

Colin Jones

As I take my battered, now coverless, spine-half-broken copy off the shelf, I discover that the 60th anniversary of the publication of George Rudé's *The Crowd in the French Revolution* is also the 50th anniversary of my purchasing it. The physical dilapidation of my personal copy is tribute not just to the passage of time but also to my frequent consultation over the years of this pioneering volume in the tradition of "history from below" — the Revolution, as Rudé with modest punctiliousness put it, "seen as it were from below".¹ Reflecting, I wonder whether I purchased the book just after I had seen Rudé — my only sighting in fact — deliver a lecture Oxford in that year, dressed in an elegantly cut three-piece suit which made him look more like a natty city gent than the radical historian and activist. Certainly, I was at the lecture and bought the book because I was studying the French Revolution and because 1969 happened to be one year after 1968, so "revolution" and "history from below" were not only in the air — they were also entering the bloodstream of the historical profession. Rudé was, after all, one of the "five musketeers" — along with Richard Cobb and Albert Soboul (the two very much Rudé co-workers), and Edward Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm — who were making this kind of approach to the past a central preoccupation of the discipline in Anglo-French circles for decades to come.

Time has dealt Rudé's influential volume some very telling blows. The crowd itself is a rather fuzzy historical object.² The choice of the hyper-reactionary Hippolyte Taine as his interlocutor appears suspiciously like the deliberate selection of a straw man. Rudé looks popular violence squarely in the eye, but his emphasis on the respectability of the social composition and motivations

Colin Jones is Professor of History at Queen Mary University of London and visiting Professor at the University of Chicago. He studied for his D Phil in Oxford under the supervision of Richard Cobb. He is the author of many books on the history of France, including *The Great Nation: France 1715-99* (2002), *Paris: Biography of a City* (2004), *The Smile Revolution in 18th-century Paris* (2014) and *Versailles* (2017). He is currently completing a history of the *journee* of 9 Thermidor Year II.

¹ Rudé, *Crowd*, 5.

² See the comments of Andress, *Massacre at the Champ de Mars*, esp. 15, 22-4.

of revolutionary crowds comes close at times to sanitising the character of popular radicalism.³ Furthermore, the idea that the crowd action on which Rudé focussed his attention was merely a pre-industrial prelude to factory-based producer-led collective action looks quaint following the coup de grâce that post-modernism, late capitalism and the demise of world communism delivered on all such teleologies. Post “Cultural/Linguistic Turn,” moreover, the idea that anyone could write an introduction about 18th-century Paris without even mentioning the Enlightenment seems quite extraordinary; but then this was a moment when the causes of the Revolution were still invariably parsed in terms of the price of bread rather than the ideas of Voltaire or Rousseau or indeed anyone else.⁴

Rudé gave prime importance to economic factors in explaining political action in a way that most historians these days find clunky. And his economics are in fact rather problematic. The critical importance that he accorded to the scissor movement between prices and wages in triggering collective political action looks decidedly off-target. The dependence of his model on the level of wages of the male breadwinner — an approach that derives from C.E. Labrousse, one of his mentors — disregards the extent to which the popular economy was above all a family economy in which the wages of all members counted.⁵ The volume of research on the material culture of the popular classes in the wake of Daniel Roche’s *Le peuple de Paris* (1981) has, moreover, demonstrated that the *sans-culottes* did not live by bread alone: indeed they were rarely totally *sans café* and even struggled when obliged to be *sans sucre*.⁶ In many cases, the emphasis on bread in popular ideology was more symbolic and rhetorical than real.⁷ Furthermore, the members of Rudé’s crowds also consumed ideas quite as much as life’s alleged necessities: he largely overlooks the dynamism of print and the press right across the late-eighteenth century, underestimating the extent to which the people of Paris engaged with politics and political ideas long before 1789 (let alone after...)⁸ Finally, in an age where the mode is often for the microhistorical and biographical, Rudé’s popular classes now seem rather anonymous and lacking in character — there are surprisingly few interesting faces in his crowds.

Yet if historiography has moved on and in many respects not taken Rudé with it, it is more than appropriate at this anniversary moment to remember a historian who marked the profession and whose practice can still truly inspire. First, although OUP’s apparently restrictive policy on footnotes obscures the fact, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* is incredibly impressively grounded in huge amounts of what were almost totally neglected archives, which still in fact contain untapped riches.⁹ Second, his persistent determination to go beyond labels and to see just who was engaged in collective activity (what I once heard Gwyn William describe as giving a group ‘benefit of Rudé’)

³ Ibid., 109-114. For a famous discussion of the dangers of sanitisation of violence, see Corbin, *The Village of Cannibals*.

⁴ After a brief Introduction, Rudé’s first chapter is a social history of pre-Revolutionary Paris (“Paris on the Eve of the Revolution”).

⁵ Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*; and Colin Jones and Rebecca Spang, “Sans-culottes, sans-café, sans tabac.”

⁶ Ibid., and for Daniel Roche, see especially his *The People of Paris*, and *The Culture of Clothing*.

⁷ Sewell, “The Sans-Culotte Rhetoric of Subsistence”. For an approach which also comes to the topic through intellectual history, see Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem*.

⁸ Work that stresses popular engagement in politics prior to 1789 includes Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*; Farge, *Subversive Words*; and Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris*.

⁹ It would be fascinating to see a full list, for the ‘Bibliographical Note’ is only very summary. Rudé, *Crowd*, 258-9. Police archives (F7 in the Archives nationales and the archives of the Prefecture of the Police) constitute a case in point.

remains an essential precept for good social history. Third, although Rudé's anti-Tainian argumentation becomes a little forced, his emphasis on the agency of the popular classes is a cheering antidote to histories of the French Revolution that imply that the only worthwhile historical reality comes out of the mouths of a few hundred deputies in the National Assembly (to paraphrase Rebecca Spang).¹⁰ Moreover — and fourthly — if a generation of post-Rudé scholars has attacked his alleged sanitisation of popular violence, the work of Micah Alpaugh and others has upheld Rudé's view about the purposive eschewing of violence that characterised most acts of collective popular action in the 1790s — violence was indeed the exception rather than the Schama-esque essence of the Revolutionary crowd.¹¹ Finally, one only has to read a few pages of Rudé to realise that here is someone who obviously cared deeply about the values generated by the French Revolution. And this, after all, is one of the main reasons of why many of us got to study the French Revolution in the first place. It only serves to confirm the view that *The Crowd in the French Revolution* is a volume not only to commemorate but also to cherish.

References

- Andress, David. 2000. *Massacre at the Champ de Mars: Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution*. London.
- Corbin, Alain. 1993. *The Village of Cannibals. Rage and Murder in France 1870*. Cambridge, Mass.
- Farge, Arlette. 1995. *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France*. University Park, PA.
- Garrioch, David. 2002. *The Making of Revolutionary Paris*. Berkeley.
- Hufton, Olwen. 1974. *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-89*. Oxford.
- Jones, Colin, and Rebecca Spang. 1999. "Sans-Culottes, Sans-Café, Sans Tabac: Realms of Necessity and Luxury in Eighteenth-Century France." In *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650-1850*. Eds Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, Manchester.
- Roche, Daniel. 1994. *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Régime*. Cambridge.
- Roche, Daniel. 1987. *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Berkeley.
- Sewell, William H. 1994. "The Sans-Culotte Rhetoric of Subsistence." In *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture. Vol. 4. The Terror*. Ed. Keith Baker, 249-269. Oxford.
- Sonenscher, Michael. 2008. *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution*. Princeton.
- Sonenscher, Michael. 1989. *Work and Wages. Natural Law, Politics and the Eighteenth-Century French Trades*. Cambridge.

¹⁰ Spang, "Paradigms and Paranoia".

¹¹ Alpaugh, *Non-Violence and the French Revolution*; Schama, *Citizens*.

Spang, Rebecca. 2003. "Paradigms and Paranoia: How Modern was the French Revolution." *American Historical Review*, 108, no. 1: 119-147.

Alpaugh, Micah. 2017. *Non-Violence and the French Revolution. Political Demonstrations in Paris, 1787-95*. Cambridge.

Schama, Simon. 1989. *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*. New York, 1989.