

Peter McPhee

I first became engrossed by the French Revolution when, as an undergraduate at the University of Melbourne in 1968, I bought a paperback copy of George Rudé's classic study of *The Crowd in the French Revolution*. Rudé's book was based on a PhD at the University of London ("The Parisian Wage-Earning Population and the Insurrectionary Movements of 1789-1791") completed in 1950 and enriched by periods of further archival study in Paris when his school-teaching responsibilities permitted. In the preface to *The Crowd*, Rudé acknowledged his mentor Georges Lefebvre and especially his "friends and collaborators" Richard Cobb and Albert Soboul. He described his book as part of a "collective enterprise", one which was also to result in Soboul's thesis on the Parisian *sans-culottes* and Cobb's study of the *armées révolutionnaires*, the civilian armies of *sans-culottes* established in the second half of 1793.¹

"Les Trois Mousquetaires," as they were known, and another English left-wing historian, Eric Hobsbawm, had an enormous impact on the writing of history from the 1960s, opening up pathways to the writing of history "from below", pivotal to the explosion of social history in the 1970s. As a Marxist historian, Rudé's fundamental concern was to explore the ways in which the twin upheavals of the late-eighteenth century — the industrial revolution and the French Revolution — radically transformed socio-economic structures, the nature of ruling élites and the social composition and collective protest of urban crowds.

The specific focus of *The Crowd* was the *menu peuple* of Paris, a complex social grouping of shopkeepers, craftsmen, apprentices, skilled and unskilled wage-earners, who together were perhaps two-thirds of the city's population of approximately 650,000 people.² Rudé examined the ways in which, at crucial moments, these working people — dubbed by 1791 the *sans-culottes* — intervened to defend or extend the revolutionary movement in the years 1789-95, and in the process developed an egalitarian political ideology, essentially learnt from the "revolutionary

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¹ Soboul, *Les Sans-culottes*; Cobb, *Les Armées révolutionnaires*.

² For general considerations of Rudé's work, see Krantz, ed. *History from Below*; and Kaye, ed. *The Face of the Crowd*.

bourgeoisie,” which went far beyond the subsistence concerns which continued to fuel their anger. The book rapidly became a classic, although not translated into French until 1982, because it was seen to give agency and “faces” to those in the insurrections which played determining roles at key junctures, but which for so long had been dismissed as amorphous “mobs.”

Despite his deep knowledge of revolutionary Paris and meticulous use of archival material, Rudé was criticised for an allegedly mechanistic understanding of the interaction between material and political motivations. His later work became more supple in its use of a dynamic interplay between perceptions and reality in “popular ideology,” showing how ideas derived from others were not simply adopted in their original form but which were adapted to particular uses.³

Profoundly influential although *The Crowd* has been, the changing approaches of historians over the past sixty years have inevitably highlighted shortcomings. Rudé was later to fall out with Richard Cobb, who developed a distaste for ideologues — historians as much as revolutionary politicians — who claimed to speak for the masses and their supposed interests and ideology. He asserted that Rudé had made horrific violence “respectable” by giving rioters names, addresses and occupations, and of wanting “the exhilaration of riot, experienced in the safety of a record office.”⁴

Certainly, Rudé’s quantitative focus on the characteristics of violent collective behaviour led him away from a deeper qualitative analysis of the cultural practice of violence. Sporadic though they may have been, horrific instances of deliberate cruelty by rioting crowds have since attracted closer study, as scholars have highlighted the importance of close-knit communities of place, faith, and family, and examined the specificities of violent acts.⁵

Another shortcoming lay in Rudé’s focus on only the most famous *journées* and their social composition and political consequences. Far closer to actuality than the potent images of violent crowds were peaceful demonstrations, petitions, banquets, and mass meetings. Micah Alpaugh has found that only 12 per cent of an estimated 750 protests by *sans-culottes* in 1789-95 resulted in physical violence.⁶

Nonetheless, Rudé’s great book has been remarkably influential, not only because of its combination of deep erudition and conceptual sweep, but also because of his capacity for lucid, coherent argument. He was a fine if unaffected stylist. He wore his political affiliations lightly, even though they at times had harsh consequences, including in Australia. In 1960 the Council of the University of Tasmania refused to appoint him on the grounds that he was a communist.⁷ Rudé was quickly offered a position at the University of Adelaide. His decade there was to be the most productive of his life as this mature scholar (he was by then 50 years of age) made the most of his first academic appointment. In the 1960s he published or completed seven books on French, British and European history, including best-sellers such as *Revolutionary Europe, 1783–1815* and (with Eric Hobsbawm) *Captain Swing*. He also published a wide range of articles and chapters, including some on Australian history, particularly on transported political prisoners.⁸ His personal influence in Australia and elsewhere was profound. George Rudé was a charming,

³ This was developed in *The Crowd in History*, ch. 14, and *Ideology and Popular Protest*, ch. 2.

⁴ Cobb, *The Police and the People*, 89-90.

⁵ See, for example, Farge, *Fragile Lives*.

⁶ Alpaugh, *Non-Violence and the French Revolution*.

⁷ McPhee, “The French Revolution seen from the *Terres Australes*,” 263-64; Munro, “The Politics of George Rudé’s appointment to the University of Adelaide.” Munro has also written the best study of Rudé’s life: “The strange career of George Rudé: Marxist historian.”

⁸ See Friguglietti, “A Scholar ‘in Exile’.”

eloquent, generous man whose company and friendship were widely valued and whose decade in Australia and frequent visits thereafter created a rich legacy.

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