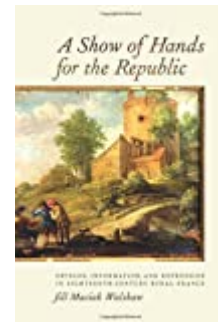


Jill Maciak Walshaw. *A Show of Hands for the Republic: Opinion, Information, and Repression in Eighteenth-Century Rural France.* Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014. 320 pp. (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-58046-479-6.



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What does it mean to be political or to be politicized? What criteria must be met for historians to declare that a population has been politicized? Jill Maciak Walshaw's *A Show of Hands for the Republic* departs from classic works on politicization by Eugen Weber (*Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* [1976]) and others by considering rural populations during the eighteenth century and arguing that politicization was not reserved for the modern, radical, or revolutionary. Through two chapters on the ancien régime and three on the French Revolution, Walshaw challenges conceptions of rural France as parochial and ignorant and suggests that local concerns were never radically distinct from national concerns.

Early modern bread riots, for example, were perhaps conservative in nature, as villagers seized bread but paid what they felt was fair. But this does not mean they were not political, Walshaw argues. Hungry rioters believed that government intervention had unjustly inflated the price of food. Concerns about government involvement in daily life were no less political because they were accompanied by real need. After all, the day with the highest grain prices in 1789 was the July 14: the day Parisians stormed the Bastille. Moreover, rural gatherings to protest the Law of the Maximum (govern-

ment control of prices) in the mid-1790s closely resembled grain riots of the 1770s, although the traditional notion of the right to subsistence was now bolstered by a greater sense of political rights (p. 152).

Refusing to see rural inhabitants as politically capable, Walshaw argues, is to fall into the same prejudiced trap as eighteenth-century French government officials. The government of the ancien régime believed that peasants were capable of sedition, but not necessarily that they were capable of politics. Government records of uprisings and riots emphasized the irrationality and imbalance (*Ã©motion*) of these actions, and tended to blame a handful of outside agitators for stirring up the ignorant masses. This distinction made between the innocent people and the seditious rabble-rousers meant that rural officials could dismiss riots and absolve themselves from blame. Monitoring rural sedition while denying its importance made strategic sense for a government that wanted to avoid violent uprising and to ignore the political complaints of peasants.

The revolutionary governments also tended to believe that rural dwellers were ignorant and easily led astray from the revolutionary cause, and so officials focused on education to combat that ignorance. Local di-

alects were believed to be the greatest hindrance to that education, and by 1794, a faction in the Convention began arguing that "foreign" languages within France's borders were dangerous to the republic. This attempt to educate the rural populations in republican sentiment was not significantly different from attempts under the ancien régime to keep villagers apprised of laws, royal decrees, and important political events. Both royal and revolutionary governments relied on the same infrastructure and intermediaries to facilitate their agendas. Moreover, just as there had been concern about revolutionary influences under the ancien régime, so too, under the Revolution were officials quite convinced that rural populations would be swayed by a conspiracy of dedicated antirevolutionaries, and so sought to monitor and eliminate seditious speech. As Walshaw argues, "the assumption that popular dissent was the result of enemy plots and not a genuine response to the disadvantages of the new era for rural communities stems from elitist ideas about rural political maturity" (p. 131).

By focusing her attention on the politics of rural life, Walshaw challenges conceptions of the public sphere as something born out of print culture. Rural France, Walshaw argues, also had a public sphere, albeit one based on oral tradition; new laws and other news were read to gathered crowds, often in church or at market, and governmental attempts to control political violence in rural areas manifested in the prosecution of seditious speech. Not that print played no role; certainly Walshaw recognizes the hybrid role of print and orality in disseminating information from Paris to the French periphery, or she would not spend two chapters on communication routes, roads, and the postal system.

Walshaw's book is meticulously researched, with evidence gathered from eight different departmental archives in different areas of France. She treats her sources with care, recognizing the difficulty in drawing conclusions about peasants from sources produced and/or mediated by government officials. Her treatment of the *Cahiers de doléances* (the list of grievances drawn up by each of the Estates in 1789 in preparation for their May meeting) follows in the footsteps of John Markoff and Gilbert Shapiro's *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (1998). But Walshaw's particular contribution is her treatment of revolutionary sedition trials. Trial records, particu-

larly when used to elucidate the thoughts or beliefs of those being tried, are problematic sources. And, as Walshaw tells us, the sedition trials under the Revolution were reputed to be particularly sensationalist. But her careful examination reveals that rural populations engaged in national politics on numerous levels. The villagers brought to trial had verbally expressed political opinions of various stripes—that there would be no peace unless there was a king, that it would be nice to only have one ruler again, that the republic ought to exist by a simple majority "show of hands." Even if the people brought to trial were falsely accused and had never said those things, they were at the very least potential political opinions that villagers might hold, since someone had come up with them. And moreover, the high number of acquittals and low number of executions of those who were convicted, in opposition to the letter of the sedition laws, suggest "that local authorities were unwilling to apply the death penalty to simple expressions of opinion" (p. 160). The excuses the accused made in court—that he had been drunk at the time, and that surely he had meant no harm (p. 2)—Walshaw argues, could be taken to demonstrate a kind of political acumen: the accused made use of assumptions authorities made about them in order to escape conviction. By looking for common themes and ideas that show up in a number of trials, and by focusing on the ways in which rural communities used the trials themselves to push back against authority, Walshaw is able to circumvent some of the larger issues inherent in court archives.

Moreover, in spite of their problems, these sources, Walshaw shows, are invaluable because they capture small events in people's lives rarely captured by the historical record—conversations at crosswalks, in markets, in cafes, and at cabarets, often private conversations in public places: a casual gripe about the war dragging on, disappointment at the decreased value of an *assignat*, or a rumor about how expensive wheat was in the next town. Oral utterances are generally only preserved in the historical record because they were mediated by writing—transcripts of meetings, interrogations, court proceedings—and these casual utterances that straddle the line between public and private speech are perhaps even less likely to be recorded. *A Show of Hands for the Republic* does important work bringing these utterances to light and showcasing the politics of rural inhabitants.

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