶ Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 56–64. Andress, “Neighborhood Policing,” 240–43, 252–4. Denis, “Police et société,” 2: 37.

²⁷ AN Y18768, 21 Oct. 1789. I am indebted to Michael Sonenscher for bringing this document to my attention. Clifford, “National Guard and the Parisian Community,” 851–9, 870–3. AN Y14484, 29 July, 13, 24, 28 Sept., 4 Oct., and 7, 24, 30 Nov. 1789. See also Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 67–8.

²⁸ Dale Lothrop Clifford, “Command Over Equals: The Officer Corps of the Parisian National Guard,” *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 18 (1991): 152–65 (152).

Clifford has shown that many districts provided uniforms, and that some deliberately selected as paid replacements men who were unemployed and in need. Other guardsmen purchased second-hand uniforms, and some were shared. Hence many men of quite modest rank managed to remain in the ranks well into 1790.²⁹ The proximity of the Guard to the working population was a key factor in its participation in the march to Versailles in October 1789. But for those who were excluded, particularly after October, the experience of being forced out may in itself have been a radicalizing influence.

The initial creation of the district committees and of the bourgeois militia (as it was called at first) was very clearly a revolutionary action by the citizenry, and over the following months their activity became a major source of revolutionary education. The fact that they were obeyed, when they stepped in to replace the Old Regime police during the vacuum of authority following the fall of the Bastille, demonstrated to everyone the transfer of power that had taken place. In the process, the committee members and the population alike were learning how self-government could operate, even in a city the size of Paris.

This practical experience of exercising sovereignty, through the committees and the National Guard, underpinned some of the positions taken by the districts almost from the beginning. Many of them very quickly made clear that they perceived the central assemblies in which they were represented, and the increasingly powerful Municipality itself, as an emanation of their will and not as bodies with their own distinct legitimacy. They insisted that their deputies could be revoked at will, if they failed to represent the views of those who had elected them.³⁰ The Saint-Marcel General Assembly decided that important issues should be discussed at its weekly meetings, so that the Municipality could be informed of what the people were thinking *before* it took decisions. The District's General Assembly also appealed to the representatives of all the districts to keep a close eye on the governing body of the Municipality, to ensure it was conforming to the will of the people.³¹ This became a major issue in November 1789, when a decree of the National Assembly, obtained by Mayor Jean-Sylvain Bailly, declared the policing functions of the districts subject "to the orders and terms which will be issued by the Municipality." Several districts protested vigorously at the "usurpation" of their authority and their committees sometimes explicitly rejected rulings of the municipal officers.³² A little earlier, in September, at least two of the districts had argued that the National Assembly itself should make no decision on whether to allow the king to veto legislation until the districts had discussed the issue. Again in April 1790, when the

²⁹ George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 77, note 1. Clifford, "National Guard and the Parisian Community," 850, 862–8. Clifford, "Can the Uniform Make the Citizen?" 374, 377. Genty, "Controverses autour de la garde nationale parisienne."

³⁰ Genty, "Pratique et théorie de la démocratie directe," 12–14. Burstin, *Une révolution à l'oeuvre*, 97–8.

³¹ BHVP 10065, no. 161, *District de Saint Marcel, extrait des registres de délibérations, du samedi 5 septembre 1789* (Paris, 1789). For other examples, Andress, "Neighborhood Policing," 237 and Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 40.

³² Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 69.

Municipality tried to assert its authority over the districts, there were explicit statements that sovereignty resided at the local level, not at the center.³³ As Jacques-Pierre Brissot complained, “Since the districts have taken it into their heads to meet constantly, many of them have disputed the powers of their representative at the Commune, opposed decrees of the National Assembly, and even judged the judges.”³⁴

Similar disputes erupted over control of the National Guard. The elected officers were expected, in the eyes of most Parisians, to act as leaders of equals, owed obedience but not abject deference. Several districts attempted to limit their term of office, and some expected the men elected to return to the ranks after their term, allowing others to command in their place. Most chose as officers men who were not also members of the Communal Assembly, once again seeking to avoid concentrating power in too few hands. There was much hostility, in the districts, to the Marquis de Lafayette’s direct appointment of officers to the central General Staff of the National Guard, on the grounds that they, too, should be elected. Two districts subsequently came into conflict with the Municipality for attempting to remove officers from their positions for neglecting their duties.³⁵

The district assemblies undoubtedly had a role in developing these ideas and in disseminating new understandings within the electorate. Nevertheless, only a few of them supported wide participation in debate and decision-making, preferring to restrict it to the better-off male population. In any case, as noted earlier, attendance at the district assemblies seems to have been quite low, even for elections, and women were excluded.³⁶ By contrast, even though no sources allow us to identify the thinking of the mass of the population who did not make their views heard at district meetings, all the inhabitants of the city witnessed the district committees and the National Guard at work. If, in mid-1789, the revolutionary consequences of their actions were unintended and unexpected, by the end of the year many Parisians were defending the powers of locally elected bodies, with the deliberate goal of cementing the shift in sovereignty from the monarchy to the people.

Of course, wider events clearly played a key role in the revolutionary education of Parisians, as did the press whose output was growing explosively in these months. It was the struggle between the Third Estate and the privileged orders, the king’s clumsy response and the threat of military intervention, which precipitated the crisis of July 1789 in Paris. The resistance to reforms that most people, as far as we can tell, believed were desirable and necessary, and the perception that those responsible would stop at nothing to prevent them, were key factors in mobilizing Parisians behind the Third Estate and particularly behind the more radical deputies. We can also see, in direct

³³ Garrigues, *Les districts parisiens*, 58–60. Tackett, *Coming of the Terror*, 85. Burstin, *Une révolution à l'oeuvre*, 99. Genty, “Pratique et théorie de la démocratie directe,” 23–4.

³⁴ Jacques-Pierre Brissot, *Le Patriote français*, no. 209, quoted in Bourne, “Municipal Politics,” 271.

³⁵ Clifford, “Command Over Equals,” 153–8. Genty, “Controverses autour de la garde nationale parisienne,” 78–9.

³⁶ See footnote 13.

response to what was happening at the National Assembly, growing support for further changes to national institutions. An early example came in September 1789, in debates over whether the king should be able to veto legislation passed by the National Assembly. This provoked a great deal of discussion and passion in Paris. A little later, from early 1790, political clubs began to proliferate, some of them open to women, and people discussed current events in cafes and in the street.³⁷ There were many sources of information and education in the new revolutionary politics.

The events I have just referred to reinforced a predisposition to see conspiracies as responsible for all kinds of mishaps.³⁸ That led to individuals or groups being blamed, rather than structures, but although this assumption never disappeared, one of the features of the early Revolution was the belief that if appropriate legal and administrative changes were made, then France would be regenerated. Hence the insistence, at the local level, that the districts have a permanent role in city government, that they should control the National Guard, that all public officials and the officers of the Guard should be elected, and that their terms of office be restricted. All these measures were explicitly intended to prevent cosy deals and patronage. The Old Regime experience had led to dissatisfaction with this form of administration, and the new, relatively open structures of the districts and elected National Guard offered an alternative model, demonstrating what a regenerated France might look like.

This short paper does not claim that all Parisians had become revolutionaries, in Tackett's sense, by the middle of 1790. That certainly was not the case, although the huge numbers who attended the Fête de la Fédération on 14 July 1790, despite the pouring rain, point to enormous enthusiasm for the Revolution and for the new constitution.³⁹ There were, as I have noted, many factors that led Parisians to become revolutionaries. I have not evoked the key experiential role played by direct action and by the spontaneous organization of trade associations and of café societies and clubs, what Tackett has called "the dynamics of democracy," although the districts and the National Guard were a crucial part of this phenomenon, very early models for the principles of popular sovereignty and elective office.⁴⁰ I have also said little about the pre-revolutionary experiences and assumptions that, as in the case of the deputies of the National Assembly, helped

³⁷ Dominique Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses. Les femmes du peuple à Paris pendant la Révolution française* (Paris: Alinea, 1988), 89–94, 109–17. Rose, *Making of the Sans-culottes*, 96–116.

³⁸ Timothy Tackett, "Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789–1792," *American Historical Review* 105: 3 (2000), 691–713. Tackett, *Coming of the Terror*, 135–9. David Andress, "'Horrible Plots and Infernal Treasons': Conspiracy and the Urban Landscape in the early Revolution," in Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser, and Marisa Linton (eds), *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2007): 85–105.

³⁹ Adrien Joseph Colson, *Lettres d'un bourgeois de Paris* (Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire, Christian Pirot, 1993), 146–51. Marcel Reinhard, *Nouvelle histoire de Paris: La Révolution* (Paris: Hachette, 1971), 182–5. Mona Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire, 1789–1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), chap. 2.

⁴⁰ Tackett, *Coming of the Terror*, 76–82.

to shape responses to the early events of the Revolution.⁴¹ All of those factors were crucially important for particular groups within the Paris population. But what I hope to have shown here is that it is worth taking seriously the experience of revolution that was provided by the day-to-day operations of the district committees and of the National Guard in these early months. Through these institutions, some hundreds of men gained vital experience in administering local affairs, everything from food supply and street maintenance to policing and dispute resolution. Far greater numbers did service as national guards, and while much of that time was certainly spent doing very little, at other moments they exercised authority in dealing with disputes, sorting out traffic problems, and in conducting arrests and preliminary interrogations. When they spoke of their role in these matters, in reporting to the police authorities, they expressed pride and confidence.

Even more people learned about institutions by seeing them in action. They saw ordinary citizens – sometimes their neighbors – organizing and running the city, taking command of armed men, becoming leaders. The work of the district committees and of the National Guard offered a practical demonstration of the way government could be conducted at the local level. Not everyone liked the example they provided. It is also unlikely that everyone reflected on the more abstract issues of sovereignty that their actions raised. The debates over the king’s veto suggested that for many people, immediate practical considerations were more significant than principles of government: although the argument was made, in at least one district, that a royal veto infringed the separation of powers that underpinned good government, much opposition to the royal veto was clearly driven by the likelihood that the king would use it to block the decrees of 4 August, under pressure from conservatives in the clergy and at Court.⁴² Yet there was a principle underlying this, too: a long-standing concern about cabals and undue influence – “aristocratic despotism” – and a commitment to participatory government that led many people to support limiting the power of the throne. That was a revolutionary stand, as Tackett defined it for the deputies: those who took this position – and admittedly we do not know how numerous they were – had concluded that the key institutions of the kingdom needed changing, both in formal, constitutional terms and in the informal ways that they operated. They were determined to shift the locus of sovereignty.

The issue of the royal veto was an extension of concerns and principles that continued to be debated at the local level. There, too, fears that government would be manipulated by a few influential people, to the detriment of the majority, dictated firm support for local autonomy. Such support, furthermore, was not limited to having an ongoing say in legislation and in the choice of officials (often termed “direct democracy” by historians). Most of the disputes in municipal affairs that occurred between July 1789 and June 1790 were about hands-on control of administration by local people, and hence about executive power rather than legislative authority.⁴³ In Paris, in this first year of the Revolution, the daily experience of self-government was a powerful force in transforming subjects into revolutionaries.

⁴¹ See David Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); for a summary, 283–99.

⁴² BnF naf 2671, fol. 10.

⁴³ Maurice Genty, “Pratique et théorie de la démocratie directe,” 22.

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