

MAJOR FORMS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION IN WESTERN EUROPE 1500–1975

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Any effort to sort into a few categories the many different ways Europeans have acted together in pursuit of common grievances or aspirations is bound to do injustice to the richness of human behavior. Yet to categorize is a first step on the way to identifying what there is to explain, and therefore on the way to explaining it. If we compare the *continuous* forms of collective action which prevailed in sixteenth-century western Europe—the exertion of pressure through craft guilds, the collective appeal to a landlord, and so on—with those of the twentieth century, we see a world of difference. In the twentieth century, we discover elections, political parties, associations, pressure groups, trade unions and many other factions which were practically nonexistent five centuries ago. The contrast between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries appears even more dramatically when we turn to *discontinuous* forms of action such as the peasant revolt, the tax rebellion, or the mutiny. This paper will sketch a rough classification of discontinuous forms of collective action, place some of the most widespread varieties of European collective action within the classification, and discuss some of the ways the repertoire of collective actions available to ordinary Europeans has changed since 1500.

The classification stresses the nature of the interaction between other groups and the group whose action we are classifying. More precisely, it depends on the claims the collective actors are asserting in their action: *competitive* claims, *reactive* claims or *proactive* claims.

Competitive actions lay claim to resources also claimed by other groups which the actor defines as rivals, competitors, or at least as participants in the

same contest. Take the *charivari* for example. Only recently have European historians begun to uncover the larger base of competition and control on which this ostensibly frivolous custom rested. John Gillis describes one standard version:

In a typical rural *charivari*, a recently remarried widower might find himself awakened by the clamor of the crowd, an effigy of his dead wife thrust up to his window and a likeness of himself, placed backward on an ass, drawn through the streets for his neighbors to see. Paying of a "contribution" to the Lord of Misrule might quiet his youthful tormentors, but by that time the voices of village conscience had made their point. Second marriages invariably drew the greatest wrath and, by contrast, endogamous marriages of young people of roughly the same age were the occasion of the youth group's rejoicing. In that case, the functions of *charivari* were reversed and the couple were accompanied by a noisy crowd to their wedding bed, the ritual sendoff of its former members by the peer group.¹

Mild enough, even if one adds the customary thumping of pans and blowing of horns. Yet the *charivari* became a "disorder" in the eyes (and, no doubt, the ears) of the authorities when it persisted more than a night or two, or when dozens of young people joined the fun. The village age-groups also fought the youth of neighboring villages, sometimes lethally. They also assembled as a bloc at public ceremonies, sometimes mounting elaborate charades to mock and warn those who had transgressed their rules. All these activities affirmed the priority of the village age-group over the eligible females and over the rituals of courtship within their own villages. Within their sphere, they were deadly serious.

The *charivari*, the village fight and the youth group's mocking ceremony had many relatives. There were brawls between student groups, different detachments of soldiers, soldiers and civilians, ethnic and religious groups. There were the more highly routinized struggles of rival groups of artisans to dishonor each other's symbols, impede each other's ceremonies and challenge each other's priority in processions and other public assemblies. Somehow these forms of action seem trivial and quaint to twentieth-century people who have seen giant wars and mass murder, and who have come to think of "serious" politics as having a national or international scope. They were, indeed, usually small, short-lived, local in scope. They rarely linked with revolutionary movements or great rebellions. Yet they left their toll of dead and injured; in times of crisis they blended into major conflicts.

Some features of competitive collective action, such as the ritualized mockery, carried over into the second major category: *reactive* collective actions. They consist of group efforts to reassert established claims when someone else challenges or violates them. Speaking of peasant land invasions in contemporary Peru, E. J. Hobsbawm points out that they take three forms: squatting on land to which no one (or only the government) has a clear title, expropriating land to which the invaders have not previously enjoyed a claim and to which someone else has, repossessing land from which the invaders have themselves been expropriated.² The third variant is the clear reactive case: the dispossessed react. That sort of land re-occupation characterized the first stages of Zapata's rebellion during the Mexican Revolution, recurred through much of southern Italy during the massive nineteenth-century concentration of land in bourgeois and noble hands, and marked the consolidation of bourgeois landownership wherever it developed in the presence of solidary peasant communities. In a standard European scenario, a group of villagers who had long pastured their cattle, gathered firewood and gleaned in common fields, found a landlord or a local official (or, more likely, the two in collaboration) fencing the fields by newly-acquired or newly-asserted right of property. The villagers commonly warned against the fencing. If the warning went unheeded, they attacked the fences and the fencers. They acted in the name of rights they still considered valid.

The overlap with competitive forms of collective action appeared clearly when costumed avengers tore down the fences or occupied the fields, as in the *Demoiselles* movement of the 1830s in the Pyrenees. In other reactive collective actions, the overlap was at least as notable, for in both cases the actors commonly assumed, more or less self-consciously, the role of the authorities who were being derelict in their duty, and the groups which reacted were often the same local solidarities: the youth groups, guilds, and so on.

The basic outline of the land occupation applied to the bulk of European food riots, machine-breaking, tax rebellions and local actions against military conscription: all moved directly against someone who had unjustly deprived, or tried to deprive, a local population of a precious resource. Yves-Marie Bercé, expanding on his comprehensive analysis of the seventeenth-century rebellion of the *Croquants* in southwestern France, has proposed that the kernel of European peasant rebellions before the nineteenth century was the resistance of closed, solidary peasant communities to outside attempts to infringe upon their established rights and routines. In the case of seventeenth-century France, he distinguishes four major occasions for rebellion: high food

prices, billeting of troops, tax collection and the imposition of excise taxes by tax farmers. In all these cases, reports Bercé, “Revolt is the strategy of the little people, an extraordinary organization for defense against fiscal aggression.”³ As community solidarity declined, according to Bercé, the concerted peasant rebellion disappeared. Only much later did farmers and agricultural workers reappear in action. Now they were organized around forward-looking special-interest groups. Although (as Bercé himself concedes) the scheme homogenizes unduly the participants and motives in the older forms of conflict, it captures an essential contrast. It is the contrast between reactive and proactive forms of collective action.

Proactive collective actions assert group claims which have not previously been exercised. The strike for higher wages or better working conditions provides an everyday illustration. Deliberate work stoppages to gain a point have probably existed since people first worked for one another. Natalie Zemon Davis describes well-organized strikes in sixteenth-century Lyons.⁴ But the strike only became a common way of doing public business in the nineteenth century. As wage-work in organizations larger than households expanded, the number and scale of strikes also expanded. In most western countries, fifty to a hundred years went by in which strikes were increasingly frequent but remained illegal—sometimes prosecuted, sometimes broken up by armed force, sometimes tolerated, always disapproved. Under pressure from organized workers and their parliamentary allies, most western governments legalized the strike between 1860 and 1900. Since then, states that have stepped up repression (states of emergency, wartime governments, Fascist regimes) have normally rescinded the right to strike, and all regimes have negotiated continually with workers and employers over who had the right to strike, and how. But in general the strike has been widely available as a means of action since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Government sanction of the strike shows up in strike statistics; they date from the 1880s or 1890s in most western countries. Their appearance reflects the working out of a standard public definition of the word “strike,” and the formation of a bureaucracy to monitor and regulate the strike’s use. In France, Michelle Perrot argues that the strike lost much of its expressive function, its festival air, its revolutionary potential, as the bureaucratization of the 1890s set in.⁵ By way of compensation, it became a more widely accessible, less risky way of making demands.

Several other proactive forms of collective action came into their own during the nineteenth century. The demonstration, the sponsored public meeting and the petition drive began to thrive with the arrival of mass electoral

politics. The seizure of premises by an insurrectionary committee also generalized during the nineteenth century, although the ties to electoral politics are more distant. The military *pronunciamiento* is of the same vintage. On the other hand, the general strike, the sit-in and the farmers' dumping of surplus crops in protest are essentially twentieth-century creations. Proactive forms of collective action have proliferated over the last two centuries.

My labeling of forms has a catch to it. Strictly speaking, a public meeting or a general strike could fit any of the three types: competitive, reactive or proactive. Just as the *charivari* could mock a wrongdoer or celebrate a right-doer, people can demonstrate for something, against something, or both at once. The classification as competitive, reactive or proactive depends on the claims being asserted, not on the form of the action. The squatting and expropriating land occupations described by Hobsbawm have a far more proactive flavor than the re-occupations of lost land, although the actual behavior involved in the three cases is quite similar. Workers have often struck in defense of threatened job rights. Those strikes were reactive. Nevertheless there is a general association between proaction and strike activity: since the early nineteenth century, workers who have asserted new claims have commonly done so via the strike. A substantial majority of strikes have asserted new claims. Parallel observations apply to demonstrations, public meetings and the like. Thus it is a shorthand—but a shorthand which will do no harm once we understand it—to speak of the food riot as a reactive form of collective action and the demonstration as a proactive form.

In the Europe of the past few hundred years, the three forms of collective action have waxed and waned in sequence. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, competitive actions seem to have predominated. From the seventeenth into the nineteenth century, the reactive forms became much more widespread, while the competitive forms remained steady or perhaps declined. With the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, proactive collective action began to predominate, the reactive forms dwindled, while new competitive forms came into existence. If I read the record right, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans took collective action in defense of threatened rights much more than their predecessors had, while twentieth-century Europeans became exceptionally prone to act in support of claims they had not previously exercised.

The reasons for the successive changes are, I think, twofold: 1) during the period from 1600 to 1850, more so than before and after, the agents of international markets and of national states were pressing their new (and proactive) claims on resources which had up to then been under the control

of innumerable households, communities, brotherhoods and other small-scale organizations. The small-scale organizations reacted repeatedly. They fought against taxation, conscription, the consolidation of landed property and numerous other threats to their organizational well-being. Eventually the big structures won, the battle died down, the reactive forms diminished. 2) Increasingly, the stocks of resources necessary to group survival came under the control of large organizations, especially governments, which only redistributed them under the pressure of new claims. There may be a third factor: 3) a general decline in the difficulty of collective action during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as a result of the massing of population in large settlements and big organizations, the elaboration of communications, the expansion of elections as a way of doing public business. I hesitate to propose this third factor, because we must weigh against these facilitators of collective action the increased repressive activity and repressive efficiency of governments and other large organizations. Intrinsic costs are down, but the costs imposed by others are up. I guess that the intrinsic costs have declined more than the imposed costs have risen. In the present state of our knowledge, however, that judgment is both risky and unverifiable.

The scheme provides a convenient means of summing up the largest trends in the evolution of collective *violence* in western Europe over the last four or five centuries. Two main processes have dominated all the rest: 1) the rise of national states to preeminent positions in a wide variety of political activities; 2) the increasingly associational character of the principal contenders for power at the local as well as at the national level.

In 1500, no full-fledged national state with unquestioned priority over the other governments within its territory existed anywhere in the West. England was probably the closest approximation. The England of 1500 was, however, only fifteen years past the slaying of King Richard III by Henry Tudor at Bosworth Field. It was fresh from the widely-supported rebellions of Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck. It had yet to effect the union with Scotland. It still harbored a number of great lords who controlled their own bands of armed retainers. Government itself consisted largely of shifting, competing coalitions among great magnates and their retinues, the king being the greatest magnate of the strongest coalition. Become Henry VII, Henry Tudor began the large work of statemaking which Henry VIII and Elizabeth so vigorously pursued.

A century and a half after 1500, a great civil war reopened the question of whether the centralized royal apparatus the Tudors, and then the Stuarts, had begun building would be the dominant political organization in England. In

fact, the state which emerged in 1688 had rather different contours from the state the Tudors and Stuarts had been building. The strength and autonomy of Parliament far exceeded anything a cool observer of the England of 1600 or 1620 could reasonably have anticipated.

In 1500 most states faced serious challenges to their hegemony from both inside and outside the territory. Only a small minority of the hundreds or more or less autonomous governments survived the next two centuries of statemaking. Most power was concentrated in political units of smaller than national scale: communities, city-states, principalities, semi-autonomous provinces. Most contenders for power in those political units were essentially communal in structure: craft brotherhoods, families, peasant communities. The predominant forms of collective violence registered those circumstances: wars between rival governments, brawls between groups of artisans, battles among the youth of neighboring communes, attacks by one religious group on another.

The rise of the state threatened the power (and often the very survival) of all these small-scale units. They resisted. The statemakers only won their struggle for predominance over the furious resistance of princes, communes, provinces and peasant communities. For several centuries the principal forms of collective violence therefore grew from reactive movements on the part of different segments of the general population: comunally-based contenders for power fought against loss of membership in polities, indeed against the very destruction of the political units in which their power was invested. Collective resistance to conscription, to taxation, to billeting, to a whole variety of other exactions of the state exemplify this reactive road to collective violence.

For a century or more in the experience of most West European countries, however, the most frequent form of violence-producing reactive movement aimed at the market more directly than at the state. That was the food riot. The name is misleading: most often the struggle turned about raw grain rather than edibles, and most of the time it did not reach the point of physical violence. The classic European food riot had three main variants: the *re-tributive action*, in which a crowd attacked the persons, property or premises of someone believed to be hoarding or profiteering; the *blockage*, in which a group of local people prevented the shipment of food out of their own locality, requiring it to be stored or sold locally; the *price riot*, in which people seized stored food or food displayed for sale, sold it publicly at a price they declared to be proper, and handed the money over to the owner or merchant.

In the best-documented cases—England and France of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the blockage occurred more frequently than the price riot, and much more often than the retributive action. In those two countries, the food riot practically disappeared some time during the nineteenth century. Later, questions of food supply motivated dramatic collective actions now and then, but almost always in the form of demonstrations in which producers complained about low prices or consumers complained about high prices.

The timing of the food riot's rise and fall is revealing. In England, France and some other parts of western Europe, the food riot displaced the tax rebellion as the most frequent violent form of collective action toward the end of the seventeenth century. It declined precipitously in England just after 1820, in Germany and France just after 1850, only to linger on in parts of Spain and Italy into the twentieth century. The calendar did not conform to the history of hunger; indeed the great killing famines of Medieval and Renaissance Europe were disappearing as the food riot came into its own, and per capita food supply was probably increasing through much of the period. Instead, three conjoint changes account for the timing: 1) the proletarianization of the population, which meant a drastic diminution in the proportion of households which produced enough food for the subsistence of their own members, a great expansion in the number dependent on the market for survival; 2) the commercialization of food production, which included the building of national markets and the promotion of the ideas that the national market should have priority over local needs and that the market's operation tended to set a just, proper and efficient price; 3) the dismantling of the extensive previously-existing controls over the distribution of food, which gave the local population a prior claim over food produced and sold in a locality, and bound the local authorities to provide for the subsistence of the local poor.

E. P. Thompson has called the entire process a decline of the old Moral Economy, a shift from a *bread nexus* to a *cash nexus*. People resisted the process so long as local solidarity and some collective memory of the locality's prior claims survived. To an important degree, the crowd's actions of blocking, inventorying, storing, declaring a price and holding a public sale for the benefit of the locals fulfilled what had previously been the obligations of the local authorities in dealing with shortages and high prices. Magistrates or mayors often acknowledged that fact implicitly by acquiescing in the routine. When local officials took the initiative themselves, the crowd usually stopped its work.

The immediate objects of the crowd's attention were commonly local officials, bakers, rich farmers and, especially, grain merchants. The struggle pitted the claims of the national market against the claims of the local population. For that reason, the geography of the food riot reflected the geography of the grain market: tending to form a ring around London, Paris, another capital or a major port, concentrating especially along rivers, canals and principal roads. For the acute English crises of 1795-96 and 1800-01, Stevenson remarks:

The map shows the extremely close relationship of disturbances to the communications network in the production areas around London in these two shortages. The most striking pattern overall is that of 1795-96 when at least fifty food disturbances took place at communication centres, either coastal ports, canal or river ports, or towns within easy carting distance of major populations centres.⁶

Yet the reflection of the market came through a distorting mirror, for the most thoroughly commercialized areas, adjacent to large old cities, did not typically produce food riots. There, the market had already won out over local rights to the food supply.

Despite the salience of the market, the food riot also resulted in part from the rise of the national state. In general (although with great hesitations, variations and differences in outcome) European statemakers acted to promote all three of the processes underlying the food riot: proletarianization, commercialization, dismantling of local controls. As their dependent government staffs, urban populations and non-agricultural labor forces swelled, the managers of states intervened increasingly to promote marketing. (There is irony in the fact that they acted thus in the name of freeing the market.) As Stevenson says of the English crisis of 1795:

The government, however, was determined to keep out of the internal corn trade and attempted to keep up the normal circulation of grain, so that the large urban centres would be supplied. On these grounds the government refused to yield to the pleas of local authorities and interfere with the normal movement of grain . . . It was reported to the Home Office that stopping the movement of grain had become so widespread that country millers were said to be frightened to send grain to the capital except by night. In an attempt to free the circulation of grain from these checks the government passed an act to prevent the stopping of grain by making the whole hundred liable to fine and individuals liable to fine and imprisonment⁷.

In that crisis, many local officials sought to restrict the flow of grain away from their own markets. Within three decades, however, the market and the national government had won their battle; few mayors and magistrates chose to counter the national will, and few hungry crowds harbored the hope of making them do so. One of the great English forms of collective action had withered away.

Two things eventually put an end to the predominance of the reactive forms, although at times and at tempos which varied markedly from one part of the West to another. First, the state won almost everywhere. One may ask how complete the victory of the state was in the remote sections of vast territories such as Canada, Australia or Brazil, and speculate whether recent surges of sectionalism in Belgium, Great Britain and even France presage the end of state control. Yet on the whole the two centuries after 1700 produced an enormous concentration of resources and means of coercion under the control of national states, to the virtual exclusion of other levels of government. Second, a whole series of organizational changes closely linked to urbanization, industrialization and the expansion of capitalism greatly reduced the role of the communal group as a setting for mobilization and as a repository for power; the association of one kind or another came to be the characteristic vehicle for collective action. The rise of the joint-stock company, the political party, the labor union, the club all belong to the same general trend.

Working together, the victory of the state and the rise of the association transformed the collective actions which most commonly produced violence. In country after country, politics nationalized; the crucial struggles for power went on at a national scale. The participants in those struggles were most often organized as associations. The strike, the demonstration, the party conspiracy, the organized march on the capital, the parliamentary session, the mass meeting became the usual settings for collective violence. The state became an interested participant in all collective violence—as policeman, as party to the conflict, as *tertius gaudens*. Although at first glance such exotic events as charivaris and food riots seem far removed from questions of power and politics, their rise and fall depends intimately on changes in the structure of political power.

NOTES

1. John R. Gillis, *Youth and History, Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770-present* (New York, 1974), pp. 30–31.

2. E. J. Hobsbawm, "Peasant Land Occupations," *Past and Present* 62 (1974), pp. 120–121.
3. Yves-Marie Bercé, *Histoire des Croquants* (Paris, 1974), vol. II, pp. 680–681.
4. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), pp. 1–16.
5. Michelle Perrot, *Les Ouvriers en Grève, 1871–1890* (Paris, 1974), 2 vols.
6. J. Stevenson, "Food Riots in England, 1792–1818," in R. Quinault and J. Stevenson, eds., *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1974), p. 43.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.