

The masses normally are not a key initiative-taking force in history. Instead, the elite, or some other higher class (i.e. "the middle class") component acts upon them and uses them for the former's benefit. However, this state of affairs is not always the case, as Albert Soboul's The Sans Culottes and E. P. Thompson's "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" remind us. The masses can have an inner dynamic of their own that is not fully controlled by the upper classes, and which can restrain the range of actions the latter can undertake.

Although Thompson is dealing with England, and Soboul France, nevertheless, the motivations and even actions of the common people in both can be quite similar. Just as the sans culotte call for price controls to keep down the price of Parisian bread, likewise the English crowd would riot if bread prices rose too high (Soboul, p. 43; Thompson, p. 79-80). In both cases, the ratio of wages to bread prices was a very important factor in determining people's happiness. The average sans culotte family ate ten pounds of it a day (S., p. 240-241). In bad years in England, more than half of the income of a labourer's family might be used in buying bread (T., p. 82). Both the English crowd at a bread riot and the sans culottes when intimidating the Convention believed in direct action and even violence to achieve their immediate needs (T., p. 98, 105; S., p. 64, 96, 129, 158, 227). In both cases, whether composed of sans culotte or of English men and women, when the crowd thought <sup>its</sup> rights were seriously violated, it felt violence was a perfectly legitimate course of action (T., p. 78; S., p. 160-161). High bread prices in times of dearth did not encourage strikes and increased wage demands, but food riots and demands for maximum food prices (T., p. 79; S., p. 43), due to the pre-industrial mentality of both groups. Both were hostile towards middlemen, factors, and wholesalers, not realizing the time-place economies normally created by such people's actions (T., p. 83, 85, 87; S., p. 14-18). However,

the sans culottes' level of sophistication has to be seen as higher than that of the typical English crowd's food riot, for they through their sections and proximity to the organs of the national government, could exert directly their desires politically, including having price controls on bread systematically imposed by the government (S., p. 238, 254). Of course, the unique conditions of Revolutionary France and being strategically located in the capital made this kind of political power possible for them. This is not to underestimate the English crowd's restraint and orderliness in most of its "riots" (T., p. 108-113), but these normally had only immediate goals and intentions, even if an intimidating "rational expectations" effect kept prices lower in the future broadly (T., p. 120-124).

Both Thompson and Soboul are Marxists, but the latter's work shows far more signs of Marxian concepts and constructs. Soboul repeatedly says the sans culottes were not a proletariat, that they did not have class consciousness, and that their movement was rent by contradictions, since they were often petty proprietors with property interests of their own, not just journeymen (S., p. 20, 23, 32, 40-42, 62, 257-258). His definition of class consciousness is very narrow: it seems that it can only be created by the relations of production and on factory room floors. By contrast, Thompson's largely cultural definition and account of its origin realistically includes far more than just the experiences of selling labor power to capitalists:

And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. . . . Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way."<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the sans culottes were so suspicious and resentful of the rich (S., p. 20-22), and then acted on these views politically shows they definitely had a group feeling opposed to another, richer, more powerful group. Hence, by Thompson's more realistic definition, the sans culotte were class conscious.

Hence, both Thompson and Soboul show the masses can be at least partially autonomous forces in history, not entirely manipulated by the elites, but Thompson's explanation of their inner dynamic and beliefs is more accurate than Soboul's.

<sup>1</sup>Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class. p. 9-10.