A Note on Mobs in the American Revolution

Gordon S. Wood*

There used to be a time when we thought that mob violence in the preindustrial age of the eighteenth century was strictly a European phenomenon. In recent years, however, we have been made increasingly aware of how important and prevalent mob activity was in early American history. From the time of the first settlements on through the eighteenth century, social eruptions and popular disturbances were a recurrent event in the American colonies. Mob rioting at one time or another paralyzed all the major cities; and in the countryside violent uprisings of aggrieved farmers periodically destroyed property, closed courts, and brought government to a halt. With such a history of popular disturbances in the colonies it was not surprising then that mob action would become, as the Tories pointed out, "a necessary ingredient" in fomenting the American Revolution. "Mass violence," Arthur M. Schlesinger reminded us in 1955, "played a dominant role at every significant turning point of the events leading up to the War for Independence. Mobs terrified the stamp agents into resigning and forced a repeal of the tax. Mobs obstructed the execution of the Townshend Revenue Act and backed up the boycotts of British trade. Mobs triggered the Boston Massacre and later the famous Tea Party." And even after the Revolution had begun "civilian mobs behind the lines systematically intimidated Tory opponents, paralyzing their efforts or driving them into exile." In short, the American colonies were no more free of urban and rural riots and disturbances than eighteenth-century England and France.1

Yet while recognizing that eighteenth-century crowd disturbances were as prevalent in the colonies as in Europe, almost all historical accounts of American mob activity have suggested that the colonial mobs were fundamentally different from their European counterparts. True, the American Revolution produced mob violence, but these crowd disturbances, most historians imply, were by no means comparable to the

* Mr. Wood is a member of the Department of History, Harvard University.
popular uprisings during the French Revolution, or even to the various English mob demonstrations during the same period. The American mobs seem to have behaved in a particularly unusual fashion, and in contrast to the violent uprisings of eighteenth-century Europe they appear to be hardly mobs at all.

Apparently in order to distinguish the American from the European crowds of the eighteenth century, historians have usually emphasized the middle-class character of the colonial mobs. "It is evident," Carl Bridenbaugh has written, "that in American cities those who constituted the mob, so called, were far from being a mere 'rabble' seeking bread and an opportunity to release pent-up boorish boisterousness by despoiling the Egyptians." Indeed, "the contrast with the still medieval English mob is striking in that the colonial variety had in them always a majority of middle-class citizens and the approval of many more." Bridenbaugh has concluded, however, as has Bernard Bailyn in a more recent note on American mobs, that the American crowds possessed many real "deeply rooted, popular grievances" which found expression in general political issues and principles, a conclusion which by itself has important and unsettling implications for our traditional assumption about the character of American mob behavior. In his comprehensive account of the mob violence surrounding the Stamp Act and its marked effectiveness in pressuring the stamp distributors into resigning, Edmund S. Morgan has given us a somewhat different view, denying that the mobs were the "spontaneous outbursts of the rabble," and picturing them more as passive bodies of men manipulated by their socially superior leaders; indeed "the episodes of violence which defeated the Stamp Act in America were planned and prepared by men who were recognized at the time as belonging to the better and wiser part." So extraordinary in fact were the mobs' discipline and discrimination in the destruction of property that Morgan was led into a noticeably sympathetic description ("the previous evening's entertainment") of the mob violence. The American Revolutionary mob, Lloyd Rudolph has concluded in a pointed comparison of eighteenth-century European and colonial mobs, demonstrated particular restraint "in confining its activities to specific and limited objectives. . . . In America, the mob stopped when it had attained what it set out to do." The rioters destroyed only property, and particularly selected property, and took no, or few, lives during the Revolution. "Heads did not roll in the American Revolution," wrote Bailyn; "mobs did not turn to butchery." "A singular self-restraint characterized the frenzies," declared Schlesinger, "for the participants invariably stopped short of death." In short, as Rudolph has summarized, the American mob, like the Revolu-
tion of which it was a part, was remarkably moderate and disciplined. It was "never swept up into an irrational destruction of lives and property." Thus America was "spared from the mob in the European sense of the word." Indeed, it seems to be the assumed conclusion of all historians of eighteenth-century American crowd disturbances that it was only "in Europe that the real mob existed."2

But what actually is a "real mob," a mob "in the European sense of the word"? It would seem that our image of the eighteenth-century European mob has been very impressionistic and hazy, but understandably so, since only in recent years have scholars begun to study the preindustrial European crowds with care and sympathy, investigating them not as static abstractions but as concrete historical and social phenomena, seeing them not as the authorities saw them, but as they were to the participants. One of the boldest and most prolific of these scholars is George Rudé, who has recently sought to bring together his several studies of the European crowd into a more general discussion, entitled The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848.8 Speculative as Rudé's conclusions about the European crowd may be, they still have interest and significance for all historians; but they have a special relevance for students of the American Revolution, for in effect they call into question the assumptions about the unique quality of the American mobs in the eighteenth century.

Far from discovering the irrational, fickle, and destructive abstractions described by Gustave Le Bon, the father of modern crowd psychology, and others, Rudé found the eighteenth-century English and French crowds to be unusually rational with a "remarkable single-mindedness and discriminating purposefulness." "In fact," he writes, "the study of the pre-industrial crowd suggests that it rioted for precise objects and rarely engaged in indiscriminate attacks on either properties or persons." The Gordon Riots of 1780, for example, were "directed against carefully selected targets," and "considerable care was taken to avoid damage to


neighboring property." Moreover, those who assume that the mobs "have no worthwhile aspirations of their own and, being naturally venal, can be prodded into activity only by the promise of a reward by outside agents or 'conspirators'" are greatly mistaken. The crowd's motives were diverse and complicated, ranging from the seeking of "elementary social justice at the expense of the rich, les grands, and those in authority" to the devotion to political principles and generalized beliefs about man's place in society. Such complex goals reflected the varied composition of the crowds. For the crowds of eighteenth-century England and France, even the French Revolutionary mobs, were not composed of the riffraff of society, but rather represented a fair cross section of the working class together with some petty employees and craftsmen occasionally interspersed with men of "the better sort." Nor were the preindustrial crowds bloodthirsty. According to Rudé the usually selective destruction of property was a constant characteristic, "but not the destruction of human lives." There were notably few fatalities among the rioters' victims. In the week-long Gordon Riots not a single person was killed by the mobs. And, in fact, "the French Revolution in Paris, for all the destructive violence that attended it, was not particularly marked by murderous violence on the part of crowds." Most of those who died during the European demonstrations were rioters killed by the magistracy or the army. "It was authority rather than the crowd," Rudé concludes, "that was conspicuous for its violence to life and limb."  

What is particularly striking about Professor Rudé's analysis of the eighteenth-century European crowd is its resemblance to the description of the American Revolutionary mobs that we have been used to. When viewed in light of Rudé's study, eighteenth-century American crowd behavior loses much of its distinctiveness. It now becomes more difficult to emphasize the peculiar rationality and discrimination of American mobs in their treatment of property. It is also hard to see how they were composed of more respectable, middle-class elements than their European counterparts. And it appears especially distorting to stress the unusual moderation and respect for lives displayed by American crowds.  

It seems misleading, in short, to conclude that during the American Revolutionary crisis "no mob action approached the mayhem and destruction of French and English mobs of roughly the same period."  

4 Rudé, The Crowd in History, 60, 214, 224, 233, 253-257.  
6 Rudolph, "The Eighteenth Century Mob," 458. It seems more misleading than
Nevertheless the historical and social situation and the consequences of mob violence in America were very different from those in Europe, and it would be distorting the very basis of Rudé's studies to ignore these differences. Eighteenth-century American society had neither the complexity nor the number of grievances possessed by eighteenth-century French society. In the colonies there were no bread riots, no uprisings of the destitute. Yet, as Rudé has pointed out, it was not really poverty that precipitated rioting in Europe. Many of the disturbances occurred in times of greatest prosperity; even the food riots were not the product of long-suffering deprivation but of temporary price rises and shortages. Rudé's study suggests that the preindustrial demonstrations represented not the anarchic uprisings of the poor and hopeless but rather a form of political protest made both necessary and possible by the increasing democratization of a society lacking the proper institutions for either the successful expression or the swift repression of that protest. It is perhaps in this context that the American mobs can most instructively be viewed and compared with the European crowds. What particularly seems to set mob violence in the colonies apart from the popular disturbances in England and France is not so much the character of the mob, the purposeful and limited nature of its goals, its consideration for human life, or even the felt intensity of its grievances; rather it is the almost total absence of resistance by the constituted authorities, with all that this absence may signify in explaining the nature of the society and the consequences of the outbursts. If the institutions of law and order were weak in eighteenth-century England and France, in America they were unusually ineffectual. Scholars have emphasized time and again the helplessness of the imperial government when confronted by a colonial mob reinforced by widespread sympathy in the community. It was apparently helpful in understanding the course of the French Revolution to lump the mob clamor and violence of the period with the organized terror of the revolutionary authorities in 1793-94. The Terror was the instrument of the state, and its brutality is perhaps better equated with the repressive actions of governing bodies faced with antiauthoritarian threats.


8 See, for example, Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 162, 164-165, 168, 170, 192, 253-255. Whenever troops were used by the British against the mobs, deaths did result. A British major, in command of Fort George during the Stamp Act riots in New York on Nov. 1, 1765, later testified that if he had fired on the crowd he could have killed 900 of the mob that night. Herbert M. Morais, "The Sons of Liberty in New York," in Richard B. Morris, ed., The Era of the American Revolution (New York, 1939), 284; Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 254.
more the restraint and tidiness of the British authorities, and less the moderation of the American crowds, that prevented a serious loss of lives during the American rioting. The nearly complete breakdown of the royal government's ability to command support in the society in the years before independence worked to retard an aggravation of colonial grievances and a rapid escalation of killing and violence, but it did not make the American mob any less a mob.  

Moreover, the weakness of the legally constituted authority in America did not end with the Declaration of Independence and the formation of new popular governments. The Whig belief in the people's "right of resistance" (which had often hampered magistrates in England dealing with mobs) became a justification for continued disorder in the years after 1776. Serious rioting recurred in many of the major cities and formed the background for the incorporation movements in Boston, New Haven, Philadelphia, and Charleston in the 1780's. Extralegal groups and conventions repeatedly sprang up to take public action into their own hands, to intimidate voters, to regulate prices, or to close the courts. To some in the 1780's it seemed as though mobs were taking over the functions of government. This was not simply a chimerical fear, for the legislatures in the 1780's appeared to be extraordinarily susceptible to mass


10 Rudé, The Crowd in History, 263.


demonstrations and mob violence. The state governments were continually forced to submit to various kinds of popular pressures, often expressed outside the regular legal channels. In this atmosphere Shays's Rebellion represented something of an anomaly, largely because the farmers of western Massachusetts, unlike other groups in the 1780's, found no release for their pent-up grievances in legislative action but instead were forcefully resisted by the authorities. Connecticut had no violence like that of Massachusetts, said Noah Webster, "because the Legislature wear the complexion of the people." Only "the temporising of the legislatures in refusing legal protection to the prosecution of the just rights of creditors," remarked David Ramsay, freed the Southern states from similar disturbances. Within a few months, however, observers noted that the Shaysites were trying their strength in another way, "that is," said James Madison, "by endeavoring to give the elections such a turn as may promote their views under the auspices of Constitutional forms." With "a total change" of men in the legislature, wrote Webster, "there will be, therefore, no further insurrection, because the Legislature will represent the sentiments of the people." Some Americans in the 1780's could thus come to believe that "sedition itself will sometimes make law." 14 Hence, it might be argued that it was the very weakness of the constituted authorities, their very susceptibility to popular intimidation of various kinds, or, in other words, the very democratic character of legislative politics in the 1780's, rather than any particular self-restraint or temperance in the people, that prevented the eruption of more serious violence during the Confederation period. If this is the case then our current conception of the period and our understanding of the Federalist movement may have to be reexamined.

What Professor Rudé's analysis of the eighteenth-century European crowd requires at the very least, it seems, is a new look at American mob violence during the Revolution focusing on the structure of the society which prompts popular demonstrations and on the nature of the institutions which are compelled to deal with them. If the conservatism of the American mobs is not as peculiar as we once assumed, if the crowds were not simply the passive instruments of outside agents, we must learn more

about their composition, their goals, and the sources of their discontents. Particularly we need to know more about the circumstances and consequences of repression or the absence of it. In short, in light of Rudé’s findings the obvious differences between mob action in America and in Europe that do exist demand a broader and yet more precise explanation than we have had. It is not enough now to say that the nature of the American mob in and by itself was distinctive.

Moreover, if the mob is pictured as a kind of microcosm of the Revolution, Rudé’s studies may even have wider implications. Perhaps the American Revolution was as moderate as it seems, so lacking in the violence and ferocity of the French Revolution, not because it was inherently conservative and unrevolutionary, led by law-abiding men with limited objectives, but rather because it was so unrestrained, so lacking in strong resistance from counterrevolutionary and authoritarian elements, and consequently so successfully revolutionary. Unchecked by any serious internal opposition, unrestrained by any solid institutional bulwarks, the American Revolutionaries may have ultimately carried themselves further in the transformation of their society, although without the bloodshed or the terror, than even the French Revolutionaries were eventually able to do. For if the American mob was no less a mob because of the absence of effective resistance, was the Revolution any less a revolution?

15 See Richard Walsh, Charleston’s Sons of Liberty: A Study of the Artisans, 1763-1789 (Columbia, 1959).