

The bicentennial of the French Revolution marked less the apotheosis of revisionism than the entombment of Marxism, rendering the scholarly field devoid of a unifying interpretation. If, as Lynn Hunt recently noted, historians since 1989 have continued to search for a new paradigm, then no comparable quest is needed to identify violence as a central focus of their inquiry.[1] A mention of major publications by Patrice Gueniffey, Arno Mayer, Howard Brown, and Jean-Clément Martin, all of which contain “violence” in their titles, illustrates the point most obviously.[2] But considerable additional evidence—for example, international conferences on the subject, the proliferation of work on related subfields such as conspiracy and emotions, and the fact that this is the second H-France Forum since 2007 devoted to the topic—highlights scholarly attention to the causes, nature, and significance of French revolutionary violence.[3] Antoine Pierre Barnave’s infamous retort to Lally-Tollendal in the aftermath of the July 1789 murders of Bertier and Foulon (“Ce sang qui vient de se répandre était-il donc si pur?”) might fairly or unfairly stand revolutionaries condemned of insouciant disregard for the phenomenon of violence, but no such charge can be hurled at contemporary scholars.

As an organizer of the aforementioned international conference, D. M. G. Sutherland has long insisted that “clearly it is time to discuss the issue [revolutionary violence] directly.”[4] On one hand, the call stems from Sutherland’s disagreement with the Marxist-Jacobin treatment of violence. In this synthesis, popular violence emanated either from the understandable but restrained anger of hungry patriots or the perceived need to preempt counterrevolutionary plots during national crises. State violence or Terror resulted from emergency circumstances facing France in 1793 and mostly corresponded to the geography of civil war and counterrevolution. For Sutherland, the historiography depicting revolutionary violence as largely rational and justifiable contains serious flaws: George Rudé’s focus on hungry Parisians provides an incomplete picture of popular violence; Donald Greer’s work normalizes the Terror and leads, as Sutherland puts it, to the “banalization of revolutionary justice” (p. 173); the thesis of circumstances neglects the significance of local factors in understanding the nature and chronology of bloodshed and repression.[5]

On the other hand, Sutherland’s call also has roots in his dissatisfaction with revisionists’ treatment of revolutionary violence as either the essence of the Revolution, as depicted by Simon Schama, or the logical unfolding of French revolutionary ideology, as argued forcefully by François Furet and Keith Michael Baker.[6] To Schama’s pithy contention that “the Terror was merely 1789 with a higher body count” Sutherland retorts just as pithily that “to connect the Ideology dot directly to the Terror dot, one has to forget about explaining why the Terror occurred when it did and where it did” as a way of emphasizing the importance of contingency and the unfolding narrative between 1789 and 1793.[7] And while he might share revisionists’ umbrageous characterization of the Revolution, he differs from them insofar as he is a self-professed empiricist deeply immersed in regional archives, whose body of
work stresses popular resistance as the central dynamic of the Revolution. As such, Sutherland objects to revisionists’ “fixation on a Paris-based interpretation [of the Terror],” their focus on discourse and political culture to the neglect of human agency and the local impact of revolutionary policies, and their privileging of Rousseauist ideology over the dialectic of revolution and counterrevolution. For him, “there was a Terror in France in 1793-4 because there was an armed opposition against the Republic,” an armed opposition that existed because “revolutionaries drove very large numbers of men and women to a profound revulsion against them and their works….”

Sutherland’s present addition to the literature on the subject originated in his discovery of the *grande affaire d’Aubagne*, an 1801 trial of sixty-seven people for numerous murders and other crimes in the town’s vicinity from 1795 to 1798. Armed with the techniques of microhistory, he situates the crimes in the broader context of political upheaval and social tension in Aubagne since 1789. But Sutherland’s purpose is not to play the archival sleuth to recount a sensational murder mystery (indeed, *caveat lector*: casual readers attracted by the title and accustomed to the charms of best-selling microhistories such as *The Return of Martin Guerre* or *The Cheese and the Worms* will encounter here a challenging work intended for a scholarly audience). Rather, he contends that a study of one violent town sheds light on the phenomenon of revolutionary violence in general. But comprehending Aubagne’s violence necessitates a regional study of the Midi, especially the Bouches-du-Rhône department and the turbulent city of Marseille around which Aubagne orbited, with a particular focus on the area’s dense network of militant Jacobin clubs. In fact, the index suggests and the text confirms that the author devotes more space to Marseille than to Aubagne. So a project commenced as a microhistory assumes many characteristics of a regional monograph.

Although a more systematic treatment of it in one place would have increased the book’s clarity, Sutherland’s unifying argument seems to consist of the following interrelated components. First, Aubagne’s violence was a product of the town’s factionalism and the struggle to control local institutions. Second, while the Terror organized by the National Convention purportedly aimed to defend the Revolution from foreign and domestic enemies, in Aubagne Jacobins “translated the national idiom of terror into a local context” (p. 206), meaning that terror in the Bouches-du-Rhône was a continuation of factional struggle in which each party, when in power, organized repression to eliminate its opponents. Finally, the author claims that “a special kind of democracy explains why the Revolution was so violent and tragic here” (p. 12), for the doctrine of popular sovereignty—endorsed by patriot leaders, Jacobin clubs, and revolutionary crowds alike—was applied to the realm of justice and vindicated the bypassing of the rule of law and legal procedures in order to punish enemies of the people. Popular belief in the right to administer justice directly, stemming in part from authorities’ “desire to use the judicial apparatus of government for political ends in the French Midi,” (p.11) fuelled vigilantism in the region. When this vigilante instinct was channeled institutionally through the *comité de surveillance* in 1793, the result was that “the Terror became an ultimate, nuclear weapon in the hands of one of the local factions” (p. 291). After Thermidor the anti-Jacobins turned the doctrine of popular justice against the Jacobins and employed terrorist methods against the terrorists, giving rise to the wave of murders at the heart of the *grande affaire d’Aubagne*. The 1801 trial dossier that he first stumbled across ultimately led Sutherland to contemplate the “phenomenon of violent democracy” (p. 285).

On a basic level this book constitutes an impressive research feat. Anyone familiar with provincial French records will appreciate, upon perusing the (online) bibliography’s twelve pages of archival sources, the enormous amount and enormously complicated nature of the work required to complete it. (A list containing thirty-one pages of primary sources might in this climate justify Cambridge University Press’ decision to publish the bibliography electronically, but the book’s lack of a map is inexplicable.) Anyone familiar with Sutherland’s body of scholarship will appreciate his qualifications to do this study. The re-creation of the narrative, both in Aubagne and the entire region, itself stirs admiration, but the painstaking analysis is especially noteworthy. To cite but one example, Sutherland’s
More important is the fact that Sutherland illuminates refugently the experience of revolution in a local context. He examines the sociology of factions and the principal pre-revolutionary sources of tension—the rights of banality and the tax on grain and flour (piquet)—and then reveals how local solidarities were mobilized in a contest for political power, the winning of which would either preserve or restructure the town’s fiscal system. By following the Jacobin ascendency as well as the manner in which revolutionaries from Marseille intervened to promote that ascendency, he explains why local politics failed to “settle down” (p. 62) after the reform of municipal taxes; the mobilization of anti-Jacobins in the face of Jacobin militancy plays a central role in this story of the failure to establish a viable civic order in Aubagne. Sutherland also describes the town’s drift to violence as tensions spilled over into bloodshed with the lynching of two people in September 1792. Subsequent recriminations over vigilantism and divergent attitudes toward political violence contributed to growing factional enmity throughout the region, which ultimately manifested itself in the federalist revolt. In tracing the Jacobin’s return to power in 1793, Sutherland sheds light on how an informal terror whose goal he describes as the “mass annihilation” (p. 174) of local enemies merged with the Convention’s repression of military and political threats to the Republic, though not without conflict over strategy, especially with the representatives on mission Barras and Fréron. His late chapters show how Jacobin militants, insensitive to the prevailing moderate winds after Thermidor, provoked a “revolution of the antiterrorists” or White Terror, which included Aubagne’s violence from 1795 to 1798 (p. 214).

But Sutherland’s work pays more dividends beyond the detailed depiction of revolution in a unique setting. The combination of microhistory and regional monograph allows him to offer important insights into, and challenge scholarly consensus about, numerous themes that cross his range. Clearly, Sutherland adds significantly to an understanding of revolutionary factionalism and in so doing fills an important lacuna in Arno Mayer’s provocative but much criticized analysis of “the furies” as the product of counterrevolution inevitably unleashed by revolution.[11] Murder in Aubagne also doubles as a major study of Jacobinism. In finding much overlap between revolutionary crowds and the clubs, Sutherland rejects the argument that “the crowd imposed violent policies on otherwise-reluctant Jacobins who went along to forestall an even worse violence” (p. xii).[12] The “unscrupulous” Jacobin “hotheads” (p. 140) portrayed here as engaged in destabilizing mass mobilization and preaching mass annihilation scarcely resemble those revolutionaries committed to social justice as analyzed by Jean-Pierre Gross.[13] Federalism emerges as another central theme. Sutherland’s treatment of the topic covers familiar terrain but with a stronger accent on the violence of the conflict and with more attention to how putative “law and order” anti-Jacobin sections accepted exemplary justice and resorted to exceptional measures of repression just as their Jacobin opponents had.[14] In Aubagne, the rise and fall of federalism mirrored events in Marseille. As suggested earlier, Sutherland also enriches our knowledge of the Terror, specifically by showing how local measures of repression during the “anarchic terror” of late 1793 were as noteworthy as the repressive apparatus organized by the state; ultimately the strands of Terror would merge as the comités de surveillance, closely linked to Jacobin clubs, invoked the Law of Suspects to convey enemies to the revolutionary tribunal. Along with the recent articles by Stephen Clay, this book is a welcome addition to studies on the White Terror and complements Howard Brown’s research on the intractable problems of law and order confronting the Directory.[15] Sutherland interprets the réaction not merely as a product of a post-Terror thirst for vengeance, but as a continuation of local factional struggles in which a vigilante instinct, linked to “doctrines of popular justice” (p. 216) and abetted by the complicity or inactivity of officials who failed to support the rule of law, was both “cause
and consequence” of the “destruction of the civic order” (p. 261). The preceding idea points to a final theme of Sutherland’s book captured in the “lynching, law and justice” of the title. On an anthropological level, he invokes Mary Douglas to interpret revolutionary lynchings as attempts to restore a pure community through the ritual killing and humiliation of impure individuals. Politically, lynchings and revolutionary violence stemmed from “l’application à la sphère judiciaire des idées de la souveraineté populaire.”[16]

A meticulously researched piece brimming with insights, Sutherland’s study provides additional evidence that the Terror—“never a single essence that a single definition can capture” (p. 212)—should not necessarily be understood as a “system” emanating from Paris, [17] just as it provides a fascinating portrayal of how French people in a distinctive town and region experienced the Revolution. The issue of how distinct and why will rightly attract scholars’ attention. On the one hand, he correctly concludes that violence in Aubagne and Provence “was not paradigmatic of France as a whole” and that it “had few counterparts elsewhere in the country” (p. 285), just as he maintains that “another lesson…is the immense diversity of the experience of Revolution in France” (p. 286). On the other hand, his larger goal aims at interpreting revolutionary violence more generally, just as he had previously objected to Jean-Clément Martin’s enumeration of the multiple causes of that violence as a “scatter-gun approach” by proffering an alternative explanation related to the nature of justice in France from 1789 to 1799. [18] Unless he contends that Aubagne’s uniqueness rests in the amount and intensity rather than the source of its upheavals, the acknowledgement of the region’s non-paradigmatic status fits uneasily with his more ambitious agenda, stated in earlier writings and suggested in the present book, linking violence to the practice of direct democracy in the judicial sphere.

That overall argument, whose slipperiness must be reiterated, will attract scholarly challenges on several grounds. First, one wonders if, notwithstanding ex post facto justifications, categorizing violence as “popular justice” is the best way to view the issue. In contrast to Sutherland’s interpretation of violence as the logical unfolding of a system of popular justice that served as an alternative to formal justice, it seems plausible to suggest that the spilling of blood in many circumstances was instead the expression of communitarian tensions unleashed in specific crisis periods characterized by inter-elite strife, inadequate repressive forces, and a “défaut d’état.” [19] Second, Sutherland’s admission that “reconstructing the theory of popular revolutionary justice is also hard because most of the sources condemn its most spectacular feature, vigilantism” (p. 118) suggests that much more tension existed at times between crowds and revolutionary leaders than he lets on. He conflates popular, formal (the institutions and practices of which go unexplored), and exceptional justice into a doctrine of revolutionary justice that encouraged vigilantism and retribution when keeping them separate might help explain not only the areas and circumstances of their overlap but also the drift from formal to exceptional justice partly (and only partly) because of the demands of a mobilized populace desirous of protecting revolutionary gains and mistrustful of public officials. Finally, while the restructuring of access to political power, combined with the events of July 14, 1789 and August 10, 1792 as well as the enshrining of the right of insurrection in the constitution of 1793, undoubtedly rendered popular sovereignty a potent element of revolutionary political culture that merits attention in any explanation of how local groups became violent, as a catch-all explanation the concept remains unconvincing. It scarcely applies to anti-seigneurial violence studied by John Markoff, for example, [20] let alone one of Aubagne’s three episodes of violence: the furtive, pre-meditated, night-time murders during the réaction (the others consisted of two lynchings in 1792 and the judicial killing of nineteen people during the Terror). Here vengeance motivated by factional hatred explains violence better than does the idea of an aroused people asserting judicial sovereignty. Stephen Clay’s recognition of this popular violence as a challenge inherent in the establishment of a new judicial system in places where passionate hatred defined political life is more nuanced than Sutherland’s portrayal of it as the expression of a revolutionary doctrine of justice writ large. [21]
In an otherwise laudable work, one weak aspect of Sutherland’s book relates to his analysis of why Aubagne’s factionalism failed to recede after Jacobin victories and a new tax system by 1792 “introduced real fiscal justice” (p. 87). He cites as the primary cause of an escalation into violence the revival of a peasant program articulated by the cultivator Pichou during the turmoil surrounding the drafting of cahiers in March 1789. Sutherland says of Pichou’s anti-seigneurial and anti-bourgeois speech: “The verbal violence of this angry tirade with its chilling threats and its loathing of the old elite obviously point forward” (p. 42). This emphasis on foreshadowing—even the Bastille Day 1792 stringing up of Lafayette in effigy revealed “the rehearsal quality for the real hangings to come” (p. 98)—allows the author to link rhetorical excesses in 1789 to the actual violence of 1792, thereby connecting the “popular sovereignty dot” of 1789 to the “violence dot” of 1792. And the essence of that peasant program? “This would be a society with the enemy eliminated altogether, with, in effect, no need for struggle because the enemy was no longer” (p. 87). In other words, patriotic successes in dislodging traditional political structures raised Jacobin hopes for “a much more utopian outcome: the physical elimination of enemies” (pp. 89-90). Scant evidence supports such a claim, and in any event the contours of that utopia receive less-than-cursory treatment, perhaps the reflection of Sutherland’s interest in the nature of Jacobin politics rather than their ideals.

Finally, despite Sutherland’s impressive efforts and the undeniable significance of factionalism, the precise nature of the anti-Jacobin faction emerges only opaquely. He writes that in February 1792 “the social composition of the anti-Jacobins was not yet clear,” (p. 62) and the uncertainty never dissipates. Furthermore, the political values of the “anti-Jacobins,” a capacious grouping that obscures ambiguities, are difficult to pin down. Are the individuals who organized at the bastide of Rousserie shouting “vive l’aristocratie, vivent les aristocrats” or the revelers who celebrated the annulment of elections at the Château Belloi, owned by the Bishop of Marseille and seigneur of Aubagne, the same federalist republicans who supposedly accepted the revolutionary heritage but simply disagreed with Jacobins over the notion of democratic accountability? And who exactly were the fifty-nine Aubagniens tried during the Terror and the nineteen executed? For all of Sutherland’s detailed investigating, this looms as an important omission, since a clear picture of the group would support his claims about the Terror and White Terror as continuations of factional strife. In addition, it is significant that the only two members of the bande d’Aubagne who confessed to crimes from 1795 to 1798 admitted membership in the counterrevolutionary Company of the Sun and Jesus, commanded by the émigré Jourdan and in the pay of the former curé Martinot, to whom the ear of the murdered Jullien père was presented. To raise this point is not to accept uncritically the Jacobin contention that all gangs in the Midi were counterrevolutionary and royalist, about which Sutherland concedes: “This picture is not so much wrong as incomplete” (p. 276). Rather, doing so questions the catholicity of the book’s argument about the application of popular sovereignty in the judicial sphere as the mainspring of revolutionary violence, just as it reminds us that some of the violence can be attributed to fears about, and the actual existence of, enemies of the Revolution.

NOTES


On federalism in Marseille see the voluminous writings of Jacques Guilhaumou and also Paul R. Hanson, *The Jacobin Republic under Fire: The Federalist Revolt in the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003). Sutherland writes (p. 190, n. 19) that Hanson’s is a “handy narrative” but one that “underplays the violence of local politics.”


Jean-Clément Martin cautions about the misuse of the concept of “popular justice” in “Violences et justice,” p. 131, while the idea of a “défaut d’état” looms large as a theme of *Violence et Révolution*.
