6. Conclusion

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Conclusion

FINALLY, armed with a list of responses, we can return to the question, What did the radical press say? Or alternately stated, we can now answer the questions, (1) What were the Parisian radicals thinking from 1789 to 1791? and (2) What was the content of this major source of information for the Parisian public? Indeed, this press is a crucial source for an understanding of the radicals, for the Cordeliers, like most Frenchmen of the time, resisted formal party organization. Their meetings were spontaneous and ill-organized, and the journalists with a continuous forum for their opinions exercised a predominant influence on radical thought. Furthermore, many Parisians were regular followers of the popular political press, and we can state with some confidence that its impact was widespread. Thus, the following summary of reporting in the radical press provides not only an insight into the radicals’ thinking but also an account of one segment of opinion that shaped the views of the public.

The message found in the radical press focused primarily on the propagation of a political ideology, however rudimentary and unsophisticated. Although almost all the articles were written as a response to some particular event, there was no great concern with the events themselves. Events were reported briefly. Even those occurrences that precipitated shifts in radical opinion were isolated and relatively unimportant in themselves, and they certainly are not the “key” events regarded by most historians as determining the course of the Revolution. Indeed, the events reported by radicals were ignored by most of the Parisian press; the radical newspapermen concentrated instead on events relating to the success or failure of popular sovereignty. Consequently, events, insofar as
they had import, were significant largely as symbols of the radical commitment to the ideology of popular sovereignty.

Nonetheless, the radical newspapermen were involved in reporting and evaluating the activities of the powerful individuals and institutions of the capital. In fact, for the heroes and "semi-heroes," the reporting in the radical press was largely based on their actual activities. However, villains were castigated not for what they did, but as haughty, antipopular, conspiratorial aristocrates. Because the radicals interpreted, according to their own ideology, the actions of those they distrusted, these attacks were a confirmation of the ideology of popular sovereignty as much as they were a castigation of a certain group or individual. With almost all groups being treated as villains by 1791, the message of the papers was in fact increasingly stereotypical and ideological.

What, then, was the ideological position of the radical press? In brief, the radicals believed that, by an accident of history, a moral, egalitarian peuple had developed. This peuple embraced brotherhood and desired no more wealth, or power, or prestige, than their comrades. Confronting the peuple, however, was an aristocratie who wished both to preserve their old power and luxuries and to monopolize any new positions created by the Revolution. While the peuple disdained wealth, the aristocrates coveted it in order to provide themselves with luxuries and with offices. Moreover, if money or influence in high places would not arrest the progress of the peuple, the aristocrates were capable of resorting to any tactics—even the most violent—to achieve their ends.

To counter the "aristocratic" menace to the social ideal of the peuple, the radicals proposed a literal adherence to popular sovereignty. Already imbued with a morality of concern for their fellows, the peuple would make certain that government could do nothing contrary to their wish. Government would be left weak with vigorous action reserved to the peuple themselves, who could be trusted never to abuse their power. Also, cultural life would be organized so that the peuple could express their opinions freely and so that the influence of the aristocratie would be severely restricted. In the realm of economics, the radicals were more reticent in redefining conditions. Here they did not advocate destruction of the accumulated wealth of the aristocratie. Although they believed only a member of the aristocratie would want more than did his neighbors, they did not sanction equal fortunes. Generally, they avoided proposing any specific means—such as a limit to free trade or a progressive income tax—that might reduce or redistribute the wealth of the aristocratie. Also, while they advocated a guaranteed minimum subsistence, they were very vague about how it would be provided. They relied on moral suasion to convince the wealthy to pay high wages and to spend more money in order to stimulate the economy.
Thus, from 1789 to 1791, the Parisian radicals were obsessed with this ideology of popular sovereignty. Their treatment of events, individuals, and institutions only served to highlight radical ideology. In emphasizing ideology, they were not very different from the “grub-street” radicals, similarly unconcerned with mundane activity. They were also similar in their indifference to, and in their hostility for, constituted authority. The professional and social rejection in the 1780s had made them resentful of the “establishment,” and this bitterness influenced their revolutionary activities. But the radicals did not continue their prerevolutionary behavior without modification, for after 1789 they spoke prudishly, not pornographically. They constantly warned of the sharp and dangerous horns of the aristocratie, rather than the foolish and witless horns of the cuckold. Before the Revolution, the radicals had envisioned a moral peuple, who were opposed to a degenerate, debauched aristocratie. After 1789, they continued to believe in this same moral peuple, but this time their opponents, if they still lusted after wealth and indulgence, including the sins of the flesh, were now aggressive and active—and capable of effective political machinations. The Cordelier lack of interest in Marie-Antoinette clearly reveals that their chief target was no longer private morality, for the queen certainly would have been more frequently mentioned if sexual indiscretions had been a principal point of the radical focus. In the Revolution, radical attacks on licentiousness changed to attacks on political persuasions.2

On the other hand, there was little substantive difference between the ideology of the Cordelier radicals of 1789–91 and the Jacobin radicals of 1793–94. Although it is difficult to define precisely the radicals and radicalism of the later period, one can compare the earlier militants both with the “most advanced” Jacobins of 1793–94 and with the sans-culottes of the Year II as described by Albert Soboul. The similarity between the “most advanced” Jacobins, Robespierre and his followers, and the Cordeliers of 1789–91 is striking. Of course, Robespierre and his associates were concerned with planning and manipulating daily politics, but their social, political, and economic ideals are impossible to differentiate from those of the early radicals. Both groups favored social equality, popular sovereignty, and a minimum subsistence for all. Both favored free trade and opposed the indiscriminate sequester of the fortunes of the wealthy qua wealthy. This similarity is confirmed by the fact that the Cordeliers supported Robespierre wholeheartedly from 1789 to 1793. For example, of the newspapermen who were regular contributors to the radical press, fourteen of the seventeen were political allies of Robespierre in the Year II.3

Furthermore, the early Cordeliers differed from the sans-culottes in the same way as the “most advanced” Jacobins. The sans-culottes agreed with the Jacobins and the Cordeliers in their politics and social ideology, but
they wished to limit free trade to guarantee themselves adequate supplies. This difference on economic policy and principle was partially responsible for dissolving the coalition between the *sans-culottes* and the Jacobins. Nonetheless, the similarities in ideology between these two groups were considerable, and as Soboul points out, it was not exclusively the dispute over economic issues that split the *sans-culottes* from the Jacobins. It would seem rather that their problems were exacerbated much more by the fact that the Jacobins occupied the central government and the *sans-culottes* the local centers of authority. The dissolution of their coalition was caused, not so much by fundamental ideological disagreement, but by a struggle for power.4

On an ideological level at least, the *sans-culottes* may be considered the heirs of the Cordeliers. The “most advanced” Jacobins, moreover, inherited both ideology and personnel from these Cordeliers. It is significant that there is this coherence between the militants of 1789–91 and those of 1793–94. It is now apparent that the positions taken by the *sans-culottes* and Robespierre and his followers were not, for the most part, new positions, born of political exigencies of the moment. Their principles were most certainly articulated in the radical press beginning in 1789. As we shall see, the longevity and stability of these opinions cast some doubt on the findings of M. J. Sydenham and Richard Cobb.

Michael J. Sydenham has insisted that there were no serious ideological differences between the Jacobins and the Girondins. Although he notes that one issue, the Girondist hostility to Paris, divided these two groups, he considers that this single issue was relatively minor compared to the many points of political agreement. He emphasizes that a “Girondist” was really only a political opponent of Robespierre without any ideological distinctions between “Girondist” and Jacobin.5 My study, however, indicates that the dissension between Robespierre and his opposition was far more than simply political. Indeed, the one ideological difference that Sydenham does cite—the Gironde’s animosity to Paris—is not a small exception. Rather, it was crucial because hostility to Paris meant hostility to the long term ideology of the Jacobins described in this book. Since 1789 many of the Jacobins had advocated an ideology that called for social equality and popular sovereignty. Because Paris was the workshop of these ideals, the Girondist opposition to Paris could not be taken lightly by the “most advanced” Jacobins. Their belief in Cordelier ideology and in Paris was no creation of the political strife of 1792–93: it was their longstanding guideline; it dictated that those who distrusted Paris must be eliminated. Thus, the division over Paris was not a simple, possibly reconcilable, difference, for the Jacobin position was founded upon a four-year commitment to an ideology that had been nurtured and guided by the capital.
Similarly, the persistence of this Cordelier ideology from 1789 to 1793 testifies against Richard Cobb’s assertion that sans-culottism was a fleeting, unsubstantial movement. He has argued that the political power of the sans-culottes was based on an unusual confluence of certain conditions and that their destruction requires no explanation—especially not that of Albert Soboul. To some extent, Cobb is correct. Nonetheless, the existence and incessant propagation of Cordelier ideology by the journals cannot be dismissed as insignificant. Since the efforts of these newspapers were supplemented by the efforts of a host of clubs, there was a solid experience of four years underlying sans-culotte agitation. Their existence and prosperity should be no surprise, and Soboul’s explanation of their demise is certainly warranted.

Just as these six newspapers are a source for radical thought from 1789 to 1791, they are also a source for the thought of some segments of the Parisian population at large. Few outside the Cordeliers thought precisely the same way as these newspapermen, but many were strongly influenced by them. Thus, since the radicals were fiercely ideological, since they supported social equality and popular sovereignty, and since they were moderate and restrained in their economic goals, we might expect those under their influence to think somewhat along those lines. While it is impossible to discover who subscribed to radical views, one might logically assume that the members of George Rude’s crowd were among the most likely believers in the radical cause. The assumption that the crowd shared Cordelier ideology makes its activities easier to explain. The political awareness of the crowd, its idealism, its choice of political goals over economic ones all make sense if one accepts the notion that they were greatly influenced and patterned by the radicals’ idealism and political views. This is not to say that the crowd was created or totally shaped by the radical press. Rather, it is simply to suggest that at least in part the behavior of the crowd was determined by the news reports they read or heard—not exclusively by material conditions of life.

The stress of the radical press on ideology, their persistent advocacy of direct popular sovereignty and of vigilance against the “aristocrates,” raises again the role of ideas on the course of the French Revolution. Since the demise of H. Taine’s “conspiracy of ideologues,” French revolutionary historiography has leaned heavily on nonideological explanations of revolutionary actions. These have ranged from the “theory of circumstances” of Aulard and the “premature class struggle” of Mathiez to the “power struggle” of Sydenham and the “release of capitalist enterprise” of Soboul. To explain the Terror, the role of the sans-culottes, and the grand journées of Paris, historians have offered corollary and supplemental hypotheses including crowd action, political organization, secular religion, and personal rivalries—indeed, almost every explanation.
except political ideology. This book does not intend to resurrect Taine's assertions; but it does raise doubts for his opponents. The Cordeliers, at least, acted and argued primarily from their ideology. This ideology was not a sophisticated political theory, but its tenets were completely understood and accepted by the radical journalists. The ideas probably originated in the past poverty and career frustrations of the Cordelier journalists, but by 1789 they existed independently of their origins. Further, these ideas were repeatedly trumpeted in the radical press—they echoed throughout Paris—and with the rise of the radicals to power, were greatly influential in determining the course of the Revolution. Furthermore, these concepts were so powerful that even the Thermidoreans, the Directory, and Napoleon could not suppress them, and they persist to the present day. The radical journalists, who brought these ideas into focus and then popularized them, were thus responsible for many of the developments of 1789, 1790, 1791, and beyond.