

## THE PARIS DISTRICTS AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY, 1789-1790

By R. B. ROSE, M.A., F.A.H.A.

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

THE Sans-culotte movement in Paris at its apogee in 1793-4 is the subject of a massive study by Albert Soboul.<sup>1</sup> The decline of the movement has been exhaustively examined by Kare Tønnesson,<sup>2</sup> and the last fitful flickerings, down to 1799, have been chronicled by Isser Woloch.<sup>3</sup> Relatively little has been done, so far, to follow the stream back in the other direction, to explore the origins of the ideas and institutions that have come to be recognized as typically "Sans-culotte", as they took shape during the early years of the Revolution. Yet from Garrigues' and Isabelle Bourdin's studies, respectively, of the Paris Districts and Popular Societies<sup>4</sup>, it is clear that central themes of Sans-culotte politics were both implicit and explicit in the transactions of the Districts from as early as 1789, and still more so in those of the Paris Sections and Popular Societies during the years 1790-2.

In particular the idea of "direct democracy", or the day-by-day participation of the Sovereign People in Government, either directly or through an unflinching and active supervision of the officers to whom the sovereign power was delegated, was a constant presence. It formed, from the earliest days of the Revolution, a significant counter-pressure to the National Assembly's thrust towards a constitution based on representative

<sup>1</sup> A. Soboul, *Les Sans-culottes Parisiens en l'an II. Mouvement Populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 2 juin 1793-9 thermidor an II* (Librairie Clavreuil, Paris, 1958).

<sup>2</sup> K. Tønnesson, *La Défaite des Sans-culottes: Mouvement populaire et réaction bourgeoise en l'an III* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1959).

<sup>3</sup> Isser Woloch, *Jacobin Legacy: the Democratic Movement under the Directory* (Princeton University Press, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> G. Garrigues, *Les Districts Parisiens pendant la Révolution française* (Editions Spes, Paris, 1931); Isabelle Bourdin, *Les Sociétés Populaires à Paris pendant la Révolution française* (Recueil Sirey, Paris, 1937).

democracy and the separation of powers. At a time when the National Assembly was busy setting up a restricted franchise and erecting careful barriers between "active" and "passive" citizens, hardy pioneers of Sans-culottism pressed for popular participation in its broadest sense, for the involvement of all classes of people, down to the lowest, and in the greatest possible numbers, in the business of government. Often the demand for political equality was linked with that other mainstay of Sans-culotte ideology, a passionate critique of social inequality, and the enthusiastic apotheosis of the poor worker and the honest artisan.

During and immediately after the Parisian revolution of 14 July 1789, the Paris Electoral Assembly, with the support of the Districts, improvised Paris's first Revolutionary municipal government, a *comité permanent* of Electors, with four sections or *Bureaux*. The Mayor, Bailly, and the Commandant of the National Guard, Lafayette, also owed their appointments to this tumultuous period, although these were subsequently ratified by each District.

As soon as possible a regularization of the situation was attempted, and the Electors were replaced by an elected assembly of representatives of the Commune of Paris, chosen on the basis of two delegates per District. This body met for the first time on 25 July. At the beginning of August another representative was added from each District, to bring the assembly's numbers to 180. During August a new provisional municipal constitution was adopted, with an elected assembly of five representatives per District. This assembly of 300 met for the first time on 19 September and remained in office until the middle of 1790.

From the beginning there was conflict over the functions and attributes of the municipal assemblies. Their primary task was seen by the Districts as constituent: they were to prepare a draft of a definitive municipal constitution for ratification by the Districts and promulgation by the National Assembly. The representatives, on the other hand, tended to assume the role of administrators and legislators, at the expense of both the Mayor and the districts, and they quickly developed a strong corporate sense. There was considerable continuity between the successive assemblies. Thus almost a half of the first assembly of 180 had

been Electors, and 115 of that assembly were elected to the assembly of 300.<sup>1</sup>

Very often those who remained active at the level of District Assemblies or Committees were chagrined to discover the readiness with which their elected representatives absorbed the spirit and adopted the pretensions of the Commune assembly. Even the most advanced democrats of the Districts, men like Brissot and Danton, proved to be not immune to seductions of this kind once they had secured election.

The basic foundations of the constitution of the Districts themselves remained the electoral regulations for the Parisian Third Estate promulgated in March and April 1789, enfranchising only the wealthiest third of adult males. The revolution of July inevitably meant the intervention of much more popular elements in the District assemblies. Yet almost immediately the wealthier elements, who remained in control of the District bureaux took steps to squeeze out the artisans, the small shopkeepers and labourers again. Indeed a regulation of the provisional Parisian Municipal government soon made this mandatory. "The municipal aristocrats have declared that all those who do not pay six livres *capitation* do not possess citizen rights" (*droit de bourgeoisie*), a contemporary pamphlet complained. "They are excluded from the assemblies if not as rogues at least as strangers; but those who do not pay the six livres *capitation* make up three quarters of the nation".<sup>2</sup>

On 16 September, Elysée Loustalot's *Révolutions de Paris* similarly denounced the lawyers (*gens de robe*) for excluding the "moins de six livres" from the current elections of provisional representatives of the Paris Commune.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there is evidence that this reaction by the *élite* was not universally successful.

When, during August 1789, the domestic servants of the District of l'Isle Saint-Louis petitioned against their exclusion from District meetings, they protested that "the greatest number

<sup>1</sup> H. E. Bourne, "Municipal politics in Paris in 1789", *American Historical Review*, xi (1906), 263-86. For a useful map of Paris divided into the 60 Districts, see M. Reinhard, *Nouvelle Histoire de Paris: La Révolution 1789-1799* (Paris, 1971), pp. 128-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Hôtel-de-Ville de Paris, ou l'Aristocratie Municipale* (Paris, 1789), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Révolutions de Paris*, no. X, 16 Sept. 1789, p. 22.

of the other classes of citizens is composed of small shopkeepers, workers, day labourers, etc., of whom the greater part are poorer than the petitioners. However, they are received into the District Assemblies".<sup>1</sup>

On 12 August the central assembly of representatives of the Commune considered a provisional municipal constitution for which Brissot was largely responsible, and which provided for a simple taxpayers' franchise,<sup>2</sup> and this was certainly adopted by a few Districts in the September elections to the new commune assembly. In June 1790 the Cordeliers District Assembly petitioned the National Assembly to permit the interpretation of the new national constitution in such a way as to admit to "active" citizenship all persons domiciled and paying any tax contribution whatsoever. Moreover the Cordeliers District made it clear that the payment of *indirect* taxes (from which nobody was in fact exempt) ought to be regarded as a qualification.<sup>3</sup> This would have meant universal male suffrage in practice. In November 1789 the *Revolutions de Paris* published a calculation by a six livres *capitation* payer estimating his annual indirect tax contribution at the staggering total of 262 livres, including 27 livres for a modest daily average consumption of 1½ livres of bread.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Pétition des personnes en état de Domesticité du District de l'Isle Saint Louis à Messieurs les Représentans de la Commune* (Nyon, Paris, 1789), p. 7. (A.N. AD XVI 68A).

<sup>2</sup> *Projet du plan de Municipalité de la Ville de Paris présenté à l'assemblée générale des Représentans de la Commune, par ses Commissaires, le 12 août 1789* (Lottin, Paris, 1789), pp. 5-6. (A.N. AD XVI 68A).

<sup>3</sup> *Extrait des Registres des Délibérations de l'Assemblée du District des Cordeliers du 17 Juin 1790* (Imprimerie de Momoro [Paris, 1790]), pp. 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Révolutions de Paris*, no. XVII, 31 oct.-7 nov. 1789, pp. 9-20: Letter from Goubée tabulating his consumption, and the tax thereon as follows:

	livres tax
1½ livres bread per day	27
400 pints of wine	90
300 livres of meat	45
60 livres candles	9
1 oz. snuff per day	44
Lease of 200 livres	20
Clothing, linen, furniture	12
Six pairs of shoes	9
Groceries, oil, etc.	6

In April 1790 Dufourny de Villiers, who served as President of the Mathurins District during 1789, condemned the proposed new municipal constitution for threatening to exclude, by its 3 livre direct tax franchise "the citizens who by a just forgetting of the municipal regulation which excludes those who do not pay 6 livres capitation, have been admitted there and have, for a year, defended the nation and defended the capital by the wisdom of their advice, by the purest zeal for the common good and by their assiduity in the primary assemblies".<sup>1</sup>

While it may be assumed that the practice varied from District to District, it is apparent that in some, at least, a fairly wide cross-section of the inhabitants was able to play some part in political life, until the time that they were disqualified by the new municipal constitution of 1790.

Certainly this fraternal equality of all citizens in the District assemblies was a constantly recurring theme in the democratic agitation against the definitive new municipal constitution which was a feature of the spring of 1790. "It is in the Districts that there reigns that equality, that fraternity of the golden age that our benevolent laws are seeking to restore" an address drawn up by the leaders of this campaign declared. "There, one finds no distinctions or ranks. All places are taken by the first-comer. Conditions are forgotten. Everybody speaks, everybody is honoured equally with the name 'citizen', the finest of titles . . . Devoted to these Districts, which they regard as the cradle of their regeneration and the gage of their liberty, the people go there at times which do not interfere with their labours or their commerce. They rest there from the fatigues of the day, they instruct themselves by amusing themselves. There they learn of [the National Assembly's] august decrees, and have their useful and sublime intentions expounded; there they are taught to respect and love them."<sup>2</sup>

"These assemblies are becoming for men of talent a veritable school of public law", the Mathurins District general assembly

<sup>1</sup> L.-P. Dufourny de Villiers, *Adresse aux Citoyens sur le meilleur plan de Municipalité conclu de la Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (Paris, 1790), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> *Adresse de la Commune de Paris dans ses soixante sections, à l'Assemblée Nationale* (Paris, 1790), pp. 8-11.

resolved in January 1790, " in which they exercise themselves to treat of interests which did not concern them before they existed, but which are becoming properly theirs as a result of the freedom to deliberate, and the noble ambition to enlighten themselves in enlightening their fellow citizens . . . these assemblies are not less useful to the citizens whom a laborious estate has not permitted to give themselves up to study . . . they learn there to guarantee themselves against their prejudices, to defend themselves against first impressions of the spirit of the people, and to suspend their judgement until such times as rays of light have dissipated their preconceptions."<sup>1</sup>

If the regular meetings of the Districts were abolished, the District of the Capucins de Saint Louis lamented, " a multitude of citizens that their desire to make themselves useful would make consecrate themselves to the study of public law, would embrace other occupations, because there would be no occasion any more to contribute the progress of their expertise in their assemblies. A precious advantage that we owe to the revolution and of which we shall bitterly feel the deprivation, is that equality, that confusion of ranks, that sweet fraternity, whose first links have appeared so agreeable to us."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, ideally, the Districts served as a fraternal school of citizenship and a training-ground for political responsibility for ordinary people. The reality perhaps fell some distance short. The author of one brochure, Leblond de Saint-Martin, of the Oratoire District, contrasted the four or five hundred attenders at a District assembly with the ten or twelve leading figures who were able to manipulate the vote,<sup>3</sup> but in fact there is no evidence for anything resembling such a massive degree of participation. On one occasion " 300 persons " were said to have been present at a Cordeliers District meeting,<sup>4</sup> but this is the largest attendance

<sup>1</sup> *Extrait du Registre des Délibérations de l'Assemblée-générale du District des Mathurins*, Samedi, 30 jan. 1790 (Paris, 1790), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *District des Capucins de Saint Louis de la Chaussée d'Antin. Rapport fait en l'Assemblée-Générale du 18 mars 1790* (Prault, Paris, 1790), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Leblond de Saint-Martin, *Observations sur l'organisation des assemblées des districts* (Cressonnier, Paris, 1789?), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *District de Saint-Marcel. Extrait des Registres de ses Délibérations du 21 Mars 1790* (Chardon, Paris, 1790), p. 4.

recorded for this ultra-democratic District. On another occasion 202 "citizens of all estates, qualifications and conditions" met to elect the officers of the Notre Dame District National Guard Battalion.<sup>1</sup> In the Mathurins District 160 persons voted to elect National Guard officers on 23 July 1789,<sup>2</sup> and 140 votes were cast on 11 September for the new Provisional Commune representatives. On 4 September 111 citizens of the Saint-Roch District voted in the same election, but a resolution of the District was carried with only 83 votes at an ordinary meeting on the 14th.<sup>3</sup> Seventy-seven citizens of the Capucins du Marais District voted an address to the King after 5 October 1789.<sup>4</sup> A somewhat cynical (or is it merely realistic?) appraisal of what Danton's brand of democracy meant in the Cordeliers District was offered by a hostile pamphleteer in 1790, who attributed the leading agitational role of the District to "Three persons [he meant Danton, Paré and Fabre de l'Eglantine] who first gained by craft about fifty individuals too ignorant to be distrustful, and then, masters of these, were able soon, by wrongful procedures and threats, to drive out the respectable and educated citizens who used to make up the assemblies." This silent majority was estimated by the writer to number more than a thousand "citoyens recommandables" who inhabited the district and served in the National Guard Battalion.<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to another contemporary pamphleteer we have a useful, if very subjective, analysis of about 100 "men of mark" of the District of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, in the heart of Paris. In July 1790 the District was merged, with part of the Sainte-Opportune (or Grands Augustins) District, into the newly created Section du Louvre, and an anonymous observer decided to draft a guide to the District "politicians" of Saint-Germain for the benefit of the Sainte-Opportunists. Thanks to this

<sup>1</sup> *Extrait des Délibérations des Assemblées-Générales du District de Notre Dame des 29 et 31 Août et 2 Septembre 1789* (Veuve Herissant, Paris, 1789), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Quesnay de Beaurepaire, *Rapport adressé à MM. les honorables membres du Comité civil du District des Mathurins* (Paris, 1789), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Bourne, "Municipal politics in Paris in 1789", p. 278 n; B.N., N. Acq. françaises 2665, fols. 31, 36.

<sup>4</sup> *Ville de Paris. Comité du District des Capucins du Marais* (Clousier, Paris, 1789), 7 pp.

<sup>5</sup> *Lettre à un Anglais sur le District des Cordeliers* (Paris, 1790), 4 pp.

unique, and sometimes astringent, production it is possible to establish the kind of people that dominated the District's affairs in the years 1789-90.<sup>1</sup>

At the one end of the social scale no nobles figure in the list, and only two priests; at the other, no labourers and only one journeyman, a clockmaker. Almost a half of those whose occupations are identified were engaged in wholesale or retail trade, or small workshop manufacture of a considerable heterogeneity, with five goldsmiths and four jewellers making up the two largest groups. About a quarter of the District's chief spirits were lawyers, headed by a solid phalanx of a dozen *avocats* and a half dozen *procureurs*, with another half dozen assorted legal practitioners or officials. The liberal professions are represented by three doctors, a surgeon, two artists (one of whom is a speculator), an author, and a *professeur en collège*. The author of the survey betrays a strong animus against the pretensions of the doctors and the lawyers who appear to have made most of the running in the District. Dr. Nolant, for example, is taken to task for his posing on committees "like a petty scribbler who has been elected to the Academy (un littérateur qui a obtenu le fauteuil académique)". The most bitter invective is reserved, however, for the *avocat*, Petit, chief of the dominant party in the District, renowned for his intrigues and for wining and dining his way into the good graces of his supporters.

Some of the more plebeian citizens receive much more favourable treatment: Boiville, the lace-seller, is worthy of respect even though not well educated, as is Ruby, the old-clothes merchant. Tatin the seed merchant and Roland the butcher are sound fellows, and so is M. Paulet, despite his puzzling Languedocian accent. On Frankaert, the Jewish tailor, no particular judgement is passed. But very few of the other District members listed escape unscathed. Solier, for example, is a drunkard; Mellet, the parfumeur, gives himself airs in the assembly but is without merit; many of the lawyers are qualified sardonically as "self-styled" *avocats*.

<sup>1</sup> *Section du Louvre. Liste des citoyens de l'ancienne composition du District de Saint-Germain L'Auxerrois qui sont fait connoître en bien ou en mal depuis le commencement de la Révolution* (Paris, 1790). See also table on p. 443.



From the beginning of their existence the Paris Districts fulfilled an ambiguous role. On the one hand they were prosaic enough bodies, engaged in the humdrum of everyday local administration : elections, police, hygiene, public welfare. On the other they were essentially revolutionary organs, the expression of the people's sovereignty, the watchdogs of liberty. In both aspects the Districts challenged the position of the surviving instruments of the old Royal government that still claimed a legal authority in Paris, and in particular the main police authority, the *Châtelet*. They also inevitably entered into competition with the rival expressions of revolutionary popular sovereignty : the National Assembly itself, the Mayor, the Commandant of the National Guard, Lafayette, and a succession of provisional municipal governments and representative commune assemblies and councils at the *Hôtel de Ville*. During 1789 and 1790 the Districts became embroiled in a series of political demarcation disputes with all these rivals, each of which, even when the Districts were divided or defeated, strengthened a growing body of doctrine that asserted the principles of direct and participationist democracy.

The first confrontation had occurred in April 1789, when the Districts seized control of the electoral proceedings of the Paris Third Estate from the royal officials. Later the right of the Districts to draft and approve the new legal municipal constitution of Paris, and in the meantime to exercise a tight surveillance over the provisional Commune Assemblies through the mandate and the recall of representatives were both vigorously defended. The right of the *Châtelet* and of the municipal government of Paris to abridge personal and press liberties was also contested. Undoubtedly the most dramatic episode in this latter conflict was the mobilization of the National Guard Battalion of the Cordeliers District to protect Marat against arrest by the Paris municipal government in January 1790, establishing a "no go" area within which outside forces were not permitted to penetrate without a visa from the leaders of the District, Danton's friends.

In the Marat affair the Cordeliers District was doing no more than taking to their logical conclusions certain principles of sovereignty that had been steadily asserted by many of the Districts since July 1789.

As if by political reflex, on the morrow of 14 July the Districts began to turn to general principle to legitimize their practical seizure and consolidation of political power.

Thus the printed Constitution of the Prémontrés District, adopted on 24 July, begins: "The general assembly of the Prémontrés District, recognising that in itself alone resides the legislative power", with "of the District" added afterwards in ink, as a cautious afterthought, in the Bibliothèque Nationale copy.<sup>1</sup> On 21 July Brissot, seizing the revolutionary moment, assured the Filles-Saint-Thomas District Assembly that every District had the right to set up its own executive committees and deliberative assemblies. It was "to the people of the Districts that belonged unalterably the setting of the seal of legality on the plan. To await the decision of the National Assembly would be to abandon the inalienable right of the *Cité* to constitute itself by itself. . . . No sanction is necessary when the people has given its own".<sup>2</sup> In the heady aftermath of the first triumphs of the Revolution there was a sense of being reborn into a world of unlimited possibilities. "A people that recovers its liberty finds itself at the origin of society", Prévost de Saint-Lucien, of the Trinité District, wrote in August 1789, urging his own plan of municipal reform, "It returns to the primal natural right; it is carried back to that happy epoch where all men, equal among themselves, regulate and govern themselves in common. France is this new people; in breaking her chains she has abdicated her ancient forms, her old errors, her Gothic customs, in the middle of the century of iron she is reborn into the infancy of the world".<sup>3</sup>

Dufourny de Villiers developed a general constitutional doctrine, appropriate to the new-born nation, which he presented to the new-born Cordeliers Club, over which he presided, in

<sup>1</sup> *District des Prémontrés. Règlement pour le District des Prémontrés* (Paris, 1789) (Bibliothèque Nationale 4<sup>o</sup> Lb<sup>40</sup> 1519).

<sup>2</sup> J.-P. Brissot de Warville, *Discours prononcé au District des Filles-Saint-Thomas, le 21 juillet 1789, sur la Constitution Municipale à former dans la Ville de Paris*, pp. 13-15.

<sup>3</sup> Prévost de Saint-Lucien, *Plan d'organisation de l'assemblée des trois cents Représentans de la Commune de Paris* (L. M. Cellot, Paris, [1789]), pp. 1-2.

April 1790.<sup>1</sup> At its heart was a theory of the social contract that owed more to Locke than to Rousseau, and indeed stood Rousseau on his head. In entering society, Dufourny argued, each individual surrendered a portion of his personal sovereignty, in order to make secure that which he retained. In the same way each commune surrendered a portion of its own sovereignty to the Nation only in order to protect that portion which the commune held back. Consequently—and practically—"the sovereignty of the National Assembly ceases where the individual sovereignty (*souveraineté propre*) of the commune begins; in the same way the individual sovereignty of each commune ceases where the personal sovereignty, the radical sovereignty of each individual, begins".

The right to assemble is an essential protection for the personal sovereignty of the citizen, and it is for the citizens themselves to regulate directly the manner and order of such assemblies. Sovereignty being thus very firmly rooted in each individual, it follows that representation is an inferior form of government, appropriate only where personal presence is impossible. "If it is necessary in numerous nations it should be rejected in small societies", and it is particularly unsuitable to small communes. Moreover, Dufourny, in perfect consistence with his general theory, was clear that the rights of citizenship must belong to all men equally, without regard to wealth or position.

Nowhere is the spirit of the democratic element in District politics better expressed than in Dufourny's address: a conviction that new, hard-won, liberty was intensely personal and individual, and that the less political power was alienated to external bodies, however representative, the better. Many of the major chords of subsequent democratic politics were sounded also by the lawyer Louis-Marie Lulier, future president of the Revolutionary Commune of 10 August, in an address to the District of Saint-Jacques l'Hôpital, delivered less than a week after the fall of the Bastille, and subsequently published by the District.

<sup>1</sup> Dufourny de Villiers, *Adresse aux citoyens* (see p. 426, n. 1). For the foundation of the Cordeliers Club, and Dufourny's presidency see Mathiez, *Le club des Cordeliers pendant la crise de Varennes* (Champion, Paris, 1910), p. 2.

“Don't lose sight, I beg of you, that, the sovereign power emanating from you, you ought ceaselessly to direct its effects”, Lulier warned, “Every citizen must idolize liberty. All must have equal right to be heard and to put forward ideas”. Each District should name a Censor to spy on the conduct of the new government “in all the degrees of authority” and warn the citizens of infractions of their rights. The greatest care should be devoted to the choosing of representatives, to avoid the danger of a new aristocracy arising. “You have destroyed ministerial despotism, the aristocracy of the Great Ones; beware and protect yourself against that of the Bourgeois, your fellow citizens: this yoke will be the most cruel of all. It is Despotism in the form of a brook: if you do not keep it under surveillance in its course, if finally you do not dry up its source, it will become a bloody torrent, of which you yourself will have swollen the mass”.<sup>1</sup>

In point of fact, most Districts did take immediate steps to draft provisional working constitutions for themselves in 1789, without waiting for the imposition of definitive decrees from above, either of the Municipality or of the National Assembly. Often, as in the case of the Prémontrés District, such constitutions were oligarchical, restricting political rights to the wealthier inhabitants, and vesting considerable powers in their permanent committees. At the other extreme was the Constitution approved by the general assembly of the District of Saint-Etienne du Mont at the end of July 1789.<sup>2</sup> This constitution was the work of a committee of six, although the inspiration was that of Bayard, the Vice-President of the District, who by his own account had begun working on it on 14 July and who presented the first draft to the District Assembly on 22 July. Bayard was centrally concerned that “all citizens, without distinction of estate or rank, should have the same right of access to public office” and that the “shopkeepers and artisans” in particular who made up

<sup>1</sup> *District de Saint-Jacques l'Hôpital. Discours prononcé le 20 juillet par M. Lulier, Licencié en Droit, membre du District de Saint-Jacques l'Hôpital à l'Assemblée dudit District, et imprimé suivant son vœu général* (Au dépens du District et se trouve chez Masson, 1789), 7 pp.

<sup>2</sup> *Extrait du Procès-verbal des Assemblées-générales des Citoyens de la Commune de Paris au District de Saint-Etienne du Mont, tenues les 22, 25, et 27 juillet 1789* (Imprimerie de J. Ch. Desaint, Paris, 1789), 16 pp.

the greater part of the citizens of the District should be enabled to enjoy their rights. To this end he proposed a further decentralization even below the District level.

The District was divided into ten *arrondissements partiels* in each of which a monthly Sunday afternoon meeting of citizens was planned to elect four members of the District committee, whose tenure would be limited to four weeks at a time, and *commissaires* to command the local militia, also with limited tenure.

By this decentralization Bayard hoped to increase popular participation in public affairs. As he explained: "Many people who would not come at all to the general assemblies of the district, will go to these particular assemblies, and those who compose these latter assemblies, knowing one another, being united by the bonds of neighbourhood, will make more enlightened and surer choices than one may ever do in the middle of the confusion of these general assemblies, which often begin by being too numerous and finish by becoming deserted, and which one will shortly see entirely abandoned, if one were to have the imprudence of multiplying them too much". The general assemblies of the District were, however, to be retained for the discussion of important and general matters. Bayard's vision was of a constant flow of ordinary citizens through the District Committee and its sub-committees, to which they would be assigned by lot. "The more persons there will be who will become, turn-by-turn, depositaries of the public power, the more good citizens will be formed".

It is a pity that there is no evidence of how this project for direct government, adopted by Saint-Etienne District in the enthusiasm of July 1789, survived the long months of administrative routine that would inevitably follow. Both general experience and particular evidence from the period suggest that the constitution could not possibly have worked. But perhaps that is not so important as the fact that the citizens of the District thought that it might, and were prepared to give it a try, or that they sympathized with its spirit and its objectives. Nor was Bayard's vision of the virtuous citizen unique. In November 1789 Elysée Loustalot painted in the *Révolutions de Paris* an

ideal picture of the "complete citizen", dividing his time between domestic and public duties without neglecting either, and in particular, in Paris, assiduous in his attention to District affairs.

"It will be by multiplying primary assemblies, in often renewing committees, that by way of arguments, counter arguments, debates, the clash of opinions, citizens will learn to know the laws, to love them and put them into effect according to their spirit, to make them the rule of their conduct. Especially, he added, "if, moderating the impetuosity of an ardent character, we cease to declare our opinions like furies and present our views as wise men".<sup>1</sup>

In practice, vigilance against the "bourgeois aristocracy", of which Lulier warned, chiefly took the form of a careful watch on the conduct of the representatives elected by the Districts to the provisional Commune assemblies at the Hôtel de Ville, and of the Mayor Bailly and Lafayette, the commander of the Paris National Guard. Thus, on 5 August the Sainte-Opportune District Assembly conceded that the representatives might properly draft a plan for a provisional municipality, but "the examination, revision, the definitive judgement will always belong essentially to the Districts. Moreover the choice of representatives is always revocable, if the occasion should possibly arise".<sup>2</sup> During the first half of October, the Petits-Augustins District Assembly rescinded Lafayette's nominations of the officers of a special full-time corps of Chasseurs within the District's National Guard battalion "considering that there cannot exist any authority which does not emanate from the citizens in whom it essentially resides" and reserved the right to make its own appointments.<sup>3</sup> On 9 November the Committee of the Saint-Roch District expressed its surprise that the delegates of the Districts at the Hôtel de Ville were making regulations and giving instructions to the Districts on how to deal with the current food crisis, and condemned them for pretending to the

<sup>1</sup> *Révolutions de Paris*, no. XVII, 31 oct.-7 nov. 1789, pp. 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Discours prononcé par Mm. du Comité de S. Merry à l'assemblée du District de Sainte-Opportune, le 10 août 1789 et arrêté à la suite*, 4 pp.

<sup>3</sup> *Extrait des délibérations de l'Assemblée-générale du District des Petits-Augustins du 19 octobre 1789* (Paris, 1789), 1 p.

title "representatives of the Commune". "The Commune of Paris has no representatives but itself, and the 240 delegates still existing at the Hotel de Ville are only *mandatories* to draft a plan, and not at all *legislators*, administrators to address ordinances and *arrêtés* [*sic*] to it".<sup>1</sup>

Towards the end of October the Bonne-Nouvelle District protested to the National Assembly over the way in which the provisional Commune had solicited, and obtained, a Martial Law decree from the Assembly, without authorization from the Districts: "One could also recommend very instantly to Messieurs de la Commune never to demand any law whatsoever without communicating it beforehand to the citizens of whom they are the representatives".<sup>2</sup>

A major row was brewing up, in fact, over the obstinate refusal of the Commune representatives to regard themselves as mere mandatories of the District Assemblies. At the beginning of September the Cordeliers District had launched a campaign to persuade the Districts to "engage" their representatives on the Commune council to demand the prosecution of Besenval, the Swiss mercenary officer who had held the responsibility for maintaining order in Paris during the July uprising. As the campaign developed, demands were made for a general recall and purge of the recalcitrant representatives.<sup>3</sup> On 29 October the representatives counter-attacked, condemning the Cordeliers District for imposing an oath of obedience on its own representatives, rejecting the mandatory principle entirely, and denouncing the District's habit of printing and circulating its deliberations as a usurpation of a right that belonged only to the legislative, executive, and administrative power. By mid-November both parties had appealed to the National Assembly and the Districts had mostly taken sides. In supporting the Cordeliers, the

<sup>1</sup> B.N., N. Acq. francaises 2665, fol. 59. Sixty of the 300 representatives had been formally seconded to an administrative council of representatives of the Commune. Hence the figure 240.

<sup>2</sup> Archives Nationaux C32/371.

<sup>3</sup> *Pièces qui établissent l'illégalité de l'arrêté des Mandataires provisoires de l'Hôtel de Ville, relativement aux cinq Mandataires particuliers du District des Cordeliers* (Momoro, Paris, 1789); *Révolutions de Paris*, no. XVIII, 7-14 nov. 1789, p. 15.

Prémontrés District Assembly gave the National Assembly a lecture in political philosophy which may be taken as typical of the radical half of the debate : it begins : " Considering that the principle of natural law that subjects the mandatory to the delegating party, according to the letter of the instruction that the former receives from the latter, is an immutable principle, and which the delegating party cannot be deemed to have renounced in any case in favour of the mandatory . . . considering that it is important to the integral parts of the commune not to abandon their rights of supervision over their provisional representatives in general, or in particular . . ." <sup>1</sup>

The mandate affair was a drawn battle : on 23 November a committee of the National Assembly voiced its Solomon's judgement : the Cordeliers District had no right to impose the recall on its representatives, but the Commune assembly should nevertheless admit the replacements substituted by the District.

The Districts were, in any case, on the threshold of a much more significant struggle, over the shape of the definitive Parisian municipal constitution, which was decided between November 1789 and April 1790. During this period a number of separate political issues became fused together in a common democratic campaign. In the first place the militant Districts were determined to assert the principle that the Commune of Paris, by which they meant the people assembled in their sixty Districts, had the sole right to decide on and approve a constitution for Paris, subject only to the ratification of the National Assembly.

Secondly, they advocated a constitutional plan that would leave the maximum legislative and executive powers in the hands of the Districts, and the minimum in the hands of whatever central municipal administration was finally established. Thirdly, a campaign was launched to preserve the *permanence* of the Districts : the right of the general assemblies to meet regularly and frequently, to discuss and resolve on matters of public interest. Finally, some of the leaders of the democratic party, Elysée Loustalot, the Abbé Fauchet, and Camille Desmoulins the most prominent among them, extended their advocacy of direct

<sup>1</sup> *District des Prémontrés. Assemblée générale du 18 novembre, 1789* (Paris, 1789), pp. 1-2.



democracy beyond the immediate municipal debate, extolling its virtues as generally applicable to the government of France as a whole. "General and permanent laws", another pamphleteer explained, "such as the constitution, the organisation of the tribunals etc., ought to be sent out throughout the kingdom to be adopted or rejected by the generality of the citizens gathered together in their elementary assemblies."<sup>1</sup>

In March 1790 Camille Desmoulins, Danton's friend and himself a leading figure in the Cordeliers District, summarized the essentials of the democratic programme in his *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*. The Districts, he declared, must remain the indispensable basis of the new French "republic" that was under construction "for I avow that I cannot conceive of a republic without a *Forum*, without a public meeting-place, and without the *veto* of the people. We have no public meeting-place big enough, but our districts supply the need, and fulfil much better the object of *tribune* and *Forum*. People often speak of the three powers that ought to balance one another in a good government. These three powers, in my opinion, are the National Assembly, the municipalities, and the districts. The National Assembly decrees, it is the legislative power: the municipalities put into execution and administer, they are the *executive and ministerial power*; and the districts propose the law; they have the *veto*; this is the *rogative and negative power*."<sup>2</sup>

Both Desmoulins and Loustalot explicitly cited Rousseau's condemnations of representative democracy in their journals, and the *Contrat Social* was plainly the source of much of the political philosophy of the Districts and their spokesmen, even though it was not often acknowledged. Sometimes contemporary successful examples of direct democracy in action were cited, particularly the Swiss cantons of Uri, Unterwald and Schwyz.<sup>3</sup> "That which is practicable in Switzerland in assemblies of twenty

<sup>1</sup> *Vices essentiels dans le plan de la municipalité rédigé par les commissaires des Représentans de la Commune de Paris avec un mot sur la sanction des loix* (Veuve Delaguette, Paris, 1790 ?).

<sup>2</sup> *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, no. 17, 22 mars 1790, p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> *Révolutions de Paris*, no. XX, 21-28 nov. 1789, pp. 13-14.

thousand men, can be done easily enough in France in assemblies that will not be composed of more than a thousand and fifty persons",<sup>1</sup> Loustalot declared. Others, and Loustalot himself on occasion, drew on a classical education, or perhaps the last book of the *Contrat Social*, for arguments based on the golden age of Ancient Rome, with its "division of the inhabitants by tribes or curia by means of which one used to obtain in one day the will of four million men on a law, and often on a particular case".<sup>2</sup> The Franks were also frequently called into the witness box. In December 1789 the Minimes District, in demanding the right to approve the municipal constitution, reminded the National Assembly of the Frankish precedent: "At the origins of our monarchy, under Charlemagne, who so much respected the rights of the people, it was in the middle of the May Field that the laws were proposed. Universal applause announced their acceptance; the most profound silence was the proof that they were refused."<sup>3</sup> It was in vain that critics reminded the Districts of the aristocratic nature of the Frankish assemblies<sup>4</sup>: alternative precedents could easily be substituted.

When, in the spring of 1790, the majority of the Districts petitioned the National Assembly on behalf of their own constitutional plan, their printed draft relied at first on the classical precedent: "The Roman people exercised themselves in former times both the rights of sovereignty and those of government, scarcely a week passed when they did not assemble, and often several times, and, as has been very well said by a celebrated writer, the whole people was in the public assembly place almost as often magistrate as citizens." Patriotic second thoughts seem to have triumphed, however, and the paragraph was struck out, to be replaced by an alternative manuscript version citing instead "The Gauls, our ancestors, who exercised themselves in former times both the rights of sovereignty and those of government.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. no. XXI, 28 nov.-5 déc. 1789, pp. 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. no. XI, 19 sept. 1789, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Adresse Respectueuse du District des Minimes à l'Assemblée Nationale* (Paris, 1790 ?), 4 pp. (British Library, F 10\* 15).

<sup>4</sup> *Compte rendu par M. Desmousseaux, l'un des administrateurs de la ville de Paris aux citoyens de Sainte-Opportune, ses commettans, suivi de Réflexions sur la situation présente de la Capitale* (Cailleau, Paris, 1790), p. 17.

They assembled very frequently, and one could say of this people, that they were in the public assembly places almost as often as magistrates as citizens."<sup>1</sup> Such are the uses of History.

At the climax of the democratic campaign, during March and April 1790, central delegate meetings of the Districts took place almost daily at the Archévêché, the former Archbishops' Palace on the Ile de la Cité, under the shadow of Notre Dame. More than forty Districts threw their support behind both a petition in support of *permanence* and the "plan de l'Archévêché", a plan for a municipal constitution concerted between the Districts and Bailly, the Mayor.<sup>2</sup>

Despite everything, the Districts were defeated. On 21 May 1790 the National Assembly adopted instead the "Plan Demeunier", the joint work of the Commune representatives and a committee of the National Assembly. As a result the new municipal constitution was firmly based on a representative system. It included a strong municipal council of "representatives of the commune". It restricted the field of action of the 48 Sections that replaced the 60 Districts and forbade their *permanence*; and it excluded the poorer, or "passive", citizens from Section business. Moreover, in many cases the Section boundaries were deliberately drawn so as to destroy political continuity between District and Section, and to break up the experienced leadership groups that had emerged during the previous year. "Aristocracy" had triumphed. "Is it our destiny then to see ourselves eternally enslaved by our mandates", the Cordeliers District demanded, in a final public placard on 1 July 1790, "and subordinated endlessly, as if without examination, to the absolute orders, to the hidden interests of a species of men uniquely instituted to execute our wish to maintain an oversight over our interest?"<sup>3</sup> Camille Desmoulins had long

<sup>1</sup> *Adresse de la Commune de Paris dans ses soixante sections* (cited above), p. 8. (Example with MS. corrections at Bibliothèque National 4<sup>o</sup> Lb<sup>40</sup> 90.) The "celebrated writer" was Rousseau: cf. *Social Contract*, bk. III, ch. XII.

<sup>2</sup> (Permanence): *District de Saint Marcel. Extrait des Registres de ses Délibérations des 15 et 21 Mars 1790* (Chardon, Paris, 1790), p. 14. (Plan de l'Archévêché): Garrigues, *Les Districts de Paris*, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> *Extrait des Registres de l'Assemblée-Générale du District des Cordeliers du 1 Juillet 1790* (Placard) (British Library, Tab 443a 3/67).

since paid an evocative tribute in his Journal to the year-long struggle of the District for an activist democracy.

“Oh my very dear Cordeliers”, he wrote in his number of 17 May, “farewell then to our handbell, to our president’s chair, and to the tribune, resounding and full of illustrious orators. In their place there will be nothing more than a great urn, a pitcher, to which the active citizens, who are never visible, will come to put in their votes and distribute the tricolor sashes to the most adroit intriguer. We were beginning to know one another so well: for nearly a year we tested out our open aristocrats and our so-called impartial, and our determined republicans . . . Perish then, even to the name of the district, this formidable name that would remind citizens of their glory, the taking of the Bastille, the expedition to Versailles.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the most interested observers of the Districts campaign during the spring of 1790 was the Picard revolutionary and future leader of the Paris Sans-culottes, Francois-Noel (later “Gracchus”) Babeuf. From the middle of May, Babeuf had been locked up in the Conciergerie prison on the Ile de la Cité, sent there for his part in organizing a rebellion against indirect taxation on his native province. With Marat’s support, at the end of June and during the first few days of July, Babeuf began to publish a newspaper, the *Journal de la Confédération*, which he composed in prison and smuggled out. No. 3 of the journal, published on 4 July, was largely given over to a protest against the dissolution of the Districts, and some characteristic reflections on direct democracy.

The end of the Districts, Babeuf affirmed, would mean the triumph of the fatal practice by which the great mass of citizens came to be represented by an ambitious and self-seeking few.

“When the majority of citizens shall be no longer able to think, speak, and act for itself, and when exclusion from debates on public matters shall have caused them to lose the habit and the taste for discussion, those great examples of *civisme* and fraternal solicitude will not reappear again; vigilance against the outrages of authority will be no more: the citizen and the fatherland will at one and the same time lose their incorruptible

<sup>1</sup> *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, no. 25, 17 mai 1790, pp. 546-7.

defenders. The oppressed will always succumb to the knife of the tyrant, and the rights of humanity will continue to be violated and unrecognised". Babeuf's message to his Parisian readers was a concentrated distillation of the spirit of District politics in 1789 and 1790 :

Always, in political administration, the administrators tend to invade the rights of the administrated . . . , it is in the nature of every man to wish to dominate. Let us so arrange things that everyone dominates at once, and no one person dominates in particular . . . Above all do not lose sight of this holy maxim : *the people are the sovereign* . . . If the people are the sovereign, they should exercise as much sovereignty as they actually can themselves . . . Do not pay anybody . . . to do that which you have to do, and can do yourself ; use representation on the fewest possible occasions, and be nearly always your own representatives.<sup>1</sup>

Although Babeuf was soon to return to Picardy, and would not be in Paris again until 1793, many others remained, well capable of defending and developing such ideas, despite the dismantling of the Districts and the introduction of the restrictive municipal constitution in the summer of 1790.

Already, during the spring months, some of the leaders of the Cordeliers District had helped to found a "Society of the friends of liberty and equality" (otherwise known as the Cordeliers Club) in which they were able to continue to meet and to concert action. In the winter of 1790-1 the Cordeliers Club was reinforced by a new generation of "popular societies" ready to inculcate and disseminate the democratic ideas and techniques born in the struggles of the Districts during 1789-90.

<sup>1</sup> *Journal de la Confédération*, no. 3, 4 juillet 1790.

OCCUPATIONS, PRESENT OR FORMER, OF THE 104 LEADING FIGURES IN THE AFFAIRS  
OF THE DISTRICT OF SAINT-GERMAIN L'AUXERROIS, 1789-1790(From : *Section du Louvre. Liste des citoyens de l'ancienne composition du District de Saint-Germain L'Auxerrois qui sont fait connoître en bien ou en mal depuis le commencement de la Révolution* [Paris, 1790])

Negotiants	2	} Trade and Industry	35
Merchants and shopkeepers	15		
Artisans	17		
Compagnons	1		
Office-holders	2	} Officiers	10
Procureurs	6		
Other legal office holders	2		
Avocats	12	} Lawyers	15
Notaires	1		
Other lawyers	2		
Professors and teachers	1	} Liberal professions	10
Doctors	3		
Surgeon	1		
Architect	1		
Other liberal professions	4		
Commis, clerks, employés	3	} Others	11
Priests	2		
Military officers	2		
Others	4		
Not given	23	Unidentified	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>104</b>		<b>104</b>