

Excerpt from **HERALDS OF THE TERROR** by Michael Chrzanowski

THE JOURNALIST-LEGISLATORS OF 1793

In late May and early June 1793, the Parisian sections and the Paris Commune purged the National Convention, the sitting government of France, of its “treacherous” elements in an insurrectionary intervention.¹ Those members deemed a threat to the Revolution and proscribed were all individuals associated with Jacques-Pierre Brissot, the symbolic head of the Girondins. With these members removed from the Convention, the Montagnards, the opposing faction, reigned triumphantly. The Girondins and Montagnards were once part of the same revolutionary group under the Jacobin Club, a political society in Paris. But through successive phases of the Revolution, the Jacobin Club divided. During the National Convention, the Girondins, named after the area of France known as the Gironde, were members that had broken off from the Jacobin Club and joined with Jacques-Pierre Brissot. The Montagnards, named for the high “mountainous” position they sat in within the Convention, were those who had stayed as loyal members of the Jacobin Club during the schism. With the support of the unaligned deputies, known as the Plain, the Montagnards consolidated their power in Paris and set about enshrining their ideological vision within this new era of the French Revolution. To be sure, the Montagnards were not united in their revolutionary plans, as the infighting and eventual collapse of the group made apparent during the Terror (1794). Any sort of Montagnard consensus quickly faded after their ascension in the summer of 1793; one prominent member after another fell

¹ The Parisian sections were the subdivisions of the city of Paris, created by a decree of May 21, 1790. Paris was made into 48 sections, with each section having its own civil committee, revolutionary committee, and militia. The Paris Commune was the government of Paris from 1789 until 1795. It was located in the Hôtel de Ville, established by popular demand after the storming of the Bastille. It consisted of delegates elected by the sections of the city. The Commune was instrumental in the overthrow of the Monarchy on August 10, 1792, when it no longer recognized the authority of the National Assembly and instead acted according to its own mandates.

under the weight of counterrevolutionary denunciations, aroused by conspiracy theories in the political press, conceptualized by journalist-legislators.

In this thesis, I will argue that the political publications of both Girondin and Montagnard journalist-legislators perpetuated conspiratorial rumors that helped to sanction the extra-legal actions of the popular movement in the capital. Previous works have looked at members of the Jacobins as journalists, or as legislators, but rarely view those roles as inseparable, despite that role forming a crucial part of the public identity and credibility of men like Jacques-Pierre Brissot, Jean-Baptiste Louvet, and Jean-Paul Marat. What is a journalist-legislator? What political power and responsibilities did this role entail?

Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau, was the first journalist-legislator of the French Revolution as a member of the Third Estate in the Estates-General and the author of his own political publication. But Mirabeau and the journalist-legislators who followed were remarkably different due to their social positioning before the advent of the Revolution. Mirabeau was a member of the elite, the privileged nobility, who had access to the power structures of the Old Regime. Although he was an outsider at the royal court, Mirabeau held a considerable reputation for his political writings.

Brissot, Louvet, and Marat, the journalist-legislators of the First French Republic, had no such privileges and actively emulated anti-establishment personas in their publications. They stood for the people, for truth, for the Revolution, not the old, institutionalized structures of wealth and power. But once these men were elected to the revolutionary government as legislators, having established themselves as representative of the common person, they had to make a narrative shift. Did their election mark the moment in which the Revolution became the establishment? If so, where did that put these men in relation to their allies in the popular

movement of Paris? The popular movement had helped to overthrow despotism at every turn, instrumental in ushering in the republican era through the second revolution of August 10, 1792. Brissot, the leading Girondin journalist-legislator, accepted the former radicals' new positions as empowered leaders. His publication became a sort of paternalistic lecture of the popular movement, speaking at his readers rather than for them. Marat, the infamous Montagnard journalist-legislator, took the opposite approach of Brissot and instead presented himself as if the people were speaking through him. He acted as the embodiment of an abstraction, embracing conspiratorial rumors without necessarily counting himself as a typical member of the sovereign people. Thus, a journalist-legislator was a revolutionary that claimed two distinct and powerful positions in the exercise of popular sovereignty: they were elected officials, chosen by the citizenry to debate and pass laws on their behalf, and they were writers and editors of popular publications, with a sizable number of subscribers that were given information with a factional bias daily.

The extra-legal activities of the popular movement in Paris overturned the very principles of a free and fair republic, as duly elected deputies were stripped of their powers and political publications were repressed. The unrest brought about an insurrection; the Convention was purged of specific deputies implicated in counterrevolutionary conspiracies, and civil war spread across the nation. Despite both Girondin and Montagnard publications accusing their opponents of treachery, it was the Montagnards who prevailed in the summer of 1793. Not only did social, political, and economic difficulties brought on by the war and internal divisions stir popular unrest in Paris, but such unrest was exasperated by a steady diet of conspiratorial propaganda that ultimately succeeded in associating the Girondins with self-interest, dishonesty, and counter-revolution. Whether the denunciations leveled against Girondins or Montagnards were true or

not, or even professed in sincerity, such denunciations perpetuated a fear-based politics. As Timothy Tackett observed, during revolutions conspiratorial rumors, previously improbable, come to be accepted by society as the likely work of hidden internal enemies.² If substantial numbers of people were already inclined to believe in conspiracy due to the dramatic political transformations surrounding them, the constant circulation of such theories in periodicals only made the problem worse. The acceptance of conspiracy theories by the Montagnards in the Convention, at the behest of the Parisian popular movement, marked the beginning of the Terror, a period of political persecution which saw the state-sanctioned execution of thousands of French citizens in a series of draconian trials.

Conspiracy theories led to repeated purges of the Convention, most visibly starting with the proscribed Girondins and continuing into the fall of Maximilien Robespierre and the Thermidorian reaction. What were these conspiracy theories? Where did they come from, who promulgated them, and what influence did they have over revolutionary discourse and events? By observing a shift in the popular press by which authors targeted each other as the perpetrators of conspiratorial plots, historians can better understand the power inherent in the role of journalist-legislator and how it expedited the turn towards Terror. The major conspiratorial rumor that concerns this thesis was the famine plot. In the minds of the revolutionaries, enemies of the Revolution, often referred to as “aristocrats,” were artificially creating a food crisis with the intended purpose of weakening the new regime and fattening their own pockets with inflated prices. Then Girondins and Montagnards within the National Convention both acted under the assumption that a conspiracy of this sort was underway; they blamed one another for the

² Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (June 2000), 693.

supposed scarcity of grain and the rising costs of necessity goods. Parisians were agitated by these unwelcome economic hardships and wanted solutions, and when the Convention offered none, they tended to take matters into their own hands with popular action. Not only were deputies desperate to address the economic crisis, but they were also trying to reconceptualize what popular sovereignty meant, how it could be represented, and whether popular action fit into the framework of a people exercising their sovereign authority.

Louvet, Brissot, and Marat were all quite visible in the press. Deputies referred to their publications on the floor of the National Convention, where the authors also distinguished themselves as legislators.³ Louvet had long been a popular voice even before the Revolution, producing several novels and plays that met with great success. His journalistic pursuits during the Revolution were supported by powerful figures such as the Interior Minister Jean-Marie Roland. By 1793, Louvet was one of the Girondin leaders in the National Convention, and he was proscribed during the June 2 purge, which meant he had some notoriety among the popular movement. Brissot was a writer and political activist well before 1789, spending time in the Bastille for one of his publications. He was a founder of *la Société des amis des noirs*, an abolitionist group. His political pursuits only expanded with the outbreak of the Revolution. *Le Patriote français* was well known in Paris, and his enthusiasm in the Jacobin Club propelled him to a leading position in revolutionary politics. His influence on the discourse of republicanism in the Revolution can hardly be doubted, such as his circulation of the Austrian Committee conspiracy theory, a rumor that Queen Marie-Antoinette and her allies were at the heart of a royalist plot, which will be expounded upon in succeeding sections. Marat was long considered a

³ This thesis covers a particular moment when the Convention was specifically debating the contents of one of Marat's issues in late February, around the outbreak of subsistence riots in Paris. Marat was accused of whipping up an uproar in the city over a shortage of grain brought on by hoarders; his rivals brought his issue to the Convention floor to pin the blame squarely on the "Friend of the People."

firebrand and a nuisance before the Revolution and continued to be so going forward. He had a wide array of interests and skills, undertaking political and scientific writing. His direct influence on politics in 1789 was limited, but that was not the case forever. His publication *L'Ami du peuple* was one of the first in circulation among the revolutionary press, and it remained as a prolific representation of the popular movement in Paris. His work would mark some of the more violent rhetorical stances of the Jacobins.

The pamphlets of Louvet, Brissot, and Marat act as a sort of rehearsed preamble to the civil unrest that emerged in the spring and summer of 1793. It is difficult to believe that without these authors, who stoked fears of internal and external threats, politically active citizens would imagine and perpetuate a grand, treacherous conspiracy to an extent that allowed for purges and insurrectionary interventions as the best means to ensure the Revolution's success. The political pamphlets of these men were revolutionary manifestos as much as they were news, in that their writings conditioned readers to perceive the Revolution, and by extension, counter-revolution, with conspiracy in mind. Whether they leaned toward the Girondins or Montagnards politically interested citizens in 1793 believed that a sweeping plot had formed against the Revolution. Events like the betrayal of General Charles Francois Dumouriez, who defected to the Austrians after trying to lead his army against the National Convention, or the debates over the Maximum, when the popular movement in Paris tried to force the National Convention to institute regulations on the prices of necessity goods, reveal that these authors perpetuated narratives that posited the opposing faction as undoubtedly helping a conspiracy come to fruition. For both Girondins and Montagnards, everything was at stake.

Political publications and the popular movement put immense pressure on the National Convention to ensure the success and stability of the Revolution in the face of major threats. The

monarchy was abolished, the king executed, and the Republic proclaimed. Yet challenge after challenge presented themselves. As members of radical political societies (the Jacobin and Cordeliers Clubs), Louvet, Brissot, and Marat had focused their condemnation on the elements most associated with the Old Regime: the royal court, émigrés, nonjuring priests, and nobles. But, in 1793, on whom would these radicals now focus their attention since their previous foes were so greatly diminished? They turned on one another; republicans battled republicans, friendships were shattered, and bonds of fraternal fellowship were broken. Brissot and his supporters were ousted from (or voluntarily stopped appearing at) the Jacobin Club in October 1792. Figures like Robespierre, Danton, and Marat maintained their good standing in the club, and from the fall of 1792 through the spring of 1793, tensions between these prominent revolutionaries escalated to apocalyptic proportions. Former and current Jacobins leaned into the rhetoric of conspiracy theories that tried to assign the Revolution's failures to specific political actors and thus transformed the mode of republican politics from one of partisan disagreement to one of insidious treason.

Old friendships were broken, and rivalries unleashed, all fueled by the endless volleying of conspiratorial rumors between the Girondins and Montagnards, as seen in the publications of Brissot, Louvet, and Marat. These men's ability to emphasize their own vision for the events taking place in spring 1793 while also actively participating in those events as legislators made for a prevalence of conspiracy rumors in the factional debates, explained by an interplay of the historical actors' experiences, personal animosities, ambition, and ideological commitments. Former friends and peers chose opposing sides in debates over the political, civil, and economic rights endorsed by the Revolution, tensions greatly exacerbated by the subsistence riots of Paris in February 1793.