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George Rudé's *Crowd in the French Revolution* inspired countless imitators across the globe. It stimulated enquiries into crowds during subsequent revolutions, as well as studies of revolts further back in time. Rudé was one of those remarkable historians from the 1960s who studied history "from below," a perspective that thrilled thousands of graduate students, including myself. He helped confer agency on ordinary people in revolutions and he corrected the slur that revolutionary crowds were composed of thugs and ruffians. For him, the Revolution was not the result of the writings of a few intellectuals or of ideology flowing into a power vacuum or the hidden machinations of conspirators. Instead, ordinary people either made or defended a revolution that reflected their aspirations. His most persuasive argument was that the assailants of the Bastille, the marchers to Versailles, the petitioners on the Champ de Mars, the militants who brought down the monarchy in August 1792 or the crowds on subsequent *journées* were not the ne'er-do-wells, vagabonds and criminals that Taine and others insisted they were.¹ Nor, as Le Bon argued, were they caught up in the delirium of anonymity, the very act of being in a crowd permitting them to shed the inhibitions of civil life.² Rather, crowds acted with purpose.

The analysis of the social composition of the crowd has been the most enduring contribution. The revolutionary crowd from 1789 to 1795 was composed of settled tradesmen, poor but not destitute, with a few professionals and soldiers but with overwhelming participation from the building and furniture trades in the Faubourg Saint Antoine. Because he stripped away the stigmas

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¹ Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 1-3. Page references listed hereafter in brackets in the text.

² For example, "Les caractères personnels s'évanouissant dans les foules, leur action est considérable sur les individus dont elles sont formées. L'avare y devient prodigue, le sceptique croyant, l'honnête homme criminel, le lâche un héros. Les exemples de telles transformations abondent pendant notre Révolution." Le Bon, *La Révolution française*, 93.

of the past, Rudé allowed others to write about crowds in colorful, not to say mesmerizing ways. Without Rudé, it is hard to imagine Cobb's archetypical *sans-culotte*: drunk, gruff and uncouth, obsessed with fantasies of violence.³

Rudé was a member of the British Communist Party for half his adult life and a Marxist until he died.⁴ His militancy affected how he wrote history. One example would be his Leninist conception of leadership.⁵ Without the ideas of "bourgeois leaders," Rudé claimed, food riots "would have remained strangely purposeless and barren of result" (*Crowd*, 209). This is a very revealing remark. Evidently, rioting to enforce a "just price" or trying to retain grain and flour on local markets does not qualify as purposeful. He asserted that better informed and politically conscious leaders were needed to steer the crowd to superior revolutionary ends. Thus, apropos of 1789, he wrote that the "leadership [and] guidance" that the orators and pamphleteers of the Palais-Royal provided to the "angry [and] bewildered masses" was essential.⁶

This model evidently does not apply to other *journées*. The chapter on the Fall of the Monarchy on 10 August 1792 is mostly about the agitation of leaders like Fournier l'Américain and Santerre. The same limitation appears in the narrative of the overthrow of the Girondins in 1793. This chapter is about the Montagnards' intrigues, because the archival sources do not exist to reconstruct the experience of ordinary *sans-culottes*. He does say the subsistence issue probably motivated them, but he offers no evidence for this assertion.

The most famous part of Rudé's thesis was that the subsistence issue underlay revolutionary commitment. Bread prices, rather than revolutionary ideology, was the prime motivator:

Yet when all is said and done, the inescapable conclusion remains that the primary and most constant motive impelling revolutionary crowds during this period was the concern for the provision of cheap and plentiful food (*Crowd*, 200).

It is... not surprising that the price and supply of bread should emerge so clearly from contemporary documents as the constant source of popular disquiet during the insurrectionary movements of 1788 and the early revolution (*ibid.*, 202).

In this movement [the continuous agitation between April and May 1789], the problem of bread was uppermost, [it] dominated all other considerations, and drew together the largest numbers in common protest (*ibid.*, 63).

...the price of bread dominated all other considerations in the popular mind: it is, in fact, no mere coincidence...that the Bastille should have fallen on the very day that the price of grain throughout France reached its cyclical peak.⁷

³ *Reactions to the French Revolution*, 171.

⁴ Munro, "The Strange Career of George Rudé," 118-169; Friguglietti, "George Frederick Elliot Rudé," 49-55 for ancestry; Friguglietti, "Dispersing the Crowd," 301-09.

⁵ "... the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness." "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." Both quotations from Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*

⁶ "14 July 1789: The Fall of the Bastille," 452. Rephrased in *Crowd*, 51.

⁷ "Prices, Wages and Popular Movements," 247.

Unfortunately, it *is* a coincidence because there is no relationship between the price of grain *in France* on July 14 and the surrender of the Bastille. More seriously, the statement assumes grain and bread prices moved in lock-step. They did, but only with a lag imposed by magistrates' fiat. The ingenuity of the archival research that supports these statements is truly impressive; it is difficult to retrieve price and wage data for the Revolutionary period. It is equally hard to interpret them. Rudé's skill in reconstructing model budgets of working-class families has never been surpassed. But in interpreting the data, he did make certain assumptions about the regulation of the grain trade and bread prices. Later work by Steven Kaplan and especially, Judith A. Miller, show that Rudé's generalizations require further clarification.⁸

Rudé assumed that bread prices were set in a free, competitive market. Kaplan and Miller have shown that regulations deliberately interfered with the free market. Thanks to them, it is possible to appreciate the significance of price fixing. From February 1789 until the end of July, magistrates set the price of the four-pound loaf at an unvarying 14 ½ sous. The risk of this practice was that fixed prices would create shortages, so the government had to manage supplies. In 1789, this required a massive effort. It released huge amounts of flour from its stores at Corbeil to keep the price down; it subsidized bakers to the tune of a half million *livres*; and it organized and subsidized massive imports of flour and grain from as far away as Danzig and New York, most of which were directed to the Paris market.⁹ Thus, the government kept the capital supplied, albeit with some difficulty.

The subsistence crisis in Paris before 14 July was thus probably not as severe as Rudé and other historians imply. The very high bread prices had been in place for many months without provoking disturbances (subsistence was a relatively minor issue in the Réveillon riots). The strength of the relationship between subsistence and the revolutionary *journées* must have varied despite Rudé's claims that subsistence issues were "primary," "constant," dominant, and "uppermost."¹⁰

There are obvious reasons why *The Crowd in the French Revolution* deserves to be celebrated. Historians as passionate about archives as Rudé was, are in awe of the depth and ingenuity he demonstrated in discovering and analyzing sources. For the more general reader, the book's interpretive framework coincides with certain expectations most historians possess about mass movements in general. Liberal minded historians are predisposed to reject the caricatures of Taine and Le Bon. They are also predisposed to accept many basic tenets of Marxist sociology because it has slipped into the realm of received ideas. One of these is the reductionist argument that insurrections or even demonstrations are a function of a rise in the cost of living. This must be examined much more critically in the case of the revolution in Paris. Finally, Rudé's vision of the Palais-Royal sagely directing the "bewildered masses" deserves more skepticism than it has received. The crowd was much more independent than many historians have allowed.

⁸ Kaplan, *The Bakers of Paris*, ch. 18; Miller, *Mastering the Market*, 36; Laurent, *Reims et la région rémoise à la veille de la Révolution*, lxii. See also Margairaz and Minard, "Marché des subsistances et économie morale."

⁹ Bord, *Histoire du blé en France*, 44-8.

¹⁰ Rudé recognized this towards the end of his career. See his "Foules révolutionnaires," 467-70.

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