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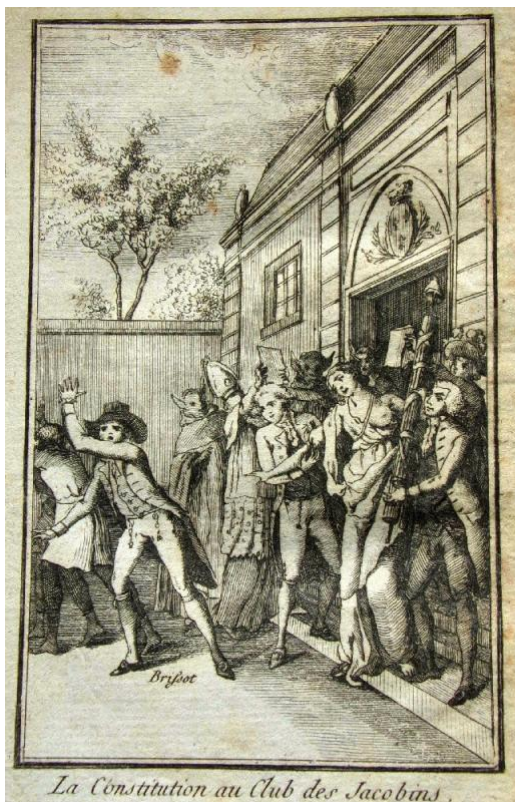
Political clubs during the French Revolution
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La Constitution au Club des Jacobins.

Mots-clés

- Clubs
- Crime
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- French Revolution
- Gender
- Law
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- Violence

Résumé

This entry examines the political clubs of the French Revolution, focusing especially on the Jacobin Club. It explores the reasons why the clubs strayed from their initial ideals of civil debate and succumbed to lethal factionalism. After reviewing historiographical debates, which portray the clubs alternatively as sources of tragic radicalisation or democratic progress, the entry explores the factors that polarised and delegitimised them to much of the public. Those factors include ideology, circumstances and the weakness of the state. The inability and, in some instances, unwillingness of the state to assert its authority in key domains, such as taxation, calumnious speech and the grain trade, created a vacuum that the

clubs attempted to fill. Lacking the constitutional legitimacy to do so, however, the clubs were accused of undermining and usurping state power.

Political clubs proliferated in France during the French Revolution and became a principal driver of regime change. In Paris and the provinces, the clubs offered a sociable space to organise political activity during a tumultuous period of constitutional transformation. They served multiple functions. They lobbied and petitioned authorities. They informed and educated the public. They fundraised and redistributed, to the poor and to the army at war after April 1792. In some respects, the clubs resembled modern political parties. In others, they prefigured thinktanks, charities and civic awareness groups.

While the activities of French revolutionary political clubs are known to historians, their impact on politics is debated. Their initial ideal of offering a space for civil debate and consensus-building gave way, by 1792, to splits, denunciations and purges. The pessimistic explanation for this tragic turn runs from Alexis de Tocqueville and Augustin Cochin in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to François Furet and Keith Baker in the late twentieth. It holds that the clubs' toxic culture grew out of their ideological commitments to collective sovereignty and political virtue.[1] A more optimistic interpretation, which runs from Alphonse Aulard in the late nineteenth century to Michael Kennedy and Raymonde Monnier in the late twentieth, credits the Jacobin clubs for many of the Revolution's achievements.[2] According to this view, the clubs offered a kind of apprenticeship in democracy, teaching citizens how to work together to define and pursue common goals for a post-absolutist age. If they lapsed into factionalism, this was due to the polarising effect of circumstances, notably the king's failed attempt to flee France in 1791, which divided constitutional monarchists and republicans, and the outbreak of war in 1792, which lowered tolerance thresholds for opposing political views and divided revolutionaries over what defined an internal enemy.

While ideology and circumstances undoubtedly contributed to radicalising politics during the French Revolution, this entry underscores other factors. First, it shows how sociability within the clubs became less 'civil', or 'sociable', due to the explosion of print and the public airing of the clubs' internal tensions. Second, it argues that the state's institutional weaknesses between 1789 and 1793 created a vacuum that the clubs tried to fill, without, however, having the constitutional legitimacy to do so. The two dynamics produced a toxic politics: while the clubs externalised their internal conflicts, polarising society, they also claimed authority that the constitution did not confer to them. The principle of popular sovereignty may have helped justify this seizure of power, but the fact that the state was too weak to carry out the most basic functions of governance created the urgency to do so.[3]

Despite the *Ancien Régime*'s ban on voluntary associations that lacked official authorisation, several such 'clubs' and '*sociétés*' appeared in eighteenth-century France, especially during the regime's latter decades. Among the earliest unauthorised associations were the Freemasons. Their underground lodges took root in Paris in the late 1720s, but by the end of

the *Ancien Régime*, many elites, including leading courtiers, had become members. In the 1780s, a raft of clubs sprang up, many with political leanings. Some served as springboards for future revolutionary careers.4 Jean-Sylvain Bailly, appointed mayor of Paris in the summer of 1789, helped found the *Club des Arts* in 1784. Jacques Pierre Brissot, a leading Jacobin by 1792, helped found the *Société des Amis des Noirs* (Society for Friends of the Blacks) in February 1788.5 This club was countered by a group of 120 plantation owners, who formed the racist, pro-slavery *Société correspondante des colons français*, or *Club Massiac* in that same year. Members of both clubs would lobby the National Assembly over the issue of extending or denying political rights for free people of colour in France's Caribbean colonies.6

As the political situation heated up in late 1788 and early 1789, two further clubs, both short-lived, appeared in Paris under the sponsorship of the king's rival cousin, the duc d'Orléans. The *Société des Trente* (it actually had over seventy members) was founded in November 1788. It was followed by the *Club de Valois* the following February. The membership of both clubs consisted primarily of wealthy liberal nobles, financiers and clerics. The abbé Sieyès, author of the influential pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?*, belonged to both. The *Club de Valois* met in the duc d'Orléans's personally owned but semi-public Palais-Royal, the seedbed of pre-revolutionary politics with its cafés, bookstores, gambling dens and countless meeting rooms – spaces ideal for socialising to coordinate political action.

Although the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 granted the freedom of expression, it said nothing about the freedom of *association*. Paradoxically, revolutionary policies towards associations were initially restrictive. Clubs required municipal authorisation to hold meetings, and their activities were limited to the drafting of addresses and petitions. Deputations before authorities could not exceed ten club members.

The Jacobin Club of Paris was less beholden to these regulations since it was founded by deputies in the National Assembly. It was formed in the aftermath of the Women's Bread March on Versailles (October 5-6, 1789), which resulted in forcing the royal family to decamp and live in Paris. The National Assembly followed. The club's initial name, *Société de la Révolution*, was changed to the *Société des amis de la Constitution* in January 1790. The club became known as the 'Jacobin Club' because it held meetings in an old Jacobin convent near the National Assembly meeting hall in Paris. Early membership was comprised of left-wing deputies (the political terms 'left' and 'right' originated at this time given which side each group sat in the assembly hall). They met after hours to strategise for the next legislative session. The club remained limited to deputies and certain influential figures until the summer of 1791, when, due to faction fighting after the king's failed attempt to flee France (some Jacobins wanted to declare a republic while others remained committed to constitutional monarchy), many members left to form the short-lived Feuillant Club. Those who remained in the Jacobin Club increasingly adopted more democratic views and broadened club membership to include more modest individuals.

The Jacobin Club of Paris quickly formed ties with clubs in the provinces. Those clubs often grew out of late *Ancien Régime* associations, such as philanthropic societies, reading salons, freemason lodges and Mesmerist harmony societies. Through active correspondence, the

Paris club kept their provincial counterparts informed about the debates and events occurring in Paris while the provincial clubs kept the Paris club informed about local politics. After the National Assembly's decree expanding the right to association in November 1790, the number of provincial affiliations with the Paris club skyrocketed from 213 to 427 in three months. The number of towns boasting such affiliations also increased: in January 1790, there were twenty, but by July 1791, there were nine-hundred-and-twenty-one.7 Many cities had more than one club, and divisions between them emerged, often along class lines. In Nîmes, for example, one club charged a hefty twenty-four livre membership fee while another charged only six livres.8 Jacobins may have spoken the language of 'equality', but they did not abandon class in politically organising during the early years of the Revolution.

Class was not the only factor producing separate clubs. Gender was as well. Women's clubs developed early in the Revolution, often as adjuncts of male Jacobin clubs. They initially tended to be less political, circumscribing their activities to reading newspapers and preparing revolutionary festivals. When they did become political, such as the *Société des citoyennes républicaines révolutionnaires* did in 1793, they were targeted by the authorities. On October 30, 1793, the National Convention banned all women's clubs. The justification for doing so was sexist, but the ban was triggered by the outbreak of violence between rival women's organisations.9 It was part of a broader effort by the National Convention to clamp down on the clubs, which had become intensely factionalised.

Despite these class and gender inflections, the revolutionary clubs did much to advance the Revolution. They pressed local officials to enforce revolutionary legislation. They rooted out counterrevolutionaries and mobilised resources to fight poverty and, from 1792, a war against major European powers. These accomplishments did not, however, prevent them from becoming divided. Ideology, circumstances and the weaknesses of the state all played a role in this polarisation process.

According to the pessimistic historical interpretation of the clubs, the utopian ideals of collective sovereignty and virtue proved to be destabilising. These ideals blurred the crucial boundary between state and society while sharpening the 'friend-enemy' divide. The state-society boundary was blurred because sovereignty was thought to inhere in 'the people' as a whole, not just its elected representatives. In extending eligibility for club membership to all adult males by mid-1792, the Jacobins reinforced the notion that being a club member and being a co-sovereign were one and the same. This conflation turned out to be a formula for conflict: many felt forced to join the clubs because those who did not were suspected of being an 'enemies of the people'. In a vain effort to prevent divisions and power struggles, the clubs called for equality, moral virtue and political unanimity – in short, a 'general will', as Jean-Jacques Rousseau had conceptualised it in his *On the Social Contract* of 1762. But this only made matters worse since any appearance of inequality, corruption or dissention was perceived as undermining the general will, prompting the search for culprits. Obsessions with virtue and unanimity also led to nationwide efforts to engineer civic morality, which entailed repressing speech and opinions considered antithetical to the Revolution. In short, the Jacobin clubs, according to this pessimistic interpretation, got carried away with their principles and, despite their good intentions, sent a viable 'liberal' revolution – one rooted in representation

and civil liberties – towards a phase of 'terror' and authoritarianism (1793-94), when hundreds of thousands of individuals were arrested for their political views.

Advocates of the optimistic interpretation do not deny that the clubs became polarised, but they attribute toxic sociability to circumstances. Louis XVI's attempt to flee France in June 1791 (he was recognised in the border town of Varennes and sent back to Paris) drove a wedge through the Jacobin Club, dividing constitutional monarchists and republicans. The former split off in July to form the short-lived Feuillants Club. To compensate for the exodus, the Jacobins lowered the bar for entry into the club, but the strategy opened the door to more radical economic demands, dividing the club.

Circumstances divided the Jacobins again the following spring, 1792. This time the issue was over whether to declare a pre-emptive war against the counterrevolutionary Austrians. Tensions between the pro-war faction, led by Jacques-Pierre Brissot, and the much smaller anti-war faction, led by Maximilien Robespierre, grew over the following months. They combined with tensions over grain policies and culminated in the expulsion of the *brissotins* (later known as the Girondins) from the Paris club in the autumn of 1792. This purge polarised the provincial clubs, which felt forced to take sides. It fed into the broad set of factors that would lead to the Federalist Revolts in the summer of 1793, when the Jacobin-led republican armies crushed several rebellious 'Girondist' cities.

A final factor dividing the clubs and delegitimising them in the eyes of some of the public had to do with the vacuum of state power. The polarising effects of this vacuum are discernible in two domains: the regulation of speech and the regulation of subsistence.

The National Assembly proudly declared the freedom of expression in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in August of 1789. Revolutionaries never tired of celebrating this accomplishment, but they – and historians – have often overlooked the clauses in that Declaration calling for the repression of abuses of this freedom. Revolutionaries envisaged limits on free speech, but they deferred defining abuses, notably for 'calumny', to future legislation, which was not immediately forthcoming. In the meantime, the victims of 'calumny' – the intentionally false imputation of a crime or vice – had no legal recourse. All victims could do was denounce their 'calumniators', and perhaps up the ante by accusing them in turn of the high crime of *lèse-nation* – a kind of 'sedition' or 'treason' (The National Assembly recognised *lèse-nation* as a prosecutable crime, but the charge was so inflated that the courts rarely convicted for it). Nor did the National Assembly pass laws against intentional disinformation, such as the false rumour spread by royalists that the Jacobins were planning to assassinate Louis XVI in 1790.[10] It was only after relentless calumny and disinformation had poisoned politics, including within the clubs, that the state finally stepped in with legislation to address the issue in 1793. The stridency of its laws against 'calumny' reflected the frustrations and grievances that had built up since 1789. The Law of Suspects of September 1793 and the Laws of Prairial of 1794 criminalised calumny and, in the latter case, called for sentencing the 'calumniators of patriotism' to death. Arguably, had more moderate libel laws been in effect earlier, the toxic 'culture of calumny'

might not have penetrated the clubs to such a tragic extent.11

Speech was not the only domain in which the state's authority was absent during the early years of the Revolution. The clubs often stepped in when the state was unable or unwilling to carry out critical tasks. They were instrumental in pressuring local authorities to auction off Church property, which the National Assembly had seized in November of 1789. Later, they were active in getting the property of émigrés seized and auctioned off. In anti-revolutionary circles, these actions earned them the reputation of being 'brigands'. During the radical phase of the Revolution (1792-1794), the Jacobin clubs encouraged, and sometimes coerced, citizens to pay the taxes, contributions and forced loans needed to finance poor relief and the war. When the Convention sent out 'representatives on mission' to the provinces to marshal resources for the war and re-establish order, those officials often turned to the clubs to run administrative operations, such as military recruitment, requisitioning, tax collection and police surveillance.12 Such measures had the effect of blurring the boundary between state and civil society.

One area of concern that deeply divided the political clubs, and society more generally, was the matter of subsistence. While early Jacobins supported the National Assembly's decrees liberalising the grain trade, other clubs, notably the *Club monarchique*, believed that the state had a moral duty to ensure food provisions through regulation, subsidies and price ceilings.13 The issue eventually divided Jacobins.14 The Girondin faction, led by Brissot, remained steadfast supporters of the free market. Radicals, such as Robespierre and Jean-Paul Marat, voiced the view of the plebian 'sans-culotte' movement on the matter and pushed for state intervention. In September 1793, three months after the Girondins were purged from the National Convention, Jacobin legislators passed the Law of the Maximum, which set price-ceilings on key staples. Once the sans-culotte movement was crushed in 1794 and the political clubs were abolished in August 1795, however, legislators, including many former Jacobins, re-liberalised the grain trade.

In short, the political clubs of the French Revolution did become engines of radicalisation. Sociability within them degenerated as debate and persuasion gave way to denunciations and purges. But this toxic turn occurred because the Revolution itself was divisive. The social, economic and political stakes were high, and the tensions generated by them ran through society. These tensions were especially concentrated in the clubs. Some of this polarisation owed to ideology: the principle of collective sovereignty made it difficult to 'fix' sovereign power in any particular institution; moreover, Jacobins' obsession with civic virtue raised the moral bar unreasonably high, making it easy to inflate opposition into sedition. But it was also the failure of the state to govern – to define limits on new freedoms, such as speech and property, and to enforce obligations, such as taxes and war requisitions, that created a vacuum that the clubs tried to fill. But because they lacked constitutional authority, their interventions appeared like usurpations.

It was only later that political clubs and parties would become stable sources of political sociability and influence in French political culture. This only became possible after constitutionalism, the rule of law and the state's authority achieved stability and legitimacy.

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2. The classic version of this interpretation is Alphonse Aulard, Histoire politique de la Révolution française (Paris: A. Colin, 1901). It has been echoed by Michael Kennedy, The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution: 1793-1795 (New York: Berghahn Press, 2000) and Raymonde Monnier, L'espace public démocratique: essai sur l'opinion public à Paris de la Révolution au Directoire (Paris: Kimé, 1994).

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7. Michael L. Kennedy, The Jacobin Club in the French Revolution: The First Years (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), Appendix B, p. 362.

8. Claude Mazauric, 'Jacobins/Jacobinisme' in Albert Soboul (ed.), Dictionnaire historique de la Révolution française (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1989), p. 586.

9. Katie Jarvis, Politics in the Marketplace: Work, Gender and Citizenship in Revolutionary France (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), especially chapters 5-6; Olwen H. Hufton, Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

10. F.-A. Aulard, 'Le Club des Jacobins sous la monarchie', La Révolution française (vol. 22, n° 2, 1892), p. 111.

11. Charles Walton, Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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13. Augustin Challamel, Les clubs contre-révolutionnaires: Cercles, Comités, Sociétés, Salons, Réunions, Restaurants et Librairies (Paris : Cerf, Noblet, 1895); Paul Hanson, 'Monarchist Clubs and the Pamphlet Debate over Political Legitimacy in the Early Years of the French Revolution', French Historical Studies (vol. 21, n° 2, Spring 1998), p. 299-324.

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