



EDITED BY JAN HANSEN, JOCHEN HUNG, JAROSLAV IRA,
JUDIT KLEMENT, SYLVAIN LESAGE, JUAN LUIS SIMAL, AND
ANDREW TOMPKINS

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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3.5.1 Protest and Social Movements in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Laurent Brassart and Maarten Prak

Introduction

Traditionally, the early modern period has been seen as an era of social movements and protest, for the simple reason that ordinary people had no alternative means to make their voices heard before the rise of modern democracy. We now know that democratic procedures did exist long before 1789, albeit locally much more than nationally. Nonetheless, that protest and social movements shaped the era can be seen from the two revolutions bracketing the early modern period: the Reformation at the beginning, and the French Revolution that marked its end. Between those two revolutions, many more political upheavals occurred, shaped by the involvement of large numbers of people. Think of the Fronde in France and the English Civil War, both in the middle of the seventeenth century. However, most of those upheavals never made it into the history textbooks, because they were too small or short-lived. Still, they sustained a tradition of popular mobilisation that would prove crucial during major events.

Following much of the historical literature, we have made a distinction in this chapter between urban and rural revolts and revolutions. We have also decided to discuss at some greater length the two most significant social movement events of the period, the Reformation and the French Revolution. In our discussion we will look at causes, numbers of protesters and their social profile, and at insurrectionary repertoires and demands. It is our claim that protest and social movements were not isolated incidents, but rather structural features of political life in early modern Europe.



Fig. 1: Unknown, "Titelblatt 12 Artikel" ("The Twelve Articles") (March 1525), Wikimedia Commons (from: Otto Henne am Rhyn, *Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Volkes*, Zweiter Band, Berlin, 1897), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Titelblatt_12_Artikel.jpg. This image shows the front cover of the Twelve Articles (also known as the Memmingen Articles of War) that articulated the peasants' demands during this powerful 16th century rebellion. The cover page shows German peasants armed with an assortment of intimidating home-made weapons.

The Revolutionary Reformation

Calculated by the size of his domains, which covered the Holy Roman Empire (Germany and Austria), the Low Countries (Belgium, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands), Spain, as well as substantial parts of Italy, not to mention overseas territories in Asia and the Americas, Charles V (1500–1558) was the most powerful ruler of the early modern period. His power was, however, challenged throughout his reign. It started with the *Comunero* revolt in Castile and the simultaneous *Germanias* (guilds) revolt in 1520, in Valencia, Mallorca, and Aragon. Charles managed to subdue them militarily, but he afterwards gave in to many of the rebels' demands. In Germany, however, he failed to suppress the Reformation, and this failure, highlighted in the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, led directly to his voluntary abdication in that same year. How did ordinary Europeans manage to topple the most powerful ruler of their time?

Martin Luther's (1483–1546) criticisms of the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, first shared with a wider public in 1517, became politicised almost from the start. This was inevitable, given the intricate connections between religion and politics in the sixteenth century. But it was also inevitable because Luther provided a perfect vehicle for certain political agendas. In sixteenth-century Europe, one of the most important issues was the balance between central authority and local autonomy. This had been the key issue in the Spanish revolts and it would prove to be in many Reformation struggles.

In June 1524 hundreds of farmers in the Breisgau area of southwestern Germany rose in arms against the exactions imposed by their lord. This movement had been imbued with Reformation ideas by a travelling preacher. The unrest then spilled over into neighbouring regions of southern Germany, where the rebels coordinated their activities in a 'Peasants' Parliament' in March 1525. They adopted a common programme, the Twelve Articles, which articulated both social and religious demands. The first article insisted that each town and village would have the right to elect its own priests, in effect taking control over the priesthood and their ideas away from the Catholic Church. Other rural areas and many small towns then joined this massive rebellion, which came to be known as the Peasants' War.

In 1525, while large parts of Germany were in turmoil, the guilds of Münster in German Westphalia extracted various concessions from their own lord. Westphalia was ruled by a bishop, who resided in Münster. The city's elites and citizens, however, broadly resented the bishop's authority over them. After the 'peasants' had been defeated, all concessions were reversed, but the Reformation movement did not disappear. In 1532, the parish of Lamberti selected a reform-minded priest, who went on to publish a booklet in which he rejected child baptism and proclaimed that transubstantiation was a symbolic act, that the bread and wine did not really change into the flesh and blood of Christ. He was thus undermining two sacred ideas of the Catholic Church and demonstrating his allegiance to a group called the Anabaptists, who favoured adult baptism. Other Anabaptists were invited to come to Münster. The bishop, in the meantime, amassed his troops around the city, triggering a full-blown revolution. Private property was abolished and polygamy introduced, showing that radical religious ideas could lead to much broader reforms. All of this happened with the ostensible support of broad sections of the town's population and more specifically the artisans and shopkeepers who made up the membership of the local guilds. The leaders of this rebellion, who came from the adjacent Low Countries, were also artisans. Ultimately, the Münster Anabaptist revolution was defeated by the military might of the bishop, but in

many other places in Germany the Reformation became firmly established as a result of collaboration between local elites and their citizens.

Outside Germany, the Reformation triggered the Catholic Pilgrimage of Grace in northern England in 1536, the Prayer Book Rebellion in the southwest of England in 1549, and Wyatt's Rebellion in 1553, all three taking issue with the religious policies of Henry VIII (1491–1547) and his successor Queen Mary (1516–1558). In the Low Countries, religious unrest erupted in the 1566 Iconoclasm, which subsequently evolved into a full-blown revolution against the rule of Charles V's son and successor Philip II (1527–1598) and ultimately led to the establishment of a new state, the Dutch Republic. In France, a series of nine civil wars were necessary between 1562 and 1598 to determine the religious features of French society, with more Protestant rebellions following in the first half of the seventeenth century. In most of these rebellions, religious issues were mixed with questions of political authority. Time and again citizens demanded more self-rule and less interference by central government authorities.

Urban Citizens Rebel

In the Dutch Republic, itself the product of a revolution, major waves of rebellion erupted during the 1610s, in 1672, in 1703–1715, in 1747–1748, and during the 1780s. The latter wave would have led to another revolution, had the Prussian Army not intervened in September 1787 to prop up the Orangist *stadhouder* and his government. In Holland, the most populous and most prosperous province of the Republic, twenty-seven local food riots took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, over half of them in 1740–1741. Half of Holland's twenty-three tax revolts also occurred during the seventeenth century, most of them local, but in 1747–1748 the rebels forced the authorities to introduce major reforms in the way taxes were collected. The great majority of these rebellions emerged in towns and their participants came from the working classes, but also from the middle classes. Among the leaders of a massive rebellion in Leiden in 1748, which managed to take over the city for several weeks, we find twenty bakers, publicans, and other professions related to the town's food supply, sixteen drapers and other entrepreneurs from the town's dominant textile industry, as well as a surgeon, three schoolmasters, three booksellers, but only one whose job description suggests he was an employee.

The urban emphasis in civil unrest may have had a lot to do with the high levels of urbanisation in the Dutch Republic and in Holland in particular, but in other countries, too, urban citizens were active participants in rebellions and

revolutions. An important explanation for their successful mobilisation was the fact that they were already organised for other purposes. Neighbourhoods, craft guilds and civic militias all provided frameworks to discuss political issues, and where necessary to recruit leaders and participants to support social and political claim-making. These organisations were, moreover, legitimate parts of the urban system of governance. And they subscribed to a shared ideology.

This ideology was perhaps not very sophisticated, but it was persistent and could be found in all corners of Europe. German historian Heinz Schilling has called it “urban republicanism”. A core element in this urban republicanism was the idea that all citizens enjoyed fundamental rights and personal liberties. On this basis, it was argued, citizens should be consulted by the urban authorities before important decisions were taken; these authorities represented the civic community. Some reformed preachers, most prominently among them Jean Calvin (1509–1564), moreover argued in the sixteenth century that it was acceptable for citizens to rise against ‘unjust’ governments, providing further legitimacy to rebellious movements.

Rural Rebels: Goals and Chronology

Rural societies of the early modern period were never quiet. They fought against the manorial system, opposed the growth of the ‘warfare’ state, and contested the diffusion of new agrarian and economic ideas, using wide-ranging repertoires of contention. Chronologies differ, of course, from issue to issue and from region to region, but roughly speaking until the mid-seventeenth century rural societies expressed their opposition in insurrections and riots. Then, because of the success of state violence against them, rural social movements changed their tactics to legal and illegal resistance (1660–1770), before returning to insurrection and revolts from the 1770s.

In Western Europe, the great peasant riots of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries forced the feudal powers to abolish serfdom. With the new manorial system, freeholders could cultivate and acquire land, but they were still subject to unpaid days of work (*corvées*), the payment of taxes on agricultural production, land transactions, and the use of collective tools (mills, for example) for the benefit of the lords. From the seventeenth century, the peasants’ resistance to this manorial system often took the form of legal proceedings, in particular lawsuits. If this proved unsuccessful, however, they could start to destroy dovecotes or refuse to pay taxes.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the dynamic of the manorial system evolved in the opposite direction: a free peasantry was reduced to serfdom on the large aristocratic estates from the sixteenth century onwards. Even if small, localised

revolts exploded during the seventeenth century, it was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that major uprisings broke out in opposition against this system. In Russia, more than 10,000 insurgents led by Emelyan Pugachev (1742–1775), a Cossack chief, took over an immense territory, stretching from the Urals to the Don, for two years (1773–1774). At the same time, several great serf revolts broke out in the Habsburg Empire. In January 1775, more than 10,000 peasants, asking for bread and an end to serfdom, destroyed castles in the countryside of Bohemia, but failed to take Prague. In the autumn of 1784 in Transylvania, Romanian serfs led by the serf carpenter Vasile Ursu Nicola (1741–1785), called “Horea”, rose against their Hungarian and German lords and burned down or looted 230 castles, demanding an end to serfdom and the division of land. Though the government of Emperor Joseph II (1741–1790) initially suppressed these rebellions by force, a few years later it relieved the status of serfs.

The early modern state’s increasing fiscal claims to fund the military were rejected in the countryside in the name of local liberties. Whereas in Spain and Italy the great anti-fiscal revolts were mainly urban, in France the countryside took the lead. The French peasant wars of 1630–1660 called neither social hierarchies nor the monarchical regime into question. On the contrary, they mobilised local solidarity between the nobility, the landlords and the peasantry against the tax abuses of the “King’s bad advisers”. Their repression by the absolutist state gave rise to new tactics, such as “bad will from day to day”: in other words, aggression towards tax agents, refusal of payment, and so on, as well as localised and often ephemeral riots that the state found difficult to control (in France alone, 799 riots between 1701 and 1730).

The rise of agrarian individualism and economic liberalism in the countryside was another source of contestation. Think of the enclosures in England and, at the end of the eighteenth century, the clearances in the Scottish Highlands. In the spring of 1607, a revolt erupted in the English Midlands with freeholders destroying the hedges of large estates and reopening the land. During the English Civil War (1642–1651), the number of revolts against enclosures exploded. In the eighteenth century, Parliament passed legislation allowing common lands to become privately owned without the consent of rural communities. Rural people turned to clandestine resistance strategies: poaching in the hunting reserves, attacks on the lords’ properties. The Black Acts (1723–1724) imposed the death penalty on such acts of opposition. Nevertheless, radical ideas of egalitarianism and Christian economy against liberalism, labelled by historian E.P. Thompson as the “moral economy”, became very popular. A similar resistance to the new liberal economy also emerged in Spain with the *Motín de Esquilache* in 1766 and in the Parisian ‘Flour War’ of 1775. In both cases, urban and rural people rose against the freedom

of the grain trade in times of scarcity. More than just food riots, these events revealed the rebirth of great peasant insurrections and—a new phenomenon—their politicisation against liberalism and the manorial system.

With the exception of England, the European countryside was troubled by revolts from the 1770s onwards. Many of these movements evolved into politicised protests. In Ireland, in the 1780s, the movement of the Rightboys, farmers who fought against new lease conditions imposed on them by the English landlords, made a connection with the Irish nationalist organisation of the Defenders.



Fig. 2: Charles Thévenin, “The Storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 (Prise de la Bastille le 14 juillet 1789)” (ca. 1793), Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/90058195>. In this scene from July 14, 1789, an angry mob of Parisian citizens storms the Bastille, a state prison and symbol of the French monarchy’s dictatorial rule. This historic day when these revolutionaries breached the Bastille fortress is remembered today as the French National Day, the day of French unity.

The French Revolution

As we have made clear, the French Revolution was not a thunderbolt in an otherwise calm European sky. It was, however, unique in its political and geographical impact. Some historians (first and foremost R.R. Palmer) have portrayed it as part of a broader “Atlantic Revolution”, with numerous bilateral circulations and appropriations of revolutionary ideas between North America

and Europe; political and social revolutions broke out in the United States of America (1776–1783), Geneva (1785), the Netherlands (1785–1786), France (summer of 1789) and the Austrian Netherlands (October 1789). But if newer generations of historians have accepted the importance of the circulation of ideas and models of struggle between these revolutions, attention to the distinct features of each revolution means that the concept of an Atlantic Revolution is no longer fashionable.

For the French Revolution, certainly the most radical, three revolutionary stages can be distinguished: in May and June 1789, a revolution led by the social elites during the Estates General (*États généraux*) at Versailles; from mid-June to mid-July, the revolution of urban citizens in Paris (the storming of the Bastille) and subsequently other towns and cities; from mid-July, the Great Fear (*Grande Peur*) in the countryside, an anti-feudal uprising. These distinct but partly overlapping popular dynamics forced the deputies to declare an end to the *ancien régime* on 4 August 1789. As a result, the manorial system was partially abolished and in 1790–1791, the National Constituent Assembly (*Assemblée nationale constituante*) established a liberal economic order: the guilds were abolished, and the liberty of trade and production became a sacred right.

These policies changed the nature of popular protests once again: eight rural uprisings from 1790 to 1792 appeared to fight the liberal order as well as the leftovers of the manorial system. In the cities, social protest transformed into a political movement, the *sans-culottes*. The *sans-culottes* sought to create a society of independent producers in a regulated economic system. On 11 August 1792, the day after the fall of the monarchy, the manorial regime was finally abolished. In June 1793, Robespierre and the Montagnards took power, introduced a cap on prices and wages, as the *sans-culottes* had demanded, and the adoption of measures to help the poorest peasantry, though without land sharing. The *Directoire* regime (1795–1799) restored the liberal economic order, from which the urban people suffered more than their rural counterparts. The regime quelled the popular urban riots (the Conspiracy of Equals led by Gracchus Babeuf in May 1796), but also confirmed the definitive end of the manorial system in the countryside. These principles were extended to the annexed European territories: Belgium, the Netherlands, Northern Italy, Switzerland, and the left bank of the Rhine. Napoleon would pursue this policy from 1800 to 1815 in Central and Eastern Europe, in particular by abolishing serfdom.

Conclusion

Long before democracy was introduced in Europe, ordinary Europeans were routinely involved in politics. Without voting rights, and often also without

representative institutions, urban and rural populations were forced to employ a range of methods to oppose unwanted policies or demand reforms. They were sustained by often poorly articulated but strongly-held ideas about right and wrong. A lot of these ideas centred around some form of local self-rule. We see such ideas in the early-sixteenth-century Reformation movements, and again during the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. Rebellious peasants and urban citizens used local institutions to mobilise and organise. They were helped by the fact that they were usually armed, while the state did not have local police forces in every community. States were often successful in suppressing rebellions, but tended later to introduce reforms that partially satisfied the rebels' demands. The great changes of the early modern period would not have happened without the active participation of peasants and citizens.

Discussion questions

1. What were the main differences between urban and rural protest and social movements in early modern Europe?
2. Against what did people rebel in early modern Europe, and why?
3. Do you see any parallels with today?

Suggested reading

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