Politics and Class, 1790-1794:
Radicalism, Terror, and Repression in
Southern France

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Between 1789 and 1793, popular uprisings and resistance to taxation played havoc with the nine departments into which the National Assembly divided Languedoc. Counterrevolutionaries organized a series of military assemblies between 1790 and the spring of 1793. These challenges to the constitutional order dominated local politics. Wealthy merchants, lawyers, and former nobles who embraced the constitution of 1791 represented stability and won the support of property owners in elections. Yet in 1793 and 1794, as the internal challenges to the constitutional order diminished, the social composition of local government changed, and many members of the upper classes faced proscription in the period known as the Terror.

In the 1970s and 1980s, historians determined that class analysis failed to account for this period. Richard Cobb saw that the Terror was the first instance of popular government in French history but maintained that it was the work of militant coteries, not a social movement. Certain individuals had the talent and temperament to seize power on the local level and impose their vision of a revolutionary order. François Furet argued that the collapse of royal authority undid the social moorings of politics and permitted militants of clubs and electoral assemblies to rally a political community around the ideology of equality and pure
democracy. The underside of this ideology was the contention that its expected enemies, the privileged orders, plotted against the people. Revolutionaries used terror against imagined opponents. Lynn Hunt finds that a "new political class" of merchants, artisans, shopkeepers, clerks, and ex-priests rose to power in towns throughout France in 1793 and 1794. It shared the fears of people across the Atlantic world that political organizing outside of public assemblies harbored malevolent plots. The French absolute monarchy had deprived its subjects of practical experience in politics. When these subjects undertook an unprecedented project of transforming political language, rituals, and organizations, they therefore had a particularly difficult time tolerating the emergence of political organizations.¹

Like the work of Furet and Hunt, this paper shows that language, symbols, and political loyalties rather than economic or property relations motivated the pursuit of

national regeneration. It bears out Cobb's insight that the Terror was the work of individuals rather than a social movement. Nevertheless, class analysis helps to explain why revolutionary leaders succeeded in using rhetoric, ideology, and symbols to mobilize townspeople around repressive policies.

One can best describe the politics of the merchants, surgeons, master craftsmen, workers, and farmers who entered the political fray in the departments of old regime Languedoc in 1793 and 1794 as envious hostility to the privileged and rich. While these politics are latent in orderly and peaceful times, they become active in periods of political and economic dislocation. Such periods prompted artisans, shopkeepers, technicians, small proprietors, bookkeepers, and lesser civil servants to demand a place at the political table, sacrifices from the privileged and rich for the good of the community, and even the repression of imaginary enemies. The absolute monarchy in late eighteenth-century France created a propitious context for the development of these political sentiments, for it left the impression among contemporaries of a regime of private interests and pretentious displays. Classic studies of the absolutist state show that it not only enforced the personal authority and property rights of seigneurs, office holders, and other nobles but also entitled these figures to lord their affluence over the rest of society.²

Jurists, wholesale merchants, former nobles, and other proprietors had the wealth and influence to carry electoral assemblies and control the governments of the nine departments of old regime Languedoc in the first years after 1789, but the Revolution awakened hope among the urban population for participation in political affairs. In 1791, master craftsmen, surgeons, farmers, workers, and merchants began joining Jacobin clubs. Some called for a republican government to destroy the influence of refractory clergy and aristocrats. Many others demanded the mobilization of troops to fight foreign monarchies and internal enemies.³


Political mobilization took place within a context of growing economic insecurity. Grain prices increased in the second half of the eighteenth century and then climbed sharply in 1788 and 1789. Prices stabilized in Toulouse between the fall of 1789 and the summer of 1791, but then began to rise until an upsurge between August 1792 and May 1793 made grain almost three times as expensive as it had been in the summer of 1791. Inhabitants of the Hérault and the Gard had never produced enough grain for local needs, and bad harvests in the areas where they normally purchased grain, the bankruptcy of local administrations, and the disruption of shipments by rebellious crowds created the possibility of dearth in 1792 and 1793. The collection of food for the troops being mobilized against the Spanish and Austrian monarchies exacerbated the crisis.4

Economic insecurity fueled conflict between townspeople and local authorities. In early 1793 the Jacobin club of Toulouse, known at the time, like all such clubs, as the

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popular society (*société populaire*), created a committee of subsistence and called on the authorities to control prices. But local leaders defended economic liberalism. The municipality of Nîmes was run by wealthy merchants who coordinated a vast region of textile manufactures extending into the northern part of the Gard and the southern Massif central. They ignored repeated petitions of workers and the popular society for affordable grain and higher wages in 1792 and 1793. The popular society wrote to affiliated clubs of the Gard in November 1792 that the upper classes favored constitutional monarchy and looked to the coming elections as a chance to establish an aristocratic republic. Landowners, lawyers, and wholesale merchants carried these elections despite universal male suffrage. Some of Nîmes’ wealthiest wholesale merchants won election to the municipality.5

Violent social conflict engulfed the Ariège, as war with Spain became increasingly likely in 1791 and 1792. The departmental administration refused to requisition grain for the army, and many municipalities refused to ask wealthy residents to help billet troops. Popular societies called for drastic measures to defend the Revolution. Departmental administrators wrote to the Minister of the Interior in June 1792:

> Popular societies, affiliated with the Jacobin society in Paris, continually issue incendiary writings and calumnious denunciations scorning constituted powers. . . . These societies carry the ignorant and credulous people to insurrection. . . . If their proceedings continue to be tolerated, we will no longer be able to vouch for public tranquility, and France will soon

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5 ADG L47; Jean Sentou, "Révolution et contre-révolution," in *Histoire de Languedoc*, ed. Philippe Wolff (Toulouse: Privat, 1967), 466, 469; Lewis, 54; Pouthas, 118; Rouvière, 3:37-38; and Gutherz and Huard, 225.
be devoured by the horrors of anarchy.⁶

Two months later, popular uprisings deposed the former nobles, seigneurs, and royal officers who presided over the municipalities of Foix, Pamiers, and Mirepoix. Revolutionaries killed one official, forced another to flee, pillaged the houses of two others, and arrested many more. Democrats won election to all levels of government in the Ariège in December 1792.⁷

Notables of the other eight departments of Languedoc maintained power until the aftermath of the events of 31 May and 2 June 1793, when an alliance of the Parisian crowd and a group of deputies known as the Mountain expelled elected representatives from the Convention. The Mountain was sure to employ aggressive measures to wage war such as requisitioning grain, controlling prices, and arming the populace. Wealthy merchants, jurists, and proprietors of the departments of old regime Languedoc feared that such measures would undermine property and hierarchy. They came out against the Mountain's coup in a revolt labeled federalist, and they declared that deputies allied to the mob could not establish a fair constitution and respect for the law.⁸

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⁶ As quoted in Arnaud, 308-9. See also pages 294-95, 300-1.
The Convention replaced federalists with militants eager to defend its power. The Convention's representatives on mission placed master craftsmen, shopkeepers, workers, and farmers in charge of municipalities. Research on tax rolls and after-death inventories by Lynn Hunt, Jean Sentou, and myself shows that municipal officers in 1793 and 1794, after the federalist crisis, were less wealthy than the officers of the first years of the Revolution.9

The merchants, artisans, and petty property owners who entered local governments between the fall of 1793 and the end of the summer of 1794 used their power to tyrannize former nobles, priests, and members of the bourgeoisie suspected of lacking revolutionary spirit and generosity for their fellow citizens. In Carcassonne, the surveillance committee arrested women and workers for crimes such as

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religious zeal and refusing to drink to the Republic in the opening stages of the war with Spain in the spring of 1793. In the aftermath of the federalist crisis, however, authorities arrested nobles rather than workers. They not only detained people for symbolic acts, such as wearing the white label of monarchy, but also for breaking the Maximum by selling grain at high prices.\footnote{ADA L392, L1153, L2124.}

Although the officials of the year II (22 September 1793 to 21 September 1794) sought to assure the livelihood of the population, they did not want to involve the urban and rural masses in political affairs. Textile workers and day laborers, paying a meager capitation tax of two livres or less, comprised almost forty-five percent of Montpellier's taxpayers in 1789. These people did not participate in government. Johnson shows that conflicts between radicals and moderates in southern France in 1793 and 1794 did not concern peasants and wage earners. These ceased having a bearing on Revolution with the ebb of popular uprisings at the end of 1792.\footnote{AN H1/748/292; Hunt, 198; Johnson, 258-60.}

Administrators of the year II were especially concerned with what Hunt terms "the language of national regeneration, the gestures of equality and fraternity, and the rituals of republicanism." Hunt argues that the Revolution invented "the mobilizing potential of democratic republicanism and the compelling intensity of revolutionary change."\footnote{Hunt, 15.} Merchants, master craftsmen, surgeons, farmers, and workers devoted themselves to the Republic that offered them public standing and responsibility. The Republic signified a break with the old regime monarchy, which reserved political authority for nobles, office holders, and seigneurs. Revolutionaries set great store by a person's political allegiance, because it
carried a message about their right to take part in government. According to the minutes of the popular society of Montpellier in the wake of the federalist crisis, "The mayor always has had liaisons with aristocrats of the area, and patriots have always looked at him suspiciously, because he only came to their café to announce with affectation news unfavorable to the republic." The popular society claimed that "Bonnefout, former royal attorney of Montpellier, [was] fairly well known under the old regime and the new regime for his villainy and his care to arouse troubles and dissensions in the commune." The municipality of Mauguio denounced the justice of the peace, Fermaud, for counterrevolutionary opinions offending the public spirit. The surveillance committee of Béziers accused the justice of the peace, Gottis père, of aristocracy for using his home as a meeting place for the least civic-minded people.

The revolutionary army of the Haute Garonne brought this brand of politics into the lives of the inhabitants of the Southwest. Richard Cobb and Martyn Lyons argue that the Convention's reliance on popular societies to prosecute the war and suppress internal enemies in the wake of the federalist crisis allowed ardent radicals, such as François Hugueny, Joseph-Alexis Blanchard, and Claude-Louis Gélas, to bring the revolutionary army into existence and impose their vision of a revolutionary order. These radicals came, however, from varied backgrounds. Hugueny was a councilor in the seneschal court of Auch during the old regime. Active citizens elected him mayor of Beaumont and president of the district tribunal in 1790. The local agent of the Convention appointed him president of the departmental tribunal in

13 ADH L5528.
14 ADH L3219, L5645, L5791.
1793. Blanchard and Gélas came from more modest backgrounds. Blanchard was a clerk at the chamber of commerce of Toulouse prior to the Revolution. His participation in electoral assemblies of 1790 earned him no more than a clerical position under a justice of the peace. Gélas moved from his old regime trade of updating feudal titles for seigneurs to a lackluster bookkeeping position for the district of Toulouse. But in 1793 ardent interventions of Blanchard and Gélas in the popular society caught the eye of authorities. Blanchard became Hugueny's adviser, and Gélas received the responsibility of organizing the revolutionary army of the Haute Garonne.

Hugueny, Blanchard, and Gélas led about 700 troops, mostly artisans from Toulouse and farmers from Beaumont, into Grenade in October 1793. The National Assembly had chosen Grenade over Beaumont for the district capital in 1790. Hugueny told the army to free the area of fanaticism, "a monster vomited by despotism." Commanders incarcerated officials felt to be lacking public spirit, billeted troops with suspects, and turned rich people's property over to pillage. One chief officer had a detachment loot the home of his former boss, the marquis de Belesta. Gélas compelled Madame de Nougarède of Beauzelle to prepare supper for his troops and take part in the meal so they could mock and insult her. The army set up a grain depot to receive an eighth of the harvest of neighboring cantons. Hugueny wrote to

16 AN H1/748/291; ADHG 1 L 548, 1 L 559; Duboul, 58-60.
17 Quoted from Pierre Gérard, "L'armée révolutionnaire de la Haute-Garonne," in Révolution et Contre-Révolution, 173.

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local authorities, "None can claim the right to eat bread while others have none."\(^{18}\)

Members of the army intended above all to see Grenade submit to the Republic they embodied. The municipality of Grenade spoke out against the requisition of grain and the undemocratic practices of the revolutionary hierarchy. Gélás was furious. He went to town hall and blustered that "even if I were a hundred leagues away, I would come back to exterminate Grenade, to pulverize it, even if need be, against the authority of the Convention; I would raze the town to the ground and leave no brick standing, if I learned after my departure that the municipality remained in a state of apathy."\(^{19}\) Hugueny then took municipal officers into the cathedral, freshly converted by the army into a temple of reason, and carried out a new purge. This temple was also the scene of public meetings at which Hugueny and Blanchard tried to outdo each other's rhapsodies for the Mountain and invectives against suspects. Army officers warned local peasants that failure to work on Sunday and to respect the ten-day week of the republican calendar would lead to arrest. The army charged a crowd arriving in Grenade for Sunday mass. On 29 November 1793, the army surprised a congregation in a church, snatched books from the lectern, ripped them apart, and forced the faithful to dance around the altar at gunpoint.\(^{20}\)

Jean-François Baby, a wholesale merchant and property owner, instituted the same type of revolutionary order in the Ariège. His connections to members of the Convention helped him secure a commission to lead a detachment of the revolutionary army of the Haute Garonne to the high valleys

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 177. See also 167, 170-71.

\(^{19}\) Duboul, 89-90, see also 84.

\(^{20}\) Archives Municipales de Toulouse 2 I 33; Gérard, 168-69, 173-74; Duboul, 93; Lyons, 60-61.
of Tarascon, reputedly infested with aristocrats and priests escaping to Spain. Soldiers climbing into a mountain pass spotted people hiding behind trees. Baby ordered the cannons to fire, and an innocent peasant boy was killed. He consoled his men by claiming that they had fired for the good cause and indemnified the father by levying a tax on the nearest town's four richest residents. The army then entered the town of Vic-Dessos and had the municipality draw up a list of fanatics and aristocrats. Baby had fathers and the elderly take turns guarding some of the suspects so that, in his words, "each poor sans culotte could savor the sweet pleasure of reducing the property of aristocrats to rubble."\(^{21}\)

The revolutionary soldiers forced the priest of Rabat to disavow publicly everything he had ever told fellow villagers about Christianity. Baby obliged the commune of Saurat to write to the Convention that it was renouncing all religious cults except that of liberty, reason, and philosophy. After Thermidor, Baby faced the hostility of the local population and spent months in prison. He was eventually executed for taking part in Babeuf’s conspiracy of equals in 1796. Richard Cobb wrote, "Baby was not a man made for a life in peaceful times."\(^{22}\)

Michel Courbis, an old regime prosecutor in the seneschal court of Nîmes, was a grimmer, more bloodthirsty


figure. He played a leading role in the revolutionary politics of Nîmes until the summer of 1793, when the upper classes cracked down on their enemies during the federalist crisis. In March 1794, however, the representative on mission, Borie, made Courbis mayor and entrusted public security to a committee of surveillance. Borie thereby precipitated a reign of terror. The departments of old regime Languedoc had seven percent of the French population and only two and a half percent of executions during the Terror. Most of these took place in the Gard, when Courbis and his partisans controlled the municipality of Nîmes and detained thousands of suspects between March and August 1794. They persecuted proportionally more ecclesiastics and former nobles than any other social group, though farmers, artisans, workers, and shopkeepers did constitute about thirty-five percent of their victims.

Nîmes' committee of surveillance was composed of five stocking makers, three merchants and manufacturers, a bookbinder, a mechanic, a launderer, and a cloth worker. One of its lists of suspects, a page drawn up at the end of April 1794, contained about a hundred names from the tenth section of Nîmes. The committee divided the names into two columns, one on the left entitled "the rich," including many merchants and landlords, and one on the right containing many farmers, bakers, merchants, and textile workers. Each entry included one of three annotations: moderate, constitutional monarchist, or aristocrat.

The revolutionary tribunal decided the fate of people appearing on these lists. The president of the tribunal was

23 ADG L3137; Gavignaud and Laurent, 181, 187-88, 190; Guthertz and Huard, 232-33.
25 ADG L189, L3138.
Courbis's brother-in-law, a former royal attorney. The other six judges included an auctioneer, a notary, an ex-priest, a silk worker, an apothecary's son, and a well-to-do farmer. They would take counsel in Courbis's home, overlooking the law court and town square, before going into session and return afterward for dinner and drinks while watching the execution of those they had condemned. It was alleged after Thermidor that Courbis and his guests would then go down to the square and dance a farandole around the guillotine. The allegation must have had some basis, for Courbis claimed in his defense that the guillotine stood next to a liberty tree and that he danced around the liberty tree to set a good example for the people on the weekly day off on the republican calendar.26

Local militants such as Courbis fell from power without a struggle at the end of the summer of 1794, when the Convention called a halt to the extraordinary policies used to wage all-out war. Former federalists and other members of the upper classes regained authority and carried out repressive policies against revolutionary militants. The bourgeoisie of Nîmes even looked on approvingly as Catholic murder gangs hunted down the terrorists of the year II.27

How do we make sense of the sans culottes' year in power? Current scholarship stresses the rhetoric of national regeneration and the unprecedented effort to achieve democracy and equality. Revolutionaries assumed that good citizens stated their views openly and that political organizing outside of public assemblies could only have nefarious ends. Revolutionaries failed to appreciate the difficulties they faced in seeking to transform their polity and society. They

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27 Gutherz and Huard, 240; Rouvière, 4:360-61; and Cobb, The French and their Revolution, 182, 187-88.
ascribed their setbacks to malevolent plotters and used state power to terrorize suspected enemies.28

This paradigm seems particularly applicable to the politics of governmental assemblies in Paris. It also makes sense of the efforts of the departmental authorities of old regime Languedoc to root out alleged schemers and aristocrats suspected of extinguishing civic virtue and leading the people astray. But the paradigm does not explain the policies that had the greatest influence on the lives of local inhabitants. Anxiety about political organizing had little to do with Gélas's desire to subject a noblewoman to the abuse of his revolutionary soldiers or his threats to leaders of Grenade who would not acquiesce to his army's authority. Suspicion of plots does not account for the pleasure Baby and other members of the revolutionary army seemed to take in humiliating the priests and well-to-do of the Ariège.

Richard Cobb argued that some militants truly corresponded to "the Thermidorian buveur de sang, enjoying bloodshed and violence and the fear in which he was held, cultivating the image of his own ferocity."29 These types of individuals, Cobb maintained, had the skill, physical attributes, and dedication to manipulate assemblies. What sans culottes had in common was not social class—their backgrounds were too heterogeneous—but temperament: a desire to seize power on the local level, cleanse the administration of old regime elements, and fill it solely with patriots. Their rift with the Convention in 1794 stemmed from irreconcilable visions of revolution. The sans culottes' militancy disaggregated authority, while rulers in Paris sought to centralize it.30

28 For recent scholarship see Furet, 14-15, 26-27; Hunt, 2, 27, 43, 49, 55-56.
30 Ibid., 172, 175, 220-21, 223-24, 227, 240.
Cobb correctly emphasized the incoherence of the sans culottes' program, their limited numbers, and their failure to envision a national movement. He also correctly emphasized the extraordinary circumstances of foreign and civil war, which led the Convention to rely on dedicated revolutionaries to carry out divisive policies in the fall of 1793. The evidence presented in this paper, however, suggests that their politics did not come down solely to their individual temperaments. The leaders of the Terror in Languedoc were jurists, clerks, landowners, and businessmen, and the offici

The urban residents' disappointment with the Revolution turned into anxiety in 1792 and 1793, as the notables in charge of local administrations refused to requisition grain, control prices, or mobilize troops. The administrators allowed spiraling prices to threaten the modest economic status that merchants, artisans, shopkeepers, and farmers had achieved.

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31 Ibid., 218, 238
They seemed willing to permit the petty bourgeois, middling strata to sink into the mass of peasants, day laborers, and indigents. They seemed willing to allow foreign monarchies to dash all the hopes the Revolution had raised.

Ardent expressions of revolutionary commitment, then, had a basis in social conditions. Master craftsmen, merchants, surgeons, farmers, and workers coveted positions of public responsibility. When they sensed that notables were willing not only to keep them subordinate, but also to allow their modest capital to dissipate and the Revolution to end, then their hope for a better life turned sullen, and their political language turned virulent. Before and after Thermidor, officials accused their enemies of debauchery, sexual perversity, and unspeakable acts of cruelty. In the Haute Garonne, judges and clerks such as Hugueny and Blanchard won a following by attacking religious practices of the old regime. A property owner such as Baby found a group of residents eager to help him bully the bourgeoisie and clergy of the Ariège. Artisans and shopkeepers collaborated with the Nîmois jurist Courbis in bloody punishments of nobles, priests, and the well-to-do.32

Revolutionaries could not translate such class anger into a political program. They had no wish to mobilize the urban and rural masses for the redistribution of property. They actually arrested many farmers, artisans, and workers on suspicion of hoarding and sympathy for the monarchy. Had the pillage of tax offices, the raids on markets, and the disrespect for property, so widespread in the first years of the Revolution, continued into 1793, then the judges, merchants, and landowners who directed the Terror probably would not have spoken out so stridently against inequality. When the leaders of the Convention decided that the perilous

circumstances of 1793 had passed, they had no trouble banishing the terrorists from the political stage, for they had not put together a social movement.