THE SANS-CULOTTES

Albert Soboul

One of the great watersheds in history, the French Revolution signaled the passing of the Old Régime. Monarchy, hierarchy, and privilege—all pillars of the social order—came under attack, not only in France but throughout much of Europe. French armies crisscrossed the Continent, attempting to spread revolutionary ideals of “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” and in the process they inadvertently awakened the most potent of nineteenth-century ideologies, nationalism. Historians have long debated the French Revolution, questioning, among other things, whether or not it was favorable to liberty, or to capitalism, and which social groups benefited the most from the Revolution.

Albert Soboul once held the chair of the history of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne. The selection here is from his doctoral dissertation on the sans-culottes movement in Paris from 1792 to 1794. As a Marxist historian, he argued that the Revolution opposed what was a feudal society, virtually destroying the old nobility, and so prepared the triumph of a capitalist economy. For Soboul, class conflict was an integral part of the Revolution. Soboul gained fame with his magisterial study of the Parisian sans-culottes, a fascinating, if ephemeral, social group that influenced political events in Paris and supported vociferously the Terror of 1793–1794.

The sans-culottes were workers, artisans, and shopkeepers distinguishable, according to Soboul, by their dress (pants and a red bonnet), behavior, and attitudes (political, economic, and social). The term sans-culotte means “without knee-breeches” and refers to urban workers who wore trousers rather than the aristocracy’s knee-breeches. Why did the sans-culottes detest aristocrats, abhor wealthy merchants, and loathe the rich? What did the sans-culottes want from the Revolution? What political ideas did they espouse? Why did they favor executions as an instrument of state policy?

We should not romanticize the sans-culottes as virtuous workers out to rid society of an oppressive nobility, exploitative businessmen, and other enemies of the “people,” for the sans-culottes often resorted to pillaging, frequently hailed violence, and cheered the guillotine as it lopped off thousands of heads. Ironi-

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cally, many of the sans-culottes themselves fell victim to the guillotine when their influence declined and the Right sought retribution.

Soboul's study is valuable not only as an example of Marxist historiography but as a thorough examination of the sans-culottes as well. He depicts their violent behavior and also analyzes what motivated them to indulge in it.

If we are to attempt to discern the social characteristics of the sans-culottes, it is important first to draw attention to the manner in which they defined themselves. . . .

Ostensibly, the sans-culottes were recognizable by their costume, which set them apart from the upper strata of the former Third Estate. Robespierre\(^1\) used to differentiate between golden breeches and sans-culottes. The sans-culottes themselves made the same distinction. Noting the intrigues that undermined the Sceaux Committee of Surveillance, the observer Rousseville, in his report on 25 Messidor, year II,\(^2\) stresses the antagonism between the "silk-stockings" and the sans-culottes. Conventions of dress also pitted sans-culottes against the muscadins [royalist sympathizers]. Arrested on 4 Prairial, year III, for having said that "the blasted muscadins'll soon have a spade up there . . ." and questioned as to what he meant by these words, Barack, a clockmaker's assistant of the Lombards section,\(^3\) replied that "as far as he was concerned, muscadins were those who were well dressed." . . .

Costume was accompanied by particular social behavior. Again, on this subject, the sans-culottes declared their stand through opposition. In the year II, the manners of the ancien régime were no longer acceptable. The sans-culottes refused to adopt a subordinate position in social relations. Jean-Baptiste Gentil, timber merchant, arrested on 5 Pluvione, year II, for not having fulfilled his duties toward the Republic, was reprimanded for his public demeanor: "One had to approach him with hat in hand, the word sir was still used in his household, he retains an air of superiority." . . . The principal charge against Gannal, iron merchant from the Réunion section, arrested on 7 Frimaire, was his "haughty manner toward his workers." . . .

The sans-culottes often estimated a person's worth by external appearance, deducing character from costume and political convictions from character; everything that jarred their sense of equality was suspect of being "aristocratic." It was difficult, therefore, for any person of the old regime to find favor in their eyes, even

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1 Maximilien Robespierre (1758–1794), leader of the most extreme political faction during the Terror of 1793–1794.

2 The French Revolution introduced a new calendar on 5 October 1793 and dated the year I from 21 September 1792, the beginning of the Convention. There were new names for the months (such as Messidor, Prairial, etc.), each with thirty days. Five days were added at the end of the year (six in leap years).

3 In June 1790, Paris was divided into forty-eight sections, which held regular meetings.
when there was no specific charge against him. "For such men are incapable of bringing themselves to the heights of our revolution; their hearts are always full of pride and we shall never forget their former grandeur and their domination over us."

The sans-culottes tolerated neither pride nor disdain; those were aristocratic sentiments contrary to the spirit of fraternity that existed between equal citizens and implied a hostile political stand toward democracy as practiced by the sans-culottes in their general assemblies and in their popular societies. These character traits appeared frequently in reports justifying the arrest of suspects.

On September 17, 1793 (Fructidor, year I), the committee of the Révolutionnaire section decided to arrest Etienne Gide, clock merchant, who had supported the Brissotins; he was also accused of being haughty and proud and of often speaking ironically. On October 12, one bourgeois, a solicitor, was arrested by the revolutionary committee of Réunion: he had risen to support aristocrats in the general assemblies; more particularly, he demonstrated a "haughty manner toward the sans-culottes."

Even more serious, according to the sans-culottes, than a haughty or disdainful manner toward themselves or straightforward indifference were statements referring to them as being of a lower social order. In its report of 8 Frimaire on Louis-Claude Cezeron, arrested for being a "suspect," the committee of the Poissonnière section made a particular case of a statement made during a meeting of the general assembly on the preceding May 31 (12 Prairial): "that the poor depended on the rich and that the sans-culottes were never any more than the lowest order possible." Bergeron, a skin merchant from Lombards, said that "although he understood that the sans-culottes were fulfilling their duty as citizens... it would be better for them to go about their work rather than meddle in politics." He was arrested on suspicion on 18 Pluviôse.

The sans-culottes refused to tolerate others taking advantage of their social or economic status to impose upon them. Anthéaume, a former abbé, was arrested on 16 Brumaire: he was reprimanded for "pride and intolerable pedagogy contrary to equality and the simplicity of a good republican."

The sans-culottes had an egalitarian conception of social relations. Their behavior also concealed realities which were more specific. To what extent were they seized upon and expressed?

The most clearly stated social friction in popular awareness was that which pitted aristocrat against sans-culotte: it was against the aristocrats that the sans-culottes addressed themselves from July 14th to August 10th, and against whom they continued to battle. The address of the sans-culottes society of Beaucaire before

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4 Followers of Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, who in 1791 advocated that France go to war against European monarchies.

5 14 July 1789, fall of the Bastille in Paris.

6 10 August 1792, overthrow of the French monarchy.
the Convention7 of September 8, 1793, is significant: “We are sans-culottes . . . poor and virtuous, we have formed a society of artisans and peasants . . . we know who our friends are: those who freed us from the clergy and from the nobility, from feudalism, from tithes, from royalty and from all the plagues that follow in its wake. . . .”

The nature of the class struggle was even more clearly stated in the address of the Dijon Popular Society on 27 Nivôse, year II: “We must be one people, and not two nations, opposed . . . all recognized aristocratic individuals without exception should be condemned to death by decree.” According to mechanic Guyot . . ., “all the nobles, without exception, deserve to be guillotined.”

At this point, the aristocracy was the main enemy of the sans-culottes. Ultimately, they managed to include in this term all their adversaries, although these might not necessarily belong to the quondam nobility, but to the upper echelons of the former Third Estate. In this way the role of the sans-culottes is imprinted upon the Revolution, and further demonstrates the autonomy of their action.

On July 25, 1792, the Louvre section announced the fall of the King, at the same time denouncing the hereditary aristocracy, “the ministerial, financial and bourgeois aristocrats, and particularly the hierarchy of recalcitrant priests.” By the year II, the meaning of the word “aristocrat” was extended to embrace all the social classes against which the sans-culottes were struggling. . . Hence the specifically popular definition, coined by an anonymous petitioner in the year II, which has both political and social connotations: the aristocrat was one who regretted the passing of the ancien régime and disapproved of the Revolution, did nothing to further its cause, did not swear his allegiance to it, did not enlist in the National Guard,8 one who did not purchase expropriated land, although he might have had the means to do so; one who left land uncultivated without selling it at its true value, or leasing it, or giving a half share in the produce. The aristocrat was also he who did not give work to laborers or journeymen, although he might be in a position to do so, and “at a wage commensurate with food prices”; did not subscribe to contributions for the volunteers; and had done nothing to improve the lot of his poor and patriotic countrymen. The real patriot was he who took a contrary attitude on every possible occasion. The term aristocrat in the end, therefore, designated all the opponents of the sans-culottes, bourgeois as well as noble, those who formed “the class of citizens from whom one should take the billion we have to levy throughout the Republic.” The most extreme sans-culottes did not use the term “aristocrat” for the old nobility, but for the bourgeoisie. On May 21, 1793, a popular orator from the Mail section declared that “aristocrats are all the people with money, all the fat merchants, all the monopolists, law students, bankers, pettifoggers and anyone who has something.”

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7 Name of the governmental assembly that first met on 21 September 1792 and established a republic.
8 Citizen militia organized in Paris after the fall of the Bastille.
The economic crisis had contributed to bringing social clashes to a head: to the fundamental hostility between sans-culotte and aristocrat was added that of the sans-culottes and the upper sectors of the Third Estate. . . . A note sent to the Public Safety Committee in Pluviôse, year II, pointed out the existence of two parties in the Brutus section: that of the people, the sans-culottes, and the other consisting of "bankers, money changers, rich people." An address delivered before the Convention on 27 Ventôse mentioned the brave sans-culottes, who were opposed not only to the clergy, the nobility, royal coalitions, but also to attorneys, lawyers, notaries and also all "those fat farmers, those egotists, and those fat, rich merchants: they're at war against us, and not against our tyrants."

Was this the "haves" against the "have-nots"? Not precisely. As far as the sans-culottes were concerned, artisans and shopkeepers belonged to the propertied classes. More particularly, the friction was between those who believed in the notion of limited and controlled ownership and the partisans of total ownership rights such as were proclaimed in 1789. Or the opposition between those who believed in controls and taxation, and those in favor of economic freedom; the opposition between consumer and producer.

Contemporary documents, over and beyond these basic reactions or distinctive statements, also allow us to explore the nuances of the social antagonisms expressed by the sans-culottes with some accuracy. They denounced "respectable people," meaning by this those who possessed, if not riches, then at least leisure and culture, the better-educated citizens, the better-dressed, those conscious if not proud of their leisure and their education. They denounced the propertied classes, that is to say, those who had unearned incomes. Finally, they denounced the rich in general, not only the propertied classes or the "haves," but also the "big men" as opposed to the "little men," which they were. The sans-culottes were not against property already owned by artisans and shopkeepers, and which journeymen aspired to possess, provided that it was limited.

The expression "respectable people" was first heard after June 2 (13 Prairial), when sans-culottes and moderates opposed one another on political and social platforms. The term was first applied to the bourgeoisie opposed to equality, but ended by having as wide a connotation as the term "aristocrat," and embracing all the enemies of the sans-culottes. . . . A certain Lamarre, lemonade vendor from the Bon-Conseil section, was arrested on 5 Prairial, year III; he consistently raised his voice against "respectable people," demanding before the assembly that they all be guillotined. As for washerwoman Rombaut, she stated that every single one of those so-called "respectable people" should be guillotined.

If the sans-culottes ironically called their adversaries "respectable people," the latter did not fail to treat them as rabbles; thus, with two expressions, the lines for social clashes were drawn. On September 25, 1793 (4 Vendémiaire, year II), carpenter Bertout was arrested on the orders of the committee of the République section: he had declared a desire for "another government being established to oppose the rabble, because respectable people were lost." . . .

This opposition was further expressed in the animosity between the sans-culottes and those who possessed unearned incomes, a situation that came to a
head during the autumn of 1793, when the economic crisis and the difficulties of daily living resulted in increased class antagonism. The fact of being independently wealthy gave cause for suspicion. On September 18, 1793 . . . , the revolutionary committee of Mucius-Scaevola ordered the arrest of Duval, first secretary of the Paris Police, on two counts: for contempt toward the assemblies of that section, and for enjoying an income of 2,000 livres . . . . On 2 Germainal, the revolutionary committee of the Mont Blanc section issued a warrant for the arrest of Jean-François Rivoire, formerly a colonist in Santo Domingo: he had not signed the Constitution, he had never contributed to the funds, nor had he served in the Guard. Further, he had an income of 16,000 livres. In one extreme case a certain Pierre Becquerel from Guillaume-Tell was arrested on 19 Ventôse during a raid by the police in the Gardens of Equality, simply for having said he had a private income. On the preceding 2 Frimaire, the Lepeletier popular society adopted a petition to exclude from all government posts not only former nobles, the sons of secretaries to the king, brokers and dealers, but also all persons known to possess incomes of more than 3,000 livres. Posts vacated by this measure would be reserved for sans-culottes. These latter were not therefore opposed to all forms of income from investments, but only to the very wealthy . . . .

The sans-culottes' hostility toward those with large private incomes was merely one particularly stressed aspect of their instinctive opposition to the rich. Extreme sans-culottes like Babeuf9 in the year IV were not far from considering the Revolution as a declared war "between the rich and the poor." The nature of this clash to a large extent characterized Terrorist sentiments . . . . When sectional power was in the hands of the sans-culottes, full of animosity or hatred toward the rich, they did not fail to take discriminatory action against them. Wealth was often the motive for suspicion. Although wealth was rarely the only motive invoked, it often lent support to vague accusations . . . .

This deep-rooted tendency among the sans-culottes to speak against the rich was encouraged in the year II by the ruling politicians of the time. "Herein lies the revolution of the poor," wrote Michel Lepeletier in the National Education Project which Robespierre read before the Convention on July 12 and 29 of 1793 (Messidor/Thermidor, year I). . . . Saint-Just10 said: "The unfortunate are the powerful on earth; they have the right to speak as masters to governments who neglect them." . . . The crisis of the Revolution from the spring to the autumn of 1793 made the popular alliance necessary: the sans-culottes formed the cadre that was to permit the most advanced faction of the bourgeoisie to quell the aristocracy and its allies. "The hidden danger," wrote Robespierre in his diary during the June 2 insurrection, "lies in the bourgeois; in order to conquer the bourgeois, it will be necessary to rally the people." . . . Those who did not belong to the government

9 François Babeuf (1760–1797), firebrand who formed the "Conspiracy of Equals" and attempted to overthrow the government in 1797.

10 Louis-Antoine Saint-Just (1767–1794), a revolutionary leader during the Terror.
openly exploited the antagonism between the rich and the sans-culottes for political ends. . . .

The differences between the sans-culottes and the rich were rounded out by the former's hostility toward business enterprise, and this hostility constituted one of the fundamental currents of popular opinion during the year II.

Being urban consumers, the Parisian sans-culottes were naturally against those who controlled staple food supplies. Retailers, they blamed the wholesalers. Artisans or journeymen, hardly workers in the actual meaning of the word, they remained essentially small independent producers, hostile toward those who had interests in commercial capital. The economic crisis and political struggles intensified this inherent antagonism among the sans-culottes. Scarcity and high prices spiraled, and every merchant was soon suspect of being a monopolist or a shark. The struggle against the Girondins and subsequently, after May 31, against the moderates, was often, at least on the sectional level, turned into a struggle against the merchant bourgeoisie. The sans-culottes were insistent upon taxation and controls, and the conflict deepened; to the extent that they defended freedom of enterprise, the merchants became suspect. Henceforth, the sans-culottes included with the noble aristocracy and the religious hierarchy the mercantile aristocracy as well. . . .

In 1793 and in the year II, popular hostility against the merchants was marked, in its moments of paroxysm, by violence and pillage. It was also marked by a constant desire for repression. . . . In March of 1793 (Ventôse/Germinal, year I), during the recruitment of troops for the Vendée campaign, collections for volunteers were often an occasion for the sans-culottes to confirm their hostility toward the merchants. In Lombards, Jean-Baptiste Larue, journeyman mason and member of the revolutionary committee, declared that the volunteers were "idiots if they left without each having a hundred pistoles" in their pockets, that we should cut off the heads of all these buggers, those merchants, and that after this operation, the sums of money required would soon be found."

Once popular power was on firm ground, the title of merchant alone was often reason enough for suspicion on the part of revolutionary committees. They were encouraged by the Commune, whose arrests of the nineteenth of the first month ranged among their suspects "those who felt sorry for needy farmers and merchants, against whom the law must take measures." Certain committees had not expected this encouragement. After September 14, the committee of Lombards, where hostility toward the merchants was particularly strong, arrested a certain Dussautoy; he was reprimanded simply for being a wholesale grocer. . . . In Bon-Conseil, the committee justified the arrest on 25 Brumaire of Jean-Louis Lagrave,

11 Name given to a group of moderate republican deputies. They were purged from the Convention in 1793.

12 Gold coins.

13 Government of the city of Paris, 1789–1795, divided into forty-eight sections and dominated by radical factions.
wholesale grocer, merely because of his social behavior: "He spends his time among business people, snobs like himself, not consorting with any patriot . . . always flaunting his rank among the wholesalers, censuring and even molesting citizens, like most wholesalers." . . .

The hostility of the sans-culottes toward business was not restricted to measures against individuals; this was a war against an entire social class that, although it did not seek to eliminate that class from politics, at least sought to curb its powers, to put a halt to its prejudicial activities. . . .

The reaction set in finally after the year III, and the merchants made the most of their revenge against former Terrorists for the maltreatment to which they had been subjected. During Germinal and Prairial, a simple remark was sufficient motive for arrest. The food shortage, worse because the "maximum"\(^{14}\) had been abolished, once again increased hostility toward commerce among the sans-culottes. The dossiers of the anti-Terrorist repression offer ample evidence, allowing us to determine the precise nature of public opinion on this subject; this varied, circumstances permitting, from a simple expression of hostility to a suppressed desire for the elimination of a social class.

For having said, in year II, "Neither the merchants nor the rich are worth sparing," Davelin, a feather dealer from Amis-de-la-Patrie, was disarmed on 5 Prairial, year III. Jacques Barbant, from Arsenal, was arrested: he had made certain vague derogatory remarks about merchants. . . .

From hostility toward commerce, the more aware or the more violent among the sans-culottes went on to justify pillage . . . .

During the upheavals of February 25 and 26, 1793 (Ventôse, year I), cobbler Servière, revolutionary commissar of the Muséum section in the year II declared before the general assembly, in what was formerly the Germain church, "that he thoroughly approved of pillage and would be very much against having to oppose it." . . . In Bonne-Nouvelle, water carrier Bergeron was arrested on 6 Pluviôse, in the year III, when "as a result of his provocations he incited the pillaging of the wood merchants." In some ways . . . , pillage corresponded to the fundamental egalitarianism of the sans-culottes: individual action was legitimated by the inequality of living conditions.

Beyond the offensive remarks or the exhortation to pillage, Terrorist exaltation and the desire for punitive measures show the deep-rooted hostility of the sans-culottes toward the commercial bourgeoisie. Many militants considered the threat of the guillotine in times of shortages an excellent remedy. To oblige farmers to sell their grain according to the official price, they insisted upon the creation of a revolutionary army. When this army was created, the sans-culottes constantly demanded that it be accompanied by a mobile guillotine, in order further to insure its efficaciousness. This outlook can be traced throughout all the Terrorists' 

\(^{14}\) Term applied to two laws in 1793 that set maximum levels for wages and prices. The ceiling on wages, but not that on prices, was stringently enforced. Thus the sans-culottes were not satisfied.
abusive remarks made in the year II against the merchants. Widow Barbau, from Indivisibilité, a veritable harriidan according to her denunciators, had the habit of declaring “that until the snobbish merchants, the aristocrats, the rich, etc., are guillotined or dispatched en masse, nothing will work out properly.” Widow Barbau quite naturally placed the merchants before the aristocrats. In Unité, a certain Roux asked for the erecting of guillotines “on every street corner in Paris, on the doorsteps of every merchant, so that, he said, we can have cheap merchandise.” ... In Invalides, the clockmaker Fagère declared that “when the aristocrats are finished, we’ll take up with the merchant class again.”

In the year III, shortages and misery still exacerbated sans-culottes’ hatred of the merchants. Terrorist remarks abound in the dossiers of the repression. On 19 Ventôse, Jacques Rohait, a job printer from the Panthéon-Français section exasperated by the high cost of meat, said that “all those wretched merchants deserve to swing.”...

During those Prairial days, frenzied offensive remarks were not unusual. Nicolas Barrucand, dyer, former revolutionary commissar of Arsenal, declared that on the feast day of Corpus Christi “the streets should be carpeted with the heads of merchants.”...

The still vivid memories of the year II suggested to many sans-culottes the need for a return to organized terror in order to put an end to the merchants, as they had done to the aristocrats. Ferrier, a hatter from Gardes-Françaises, remembering the uprisings in Lyons, Marseilles and Bordeaux in 1793, and the repression which followed, declared that “the large communes composed entirely of merchants and the wealthy must be destroyed, their inhabitants humbled and put down.”...

These texts reveal that the sans-culottes identified themselves by opposition to the aristocracy, riches, and to commerce — antagonisms that account for the imprecise nature of the social distinctions within the former Third Estate and the difficulty of defining the sans-culottes as a social class. The sans-culottes can be clearly defined only when compared to the aristocracy; when compared to the bourgeoisie, the distinction becomes less clear. Composed of many socially disparate elements, the sans-culottes were undermined by internal dissent, which explains both their inability to establish a coherent program and, in the last analysis, their political defeat. ...

The sans-culottes considered violence to be the ultimate recourse against those who refused to answer the call of unity. This stand was one of the characteristics of their political behavior. Popular violence had allowed the bourgeoisie to carry out its first attacks against the ancien régime; indeed, the struggle against the aristocracy would not have been possible without it. In 1793 and in the year II, the sans-culottes used that violence not solely against the aristocrats, but also against the moderates who were opposed to the establishment of an egalitarian republic.

Doubtless we should at times seek the biological roots of this recourse to violence, of this exaltation. Temperament offers some explanation. The reports of Prairial, year III, on the former Terrorists often mention their irascible, passion-
ate nature and their tendency to fits of rage; "Their outbursts were usually the result of being in a position to make malicious remarks without thinking of the consequences." Their reactions were the stronger because the sans-culottes were often frustrated, poor, uneducated, inflamed by awareness of their misery.

In the year III the reactionaries indiscriminately labeled all Terrorists drinkers of blood. Although one must be careful not to generalize and take denunciations and police reports literally, one must nevertheless concede that, for certain individuals, violence did mean the spilling of blood. . . . Bunou, from the Champs-Élysées section, who was arrested on 5 Prairial, demanded in the year II that a guillotine be erected in the section, "and that he would act as executioner if there was none to be found." Lesur, from the Luxembourg section, was arrested on 6 Prairial for having made a similar suggestion: "that the guillotine was not working fast enough, that there should be more bloodletting in the prisons, that if the executioner was tired, he himself would climb the scaffold with a quarter loaf to soak up the blood." In the Gardes-Françaises a certain Jayet was arrested on 6 Prairial for having declared in the year II, "that he would like to see rivers of blood, up to the ankles." On leaving the general assembly of the République section, another declared: "The guillotine is hungry, it's ages since she had something to eat." Women shared this Terrorist exaltation. A certain Baudray, a lemonade vendor from the Lepeletier section, was arrested on 8 Prairial for having said "she would like to eat the heart of anyone opposed to the sans-culottes"; she intended to raise her children on the same principles: "You hear them talk of nothing but cutting, chopping off heads, not enough blood is flowing."

Nevertheless, temperament alone does not sufficiently explain the fact that the majority of the popular militants approved of if they did not exalt violence and the use of the guillotine. For many, brute force seemed the supreme recourse when a crisis had reached its paroxysm. These same men, who did not hesitate to make blood flow, were more often than not ordinarily quite calm, good sons, good husbands and good fathers. Cobbler Duval from the Arsenal section was condemned to death on 11 Prairial, year II, for his role during the uprising of the first; his neighbors testified that he was a good father, good husband, good citizen, a man of probity. The feeling that the nation was threatened, the belief in the aristocratic plot, the atmosphere of turbulent days, the tocsin and the issuing of arms made these men beside themselves and created in them something like a second nature. According to the civil committee of the Faubourg-du-Nord section, Josef Morlot, a house painter, arrested on 5 Prairial, year III, was a man with two distinct personalities. "One of these, guided by his natural bent, was gentle, honest and generous. He has all the social virtues, which he practices in private. The other, subjugated by present threats, manifests itself in the bloody colors of all the conjoined plagues in their utmost virulence."

This violence was not gratuitous. It had a political aim and a class content; it was a weapon which the sans-culottes were forced to use in their resistance to the aristocracy. A teacher by the name of Moussard employed by the Executive Commission of Public Instruction, was arrested on 5 Prairial, year III. "Yes, I was carried away," he wrote in his defense. "Who wasn't during the Revolution? . . . They
say I am fanatical: yes; passion burns within my breast, I am intoxicated with the idea of liberty and I shall always rage against the enemies of my country."

The guillotine was popular because the sans-culottes saw in it an instrument whereby they could avenge the nation. Hence the expressions national cleaver, national ax; the guillotine was also known as the scythe of equality. Class hatred of the aristocracy was heightened by the belief in an aristocratic plot which since 1789 had been one of the fundamental reasons behind popular violence. Foreign war and civil war further strengthened the popular notion that the aristocracy would only be exterminated by the Terror and that the guillotine was necessary for consolidating the Republic. Becq, a clerk in the Navy Department, a good father, a good husband and well thought of, but extraordinarily impassioned according to the civil committee of the Butte-des-Moulins, turned his impassioned nature against priests and noblemen, whom he usually recommended for assassination. Jean-Baptiste Mallais, cobbler and revolutionary commissar of the Temple section, was the same: he did not hesitate to use clubs when arguing with noblemen and priests considered enemies of the people; he spoke of arming the wives of patriots "so that they in turn can slit the throats of the wives of aristocrats." . . . Even more indicative of the political aims which the sans-culottes hoped to achieve through violence and through the Terror were the words recorded by the observer Perrière on 6 Ventôse, year II: "Is the guillotine working today?" asked a dandy. "Yes," replied an honest patriot, "there is always somebody betraying somebody or something."

During the year III violence became even more important for the sans-culottes. The Terror had also been an economic aspect of government; it had sanctioned the application of the "maximum," which had guaranteed the people their daily bread. Whereas the reaction coincided with the abolition of price-fixing and the worst shortages, certain among them came to identify the Terror with abundance, in the same way as they associated popular government with the Terror. Cobbler Clément from the République section was denounced on 2 Prairial for having declared "that the Republic cannot be built without blood flowing." . . . Mistress Chalandon from the l'Homme-Armé section declared, "Nothing will really work properly until permanent guillotines were erected at every street intersection in Paris." Carpenter Richer, from the République section, touched the heart of the matter when he said, on 1 Prairial: "There will be no bread unless we spill some blood; under the Terror we didn't go without."

Whatever specific aims the Parisian sans-culottes had in mind, the Terror and popular violence to a great extent swept away the remnants of feudalism and absolutism for the bourgeoisie. They nevertheless corresponded to a different form of behavior, in the same way as popular political practices, essentially characterized in 1793 and in the year II by voting by acclamation and by fraternity, expressed a concept of democracy that was fundamentally different from that of the bourgeoisie, even of the Jacobins.15

15 Members of republican political clubs during the French Revolution. Originally moderates, the Jacobins became increasingly radical and dominated the government during the Terror.
Doubtless the revolutionary bourgeoisie, during the critical moments of its struggle against the aristocracy, also resorted to violence; they, too, made use of certain popular practices; for example, during the course of the Convention elections, in Paris, they used the roll-call vote. Events justified this departure from the usual concepts of liberal democracy, and also class interests. Once the revolutionary government was in power, neither these interests nor the events would allow these practices to continue. Although these practices were in accord with the popular temperament, they were incompatible with the behavior and political ideas of the bourgeoisie. They also threatened its sovereignty.