Images of Popular Violence in the French Revolution: Evidence for the Historian?
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Take away the popular revolution of July 1789 and the French Revolution is no longer the French Revolution. It was popular uprisings in July that drove the Revolution in directions that no one at the time could have anticipated, and once the people intervened in the Revolution they became part of the revolutionary dynamic. In that dynamic, popular violence was of crucial importance. As Lynn Hunt has put it, "Popular violence defined the French Revolution…[It] pushed the Revolution forward, but it also threatened to dissolve it in an acid wash of blood, vengeance, and anarchic disorder."[1]

Two illustrations by Jean-Louis Prieur depicting related events that took place in July 1789 suggest possible uses of images for historians who want to understand popular violence in the specific time and place of its initial eruption.[2] These images depict the hanging of Foulon de Doué at the Place de Grève on July 22 [Image 25] and a crowd taking Bertier de Sauvigny to the Place de Grève later in the day [Image 31], where he too was hanged. These events are well known to historians. Prieur's tableaus add nothing factual to what historians know about the killing of these two royal officials. The question is, how might these images further understanding of the events they depict, and more largely, what might they say about popular violence in the French Revolution? In the discussion that follows I will draw from an earlier study in which I examined these images; as in my earlier study I will place the images in the specific context in which the

[1] The quote is from an essay by Lynn Hunt that all members of the website group saw before writing their essays. This essay is a revised version of an earlier essay; it draws from exchanges with members of the website group.

[2] Prieur (1759-1795) was the first illustrator for the Tableaux historiques de la Révolution française, 144 prints depicting the principal events of the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799. The indispensable study of the Tableaux historiques is La Révolution par la gravure: les Tableaux historiques de la Révolution

events they depict took place.[3]

The first of the images I will consider is Prieur's The Hanging of Foulon de Doué at the Place de Grève [Image 25]. It depicts the lynching by a revolutionary crowd of a hated official who was thought to have said during a famine in 1775 that "If [the people] are hungry let them eat grass." Foulon was aware of hostility toward him when he fled the capital during the Paris Insurrection; he spread rumors that he had died, but he was recognized at Viri, a few leagues outside the capital, where he was hiding. "You want to give us hay, you shall have some yourself." With a bale of hay attached to his back, Foulon was brought back to Paris, to the Hôtel de Ville, where officials tried to protect him from the crowd. Too large and unruly for officials to control, the crowd seized Foulon and hanged him from a lamppost at the far side of the Place de Grève, across from the Hôtel de Ville. The crowd then decapitated Foulon, stuck his head on a pike, and marched up the rue Saint-Martin, brandishing its trophy as it proceeded. Bizarrely, this crowd encountered another one proceeding in the opposite direction escorting another enemy of the people to the Hôtel de Ville, where he too was subjected to popular justice. It was the encounter of these two processions that is the subject of the second illustration under consideration in this essay, The Intendant Bertier de Sauvigny, led to the Hôtel de Ville, recognizes the Head of Foulon [Image 31]. As it happened, the second official, Bertier de Sauvigny, was the son-in-law of Foulon; he too was a hated official who fled the capital during the Paris Insurrection; he too was recognized and taken to Paris; and he too was hanged from a lamppost in the Place de Grève. Earlier, the crowd had stuffed

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française, ed. Philippe Bordes, Alain Chevalier, Claudette Hould, Annie Jourdan, Rolf Reichardt, and Stéphane Roy (Paris, 2002).

[3] My study, Jacques-Louis David and Jean-Louis Prieur, Revolutionary Artists: The Public, the Populace, and Images of the French Revolution, was published by the SUNY Press in 2000.

hay into the mouth of the decapitated head of Foulon; now it ripped the heart from the body of Bertier and stuck it on a pike, as it did with Bertier's head, both trophies of the people.

When deputies of the National Assembly at Versailles received news of the killing of Foulon and Bertier, they debated what had happened. Those on the left defended the popular action, those on the right condemned it. Just as contemporaries disagreed over the killing of Foulon and Bertier, so too have historians of the French Revolution. George Rudé's response to these events was to say that reactionary historians have used the killing of these officials to discredit revolutionary crowds. In Rudé's socioeconomic analysis, revolutionary crowds were made up of artisans, shopkeepers, and petty tradesmen, law abiding people who were neither unemployed nor criminal, but stable and bent upon preserving their traditional rights. Rudé explains that "acts of popular vengeance" on July 14, "followed, a week later, by the murder of Foulon and Berthier--have, of course been picked upon to discredit the captors of the Bastille and to represent them as vagabonds, criminals, or a mercenary rabble hired in the wine-shops of the Saint-Antoine quarter. This is a legend that dies hard; yet there is no evidence to support it, but all the evidence directly refutes it."[4]

This was not how François-Noel Babeuf regarded the murder of Foulon and Bertier, which he witnessed personally. Babeuf did not try to explain away or downplay the violence; he tried to understand it in its own contemporary context. "Our punishments of every kind, quartering, torture, the wheel, the stake, and the gibbet, and the multiplicity of executioners on all sides, have had such a bad effect on our morals!

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[4] Rudé, The Crowd in the French Revolution (London, Oxford, New York, 1959), 56.

Our masters, instead of policing us, have made us barbarians, because they are barbarians themselves. They are reaping and will reap what they have sown."[5] Others who witnessed the killing of Foulon and Bertier responded much as Babeuf did. Restif de la Bretonne felt that these deeds were "worthy of cannibals."[6] The journalist Elysée Loustalot felt that the severed head of Foulon, with hay stuffed in its mouth, "announced to tyrants the terrible vengeance of a justly angered people."[7] Loustalot wrote of the just wrath of the "barbarian" who tore the palpitating heart from the "monster" Bertier de Sauvigny. Like Babeuf, he considered the killing and eviscerating of Bertier savage, but it was a just savagery. Prieur's illustrations depicting the events of July 22 can be compared to the comments of Babeuf, Restif, and Loustalot. All of these contemporary responses to the murder of Foulon and Bertier emphasized vengeance and cruelty.

To read Prieur's tableaus depicting the events of July 22, one must understand how the artist conceived them. As illustrator for the Tableaux historiques de la Révolution française, Prieur provided finished drawings of events that were engraved and offered for sale to the public in sets of two. His tableaus depicting the hanging of Foulon, and a crowd escorting Bertier to the Place de Grève, were to be issued as a set of two prints. Only the first of Prieur's illustrations depicting revolutionary crowds in action on July 22, The Hanging of Foulon [Image 25], was engraved and included in the Tableaux historiques; the second, The Intendant Bertier de Sauvigny [Image 31], one of Prieur's finest illustrations, was not engraved and offered for sale to the public. Why the second of these illustrations was not included among the published tableaus is not known,

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[5] Quoted in Thomas McStay Adams, Bureaucrats and Beggars: French Social Policy in the Age of Enlightenment (New York, 1990), 221.
[6] Restif de la Bretonne, Les Nuits de Paris, trans. Linda Asher and Ellen Fertig (New York, 1964), 252.
[7] Quoted in Simon Schama, Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution, (New York, 1989), 445-46.

but its exclusion deprives the first image of its effect, which was to set the stage for the second tableau.[8] Prieur's intent was clearly for the two images to be seen together. His perspective in The Hanging of Foulon [Image 25] is from a distance; literally, he distanced himself from the lynching of a hated official in the Place de Grève. The body of Foulon can be seen hanging from a lamppost, but it is far from conspicuous. The focus is on the crowd in the Place de Grève and the architecture that frames it, not the body of Foulon. In the sequel to this illustration [Image 31] the severed head of Foulon, seen with hay stuffed in its mouth, is the focal point of a carefully composed and scripted image. The up-close perspective gives immediacy to the head of Foulon, which is stuck on a pike and raised above Bertier, the son-in-law who turns away in horror. In the strictest sense of the word, this image is a depiction of in-your-face violence.

Prieur's scripting of these images underscored and dramatized the popular anger and vengeance that also comes through in the contemporary written responses of Babeuf, Restif, and Loustalot to the killing of Foulon and Bertier. Texts agree with images, images agree with texts. Read together, these bodies of evidence enable historians to restore meaning to deeds of popular violence that the socioeconomic analysis of Rudé drained away.[9] Prieur's depiction of a crowd taking Bertier to the Hôtel de Ville also brings out a dimension of crowd behavior that comes through in contemporary descriptions of popular violence but is missing from Rudé's socioeconomic analysis. Describing the festive character of the procession that led Bertier to the Hôtel de Ville,

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[8] I would guess that the graphic violence of the image was the reason, or one of the reasons, for its exclusion. Sets of two prints of the Tableaux historiques sold for six livres, a sum that limited buyers to those with considerable means. A decapitated head stuck on a pike with hay stuffed in its mouth might not have appealed to an audience of this type.

[9] In my thinking about the popular revolution and popular violence I have been guided by the work of historians such as Robert Darnton, Arlette Farge, Jacques Revel, and Roger Chartier, whose approaches

Loustalot said it was accompanied by fifes and drums that declared the "cruel joy of the people." In a discussion of Prieur's depiction of that procession Robert Darnton explains that the crowd chanted "Kiss papa! Kiss papa!" as Bertier turned away from the decapitated head of his father-in-law stuck on a pike and with hay stuffed in its mouth.[10] The grotesque humor that sometimes accompanied deeds of popular vengeance was part of a popular culture that was far removed from the more civilized forms of elite culture in pre-Revolutionary France. That division never broke down during the French Revolution.

The popular violence of July 1789 made a spectacle of victims, whose decapitated and, in some cases eviscerated, bodies were dragged through the streets as grim trophies of victory over the people's enemies. The typical course of events was for crowds, stirred by rumors, to seize a hated official or someone suspected of treachery and threaten him with popular justice. Someone tried to reason with the crowd, usually an official of some type, but he was ignored or shouted down. The crowd then made good its threat. In one of several scenarios, the victim was put to death, his head was separated from the body, which was eviscerated, and both the body and various organs were put on pikes. Then there was a macabre procession of the body and its removed parts through the streets, with special visits to places that were of particular significance to the victim.[11] These visits revealed a macabre humor that gave the spectacle an element of festivity. In a July 13 entry in his Journal Sébastien Hardy wrote, in the full heat of the Paris Insurrection, that "One was surprised to see that a day that should have been a day of

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and anthropological insights have led me to different conclusions than those reached by George Rudé in his socioeconomic analysis. The work of these historians post-dates that of Rudé.

[10] Darnton, The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History (New York, 1990), 13.

public mourning seemed to be a day of rejoicing, judging by the shouts and indecent laughter on every side, and by the shenanigans people were performing in the street, as if it were a day of carnival." The chant of the crowd to Bertier de Sauvigny on July 22 to "Kiss papa! Kiss papa!" was a perfect example of that humor. The spectacle of violence in the summer of 1789 was an acting out of an ancient popular culture on a new historical stage. Even as the Paris insurrection drove the Revolution into the uncharted waters of modernity, it did so by acting out a symbolic system that was buried in the past.

I should now like to return to Prieur's The Hanging of Foulon [Image 25], and place it within a sequence of three images, all by Prieur and all of which show lampposts.[12] First is The Death of de Flesselles (tableau 15 in the Tableaux historiques), which shows a crowd shooting a hated official in front of the Hôtel de Ville on July 14. As de Flesselles' body recoils from the shot, his right arm is raised upward, pointing at a lamp above him. The second and central image is The Hanging of Foulon [Image 25], which shows another hated official hanging from a lamppost in the Place de Grève. The third image is Prieur's The King and Royal Family led to Paris by the People (tableau 31 in the Tableaux historiques), which shows a man on a lamppost at the right-hand side of the tableau pointing at the lamp as he looks down on the carriage that conveys the King and Queen to Paris after women who were unable to feed their children marched on Versailles.

It was in the summer of 1789 that the lamppost became an instrument of popular justice, and it was at this time that Camille Desmoulins wrote his Discours de la lanterne

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[11] See Brian C.J. Singer, "Violence in the French Revolution: Forms of Ingestion/Forms of Expulsion," Social Science: An International Quarterly of the Social Sciences 56, No. 1 (Spring 1989), 263-93.

[12] The Death of de Flesselles is tableau 15 in the Tableaux historiques, and The King and Royal Family led to Paris is tableau 3l. The central image in the sequence, The Hanging of Foulon, is tableau 21.

aux Parisiens. "À la lanterne!" meant "To the lamppost!" "Lynch him!" "Hang him!" Insofar as I have been able to determine, Prieur's The Hanging of Foulon [Image 25] depicts the first time a Parisian crowd administered this type of justice. When a crowd dispatched de Flesselles eight days earlier it did so by shooting him, as seen in Prieur's tableau depicting that event. Other prints showing the death of de Flesselles do not show him pointing at a lamp. It would seem that Prieur's inclusion of a lamp was gratuitous and inaccurate, and therein lies its significance. Prieur saw the killing of de Flesselles through the prism of the hanging of Foulon eight days later. The lamp in the first of these images connects it to the lamppost in the second image. While we do not know precisely when Prieur did these tableaus, it was after the lamppost had become an instrument and symbol of popular justice, as seen in Desmoulins' Discours de la lanterne aux Parisiens. Prieur's third image that shows a lantern, The King and Royal Family led to Paris by the People (tableau 31 in the Tableaux historiques), is a depiction of the final stage of the last Paris uprising in 1789. Not only was the Paris Insurrection an irreversible fact, but power had passed to the people, so much so that on October 5-6 a crowd of women marched to Versailles, followed by the National Guard, and forced the King and Queen to accompany them back to Paris, where, living in the Tuileries, they were subject to the scrutiny of the people.[13] This, at any rate, is the message embedded in Prieur's tableau,

[13] Prieur's tableaus are a vivid account of the stages by which the people seized power in July 1789, and how the lamppost as an instrument of popular justice expressed their awareness of that political fact. Useful in this respect are Prieur's tableaus 18-20 in the Tableaux historiques, which show, respectively, the people guarding the Porte Saint-Denis on the night of July 14 (Alert at the Porte Saint-Denis, tableau 18), the people transporting cannons to Montmartre on July 15 (Cannons of Paris transported to Montmartre by the People, tableau 19), and the King arriving at the Hôtel de Ville on July 17 (The King at the Hôtel de Ville after the recalling of Necker, tableau 20). Initially no one knew what the outcome of the Paris Insurrection would be, hence the defensive measures taken on July 14 and July 15. At Versailles, hard-liners urged the King to take Paris by force, but military advisers explained how fraught with danger such an action would be, and that perhaps it would be impossible to carry out. It was after receiving this advice that Louis went to Paris, acknowledging the Paris Insurrection as an irreversible fact. The killing of Foulon and Bertier five

in which a Parisian sits on a lamppost that he points at as he looks down at the King and Queen inside the carriage. The King and Queen were entering a city that now imposed its will and dispensed its justice, as represented by the lamppost; either the King and Queen would accept the will of the people or there would be consequences. The street leading into Paris, along which the King and Queen pass in their carriage, is lined with people who brandish guns and pikes, objects of popular militancy, and they hold aloft tree branches and bonnets rouges, symbols of liberty. Seen against the royal carriage is a man who holds an ax and a woman who waves her fist, presumably at Marie-Antoinette. Heavily scripted, this tableau is another commentary on a Paris uprising by Prieur; the inclusion of a lamppost in the image links it to two earlier tableaus, both of which depicted the dispensing of popular justice in the Place de Grève, the most ancient of Paris's public squares.

The Place de Grève was a place for public parades, officially ordered and given for state purposes, and it was a place for public executions, where nobles, rebels, traitors, famous brigands, assassins, heretics, and ordinary criminals met their end. Claude le Petit wrote in his Chronique scandaleuse ou Paris ridicule that the Place de Grève was an "unhappy piece of ground consecrated to the public where they have massacred a hundred times more than in war."[14] He himself was executed at the Place de Grève in 1662 for lèse majesté and écrits séditieux. His right hand was amputated, his property confiscated, and his ashes thrown to the wind after he was burned alive. Executions in the Place de Grève were public for a reason: Justice was to be exemplary. Jacques-Louis

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days after the King traveled to Versailles took place within a Paris that was in the hands of the people. Psychologically, this was the seedbed of the lamppost as an instrument and symbol of popular justice.

[14] Charles Tilly, The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1986), 49.

Ménétra wrote, in the aftermath of the 1750 Children's Riot, that "These poor fellows were hanged in the Place de Grève for the sake of the Parisian state of mind." It was in the Place de Grève that Damiens was executed on 28 March 1757, before an immense crowd. Naked, Damiens lay strapped down as slow torture was applied that began with placing his right hand in burning sulfur, proceeded to the pouring of boiling liquid in holes cut in his flesh, was followed by the removal of entrails, and ended with his being drawn and quartered. The horses that were to pull his body apart found it unusually resistant, and, to facilitate that stage, hangmen loosened his joints with knives. It was only in the last stages of a prolonged execution that Damiens finally expired. Spies reported street mutterings after Damiens' execution, and police were obliged to remove seditious placards that were posted surreptitiously in the aftermath of the public event.

The physical space within which Prieur's The Hanging of Foulon [Image 25] takes place was heavy with historical memory for the crowd that administered popular justice to a hated official. In Prieur's illustration of the event the lamppost from which Foulon hangs, and around which the crowd in the Place de Grève gathers, is of central importance. Someone sits on the lamppost above Foulon, who holds the rope with one hand, trying to ward off the inevitable, and below him there is a circle formed by the crowd, with the hanging figure of Foulon at its center. By focusing attention on the lamppost in this way, Prieur was embedding the event he depicted in the history it helped define.

As an instrument of popular justice the lamppost belonged to a particular stage of the French Revolution. Its use came out of the popular revolution in the summer of 1789, and as such it was an expression of the power exercised by the people. As the political

leadership strove to stabilize the Revolution, and to bring it to closure, proper forms of justice were imposed that emphasized rational, impartial justice, administered by legally constituted authorities.[15] Lynching was incompatible with this type of justice. With the Terror another form of justice was introduced, and the guillotine was its instrument. Prieur's tableaus discussed in this essay illuminate a stage of the Revolution that began in July 1789 when crowds dispensed popular justice to their enemies by hanging them from lampposts. As for Prieur, he left the Tableaux historiques after the fall of the monarchy, and as a political activist and a member of the Revolutionary Tribunal, whose authority came from the Convention, he helped dispense its type of justice to its victims. For this, he himself went to the guillotine, along with Fouquier-Tinville, on 7 May 1795.

Jean-Louis Prieur's two illustrations depicting popular violence on July 22, The Hanging of Foulon [Image 25] and The Intendant Bertier de Sauvigny [Image 31], help the historian to understand crowds that in the summer of 1789 acted out anger that was integral to their experience, and punished enemies in their particular way. Placed in context, these images show that crowds had historical memory; that humor, including gallows humor, was part of their culture; that humor found its way into scenes of popular violence; that Parisians responded furiously to reports that passed with lightning speed

[15] Noteworthy in this respect is Prieur's tableau 34, The Agasse Brothers on the way to their Execution, which shows the transporting of two convicted criminals to the Place de Grève on 8 February 1790 for legal execution. This episode demonstrated the principles of impartial justice that resulted from liberal legislation in the Fayettist Assembly. Tableau 34 is the third image after Prieur's illustration of the people taking the King and royal family to Paris. The others are, respectively, Lafayette has 200 Soldiers disarmed at the Champs-Elysées (tableau 32) and The Commune of Paris bestows a Sword and Crown on the Englishman C.J.W. Nesham (tableau 33). In tableau 32 Lafayette puts down a plot in the National Guard, and in tableau 33 the Commune commemorates an Englishman who stood up to a mob that was about to hang an official by a lamppost. This tableau sets the stage for the one that follows, tableau 34, which depicts the dispensing of rational, equitable justice. That the Agasse brothers were executed in the Place de Grève says much about the struggle over this public space and the type of justice that was to be dispensed there. Prieur's tableaus from this point on depict efforts to stabilize the Revolution, and to bring it to closure, and they depict events that led to ongoing and increased instability. For an outstanding study

through the city; that the violence they carried out had a ritualistic component, also part of their experience; and that the violence that was at the core of popular justice threw up a wall, a barrier, between revolutionary crowds and the bourgeois of Paris. Prieur's illustrations, and those of other artists, are a body of evidence that can be of real value to historians of the French Revolution. This evidence can help historians to reconstruct and understand more fully the role of crowds in the Revolution, the acting out and choreography of popular violence, the ritualized forms of popular justice, and how popular violence threatened to dissolve the Revolution in "an acid wash of blood, vengeance, and anarchic disorder."

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of justice in the first two years of the Revolution, see Barry Shapiro, Revolutionary Justice in Paris: 1789-1790 (Cambridge, Eng., 1993).