Controlling Public Opinion in the Old Regime: Did the King Care what the Peasants Thought?

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On a chilly day in late November, a peasant named Jean Marrot, who lived in the village of Brassac in the Pyrenees mountains south of Foix, went for a walk in the woods near his home. There he encountered a group of village notables who were assisting in a formal inspection of the nearby forest by state officials. Marrot listened as the local authorities described how bandits had been known to take refuge in the woods and how difficult it was to keep the inhabitants of nearby communities – particularly those of Ganac, a rival village – from gathering wood in forest considered to be within Brassac's domain. Although some trees were felled for construction, Marrot knew that the great majority of the wood being harvested was half-burned and hardened in a slow fire to produce charcoal, an activity that ensured the survival of the villagers through the long winter. When the state officials began to pronounce that no one, not even the villagers of Brassac, had the right to harvest trees from this particular forest, Marrot became angry and spoke out. "We have always made charcoal here," he said, "and we will continue to do so – myself first in line – no matter what orders or prohibitions you might throw at us!" Marrot was arrested for "seditious speech" soon after his outburst; his sentence included a prison term.
and a fine as well as a formal apology to the owner of the forest.¹

Scenes such as this one were common during the revolutionary period. The controversy over the Civil Constitution of the Clergy sparked countless discussions of religious policy in country taverns, and as the deputies designed new policies on taxes, grain prices, and land usage, the chatter in rural areas only increased. By the height of the Terror, peasants and village artisans were being charged with anti-revolutionary, counter-revolutionary, or seditious speech on just about every topic, to the point that even a wistful comment that "things had been better under the Old Regime" could warrant a death sentence. However, Jean Marrot did not make his comment about the villagers' rights to forest land in 1793 but, rather, in 1758. The officials were from the Royal Jurisdiction of Waterways and Forestland, the forest of Brassac was owned by none other than the King himself, and Marrot's words had been taken as a clear challenge to royal authority in the borderland between France and Spain.

The politicization of the French peasantry has been the topic of much debate, and different scholars have chosen various turning points from the Revolution through the Third Republic.² However, the story of Marrot suggests

¹ Archives départementales de l'Ariège [hereafter ADA], 2B38, pièces 173-81, Juridiction de la Maîtrise particulière des Eaux et forêts, and Procès-verbal contre Jean Marrot (dit 'Le Parrou') de Brassac, pour propos séditieux envers le roi, lors de la visite des montagnes de Brassac, 1758.

that the political awareness of the majority was already a reality when the Bastille fell. In the past fifteen years, we have made much of Jürgen Habermas' concept of an eighteenth-century public sphere, an urban space in which public opinion developed, flourished, and came to exert pressure on the authorities. Historians working on sociability during the Enlightenment have shown that the public sphere was not merely literary but was also political, and scholars such as Arlette Farge, Robert Darnton, and Lisa Jane Graham have argued for the existence of a political public sphere among the urban lower classes in Paris. However, in spite of this broadening of Habermas' original construct, we have continued to assume that in this era of politicization and effervescence, the great majority of the population – the peasantry – remained silent.

This assumption of silence is based at least partly on the available documentation. The peasantry was a political non-entity under the Old Regime; administrators and police forces did not expect farmers to express political opinions, and as a result, those opinions do not jump out of the historical record. Moreover, it stands to reason that the king


would care little about the political opinions of the rural laborers who made up the majority of his subjects. Unlike the lawmakers and wealthy merchants who sat in the parlements and on the councils of larger cities, peasants were scarcely able to exert any influence, and while peasant revolts could be inconvenient, they were unlikely to threaten the viability of the government or the life of the king as might an insurrection of the Parisian lower classes. However, the political opinions held by the peasantry did, in fact, preoccupy the Old Regime monarchy, although the officials responsible for monitoring them might not have described their job in quite those words. The examples in the pages that follow are largely from the southwestern provinces of Guienne and Gascogne, administered by intendants in Bordeaux, Auch, and Montauban. They are drawn from local administrative and police correspondence as well as from transcripts of sedition trials before the sénéchaussée courts – documents that illustrate how peasants' verbal criticism of the Old Regime was perceived, monitored, and prosecuted.

**Vocabulary and attitudes**

Old Regime attitudes concerning the peasantry and rural uprisings reinforced the common notion that rural subjects were apolitical. The phrase le peuple did not, for the most part, evoke a positive image among the educated elite of the eighteenth century. To the "enlightened" classes, the "people" were ignorant, illiterate, and unintelligent. They were also childlike, easily led astray, and a target for politically savvy, ill-intentioned individuals. They could be volatile, unpredictable, hot-headed – even violent.\(^5\) In fact, to some contemporary

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\(^5\) This theme is discussed by Yves-Marie Bercé in *The History of Peasant Revolts: The Social Origins of Rebellion in Early Modern*
observers, the inhabitants of the countryside seemed as though they were from a different, even sub-human, race. By the standards of the urban elite, they lived in unhygienic conditions, ate a bland, monotonous diet, and maintained a series of near-pagan religious traditions. Words like "the masses" and "the populace," commonly used by literary authors and administrators, put the people at a distance, and the terms "mob," "rabble," and "the underworld" evoked nothing short of disgust.

This tendency to view the rural population as inferior and incompetent is also apparent in descriptions of peasant uprisings in the early modern period. While some terms for disturbances – such as "insurrection," "revolt," and "disorder" – are relatively neutral, other words infer a judgment of those involved. "Mutiny" and "rebellion," for example, imply that the protesters had stepped out of bounds; the use of a disdainful term like mutin for a dissatisfied peasant likened him to a rebellious, undisciplined child.

Sensory words that designate agitation or impending revolt highlighted the volatile, unpredictable nature of the rural population: rumeur, bruit, and murmure describe the sound of the crowd, while allarme, sensation, and effervescence give the impression of an unstable, teeming mass about to erupt into disorder. One of the most common terms for a rural revolt – and in some ways, one of the most condescending – is émotion populaire, a popular emotion. By implying that the disturbance is the result not of calculated and reasoned action but of an impulsive, reactive, and essentially instinctive response to a base stimulus such as hunger, the expression strips protesters of

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their intelligence, dignity, and clarity of purpose. Indeed, although popular protest was virtually the only action available to the peasantry to contest important issues such as grain transport policies or increased taxation, its categorization as a popular "emotion" reinforced the peasantry's exclusion from the realm of legitimate political expression.

In fact, there was only one term for rural unrest – sédition – which conceded that the result, if not the goal, of the event was a challenge to the government, according to contemporary dictionaries and judicial texts.\(^6\) At the highest level, sedition could be associated with treason and lèse-majesty, and it remained on the books even after the Revolution.\(^7\) In the countryside, the phrase was used surprisingly often, considering that peasants were not normally imagined as having the political savvy to contest the government. The question of what issues motivated peasants to react in a way characterized as "seditious" touches upon the ongoing debate of what constitutes "politicization." Considered by contemporaries to challenge the established order, rural sedition was almost never what we might consider inherently "political" – that is, peasants never argued for a change in the structure of government or for the right to participate in the decision-making process.


\(^7\) Interestingly, the phrase "challenge to legitimate authority," used to define séditation in the 4th edition (1762) of the Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, had been replaced in the 5th edition (1798) with "challenge to the established authority;" otherwise, the definitions are identical.
The issues over which they contested state policy were less abstract but far more meaningful in rural society: tax increases and the ravages of war in the seventeenth century, the price or availability of grain in the eighteenth.

"Planners, movers, and agitators:"
Not all peasants are alike

While early modern peasant revolts are hardly virgin territory – one thinks immediately of the work of Mousnier, Bercé, and Nicholas, to name just the most prolific – what I am interested in here is something substantially different from what has been done before. I focus specifically on seditious speech, on the expression of political ideas or intent which accompanied these events, on how such political talk was monitored by the authorities, and how it was interpreted with respect to the political capabilities of the peasantry.

In the eighteenth century, as in the riots of 1848 and 1871 and even in political demonstrations today, it is the ideas behind the actions – the motivation for the action, the discontent that underlies it – that constitute the ongoing threat. Although police officials were above all concerned to prevent violence, a fresh look at the judicial and administrative documents produced as a result of peasant uprisings shows that they paid special attention to the seditious words which accompanied the equally seditious actions of the offenders. The great revolts of the seventeenth century – the Croquants in the Périgord, for example, and the Nu-Pieds in Normandy – actually produced manifestos that clearly enunciated political aims and that were distributed in leaflet form. Even in the much

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8 On seventeenth-century manifestos in general, see Bercé, 118ff; for published examples, see "L'ordonnance redigée par les communes de l'Angoumois, au début de l'été 1636," in R. Mousnier, Lettres et

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more mundane, repetitive disturbances of the eighteenth century, investigators were looking for and carefully noting the speech of those involved. During the 1784 disturbance in the Pyrenees over the announcement of a new tax on wine, for example, the Seneschal of Pamiers was above all interested in determining "who, by their words or by their actions, encouraged or inspired this revolt?" In the widespread grain revolts ten years earlier in the province of Guyenne, the Intendant of Montauban secured a squadron of soldiers to help protect a grain market, based on his reports to the Controller General of Finance and to the Secretary of State of "the seditious words of the populace." 

The reason for this careful monitoring is clear and in fact is made explicit in many documents. The authorities were keen to root out the spokespeople who had instigated the revolt with their persuasive arguments and rousing speeches in order to prevent future incidents. In 1779, for example, the Presidial court of Périgueux conducted an investigation into the "authors, instigators, and supporters" of a seditious riot that had taken place in the parish of Liorac, and in the county of Foix, the "troublemakers" were the target of a search resulting from a disturbance outside

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9 ADA, 1B256, pièce 7; Sénéchaussée de Pamiers; Procès contre des quidams de Foix et de Goulier pour attroupement et émeutes à l'occasion d'une subvention à percevoir sur le vin, 1784.

10 Archives départementales du Lot [hereafter ADL], C250, Correspondence between the Intendant of Montauban, the Controller General of Finance, and the Secretary of State, Dec. 1773.
of Pamiers.\footnote{11 Archives départementales de la Dordogne [hereafter ADD], B718, Sénéchaussée de Périgueux; Procès contre les auteurs, fauteurs et adhérents de la sédition et émotion populaire, faite au son du tocsin au préjudice du sieur Valleton de Carrieux, habitant de la paroisse de Liorac, 1780; and ADA 1B285, pièces 94-119, Sénéchaussée de Pamiers; Procès contre les quidams fauteurs de troubles, désordres etc., dans les environs de Pamiers, 1790.} Often these investigations assumed that those responsible would not be peasants, and this is where the attitudes implicit in contemporary vocabulary become relevant. Regarding an illegal gathering in the Périgord, the crown prosecutor wrote that "surely, the peasants are more miserable than they are guilty,"\footnote{12 ADD, B1688, pièce 41, Sénéchaussée de Sarlat; Plainte contre les habitants de différentes paroisses réunies . . . qui . . . se transportent chez les particuliers . . . où ils mettent tout à contribution, jusqu'à enlever les grains qu'ils trouvent, 1790.} and after a grain riot in the village of Montaut in 1769, a local administrator wrote to the Intendant of Bordeaux that it was "a few seditious individuals" who had stirred up the people.\footnote{13 Archives départementales de la Gironde [hereafter ADG], C657, pièce 59, Correspondence between the Intendant of Bordeaux and the subdelegate of Montaut, Sept. 1769.} Indeed, it was often expected that such investigations would turn up a "real" enemy, some renegade noble or literate subversive from several towns or even provinces away who was the driving force behind the insurrection. True, such things had occurred in the great revolts of the seventeenth century, but the prejudices of the elite – who not only formed the majority of judicial personnel, but who were also the administrative and police authorities – did not make it any easier for them to conceive of peasants organizing a movement of resistance. In more localized, smaller-scale disturbances, such as the examples given here, those who had stirred up the revolt usually turned out to be peasants
themselves – perhaps more articulate, more politically-minded peasants than the majority – but peasants nonetheless.

Monitoring rural public opinion: did the king care what the peasants said?

The evidence that the monarchy was concerned with monitoring political speech in the countryside prior to the Revolution is not limited to a few examples of judicial prosecution. Again, with prevention in mind, a system was in place – similar albeit less extensive than that which existed in Paris – to allow for local authorities to spy on country folk and report what they had overheard. Two branches of authority in the countryside were involved in this activity: the maréchaussée, or rural mounted police, and the local administrators known as subdelegates.

If historians remain skeptical that the monarchy endeavored to eavesdrop on country conversations, it is likely because they are familiar with the maréchaussée and its limitations. Often, there were only a few dozen cavaliers at most to cover a mid-sized province, but there can be no question of the office's mandate. In addition to their better-known role as patrolmen of the high roads who rounded up vagabonds and recaptured escaped prisoners, the officers of the maréchaussée were tasked with monitoring "public sentiment" in the countryside, policing markets, fairs, and other gatherings which might turn seditious, and investigating any incidences of political agitation.\footnote{Ordonnance criminelle, août 1670, titre II, article 12; and Déclaration du 5 fév. 1731, articles 5 et 6, cited in Lorgnier, 170-89.}

When a report by the maréchaussée figures as part of the dossier of a seditious incident, we learn that they often employed spies, or mouches, to infiltrate rural networks and to learn who was likely to speak out against the government.
or start a revolt. The commander of the maréchaussée of Cahors reported to the intendant in 1779, for example, that the capture of a group of subversives had been made more difficult by the fact that he "had not been able to entice any of his spies to give information on their whereabouts."\textsuperscript{15} The maréchaussée of Bergerac, in the Périgord, had had better luck several years earlier when attempting to prevent a grain riot. The lieutenant in charge wrote in his report that he had instructed his cavaliers to find out "what the people were saying and doing" and that one of his spies had overheard that "the populace intended to gather and revolt the following Saturday." Two days later, another of his spies gave information leading to the arrest of two song-sellers from the Auvergne who were distributing inflammatory leaflets.\textsuperscript{16}

The maréchaussée's paltry numbers limited its effectiveness, and many of its responsibilities – such as capturing brigands who harassed travelers and stole commercial shipments – might have seemed a more productive use of its time than monitoring seemingly inconsequential peasant chatter. Indeed, a much stronger and more effective network existed to deal with this problem: the administrative infrastructure. Appointed as the king's representatives in the provinces, the intendants were responsible for just about everything to do with provincial government, administration, and policing, including "maintaining public order." To keep tabs on the vast regions under their jurisdiction – in the southwest the

\textsuperscript{15} ADL, C804, Lettre du lieutenant de maréchaussée François de Métivier à l'Intendant de Montauban, 22 May 1779.

\textsuperscript{16} ADG, C439, pièce 10, Compte-rendu de Jean Armand Gigounous de Verdoin, écuyer conseillier du Roy et lieutenant de la maréchaussée générale de Guienne au département du Périgord, 11 June 1775.

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equivalent of as many as eight departments – intendants employed local men, subdelegates, to act as both executive officers to carry out orders and as a source of information on the local resources, personnel, conflicts, and, quite often, political atmosphere.

The correspondence between an intendant and his subdelegates, where it has survived, consists of regular exchanges on every topic imaginable, and it is rich with comments about the circulation of political ideas in the countryside. In addition to being well placed and informed about the local rural population, subdelegates also maintained their own networks of informants who were asked to keep tabs on potentially subversive individuals and to alert the subdelegate if a storm was brewing. When a message from the Secretary of State, Saint-Florentin, arrived in 1758 advising that peddlers were trying to sell "dangerous books" which were "hostile to the State," the various intendants wrote to their subdelegates and asked them to investigate. In Bordeaux, the Intendant Tourny soon received a response from Biran, his subdelegate in Bergerac, who said that while he suspected that prohibited books were more likely to arrive directly from Dutch printing houses, he would "have his spies watch both town and countryside" for any sign of the peddlers.\(^{17}\)

The subdelegates' spies were never referred to by the police term, *mouches*, but as informants, correspondents, or simply as "trusted individuals." One subdelegate, however, based in the Périgord town of Ribérac, used a more evocative phrase when referring to those who helped him to bring a major grain riot under control in 1773. In order to learn "the statements and views of the people," the subdelegate had the crowd infiltrated with *faufilés* – an

\(^{17}\) ADG, C28, pièce 23, Lettre de Biran, subdélégué à Bergerac, à l'Intendant de Bordeaux, 6 Jan. 1759.
interesting word which means "basting stitch" in sewing but which in this context meant a person who was able to slip in unnoticed. In addition to providing him with information on the leaders of the uprising and where they lived – information which was later passed to the maréchaussée to facilitate arrests – these faufilés acted like the subdelegate's men, in at least one instance preventing the crowd from lynching a man who had unknowingly purchased grain at an inflated price.18

Clearly, a system was in place by which political opinions in the countryside were monitored and reported up the line. The question remains, however, as to how this type of information was interpreted under the monarchy. Do the instructions sent out to subdelegates suggest that those in power in the Old Regime were well aware that peasants held political opinions and felt that those opinions were important enough to warrant monitoring? Perhaps, as two important pieces of evidence seem to suggest.

In 1744, Philibert Orry, the Controller General, sent out a survey to each of the thirty-two intendants of the kingdom. Like many Old Regime surveys, it was concerned mostly with finance: correspondents were asked for descriptions of local industry, an estimate of the number of young men capable of bearing arms, and – remarkably bluntly, even for the genre – "what resources could be found in the towns and rural parishes to increase the king's revenues." But the eighth point switched the focus to political attitudes. "You will sow rumors," it read, "of a future militia levy of the order of two men per parish, and

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18 ADG, C493, pièces 12-13, Lettre de Pourteirou, subdélégué de Ribérai, à l'Intendant de Bordeaux, 29 May 1773.
you will carefully gather the reactions of the inhabitants and include them in your report to the King."\textsuperscript{19}

Although Orry wrote a bland and summary report, which he claimed was based on responses from twenty-nine of the thirty-two intendants, none of the original responses appears to have survived, nor is there any trace of his request in the eight departmental archives visited in the course of this project. Indeed, I strongly suspect that not many intendants would have risked provoking a revolt for the sake of a few statistics. Despite the fact that Orry's intentions were clear – to determine in advance what the fall-out might be if the king were to request a militia levy – his survey constituted, in effect, an early public opinion poll.\textsuperscript{20} That local authorities appear to have ignored the question suggests that they did, indeed, fear that peasants would have strong opinions on the topic.

A second example reinforces this impression. In January 1757, after Damiens' unsuccessful attempt on the life of the king, intendants and their subordinates were ordered to monitor the political mutterings of the

\textsuperscript{19} Paris, Archives des Affaires étrangères, Mémoires et documents, France, Ms. 1767, 6-10, Extrait de la lettre circulaire de M Orry, Conseiller d'Etat, Contrôleur général des finances, aux Intendants départies dans les Provinces, 17 Dec. 1744.

population throughout France in both town and village and to report any seditious grumbling (*mauvais propos*) which targeted the king or his family. Again, the motivation is understandable. Louis XV's life had been threatened; it was only natural that he extend the reach of his spies further into the hinterland in an effort to protect himself and his reign. This time, however, provincial officials heeded the order, which was sent by none other than Saint-Florentin. The Joly de Fleury collection at the Bibliothèque nationale contains four volumes of responses.\(^{21}\) While most of these were from large towns, where the police forces were such that the order to eavesdrop on conversations in taverns and inns was not unrealistic, the responses from three southern intendancies provide evidence that subdelegates were, indeed, ordered to listen for seditious words in the countryside in the early weeks of 1757.\(^{22}\)

In fact, if one combs through enough haystacks, one is rewarded with a handful of needles: rare instances in which the political speech of the French peasantry was monitored, reported on, and prosecuted by the authorities of the Old Regime. There are references throughout the second half of the eighteenth century to a certain "independent sentiment" or "republican sentiment" in rural areas, a phrase which literate provincial readers of Montesquieu applied to

\(^{21}\) Bibliothèque nationale, fonds Joly de Fleury, MSS 2072-2077 ("Mauvais discours tenus contre le roi à l'occasion de l'affaire de Damiens"), 1757-1765.

\(^{22}\) Archives départementales du Gers, C9, Correspondence between the Intendant d'Étigny and the Comte de Saint-Florentin, 94vff; ADL, C210, Correspondence between the Intendant of Montauban and the Contrôleur général des finances, 18 Jan. 1757; and Archives départementales de l'Hérault [hereafter ADH], C6852, Enquête sur les propos tenus au Peiral et à La Bastide dans le temps de l'attentat commis contre le roi, transmise au maréchal de Mirepoix par son neveu Lévis-Léran, 1757.
communities that seemed to wish to "remove themselves from the domination of the King." While most investigations into pre-revolutionary rural contestation labeled the offences *émotions populaires* or, at best, *séditations*, there are occasional examples – like Marrot, from the beginning of this essay – of peasants whose sole crime was the expression of a political opinion which ran against the grain. Consider Michel Baron, a municipal officer in the village of Gourdon, near the Pyrenees, who was prosecuted for having remarked – in response to news of a tax increase – that the king was "a rogue who wanted to devour the country." Or the trial against Desvaux, from the market town of Bourdeille in the Périgord, who was accused of trying to turn the community against the local landlord with "placards containing seditious rhymes and atrocious words spoken aloud in the cabarets."

While neither historians nor contemporaries have always been prepared to accept the possibility of peasant politicization prior to 1789, the evidence of a mechanism in place to monitor and control rural public opinion speaks to the contrary. The debate over the timing of politicization is

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24 ADA, 1B204, pièces 1-4, Sénéchaussée de Pamiers, procès mené par le procureur du Roi contre Michel Baron, consul de Gourdan, pour injures contre le roi, 1772.

25 ADD, B420, Sénéchaussée de Périgueux, verbal criminel contre le nommé Desvaux, habitant de la ville de Bourdeille, pour propos atroces et placards séditieux, 1740.
a long and thorny one, and it is difficult to resolve because different historians cite different factors as evidence of political awareness or involvement. Yet the peasants I have encountered in the archive were clearly politicized. They sat on village councils, and they were well informed of political events both from posted notices and word-of-mouth. And when they believed they had suffered an injustice, they protested by the only means open to them prior to the Revolution: outright revolt. Instead of debating among ourselves whether or not peasants were politicized, we should pay attention to the evidence – and to contemporary authorities – because by specifically monitoring the political chatter of the rural populace, they revealed their position on the matter.