

18TH-CENTURY PRICE-RIOTS,
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE
JACOBIN MAXIMUM

The “war communism” of the Jacobins, mobilizing all economic forces for the defence of the Republic, has many features which seem to anticipate later regimes more self-consciously and more consistently socialist. At the same time it appears in some respects as a partial return to the *étatisme* of the *Ancien Régime* in reaction against the liberalism of 1789. Particularly is this true of the adoption, in 1793, of a system of price control for essential commodities.

In March 1791 the *Législative* voted the formula: “From the first of April anyone shall be free to engage in any commerce or to exercise any profession or trade that he shall think fit”. On 22 July there followed a decree proclaiming absolute liberty of all transactions, and threatening those officials who continued to regulate the prices of wine, corn, or other grains, with prompt dismissal. That such a decree should have been needed is an indication of the extent of economic intervention potentially or actually exercised by the king’s government under the *Ancien Régime*. The grain trade was in fact regulated most carefully. Apart from the Parisians, who were in a privileged position, corn merchants were permitted to buy only in the open market, and then only when local demand was satisfied. In times of scarcity the *Intendants* would frequently fix prices to prevent profiteering, and compel proprietors to sell their stocks. It was this system which was finally dismantled in 1791.¹

To the royal government price-control was an accepted instrument of administration. To the French “*menu peuple*”, from the labourer up to the small master and even beyond, it was an indispensable defence against a worsening standing of living, in a period of general price-

¹ For a further discussion of these topics see my study of *The French Revolution and the Grain Supply*, in: *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 39 No. 1, (1956-7), pp. 171-187.

rise. Professor Labrousse has shown that from the middle of the 18th century the price of essentials in France, and particularly of bread, rose much faster than wages. While wages rose between the periods 1726-1741 and 1771-1789 by only 22 per cent, the price of necessities rose by an average of 62 per cent. The rise in the case of bread was so steep that a worker who, in the first period, might need to spend 50 per cent. of his income on bread, would have needed to spend in 1789 as much as 88 per cent. to obtain a similar amount.¹ It is perhaps surprising therefore that price-control does not figure more largely than it does in the *Cahiers de Doléances* prepared by the Third Estate for the States-General of 1789; but the expression of the views and desires of the "fourth estate", or workingclass, in the *Cahiers* is notoriously indirect and disproportionate. Even so, in a recent study of the *Cahiers* of the *Baillage* of Rouen, M. Bouloiseau cites no less than thirty-one in which a *maximum* for bread and corn is demanded.² At the same time, at the other end of France, the villagers of Juncalas and Peyraube, in the Pyrenees were demanding a *maximum* for bread, meat, and wine, and those of Bordères a general control of the prices of all foodstuffs.³

Failing satisfactory official intervention it was not uncommon, even before the revolution, for rioters to impose their own unofficial "*maximum*". There was general famine, or severe grain shortage in France in 1709, 1725, 1749, 1775, 1785, and 1788, and with each crisis food riots, more or less widespread, were associated. Taine cites evidence to show that there were serious riots in 21 of the 80 years between 1709 and 1789,⁴ and this count can easily be supplemented. The precise nature of a great many such outbreaks is difficult to fix, but popular price-fixing, or "*taxation populaire*" figures in a sufficient number of examples for it to be established as a general tradition. In 1752, for example, the villagers of Dauphiné and the Auvergne are said to have opened the granaries and taken out corn at their own price.⁵ In April 1768 a Mantes crowd sacked a warehouse and sold the corn at half price.⁶ In July 1770 the spinners and weavers of Rheims,

¹ C. Ernest Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris 1933, Vol. ii, pp. 492, 598, 602-3.

² Marc Bouloiseau, *Cahiers de doléances du tiers état du Baillage de Rouen*, Paris, 1957, Vol. i, p. clvi.

³ Gaston Balencie, *Cahiers de doléances de la Sénéchaussée de Bigorre*, Tarbes 1925, pp. 173, 318, 490.

⁴ Hippolyte Taine, *Les origines de la France contemporaine: L'Ancien Régime*, 32ième édition, Paris, 1930, Vol. ii, livre cinquième, *passim*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁶ Célestin Hippeau, *Le gouvernement de Normandie au XVII^e et au XVIII^e siècle*. Documents tirés des archives du Château d'Harcourt, Caen 1864, etc. Deuxième partie. Evénements politiques, I, p. 472.

after a sudden raising of the price of wheat, seized the town's markets, and after demanding, without success, that the magistrates should order an abatement, proceeded themselves to sell all grain in the markets at three-quarters of the current price. They then turned their attention to the warehouses and to the granaries of the numerous religious houses which they treated in a similar fashion.¹ Perhaps the most famous example of such a popular outbreak was the so-called *Guerre des Farines* of May 1775, which followed on the unhappy coincidence of Turgot's experiment with free trade in grain and a poor harvest in 1774. This movement as it affected the Paris region has been the subject of a study by G. Rudé² which draws attention to its spontaneous and essentially conservative nature. Over a wide district, including the capital itself, peasants and townfolk invaded the markets and "fixed" by riot the price of bread and flour at a traditional or customary level. In May 1784 rioters at Bacqueville in Normandy forced the local farmers at market to sell half their grain at 36 *livres* the sack instead of 49, the current price, and in the following months similar episodes took place in the nearby markets of Auffay, Darnetal and Yvetot.³ On other occasions, as at Caen in 1725,⁴ and Le Havre in 1768⁵ uprisings terrorised the authorities into fixing new and lower prices for bread or corn. It is probable that elements of "*taxation populaire*" would be revealed by a closer examination of other famous food-riots of the 18th century, such as that of 14 July 1725, when 1,800 rioters seized the Faubourg Saint-Antoine and pillaged the bakers,⁶ or that of May 1752, when the cotton workers of Rouen held the town for three days during which they sacked the granaries of the town's religious houses and the warehouses on the quayside.⁷ Inevitably such riots were often accompanied by open and unqualified pillage of factors, bakers and grocers, inspired partly by an endemic hatred of profiteers, and partly by a desire to profit from the temporary suspension of law and order, but the true "*taxation populaire*" was

¹ Gustave Laurent, *Reims et la région rémoise à la veille de la Révolution*, Reims 1930, p. lxxxii.

² George Rudé, *La taxation populaire de mai 1775 à Paris et dans la région parisienne*, in: *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, Vol. 28, (1956) pp. 139-179.

³ Célestin Hippeau, *Gouvernement de Normandie...*, op. cit., Deuxième partie, Evénements politiques, II, p. 157 et seq.

⁴ Gabriel Vanel, *Recueil de journaux caennais, 1661-1777* [Société de l'histoire de Normandie, Publications, 32], Rouen and Paris 1904, p. 69.

⁵ Pierre Jacques Gabriel le Verdier, ed., *Correspondance politique et administrative de Miromesnil, premier président du parlement de Normandie* [Société de l'histoire de Normandie, Publications, 28], Rouen and Paris 1900-3, Vol. V, p. 143 n.

⁶ Edmond Jean François Barbier, *Journal historique et anecdotique du règne de Louis XV*, Paris 1847-56, Vol. i, p. 224.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. iii, p. 377.

essentially a disciplined measure implying an ordered sale and the handing over of the proceeds to the proprietor. The price-riot was a particularly appropriate tactic for an inchoate working class, as yet without political rights or effective industrial organization, for it united many different strata in a joint struggle to resist worsening standards. As such it was a common occurrence in England. In 1764 the Derbyshire colliers, finding wheat priced at 8*s.* 4*d.* a bushel "cleared the market" at 5*s.* a bushel, which they said was the "London price". At Honiton, in 1766 the lace workers seized corn in the farmers' stores, took it to market, sold it at a fixed price, and returned the money and the sacks to the farmers. In the same year the Birmingham populace captured the market, and sold the bread and the cheese there at their own price. The following year about 200 Stourbridge colliers forced farmers at Kidderminster market to sell their wheat at 5*s.* instead of 7*s.* the bushel, and their butter at 6*d.* instead of 8*d.* a pound. On two separate occasions in March 1772 meat *en route* for Leadenhall market was seized and sold at a fixed price. At Falmouth, in May 1793 two or three thousand tanners descended on the town, ordered the mayor to sell the corn in the city's granaries at a fixed price, and declared their intention of marching round the county to enforce further measures of price control. A great many such outbreaks are described in the Annual Register and in R. F. Wearnouth's study "Methodism and the Common People in the 18th century."¹ Evidence appears to be less readily accessible for a parallel tradition in other European countries, but it may be mentioned that in April 1789 a Barcelona mob fired the town's granaries and forced the town commandant to order a reduction in the price of oil and wine,² while in August rioters at Tournai, in the Austrian Netherlands sacked grain merchants' houses and compelled peasants coming to market to reduce the price of their butter by almost a half.³

In France the revolution of 1789, by undermining the authority of the administration and bringing to the fore questions of popular sovereignty and popular rights doubtless helped to produce an atmosphere favourable to popular disorders and, with them, the price-riot. More important was the economic crisis caused by the superimposition of the bad harvest of 1788 on widespread poverty occasioned by persistent unemployment, particularly in the textile towns. The royal in-

¹ Annual Register, Vol. vii, p. 103; Vol. ix, pp. 119, 137-40; Vol. x, p. 148; Vol. xv, pp. 90, 91; Vol. xxv, p. 21.

² Ibid., Vol. xxxi, p. 204.

³ Jean Palou, Une émotion populaire à Tournai (août 1789), in: Annales Historiques de la Révolution française, Vol. 22, (1950), p. 363.

tendant Tolozan maintained in 1789 that the Eden treaty for freer trade, negotiated with Britain in 1785, had resulted in the unemployment of 200,000 workers in these towns. Although W.O. Henderson's recent study of the direct effects of this treaty may well exculpate it from direct responsibility, the crisis itself is well attested. At Rouen, in 1788, 7,000 "women and children" were without work. At Rheims, in 1789, 11,000 out of a force of 20,000 textile workers were classed as *indigents*, while from 1787 to 1790 there were seldom less than 20,000 out of 58,000 workers unemployed at Lyons. The researches of the Duc de Liancourt in 1790 led him to the conclusion that throughout France at least 3,200,000 persons were in need of relief, and it was estimated that Paris alone contained 118,000 paupers.¹ In the course of 1789 provinces of France from Artois to Guyenne were affected by grain and bread riots. Many of these have been listed and discussed in Professor Lefebvre's work on the *Grande Peur de 1789*. The sequence of events at the small town of Nangis, witnessed by Arthur Young, is perhaps typical of the contemporary disturbances. "The people quarrel with the bakers, asserting the prices they demand for bread are beyond the proportion of wheat, and proceed from words to scuffling, raise a riot and then run away with bread and wheat for nothing. This has happened at Nangis and many other markets; the consequence was that neither farmers nor bakers would supply them till they were in danger of starving, and when they did come, prices under such circumstances must necessarily rise enormously, which aggravated the mischief, till troops became really necessary to give security to those who supplied the markets".² The *Cabier* of Lieurey, in Normandy laments in 1789 that "The poor, exhausted by the harshness and length of the winter, have rebelled everywhere, in spite of the efforts of the Judges and the *Maréchaussée*. They carry corn from the Halles sometimes for nothing, sometimes for 30 *livres* for an amount weighing 320 to 350 *livres*, so that the farmers, who go in fear of their lives, dare not bring corn to the Halles; this will, within a few days oblige the poor to search the granaries and to commit excesses of all kinds."³

Inevitably, the larger towns, with their concentrated working-class populations were the scene of some of the most serious disorders, especially where there were markets to attract prospective buyers – and rioters – from the country round. Not only Paris, but provincial centres of such diversity as Amiens, Nantes, Rouen, Rheims, Gre-

¹ R. B. Rose, *The French Revolution and the Grain Supply...*, op. cit., p. 173.

² Arthur Young's travels in France during the years 1787, 1788 and 1789 (edited by Betham-Edwards), London 1906, p. 189.

³ Archives départementales du Calvados 16B 372.

noble, Orleans, Chartres, Marseilles and Bordeaux were affected.¹ The Paris disturbances resulted only indirectly in the lowering of the price of bread, by frightening the court and the administration. The Nantes magistrates were forced to lower the price of bread, by a riot in January. At Marseilles, on the 23 March, a crowd of 6000 stormed into the *Hôtel de Ville* and forced the magistrates to promise to order a decrease in the price of bread and meat; a group then separated and tried to break open the warehouses on the Quai du Rive-Neuve.² At Grenoble a riot in March prevented the removal of grain from the city for export.³ At Chartres, in July, the municipal officers were forced to fix the price of the nine *livre* loaf at 20 *sols*, after troubles in which 8 rioters had been killed.⁴ At Caen the signal was given for four days of rioting when, on the 23 April, a crowd of women broke into a warehouse and forcibly sold the barley it contained at 12 *sols* the *boisseau*.⁵ They also shouted for corn at 3 *livres*, and enforced the demand by sacking the premises of several other merchants, and the granary of the Abbaye aux Dames. Trouble broke out again on 20 July, when the populace invaded the market and “took the corn at 40 *livres* for a sack priced at 54 *livres*”.⁶ The following day, at Cherbourg, a great crowd, swollen by unemployed labourers from the suspended port works, marched on the *Hôtel de Ville* and forced the authorities to open the state granary, and to regulate the price of corn at 4 *livres* instead of 6 *livres* 4 *sols* the *boisseau*, and bread at 2 *sols* instead of 3 *sols* 5 *deniers* the *livre*.⁷ At Amiens, on 14 July, a multitude armed with cudgels surrounded the house of the royal *intendant* and forced him, before fleeing, to order that the price of corn and barley should be halved. They then burst into the *Hôtel de Ville* and compelled the municipal officers to confirm the order.⁸ At Rheims there was once again a “popular *maximum*”, of whose imposition an eye-witness account has survived. “A movement of the people has arisen in this town, occasioned by the price of grain”, a royal officer reported on 12 March, “some persons having seized two wagons full of sacks of

¹ R. B. Rose, *The French Revolution and the Grain Supply...*, op. cit., p. 173; Michel L'Héritier, *Les débuts de la Révolution à Bordeaux*, Paris 1919, pp. 270, 308; Gaston Martin, *Carrier et sa mission à Nantes*, Paris 1924, p. 32.

² S. Violla, *Marseille Révolutionnaire. L'armée nation*, Paris 1910, p. 7.

³ A. Prudhomme, *Histoire de Grenoble*, Grenoble 1887, p. 596.

⁴ Rabouin, *Troubles en Beauce à l'occasion de la cherté du blé, novembre et décembre 1792*, in: *La Révolution française*, Vol. 43, (juillet-décembre 1902), p. 392 n.

⁵ Archives départementales du Calvados, C 2665.

⁶ Félix Mourlot, *La fin de l'Ancien Régime et les débuts de la Révolution dans la Généralité de Caen*, Paris 1913, p. 312.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

⁸ Société civique d'Amiens, *Mémoire à l'Assemblée Nationale*, Amiens 1789 [Tract in British Museum].

barley which were being taken out of town, and having taken them to the market, a crowd formed, and as the police were not in strength, forced the sale of the barley at 4 *livres* the *septier*, although this type of grain had been selling at 7 *livres* at previous markets; by threats and violence many of the people got hold of the grain which had been brought to market, the wheat at 12 *livres* instead of 17 to 18 *livres* which had been the ordinary market price for several days, and the rye at 6 or 7 *livres* the *septier*, although it had been sold for several markets at from 9 to 10 *livres*; after having exhausted the grain in the market a part of the crowd went into a granary near the market, in a house called the *Bras d'Or*, and seized the wheat there at a price of 6 *livres* the *septier*; they also held up flour wagons, whose contents they partly pillaged and partly sold dirt-cheap; following this, many of the crowd spread out into the different quarters of the town, seized bread from the bakers without paying, got hold of grain at a low price from the different warehouses of cultivators and other persons of the town and its district, gathered round the doors of several religious houses, and tried to force an entry, notably at the gates of the Abbeys of Saint-Pierre and Saint-Etienne-les-Dames, and the Abbeys of Saint-Rémy and Saint Nicaise; they also forced the sale of a large quantity of rye in a public granary at the Chapter Court at a price of 4 to 6 *livres* a *septier*.¹ The several degrees of price-riot are clearly distinguishable in these outbreaks: simple looting and violence which indirectly forces the authorities to use their powers to open the granaries and lower market prices; conscious political action against the authorities to secure the same end directly, and "*taxation populaire*" itself. The detailed description of the events at Rheims enables a pattern to be fixed for such episodes of "*taxation populaire*" in the industrial towns. Orleans was the scene of outbreaks in April, and in September and October. On both occasions, although looting was involved, the riots were directed towards the forcible lowering of the price of bread. The Orleans rioters were defended by two contemporary pamphleteers, Taboureau de Montigny, a poor man's lawyer of whose life an account has been written by A. Mathiez and G. Lefebvre,² and a certain Vergnaud, who appears to have been a local merchant of some standing.³ They both advanced the doctrine of the *maximum* several years before it became practical politics at Paris. Its foundation was the principle, in the words of Vergnaud, that "the people ought to have the certainty that the price

¹ Gustave Laurent, *Reims et la région rémoise...*, op. cit., p. c.

² Albert Mathiez, *Un enragé inconnu: Taboureau de Montigny*, in: *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, Vol. vii, (1930) pp. 209, 305; Georges Lefebvre, *Quelques notes sur Taboureau, l'enragé d'Orléans*, *ibid.*, Vol. viii (1931), p. 140.

³ R. B. Rose, *The French Revolution and the Grain Supply...*, op. cit., pp. 180-1.

of bread will never rise beyond their wages". Vergnaud pressed for the adjustment of bread prices according to the price of a day's labour.¹ It is interesting to contrast this proposal with that of the third estate of Mareil, which, in compiling its *Cabier* in 1789, requested that the daily rate of labourers should be increased in accordance with the price of wheat.² Taboureau denounced a coalition of sellers, proprietors, and middlemen which had quadrupled prices in a century, and pointed out that not only workers, but *rentiers*, clerks and professional men were of necessity interested in the *maximum*.

Such isolated voices were no more effective in checking the current towards economic liberalism than the popular reaction of 1789. Once the immediate causes of unrest, the bad harvest and the disturbed political situation, had begun to lose their special force, the revolutionary assemblies were able to proceed with their work of remodelling the French economy. It was not until the beginning of 1792 that a fresh crisis led to a repetition of the scenes of 1789.

The causes of the troubles of January-March 1792 were twofold; at Paris, speculation in sugar, and, in the provinces, the threat of a grain shortage. While ample stocks appear to have existed, slave risings in the West Indies leading to an expectation of a severe curtailment of imports encouraged speculation in sugar. By the third week of January the price of a *livre* of sugar in the capital had increased three-fold. In a week of sporadic violence mobs from the Faubourgs Saint-Antoine, Saint-Marceau and Saint-Denis intervened to force grocers to sell their stock at the old price of 22 *sous* the *livre*. Before the troubles ended the "popular *maximum*" had been extended occasionally to bread, meat, and wine, as well as sugar.

The corn riots of the period may be divided into two broad classes; the peasants and the *sans-culottes* of the North rose to prevent the export of grain to the *Midi*, chronically an area of deficit, and the southerners rioted in the markets against the consequent shortages and soaring prices. Within this general pattern, however, it is possible to distinguish the recurring theme of the popular *maximum*. In the Eure a price-control movement began on 27 February, when about 400 woodmen and iron-workers from the Conches and Breteuil forests assembled, and began to march about, local magistrates at their head, forcing the authorities to declare a fixed price for corn. By 6 March their numbers had swollen to 8,000, and before they were

¹ Vergnaud, *Le cri général de 1789*, Orléans 1789 [Tract in John Rylands Library, Manchester, French Historical Tracts].

² Etienne Fajon, *The working class in the Revolution of 1789*, in: *Essays on the French Revolution*, London 1945 (ed. T. A. Jackson), p. 124.

dispersed a *maximum* had been decreed at a number of local towns, including Conches, Breteuil and Verneuil. An even more serious outbreak occurred in the Beauce, where, on 10 March an "army" of 10,000 from the nearby cantons marched on Melun, and, in concert with the citizens fixed the price of corn at 20 *livres* the *septier*. An earlier skirmish at Etampes on the 3rd had resulted in the shooting, by rioters, of mayor Simonneau, who was elevated by the Girondins, with the complaisance of the larger section of the Jacobins to the rank of national martyr for law and order. As in 1789, however, the rioters were not without defenders. In a petition to the Legislative Assembly Pierre Dolivier, parish priest of Mauchamp, near Etampes, took the part of the Etampes rioters, and expounded the *maximum* in a fashion reminiscent of Vergnaud and Taboureau. The petition was given a significance of a different order when Robespierre reproduced it in full in the fourth number of his journal, *Le Défenseur de la Constitution*, even though his was a minority voice, even at the Jacobins.¹ On the other hand, while he unequivocally defended the rioters as good citizens, nothing which Robespierre himself wrote on this occasion can be construed as advocating either popular price-control or an official *maximum*.

Powerful economic forces were continually threatening the maintenance of the kind of law and order which protected only the speculator and the hoarder. The circulation of the *assignats*, begun in 1789, and of the private paper money which supplemented them, led to a steep inflation, and by the beginning of 1792 the paper currency had lost more than 40 per cent. of its value. While there was a slight recovery later in the year, for most of 1792 the *assignat* stood at less than 65 per cent. of its 1789 value.² Corn prices in 1792 were on an average 40 per cent. above those of 1791 in the provinces, and 26.5 per cent. in Paris.³

When, in September 1792, the *sans-culottes* again turned to the *maximum* they seem to have done so in a more deliberate and organized manner. An examination of the origins of the popular general *maximum* at Lyons will illustrate this difference. When on 27 August 1792 the Lyons *sections* met in connexion with the elections to the Convention, Dodieu, president of the Juiverie *Section* circularized them to propose

¹ Albert Mathiez, *La vie chère et le mouvement social sous la Terreur*, Paris 1927, pp. 36-71.

² J. Auréjac, *Les emprunts sous la Révolution* [Cahiers de la Révolution française, VII], p. 145.

³ Octave Festy, *L'agriculture pendant la Révolution Française. Les conditions de production et de récolte des céréales. Etude d'histoire économique, 1789-1795*, Paris 1947, p. 88.

the seizure of grain stocks at a fixed price, and their retail by special *commissaires* appointed by the *Sections*. This programme found favour with the Jacobin women's club, the *Société des Amies de la Liberté et de l'Égalité*, and under the leadership of two one-time actors, Michu and Sulpice Huguenin, its members planned a demonstration against high prices for early September. On the 14th their campaign opened with scenes of riot and disorder in the markets. On the morrow the rioters posted up a maximum price list for sixty items of common consumption, drawn up for them by Bussat, a judge on the District Tribunal, which they proceeded to enforce by an irregular police on 16, 17 and 18 September. Finally, on the 19th the Lyons *Commune* was forced to accede to the insurgents' demands, vigorously pressed by the Lyons Central Club, and agreed to impose official price control.¹ A sequel to these events may be found in the report of Boissy d'Anglas, one of several deputies commissioned by the *Convention* to investigate matters on the spot. On 9 October he assured the Assembly that he and his colleagues had annulled the arbitrary price-list, and that the city was now perfectly quiet.² At the head of their price-list the leaders of the Lyons disturbance placed a prologue which serves as a summary of the *sans-culotte* grievances which lay behind the popular *maximum*. "The sovereign people of Lyons", it ran, "left for a long time under the yoke of the tyranny of the monopolistic aristocrats, wearied above all for four years by the loss in value of the paper money which it must use to buy all indispensable necessities, and suffering the most atrocious injustices at the hands of the speculators, being forced to pay with this paper money which is received as the price of its labour and its sweat as if it were specie, being forced to pay for things bought almost as much again as previously, decrees, in order to put a term to the oppression of the speculators, to scotch the traitors who are still within the bounds of the city, to secure, in a word, the food supply without being forced to employ those violent means necessitated by the full impact of public calamities..." (price-list follows).³

The rioting at Orleans began at the same time as the Lyons troubles and reached a crisis on 16 and 17 September, when at least five of the city's chief granaries were looted,⁴ together with a grain boat on the Loire, after the murder of the officer in charge.⁵ Out of the disorder there emerged a new *Commune* pledged to the *maximum*.

¹ Alphonse Balleydier, *Histoire politique et militaire du peuple de Lyon pendant la Révolution française* (1789-1795), Paris 1845, Vol. i, pp. 80-94.

² *Le Moniteur*, 10 October 1792.

³ Alphonse Balleydier, *Histoire... du peuple de Lyon...*, op cit., Vol. iii, p. xxxviii.

⁴ Charles François Vergnaud-Romagnési, *Histoire de la ville d'Orléans*, Orleans 1830, p. 227.

⁵ René Crozet, *Histoire de l'Orléannais*, Paris 1936, p. 299.

By November the movement had spread once again to the Beauce. This time woodmen from the forest of Vibraye and glassworkers from Montmirail joined together and marched round the countryside gathering supporters and imposing a *maximum*. By the 28th the *taxateurs*' army, swollen to 10,000, had visited Vendôme, Herbaut and Blois. Another group moved on Chartres, where they were on the 24th, and yet another on Tours. The prices fixed for bread and corn were from $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ less than those current.¹ The Orleans Jacobins, and particularly those who looked to Taboureau, defended the rioters and their actions. In a contemporary pamphlet Taboureau demanded that "all those who are bearing arms against the *taxateurs* of goods shall be declared infamous and traitors to the fatherland." It was probably this tract which aroused the fury of Roland, the Girondin minister of the Interior, against its author. "I believe that it is important for the tranquillity of the town of Orleans, to that of the Loiret Department, and, perhaps, to that of the Republic", he told the *Convention*, "that he should be arrested and punished. It is very likely that through him we shall have the revelation of the conspiracy whose existence is no longer problematical."² Roland was not alone in suspecting that secret plotters were behind the unrest of 1792. In March the administrators of the District of Evreux announced that "an invisible hand" was guiding the Eure rioters.³ In October those of the Haute Marne Department posted a placard warning against the public enemies who were agitating the poor with rumours of famine:⁴ On 26 November *commissaires* sent by the *Convention* to enquire into troubles in the Departments of Seine-et-Oise, Seine Inférieure, Aisne, Eure and Somme blamed in their report "agitators and enemies of the people who prompt them to tax the price of bread under pretext of preventing hoarding and the high price of bread."⁵ Lamartine, in his pro-Girondin history affected to believe in a highly organized Jacobin plot. "Secret emissaries", he wrote, "armed bands, went among the towns and cities where markets were held, and there disseminated the most alarming reports, provoking the people to tax grain and flour, stigmatizing the corn-dealers as monopolists."⁶ It is true that there is

¹ Rabouin, *Troubles en Beauce...*, op. cit., passim.

² Georges Lefebvre, *Quelques notes sur Taboureau...* op. cit., p. 140 et seq.

³ Albert Mathiez, *La vie chère...*, op. cit., p. 63.

⁴ Charles Lorain, *Les subsistances en céréales dans le district de Chaumont de 1788 à l'an V*, Chaumont 1911, p. 214.

⁵ Procès-verbaux des Comités d'agriculture et de commerce de la Constituante, de la Législative et de la Convention, publiés et annotés par Fernand Gerbaux et Charles Schmidt, *Collection de documents inédits sur l'histoire économique de la Révolution française*. Tome III: *Convention Nationale (Première partie)*, Paris 1908, p. 33.

⁶ Alphonse de Lamartine, *History of the Girondists* (translated by Ryde), London 1847, Vol. ii, p. 287.

some evidence for organization on the regional level. Referring, in December, to the troubles in the Beauce, the *Moniteur* reported that rioters in many different localities had assumed a common badge consisting of an oak frond in their hats. To credit the existence of a national organization of *taxateurs* with its H.Q. at Paris on purely Girondin evidence would, however, be dangerous. The evidence seems, in fact, to point to a flow in the reverse direction, the capital for once following the lead of the provinces. On 19 November the Montagnard deputy Goujon put before the Convention a petition from the electoral assembly of the Seine and Oise Department demanding price control for grains and the election of a national *Administration de Subsistances*. It was not until the 29th that the Paris *Commune*, and a meeting of delegates of the Paris *Sections* formally adopted the *maximum* and petitioned the *Convention* for its imposition, two months after its acceptance by the Lyons and Orleans *Communes*.¹ Prices at Paris had not risen so spectacularly as those in provincial cities, and a subsidy kept the price of bread within reasonable limits. When the Paris *sans-culottes* were eventually driven to riot, on 25 February 1793, it was by the inflated prices of other commodities: sugar, candles, soap, soda, and other groceries, as in the previous February.² Even so, the *enragés* of the *Sections* mounted a political campaign for the control of corn prices. On 10 February a petition to demand the *maximum*, supported by representatives of 30 of the 48 *Sections* was warmly received at the Jacobin club,³ and Claude Heudelet, one of the organizers, later claimed that Robespierre's lieutenant, Saint-Just, had promised his support.⁴ The following day Marat tried to gain a hearing for the petitioners at the *Convention*, though without success. On the 12th they did manage to obtain leave to speak, and presented the petition which began by warning the deputies: "It is not enough, citizen representatives, to have given us the Republic. It is yet necessary to give us bread",⁵ and continued by demanding the fixing of the price of corn at 25 *livres* the sack of 200 *livres* weight.⁶ By this time, however, the refusal of the *Convention* to hear the *Sections'* delegates at their first attempt had filled the streets with potential rioters, and the *Commune's* police department warned the *Sections* that strangers were going about preaching murder and pillage, before appealing for help

¹ Georges Lefebvre, *La Convention* [Cours de Sorbonne], Vol. i, pp. 110, 113.

² George Rudé, *Les émeutes des 25, 26 février 1793 à Paris*, in: *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, Vol. 25, (1953), p. 33.

³ Albert Mathiez, *La vie chère...*, op. cit., p. 137.

⁴ *Le Moniteur*, 14 and 15 February 1793.

⁵ *Journal des Amis*, No. 8, 23 February 1793.

⁶ *Le Moniteur*, 14 and 15 February 1793.

in stifling this “new plot.”¹ Thus the temper of the *Convention* was hostile, and even Marat disavowed the *taxateurs*. Nevertheless, the Mountain had begun to encourage the Paris *sans-culottes* to expect the *maximum* as the price for their political support. For the moment the alliance was experimental and uneasy, as was shown by the sharp animosity of the Mountain and the leaders of the *Commune* towards the rioters of 25 February, and it was not until the middle of April that Robespierre and his group emerged as unequivocal advocates of the *maximum*. The significance of this *démarche* cannot be over-emphasized, for the alliance which it sealed dominated a whole phase of the Revolution, the critical months of recovery from the crisis of external defeat and internal civil war which marked the summer of 1793.

On 4 May 1793 the *Convention* authorized the administrations of the Departments of France to regulate the price of corn. On 19 August price control was extended to fuels, and on the following day to oats, which had escaped the earlier regulation. Finally, at the end of September the extension of control to all necessities completed the *régime* of the *maximum*, corner-stone of Jacobin economic policy. Thus ended the experiment in economic liberalism begun by the Legislative Assembly, and defended, through all difficulties, as one of the major achievements of the Revolution.

The Jacobins did not return to control for doctrinal reasons. There is little reason to believe that their fundamentally liberal doctrine was less orthodox than that of the *Législative* or the Gironde. In his speech for the *Convention*, prepared for 8 Thermidor, the eve of his overthrow, Robespierre shrugged off responsibility for the *maximum* and its attendant legislation in words reminiscent of Roland. “Conspirators have driven us”, he complained, “in spite of ourselves, into violent measures which their crimes have made necessary, and have plunged the Republic into the most frightful famine, which would have starved her, without the intervention of the most unforeseen events.” To Barère the *maximum* was, with more simplicity, “a snare set for the *Convention* by the enemies of the Republic, a present from London.” Both statements were coloured by their authors’ need to exculpate themselves for the all too obvious practical failings of the *maximum* in application. But even in proposing the general maximum of 29 September the Committee of Public Safety made the reservation that “In normal times prices are formed naturally by the reciprocal interests of buyers and sellers. This balance is infallible. It is useless for the best government to interfere.” It seems likely that the *ex-montag-*

¹ Catalogue d’une importante collection de documents autographes et historiques sur la Révolution française (ed. Etienne Charavay), Paris 1862, p. 56, No. 89.

nard Levasseur de la Sarthe epitomized the economic philosophy of 1793 when he remarked, in his memoirs; “Certainly, it must be admitted, as a general thesis, that unrestricted freedom of commerce would be much more desirable; it is very true that with liberty and competition there is every guarantee that citizens will not refuse to sell and will not sell at too high prices, but these axioms, as simple as they are true, although very applicable in calm times, are not at all applicable in an era of crisis such as that with which we were faced.”¹

The Jacobins adopted the *maximum* for two immediate and practical reasons. The first was to halt the fall of the *assignat*, and to stabilize the currency. The second was to rally the *sans-culottes*, the collective of artisans, poor peasants and labourers, for the Republic against the external counter-revolution and internal treason, and to recompense them after the conquest of power. It is again in the memoirs of an old *Montagnard* that this last motive is clearly rationalized: “When one has gone so far in a revolution as to introduce the people, not only as a legal, but as a necessary factor”, Durand de Maillane wrote, “can one dismiss them brusquely and against their will? Nay, ought one to do so after their long and important services? For without them – let us say it – what would our orators, with their fine and balanced phrases have achieved?”²

During the first three months of the general *maximum*, September–December 1793, Jacobin economic policy helped to more than double the value of the *livre-assignat* in terms of gold.³ At the same time, in the hands of the Jacobin administration the *maximum* became something other than popular price-fixing made respectable, for its chiefs recognized no precedent in political economy for exempting labour from the commodities which they subjected to price-control. But while it was in the interest of the producers, merchants and retailers to evade the *maximum* on the goods they sold it was, equally, in the interest of the employers of labour to see that the wages *maximum* was adhered to. Thus, in 1794, when prices began again their inexorable rise, the *sans-culottes* were dismayed to see the *maximum* transmute by degrees from a weapon in their hands against starvation prices, to a weapon in the hands of the employers against the living wage. The resultant collapse of Jacobin-*sans-culotte* unity bore its fruit at Thermidor, when the Paris crowds are said to have hurried Robespierre on his way to the Guillotine with perpetual jeers of “à bas Monsieur le Maximum”.

¹ René Levasseur de la Sarthe, *Mémoires*, Paris 1829–1831, Vol. ii, p. 125.

² Pierre-Toussaint Durand de Maillane, *Histoire de la Convention Nationale*, Paris 1825, p. 19.

³ J. Auréjac, *Les emprunts...*, op. cit., p. 145.