Imagining Reality: Telling and Retelling the Buzançais Riot of 1847

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In January 1847 a riot erupted in the French town of Buzançais in the department of the Indre after some women intercepted several grain carts passing through town. What began as a classic subsistence movement triggered two days of food rioting and class hostilities. In a key incident, the son of a landowner shot and killed a protester; a crowd then beat the shooter to death. Local elites cowered before the crowds and utterly failed to halt the riot's course. Even the prefect retreated before the angry Buzancéens and found himself forced to requisition more troops from Paris. Disorder soon spread throughout the region: price fixing, assaults on châteaux, and Luddite-style attacks on machines. The July Monarchy mounted a stringent repression including military occupation, highly publicized trials, and unusually severe sentences (three hangings), all designed to discipline both a rebellious populace and cowering local elites.

The riot came to my attention while I was researching another project on the politics of subsistence in France. What struck me as important about Buzançais was not so much that it manifested unique features compared with other riots—although it was more violent than most—but that it captured widespread attention. The French press reported it immediately and covered it more frequently and more thoroughly than the over three hundred other French riots

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that erupted during the Europe-wide crisis years, 1846-1847.¹

The disorders drew considerable national attention particularly since what glitter that had ever surrounded the July Monarchy had clearly faded, and its growing opposition sought opportunities to critique the king and his ministers.² By the late 1840s in France, faster


² For assessments of the mounting critiques of the July Monarchy see Pierre Rosanvallon, Le Moment Guizot (Paris: Gallimard, 1985); David Pinkney, Decisive Years in France, 1840-1847 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); James Livesey, "Speaking for the Nation: Radical Republicans and the Failure of Political Communication in 1848," French Historical Studies 20:3 (1997): 459-
communication networks, a growing reading population, and an expanding and multivocal print culture combined to widely, rapidly, and graphically disseminate news of crisis and rioting. By reporting on an on-going crisis, the media established the immediacy of the events in ways that distinguished this from earlier crises. Moreover, as Jeremy Popkin has recently argued, "collective violence . . . gave the press the opportunity to demonstrate the existence of mass opposition to the regime" without taking too many political risks.

In this context, the political press zeroed in on the riot


4 Popkin, 170.
in Buzançais.\textsuperscript{5} For three months, the story of Buzançais remained in the public arena: as riot and repression in January, then as trial in February, and finally as punishment in March and April. By quickly focusing polemics in the political press, Buzançais facilitated factional critiques of the government and thereby contributed to the debates preceding the Revolution of 1848.

I believe that the fascination with what happened in Buzançais reflected ambiguities inherent in the riot's origins and character. No evidence ever emerged that linked the riot with formal political discourse.\textsuperscript{6} Yet, the riot generated a great deal of subsequent political discussion. Indeed, the very absence of formal politics from Buzançais may have made it particularly available for debate.

Buzançais captivated attention because it was both shockingly exceptional and disquietingly familiar. It was exceptional because it erupted in a small, provincial town of a type familiar to Balzac's readers in a part of France not

\footnote{The media sources consulted for this paper are mostly the national press: \textit{L'Atelier}, \textit{Le Constitutionnel}, \textit{La Démocratie pacifique}, \textit{Gazette des Tribunaux}, \textit{L'Echo français}, \textit{Esprit public}, \textit{Journal des débats}, \textit{Le Moniteur universel}, \textit{Le National de 1834}, \textit{La Patrie}, \textit{Le Populaire}, \textit{La Presse}, \textit{La Réforme}, \textit{La Ruche populaire}, \textit{La Quotidienne}, \textit{Le Siècle}, \textit{Journal quotidien, politique et littéraire}, \textit{L'Univers}. Neither the department of the Indre and its capital, Châteauroux, nor the more regional capital, Bourges, ever generated the rich media resources found in such provincial capitals as Lyon or Marseille. The provincial press included: \textit{Affiches de Châteauroux}, \textit{L'Eclaireur de l'Indre}, \textit{La Gazette du Berri}, \textit{Journal de l'Indre}, \textit{Journal d'Indre-et-Loire}.

\textsuperscript{6} The authorities initially tried to link the riot to the machinations of Cabet's communists: "The pillage and devastation that occurred with so much rage and savagery are the workings of communist doctrines." Lettre du procureur général de la cour royale de Bourges (22 Jan. 1847), Archives Nationales [hereafter AN] BB19 37. But he ultimately concluded that no "conspiracy" existed.

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generally known for such disorderliness, yet it signaled unanticipated "modern" class tensions, displayed Luddite-style violence, involved two gruesome deaths, revealed cowering behavior among elites, and provoked severe official repression. But it was also familiar because it resonated with memories of past protest: medieval *jacqueries*, traditional food riots, and the Revolutionary *maximum*.

Narrators found the Buzançais riot especially useful for thinking about such contested issues as moral versus political economy, legitimate protest versus crime, the right to existence versus the right to property, the meaning of collective and individual violence, and the proper exercise of authority. Their accounts also revealed contested understandings of community, class, gender, and power relations in July Monarchy France. This paper examines various versions of a particular episode in the riot, compares elements of the narratives about the episode, and hypothesizes about their nature and functions. First, I must give a little background for my story.  

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7 I define a "narrative" as a sequence of propositions used to recount events that themselves occurred in a particular temporal sequence. For a recent discussion of narratives see David Herman, "Introduction" in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997).

8 For secondary sources that discuss the Buzançais riot in some detail, see Yvon Bionnier, *Les Jacqueries de 1847 en Bas-Berry* (Châteauroux, Imprimerie Badel, 1979), 44-64, 98-99, 136-37; Solange Gras, "La crise du milieu du XIXe siècle en Bas-Berry," 2 vols. (thèse de 3e cycle, Université de Paris X-Nanterre, 1976); Price, 179; Vigier, 35-53; Bourguignat, 9-11, 446-50. I have also consulted archival material on this riot (and most others from the period). For Buzançais, specifically, in the Archives historiques de la guerre see: E5 155, E5 158. In the AN see: BB17 A 148; BB19 37; BB20 138; BB21 502 B;
On the second day of the riot, a large crowd marched to the town hall where the municipal council and other principal proprietors debated the situation. The crowd demanded not only that the council agree to sell the seized grain at a reduced price but also that everyone with surplus grain agree to distribute it at that same price until the next harvest. Indeed, they forced the mayor, justice of the peace, and eventually over sixty of the town's proprietors to sign what they called an "engagement" that obliged them in writing to the rioters' demands. Those present signed immediately; those not present received a visit from crowds escorting two men who carried the "engagement." Most of those visited signed immediately. However, nine of them hesitated, and rioters responded with physical threats, occasional scuffles, and attacks on houses and their contents.

Only one individual, Eudoxe-Louis-Joseph Chambert, the forty-year-old son of one of the largest property owning families in town, retaliated with violence. When the two men carrying the "engagement" arrived at the Chambert house, they sought his mother, with whom he lived. Chambert advised her to sign. As she signed, another man, Venin, burst into the house to demand money. A servant intervened to stop Venin. As they scuffled Chambert armed himself with a gun. He fired point blank and killed Venin.

Upon hearing the shot, the crowd outside broke into the house and shouts rang out that Chambert had killed Venin. Chambert tried to hide. Enraged rioters ransacked his house looking for him. Chambert finally managed to escape to the main street. But it did not end there. A group caught him and bludgeoned him to death with feet, hammers,

BB24 327-347. In the Archives Départementales [hereafter AD] de l'Indre see: M 2565-69; 2 U 70-71; 3 U 1 549. In the AD Cher see: 2 U 338.

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pitchforks, and axes. He suffered a brutal death. Scores of people watched, but no one intervened to stop the assault.

In this paper, I will focus on the moment in the riot when Chambert shot Venin. This episode involved uncertain and thus hotly contested elements—about deeds and words, the actors and acted upon, triggers and consequences—that invited leaps of imagination to resolve. For example, no witness survived to describe the final confrontation between the shooter and the victim. Had Chambert fired out of bravery, cowardice, or by mistake, and for what motives? I explore how and why narrators made the choices they did, examine the evidence they marshaled, and analyze the meanings they attributed to their evidence.

The shooting death of the rioter Venin proved an important pivot around which many discussions of the riot revolved, not simply because of its murderous violence but more importantly because of its moral and political implications. Subsistence and labor riots often resulted in violence against property and physical abuse of producers, merchants, or employers, which in turn might provoke aggressive repression by authorities. However, such riots rarely involved violent deaths of either rioters or their targets. Strikingly, Buzançais's rioting produced two corpses, ranking it among a small number of similarly violent riots of that crisis season (Nancy in 1846, Agen, Amanlis, Belabre, and Mulhouse in 1847).

Yet Buzançais attracted more widespread attention, for it generated strong symbols of contested political principles. Each account of Venin's death revealed not just

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9 There are other important pivots: the grain shipment interception that triggered the riot, an attack on another bourgeois following the Venin shooting, and on a bourgeoise handing out charity a day later. I look at these in my larger study.
whether the narrator had gotten the "facts right" but also communicated the author's view of the ultimate meaning of the death itself and its relationship to larger political and social questions.

Uncertainty shrouded the event from the start, though of course everyone did concur on a few major points. All agreed that during the Buzançais disturbances a local notable shot a man named Venin and that a portion of the crowd then turned against the notable and killed him. Beyond that the story was murky. Nevertheless, newspapers wasted no time reporting—or elaborating—the version that best suited their political needs. Indeed, most presses never did sort out such elementary facts as whose house the rioters entered or even the exact identity of the man who shot the rioter. They referred to the shooter by many names—as Huart-Chambert, Chambert-Huart, Chambert, or Chambert, fils—10—and sometimes called him the proprietor and sometimes the son of the proprietor. Many mentioned his previous military experience. Yet, as I mentioned earlier and as later reports revealed, the shooter turned out to be the middle-aged son of a substantial proprietor. The father lived separated and across town from his wife and son,11 and the father, not the son, had served in the military.12 The mother, not her son, functioned as head of household, at least in the eyes of locals. She had already signed the "engagement" before the violence ever started

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10 Of course, it was not uncommon to attribute more than one name to a person. However, in this case, even the newspapers admitted that they were confused about his identity.
11 Information de Villach, n° 93, AD Indre, 2 U 70.
12 The father had served in the gendarmerie at a fairly high rank. See the attempt to get all this straight by the *Journal de l'Indre* and the *Gazette du Berri* 30 (Sunday, 17 Jan. 1847) as discussed below. The national press never bothered to try.
and, it appears, she had done so at her son's behest.

Moreover, no clear picture of Venin emerged in the press. Had he belonged to the group carrying the "engagement" or did he act alone? Had he intended violence against Chambert or was he defending himself? No one ever bothered to report what he did for a living. The press revealed itself aware of the importance of and stakes involved in manipulating the story. They did so when they deferred information, permanently suppressed it, or re-ordered it. Of course, mis-reporting information sometimes resulted from the rush to report news even though editors did not have all the facts, or from reliance on previous faulty reporting. However, by filtering Buzançais through their political prisms, the press generated diverging narratives of the Venin shooting despite the evidence available.

Newspapers on the political left eschewed detailed narratives and concentrated instead on the context of social polarization: the insensitivity of rich landowners and misery among the common people. For example, on 17 January the Fourierist newspaper *La Démocratie pacifique* sketched the acts: "grain pillaged, forced sales . . . the devastation of several mills, and blood spilled."\(^\text{13}\) The next issue told a brief story with an accompanying message:

> a proprietor [who] killed a man, and dangerously wounded another, fell himself under the blows of an exasperated crowd.

> . . . God forbid that we might wish to exaggerate the evil or to alarm the public. But if it is true that the rich Berrichons, withdrawn into their selfishness, have done nothing to help the poor population . . . then we are not surprised that they were among the first to feel the consequences for their harshness.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{13}\) *La Démocratie pacifique* n° 15 (Sunday, 17 Jan. 1847).

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
The newspaper associated Venin with the "assembly of workers who wanted to make proprietors sign an [agreement to] fix grain prices"\textsuperscript{15}

When the trial began, the \textit{Démocratie pacifique} warned that the prosecution would manipulate both evidence and narrative to turn the Venin/Chambert episode to its advantage. Thus it could withhold even the smallest extenuating circumstance from those who had retaliated against Chambert:

Without asking if the poor were really suffering, the indictment [charges that the rioters] had spoken [previously] of pillage and vengeance against the bourgeois. At the time of the troubles we had reported . . . that M. Huard-Chambert had fired two pistols and mortally wounded two men before being killed by the crowd that had invaded his home. Following the version of the indictment, M Chambert was armed with one gun that went off in the struggle, by accident perhaps, and the shot only hit one victim.\textsuperscript{16}

This prosecution's version established premeditation, thus assuring a death sentence, and exonerated Chambert of an

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. It linked the riot itself to Lyon in 1834: "Ever since the great Lyonnais insurrections, [the government] has known or should know that the great worker ideal, to which he aspires and which he pursues sometimes by risking his life, is secure work, work guaranteed against unemployment and well enough remunerated to suffice for his basic needs." By February, the newspaper even warned that "the details of brutality, of revolting ferocity are also an instruction for the government . . . by reading in them the history of the Great Revolution, why doesn't the bourgeoisie ask itself: The nobility and clergy were punished for having neglected the education of the people, the middle class, now reigning, should apply itself to making sure that it doesn't merit the same reproach."

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{La Démocratie pacifique}, n° 51 (Sunday, 28 Feb. 1847).
aggressive (and possibly dishonorable) overreaction to his circumstances.

Even months later, the worker newspaper *L'Atelier* similarly underscored the power the prosecution had exercised in controlling the riot's narrative.\(^\text{17}\) It denounced the refusal of the tribunal to recognize the significance of the fact that Chambert, not the people, had fired first. It declared that:

> the condemned of Buzançais were guilty, so be it, but their execution has purified them. Now no one remembers their crime, they pity them. It was not they who first drew blood; Venin fell to Chambert's bullet before the crowd struck [Chambert]. If [the authorities] had wanted to punish all Chambert's murderers, they would have had to strike all Buzançais because the entire city participated in his death... it is to a certain extent, the city of Buzançais itself that was guillotined in effigy.\(^\text{18}\)

The editors warned that "this is first cannon shot in the social war." They asked: "Will there henceforth be two hostile classes, the people and the bourgeois?"

Etienne Cabet's communist newspaper *Le Populaire* worried even more about the political spin the July Monarchy had imposed on the Buzançais riot. The authorities had originally sought evidence of communist influence and, despite finding none, asserted it anyway. The *procureur-général* insisted that rioters had "put in action communist doctrines," but the newspaper sought to distance itself from such accusations. Following the


\(^{18}\) *L'Atelier* 8 (May 1847), 498-99.
sentencing and executions, an article in early May put the Venin/Chambert episode in play by offering its own narrative:

one drunken rioter, Venin, went to the proprietor, Chambert-Huard's house, and demanded money from him, striking the table with his club. Chambert, seeing himself threatened, grabbed his gun and took aim. A fight broke out between a servant and Venin who, by throwing himself on Chambert's gun, took the charge in the lower abdomen and died.

The writer protested:

The trial revealed among the accused only ignorance, craziness, blind and brutal violence of egotistical individual interests, evidence of [character] that is the exact opposite of communism! . . . How could the procureur-général permit himself to . . . denature doctrines that preach the opposite!!

As we will see, the newspaper's denunciation of Venin as a violent drunk (note also that he "threw himself on Chambert's gun"—was he suicidal?) and the characterization of Buzançais rioters as crazed, savage, and alienated resonated with conservative assessments of the episode.

Indeed, the newspapers on the political left had to some extent all rushed to deplore popular recourse to excessive violence and to distance their causes from it. This strategy derived in part from a cautious response to looming government sanctions. The September 1835 Press Laws had limited freedom of the press and punished endorsement of violence. However, their denunciation of the rioting rested on deeper foundations. Although the left-wing press

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19 "Calomnies et persécutions du pouvoir," Le Populaire 6 (2 May 1847).
20 Pinkney, 122; Collins, 82-85.
tried to contextualize what happened at Buzançais, the riot proved too undisciplined to endorse. As Jill Harsin has recently emphasized, working-class radicals tried to legitimize what they did as formally political and not driven by material interests, even need. They generated a code of (masculine) self-discipline for themselves that left no room for disorderly, irrational behavior.²¹ Venin looked more like a crazed criminal than a rational, respectable worker. Their discomfort with such violence encouraged them to focus less on the episode itself than on what it forewarned.²²

Newspapers sympathetic to the July Monarchy and its minister Guizot reported versions that also denounced rioters as the "dangerous classes" but left no room to justify rioter behavior. The official newspaper Le Moniteur universel reported this version:

> The troublemakers went first to the house of the Sr. Chambert-Huart, proprietor, whom they wanted to sign an engagement to


turn over his grain anytime it was requisitioned at the price of 3 francs. When this proprietor refused to agree to such an obligation, a fight broke out between him and the rioters. Threatened with death and seeing himself victim of these fanatics, M Chambert seized a gun, and after trying in vain to stop his aggressors by intimidation, found himself reduced to having to use his weapon. One of the assailants was killed. Then the crowd rushed at M Chambert, who was felled by blows and literally split into pieces.  

Deriding the common people as "troublemakers" and "fanatics" who threatened property, the report delegitimized their behavior while defending the efforts of the property owner who shot a rioter, but only as a last resort. Note also that in this account, the proprietor (a man) refuses to sign the "engagement" (which, you might recall, his mother had already signed) and this honorable and brave refusal triggers the fight that ends in the assailant's death.

The Journal des débats, an Orleanist newspaper, presented a lively narrative that focused on the defense of the rights of property, linked specifically with brave citizenship. It recounted that when rioters asked him to sign the "engagement" to lower prices and provision the market regularly:

Some [proprietors] resisted, as was their right, and we will add, as was their duty. In order to escape the ill treatment of this menacing troop, they hid themselves or fled. That was what M Chambert-Huart wanted to do when they presented him with the list. The rioters pursued him... This robust man of 36, who had been a soldier, took two pistols out of his pocket and said to them: "Leave me alone! Respect the freedom of citizens!" "Sign" they cried. "I will sign nothing by force," he replied. "The first person who approaches me, I will

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23 Moniteur universel 18 (Monday, 18 Jan. 1847).
blow his brains out!" Either by their own initiative or pushed by the crowd, several rebels advanced. M Chambert shot twice. The first shot killed the man who had spoken, the second wounded one of those nearby.24

Again, the struggle erupts over the "engagement." The article's description of M. Chambert-Huart as a robust former soldier highlights his respectability and, as Robert Nye has suggested, establishes a physical bravery essential to nineteenth-century masculine bourgeois identity.25 He speaks for the citizen/proprietor, so cherished by the liberal political theory that underpinned the Orleanist constitution. The addition of melodramatic dialogue gives the narrative greater detail and verisimilitude, particularly to readers accustomed to similar serialized fiction on the bottom of half of their daily newspapers.26

The radical republican opposition newspaper La Réforme quoted accounts offered by the Moniteur and the Journal des débats. Nevertheless, its commentary proved more sympathetic. It argued that misery served as an "extenuating circumstance" for the accused and supported this contention by printing the summaries pronounced by the defense at the trial: "I respect the memory of M Chambert, but I permit myself to say that if he had better considered his actions (which I hasten to say was his right), if he hadn't killed Venin, his house and his belongings would have been respected."27 La Réforme also found the

24 Journal des débats 19 (Tuesday, 19 Jan. 1847).
26 Although the Journal des débats reporters may have "prided themselves" on getting first hand information, this narrative relied largely on creative imagination, and, in this case, the "source" was the Journal de l'Indre discussed below. Collins, 89.
27 La Réforme (Thursday, 4 March 1847).
"Troubles de Buzançais" useful evidence for castigating the
July Monarchy for failing to act responsibly to assure the
people subsistence.\textsuperscript{28} It declaimed against the government's
"social lesson" to France reflected in its court's exemplary
repression of "a few heads stupefied by ignorance, carried
away by misery,"\textsuperscript{29} whose case represented for the country
the "horrible duel" between "hunger and the law."\textsuperscript{30}

At the local and departmental level, one newspaper
actually waged a small skirmish with another over the
episode. Only two days after the rioting had subsided, a
self-declared "apolitical" (but obviously Orléanist)
newspaper, the \textit{Affiches de Châteauroux} began with an
honest admission that it had limited information. But
nevertheless it elaborated yet another narrative. The
newspaper recounted attacks on other proprietors and then
turned to the Chambert affair:

The leaders of the rioting headed to the Chambert-Huard
house. What happened inside? On this point, we do not have
very precise or positive details, . . . and we do not wish to pre-
empt the investigations of justice. But what is unfortunately
only too true, is that M Chambert fils, resisting the moral
obligation (\textit{contrainte morale}) to which he was subjected, and
wanting to maintain the inviolability of his domicile, armed
himself with his gun and fired two shots at his aggressors.\textsuperscript{31}

The same issue critiqued the account published the same
day by another departmental Orléanist newspaper, the

\textsuperscript{28} See the following issues: \textit{La Réforme} (Sunday, 17 Jan. 1847),
(Monday, 18 Jan. 1847), and (Tuesday, 19 Jan. 1847). It particularly
targeted the laws governing importation of grain, then under debate in
the Chambers.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{La Réforme} (Friday, 5 March 1847).
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{La Réforme} (Saturday, 6 March 1847).
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Affiches de Châteauroux} (Sunday, 17 Jan. 1847).
Journal de l'Indre. In fact, the Journal de l'Indre originated the lively, melodramatic version I quoted earlier from the national daily le Journal des débats. The Affiches continued:

We are not sure if this account from the Journal de l'Indre is more accurate than the details we gave above. But it is at least certain that this newspaper confused M Huart-Chambert and M Louis Chambert, his son. The latter was felled by the assassins' blows at Buzançais. This brave young man, whose heart is righteous and soul courageous, was never in the military. His father spent several years in service and occupied a high grade in the gendarmerie.32

Some editors clearly did worry about the multiplication of divergent narratives. But why bother? On 24 January the Affiches published an erratum correcting itself about one detail:

In the last issue we published that the rioters arrived at Chambert's door at 2 rather than 10 o'clock. We recognize that this typographical accident would give false impressions. In effect the prefect and his magistrates who accompanied him arrived in Buzançais at 1:30. One might assume that they were in town at the moment when a defenseless citizen was killed in such a cowardly way. However it is certain that almost all the evil had been committed by the time M. Ferdinand Leroy had arrived at the scene of the devastation.33

Obviously, this newspaper wanted to shield the prefect from accusations of cowardice or lack of foresight. At the beginning of February, another provincial newspaper, the Gazette du Berri, worried that "with so many narrations, versions far from the theater of events, many errors have

32 Ibid.
33 Affiches de Châteauroux (Sunday, 24 Feb. 1847).
slipped in." In fact, the Gazette thus set the scene for the publication of yet another account of events, for in late January or February Buzançais notables had decided to publish their own account of the "history of their disaster." Their report referred only vaguely to "horrible scenes of pillage crowned by murder." A footnote mentioned the "assassination of M Louis Chambert" but never mentioned the provocative shooting of Venin. The report's main purpose, of course, was to denigrate the rioters and exonerate local authorities from accusations that they had failed to act forcefully and decisively as soon as the troubles began. Written by the municipal counselors and several local notables—all of them proprietors and several themselves targets of popular violence—it painted the rioters as ungrateful and inhuman at the same time that it emphasized the authors' compassion and rectitude.

As these examples have shown, the press refracted the disorder through political prisms and selected the language most appropriate for its presentation. The Left (of the socialist or republican sort) sought sympathy for the starving poor and indicted the government and landed elites for failing to respond quickly, sufficiently, and compassionately. The government of Guizot and its affiliated newspapers defended property, free circulation, and a grain trade that protected proprietors from low prices.

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34 Gazette du Berri 12 (Wednesday, 10 Feb. 1847).
35 The printed report is "Rapport sur les événements accomplis dans la ville de Buzançais les 13, 14, 15 janvier 1847 et les jours suivants," AD Indre M 2565. The Gazette du Berri also published the text.
36 They criticized the press "that had wrongly recounted that the pillage was the result of the assassination of M Louis Chambert, but while the unfortunate man succumbed to the infamous, murderous blows, four houses had already been pillaged and several others involved." Ibid.
(the échelle mobile); these papers therefore castigated the people and exonerated Chambert.

Rioting in Buzançais and elsewhere underscored the pressing nature of issues simultaneously under debate in the Chamber of Peers and Chamber of Deputies, which included questions of government intervention in the grain trade, public assistance, and the reorganization of the National Guard in the provinces. As riots erupted all over France, both houses debated a free trade agreement with England, voted for incentives to import grain into the country, and increased resources for struggling charity workshops and food distributions to the poor. The first page of many newspapers discussed the more general problems raised by these issues, while subsequent pages reported on Buzançais and elsewhere. Sometimes Buzançais even made the front page as evidence to support arguments in the larger debate.37

Thus, the political press made the Buzançais jacquerie the focus of more and more national attention.38 The Gazette du Berri admitted that "the name of the city of

37 La Démocratie pacifique featured the trial of the Buzançais accused and an article on famine on the front page of its 28 Feb. issue.
38 By mid-January, most newspapers referred to the riot in Buzançais as a jacquerie (peasant war). I have found the first reference to this in official correspondence: Lettre du premier avocat général à Châteauroux sous le couvert du procureur du roi, M Raynal, à M le Garde de Sceaux (17 Jan. 1847), AN, BB19 37: "I have received unanimous opinion that in these serious events there is something of a new jacquerie. [Formal] politics are completely foreign to these events. Rather, they have a local character; but far from being less serious, their local character is, perhaps, even more dangerous." The national press appears to have picked up the reference from the Journal de l'Indre, which on 20 Jan. declared: "Insurrection continues. Rioting and pillaging propagate from canton to canton. We are in the presence of a veritable jacquerie."
Buzançais, as a result of such deplorable events, has had a great effect: all eyes are fixed on us, all mouths want to tell of our misfortunes." 39 The press had found in Buzançais a useful synecdoche for the social, economic, and political tensions that exploded during the crisis years, and it exploited the ambiguities surrounding the riots themselves, pitting claims for social justice against those of property and public order.

Despite differences in political orientation, most government and opposition newspapers shared some similar perspectives on the Venin shooting. For the opposition on the right and government parties, conflating Venin's presence in the Chambert house with those who came to present the "engagement" criminalized both behaviors, linking Venin's disorderly demands for assistance with demands emanating from the crowd grounded in the right to existence. Associating Venin's behavior and the crowd's retaliation with memories of the revolutionary maximum and the Terror (in fact at one point the Journal des Débats called rioters "septembriseurs") further served to terrify property owners who might then more eagerly endorse government efforts to suppress demands from the left. Criminalizing food riots served the interests of property owners, a group particularly attracted to law and order issues. 40 In fact, several commentators suggested links between events in Buzançais in January 1847 and a previous riot of November 1846 in Tours, which newspapers also argued had ties to Cabet's communist movement and the revolutionary traditions of

39 Gazette du Berri 12 (Wednesday, 10 Feb. 1847).
40 Colin Lucas has observed with regard to food riots that "property owners became more uncomprehending and more quickly frightened of the crowd." "The Crowd and Politics in France," Journal of Modern History 60 (Sept. 1988): 430.
Auguste Blanqui. In this light, food riots threatened to lead to the abolition of property.\textsuperscript{41}

Moreover, focusing on the heinousness of the acts and the wild, uncontrolled behavior of the masses of rioters deflected attention away from what, to the July Monarchy forces of order, may have proved the two most disquieting aspects of the affair: the breakdown of any ability to enforce order and the lack of solidarity among elites. The inaction of authority, with the exception of one brave gendarme, is one of the most notable features of the riot.\textsuperscript{42}

Indeed, the central government found itself on the defensive from accusations of a lack of preparedness for an economic crisis as well as for domestic disorder from many of its supporters in the two Chambers. At the local level, the whole affair smacked not only of cowardice, but also of an absence of both public spirit and bourgeois class solidarity.\textsuperscript{43}

For the opposition on the Left, while conflation of both

\textsuperscript{41} As Cabet's newspaper worried, courts constantly tried to ferret out those who demanded "sharing" of resources, particularly food because this smacked of Etienne Cabet's communist rhetoric.

\textsuperscript{42} The gendarme was 41 year-old brigadier Desiré Caudrelieu - who truly dared to go where none else would, and who tried vainly to quell the violence.

\textsuperscript{43} In fact, as I argue elsewhere, aspects of the post-riot repression (including the trial itself) sought to reform elites and local authorities as much as the rioters. As Jeremy Popkin has often asserted, the press served as "important sites for the construction of social and cultural identities," Popkin, 9. See also the exciting recent work on the making of the bourgeoisie: David Garrioch, \textit{The Formation of the Parisian Bourgeoisie}, 1690-1830 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Carol Harrison, \textit{The Bourgeois Citizen in Nineteenth-Century France: Gender, Sociability, and the Uses of Emulation} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Sarah Maza, \textit{The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
acts carried certain dangers, it also proved compelling. On the one hand, linking the group carrying the "engagement" with Venin's behavior highlighted the unruly, dangerous, violent potential of the desperate poor and sounded a warning to the government. On the other hand, such a link also associated the "people"—considered inherently good—with violent murderers. No surprise, then, that the left opposition newspapers generally elided the details and carefully deplored violence. Such a dilemma encouraged left opposition journalists to omit the gory details of the riot and focus on the larger context and issues.

The Venin-Chambert episode also generated a critique of July Monarchy justice. The newspaper *L'Atelier* worried not only about who controlled the narrative, but also about the audience for it: the jury. It observed that "the government tried the accused before juries composed of the very men who, just before, had trembled for their properties."  

44 *Démocratie pacifique* had also asked pointedly: "Didn't the procureur général put the accused in the most perilous of situations, when he brought them before a jury of proprietors who were perhaps linked by tight affective ties to M Chambert?"  

44 *L'Atelier* 8 (May 1847); 498-99.  
45 *Démocratie pacifique* 51 (Sunday, 28 Feb. 1847). Even the government eventually recognized that it had acted too harshly. Already in August 1847, Louis-Philippe's Ministry of Justice reduced sentences for many rioters caught in the subsistence movements that the crisis engendered. Unlike after previous episodes of food rioting from the Revolutionary period to the eruption of 1816-17, the government did not issue a general amnesty law, but rather asked the courts to review each case and propose reductions or pardons for those condemned for participation in food riots. These the Ministry considered on a case-by-case basis. Circular letter from the Ministre de la Justice (7 Aug. 1847); Tableau des condamnés dans le ressort de la Cour Royale de Bourges pour crimes ou délits se rattachant à la cherté
By the end of May 1847, attention turned to other events and ultimately to the 1848 Revolution itself. However, by then the political press had made rich use of Buzançais as a symbol around which it could organize debate of the issues that concerned it: the economy, justice, and the social question. The memory of the riot, however, did not fade quickly.

With the Revolution of 1848 memories of Buzançais resurfaced. After hearing the news of the abdication of Louis-Philippe on 25 February 1848, the demonstrators in Limoges called for the release from prison of the Buzançais incarcerees as part of a series of revolutionary demands. The provisional committee charged with departmental administration acceded on 29 February by issuing a "pardon in the name of the French people."46 By April most of the others detained in other prisons had also received pardons on the grounds that the Limoges example called for similar responses elsewhere. "The Republic should not have two weights and measures," wrote the Commissioner of the department of the Indre to the Minister of Justice.47

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47 Lettre du Commissaire du gouvernement près le département de l'Indre au ministre de la justice (n.d., 1848), AN, BB24 327-47. The pardons are recorded in the Report of 14 April 1848. Even those sentenced to forced labor sought clemency. Although it took some longer than others, all, even those sentenced for life, were eventually released. For example, after repeated pleas by the rioter Arrouy and his
In fact, Buzançais remained available for re-telling and re-ordering. As much as its meaning divided contemporaries, it would reappear in political discourse, the press, literature, visual culture, historical narratives, local spectacle, and pedagogy: in the 1860s, in 1880, 1919, 1925-1926, and yet again more frequently from the 1970s to the present. But that is a story for another day.