

“Revolutions in Words”

Presented to the Political Science Department; CEU

12/8/2011

Sidney Tarrow

*September 17, 2011:* A group of young people carrying tents, cooking equipment, sleeping bags, and posters begins to camp out in a privately-owned but open-to-the-public square in downtown Manhattan, Zuccotti Square, near – but not in front of – the New York Stock Exchange. As they describe themselves:

Occupy Wall Street is a people-powered movement that began on September 17, 2011 in Liberty Square in Manhattan's Financial District, and has spread to over 100 cities in the United States and actions in over 1,500 cities globally. #ows is fighting back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process, and the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest recession in generations. The movement is inspired by popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, and aims to expose how the richest 1% of people are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future.<sup>1</sup>

Media-savvy and well-connected both nationally and internationally, the Wall Street protesters are soon joined by sympathizers around the country and from abroad.<sup>2</sup> By late October, it is possible to count some 250 odd sites in the United States

---

<sup>1</sup><http://occupywallst.org/about/>.

<sup>2</sup> A number of websites track the diffusion of the movement to various regions of the United States and abroad. Probably the most reliable account comes from *The Guardian*, which has been used for the analysis in Figure 1.1 and Table 1.1. Go to <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/interactive/2011/oct/18/occupy-protests-map-world>, visited on Nov. 22, 2011, and regularly updated. Particularly interesting is the link between OWS and the Spanish-born network called *Los indignados*, whose occupation of city squares spread across Europe and the Middle East roughly in parallel to those of their American homologue. For a brief account, see [http://www.clarin.com/mundo/indignados-Espana-extienden-Europa\\_0\\_484151851.html](http://www.clarin.com/mundo/indignados-Espana-extienden-Europa_0_484151851.html).

alone in which some form of occupation is being mounted. Figure 1 traces a cumulative line of beginning dates for these occupations in the United States between September 17<sup>th</sup> and October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Occupy Wall Street turns into the largest mass movement in American history since the protests against the Vietnam War.

Figure One here

The occupation of Zuccotti Square goes through a number of phases, punctuated by the positive support of trade unions and sympathetic public figures, and the periodic intervention of the New York Police Department, mayor Bloomberg of New York City, and the ever-present media, whose reporters are at first puzzled (“What do they *want?*”, asked more than one reporter),<sup>3</sup> then fascinated (some see it as a homologue to the Tea Party Movement), and, finally, bored. For their part, the occupiers busy themselves by keeping order in their rapidly-growing tent city, listening to speakers, whose words are spread by a unique human microphone chain, and, as winter creeps up on the toe of Manhattan, keeping warm.

In late November, a small radical group breaks away to march on Washington, but the attention of the media is diverted by the brutal pepper-spraying of a group of protesters by campus police in Davis, California and by the failure of the congressional

---

<sup>3</sup> It was in response to this rather meaningless question that the author offered a brief interpretation of the movement as one that aims at creating a presence, rather than asking for specific policy changes. For a summary, See [http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/trying-to-understand-ows/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+OTB+%28Outside+The+Beltway+|+OTB%29](http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/trying-to-understand-ows/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+OTB+%28Outside+The+Beltway+|+OTB%29).

“supercommittee” to come to an agreement about the nation’s deficit.<sup>4</sup> But sustained by their success in triggering solidary movements around the country, the Wall Street occupiers stick to their (non-violent) guns and refuse to be moved, even as a coordinated crackdown is organized by a conference call of mayors from the nation’s 18 largest cities.<sup>5</sup> As of November 22<sup>nd</sup>, the movement has diversified to squares, plazas, streets, public buildings and campuses around the country, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1. Main Locations of OWS Protests,  
September 17 – November 22, 2011

Location	Cities	Location	Cities
State Public Buildings	28	Parks	32
Federal Buildings	3	Plazas, Squares, and Commons	25
Banks	7	Streets	21
Chambers of Commerce	1	Downtown/Centers	13
University Campus	7	Bridges	1
Other	11		

Sources: Self-Reports from protest groups to *The Guardian* and national and local newspapers

<sup>4</sup> Go to <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2098948,00.html>

<sup>5</sup><http://capitoilette.com/2011/11/15/oakland-mayor-jean-quan-admits-cities-coordinated-crackdown-on-occupy-movement/>. It is still unclear at this writing whether the conference call was coordinated by the National Conference of Mayors or by the Homeland Security Agency.

*Note:* The table contains information on the location of OWS protests in 149 Cities (Coding Rate = 61.6%). The remaining reports did not specify the sites of the occupations.

### *A Century of Occupations*

The Occupy Wall Street protesters and their imitators around the country may have thought what they were doing was unique: and given the lassitude of most of the American public since the beginning of the financial crisis of 2008, it was indeed new and innovative. Particularly innovative was the rapid creation of an online network of supporters and communication, which helped to movement to spread and gain support around the world. And its family resemblance to occupation of Tahrir Square and other public spaces in the Middle East and North Africa earlier in the year lent it a resonance it might otherwise have lacked.

But if we look back over the last century, we see numerous other cases in which protesters used the tactic of occupying public space. The Free Online dictionary defines the occupation as "the act of occupying or taking possession of a building; "occupation of a building without a certificate of occupancy is illegal". The Merriam Webster Dictionary dates the term to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and to the Middle English word *occupacioun*, which came into English from the Anglo-French *occupaciun*, and from the Latin *occupation-*, *occupatio*, from *occupare*.<sup>6</sup>The first use of the term to signify the occupation as a form of protest was probably in Italy after World War One, when workers in Turin and elsewhere occupied their factories (Spriano 1975). The tactic

---

<sup>6</sup><http://www.thefreedictionary.com/occupation>; <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/occupation>

moved to France in the 1930s and was adopted with the label “sit-down strike” in the United States (Piven and Cloward 1977: ch. 3).

Occupations of public and private facilities marked the Events of May in France in 1968 – most notably, the occupation of the Odéon theatre (Schnapp and Vidal-Naquet 1971), and in universities and factories in Italy’s “long May” (Tarrow 1989), while, in America, the tactic of the “sit-in” was being perfected by African Americans and college students (Andrews 2004; Lipset and Wolin 1971). Various spinoffs of the sit-in (eg. “sit-out”, “be-in”) punctuated the end of the sixties cycle on the part of movements of all ideological stripes until, in the 1980s, American students opposing their universities’ investments in South Africa adopted the “shantytown” tactic (Soule 1979, 1999. At the same time, European youth looking for places to live in increasingly expensive central cities developed the form of the building occupation or “squat”. Figure 2 tracks the use of the term “building occupation” through an Ngram analysis of Google Books in English to illustrate how one version of the occupation rose and fell in the wake of the cycle of contention of the 1960s.

Figure 2 here

Occupations could have concrete material goals, as was the case in the Italian factory occupations and the European “squats”; they could have mostly symbolic meaning, as was the case for the “shantytowns” on American college campuses in the 1980s; or they could be community-building institutions with their own rituals, routines, and solidarities, as was the case for Italian university occupations (Tarrow 2012: ch. 6);

or it could combine all three, which we can see in one of the most interesting transnational protests of the last decade.

*Evian, May 2003:* A summit of the international G-8 nations takes place in Evian Switzerland. As protests are announced, Evian is surrounded by a broad no-go zone by the police, to prevent protesters impeding the summit, as they have done recently in Seattle (1999), Genoa (2001) and elsewhere. Outside the summit, protesters engage in conferences, meet and march, and hold a "Third-World Debt Court". Street performances and road blockades are staged on both sides of the French/Swiss border. *Responding to the police strategy of walling protesters off from the summit scene, protesters construct "countervillages", free spaces or temporary "liberated zones", "where capitalism and liberalism – together with racism and sexism" are discussed and contested"* (della Porta and Tarrow 2012:4, 14).

#### WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?

My listeners may wonder why I have chosen to begin this talkk with a potted history of the use of the term "occupation" and its cognate terms "sit-in, "shantytown," and "countervillage." There are at least five things that the stories above can tell us about the language of contentious politics:

*First,* words that emerge as symbols of contention are seldom made out of whole cloth: they have their sources in ordinary speech, popular folktales or music, commercial media or huckstering, or previous experience of war or social conflict.

*Second*, over time, the meanings of words change, merge, divide and diversify – nowhere more than in the history of contentious language. Historian Daniel Rodgers observes that “though words constrain their users, hobble political desires, nudge them down socially worn channels, they are in other circumstances radically unstable” (1987: 10).

*Third*, words are constructed and re-constructed to meet different strategic contingencies. “Political words take their meaning.” Rodgers argues, “from the tasks to which their users bend them” (Ibid.). Some of this construction and re-construction is the work of deliberate symbol-making and symbol-manipulation. But social construction also evolves from the interaction between contingent action situations and the stock of symbols available to elites and ordinary people. Ordinary people, Charles Tilly maintained, tell *standard stories* that embody ideas concerning what forms of action and interaction are feasible, desirable, and efficacious (2002:9).

*Fourth*, some words survive and diffuse as symbols of contention while others disappear or are absorbed into ordinary language. What was it about the word “occupation” that gave it the power to survive through decades of movement discourse, while other terms – for example, “shantytown” -- seem to have been limited to particular times and places (Soule 1999)?

*Finally*, although we usually think of words only as the expression of something, words can mobilize, unite, divide, and even conquer. “Words are tools, often weapons,” writes Rodgers: “the vocabulary of politics is contested terrain and always has been”



(1987: 11). Like the words “barricade”, “strike”, “boycott”, and “revolution”, the term “occupation” mobilized people around commonly-known symbols and brought them together in episodes of contentious collective action. Nowhere more than in revolutions do we see how words that emerge from contentious episodes survive, transform, and diffuse to other revolutionary situations.

### *From the Old to the New Repertoire*

During the 1780s, as the legitimacy of France's Old Regime was dissolving, a series of scandal trials were widely publicized (Lusebrink 1983). In the most notorious of these, the Clereaux affair, a servant who had resisted the advances of her master was accused of robbery and hauled into court. But not only was the case decided in favor of the servant (shades of DSK!) but a wave of popular outrage against the courts and the venal master surged across the country. The emotion that followed was described in terms typical of the period:

What violences! What tumults! What scandals! A furious multitude filled all the streets, straining to tear down the Thibault house with an ax, then threatening to burn it; covering the family with curses and outrages; almost sacrificing them to their hatred (quoted in Lusebrink 1983, 175-76).

Like much of collective action during the last decades of the Old Regime, this was no wild and formless *jacquerie*. It drew upon a well-known repertoire of contemporary forms of collective action and was organized around a common theme—the corruption of the courts and the innocence of the exploited. This repertoire included

grain seizures, the burning down of houses, forced illuminations, "*charivaris*", and a number of other familiar routines that Charles Tilly classified as the "traditional repertoire" (1986, 1995). France was not alone: "From the time of Wilkes forward," E.P. Thompson writes of Britain, "effigy burning, the hanging of a boot from a gallows; the illumination of windows (or the breaking of those without illumination); the untiling of a house": these were the common coin of contention in the eighteenth century (1990:67). Words like *charivari*, *emotion*, and rough music were symbols that people recognized, responded to, and governments were prepared to repress. As a modern interpreter has put it: "The public responses to the Clereaux Affair... would be inconceivable without the presence of an adequate *mental receptivity* within the contemporaneous society" (Lusebrink 1983, 375; emphasis mine).

Yet only a few years later, France was engulfed by a revolution in which an entirely new language of contention began to appear. Alongside continuing *charivari*-like episodes used to punish wrongdoers and those who had broken community norms, words like *assemblée*, *Jacobin*, *aristocrate*, *patriote*, and *citoyen* diffused throughout popular politics. If "critical junctures" and "constituent moments" are the source of changes in repertoires, we should find the most important sources of such changes in revolutions. As French historian, Maurice Agulhlon observes; "the main effect of the Revolution was to take iconography out of the studios and to make its task more complicated". By broadening the scale of political participation beyond a narrow elite,

revolutions give greater importance to simple, clear and inspiring messages (Aguilhon 1981:13).

Revolutionaries have always used symbols to designate the boundaries between themselves and their opponents and to inspire their followers to action. It is enough to think of the Reformation iconoclasts who physically destroyed the central symbols of the Roman church – images and statues – to establish the boundaries between their new faith and the old orthodoxy (Besançon 2009). But it was only after the widespread diffusion of literacy and the advent of cheap printing that words as such became deliberately-designed tools for revolutionary mobilization.<sup>7</sup>

Not only that: these forms – and the words that describe them – reappeared each time familiar forms of collective action begin to seem like a revolution. This was what Alexis de Tocqueville discovered when he saw men systematically putting up barricades outside his house in February, 1848. “These barricades,” which resembled those that had been built during the 1830 revolution, he wrote, “were skillfully built by a small number of men who worked industriously – not like criminals fearful of being caught *in flagrante delicto*, but like good workmen who wanted to do their job expeditiously and well” (1987:39).

But there is a problem for the analyst of the diffusion of revolutionary symbols: much of the evidence comes from historians who tend to focus on a single country and

---

<sup>7</sup> In America, Bernard Bailyn (1967) and Michael Kammen (1986) and in France, Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche (1989) have established how fundamental were pamphlets, broadsides, newspapers – and even pornography – in delegitimizing authority and establishing a new, popular legitimacy.

often only on a single revolution.<sup>8</sup> This leaves us in the unenviable position of often having to infer diffusion from one revolution to another from the co-appearance of the same terms, without direct evidence of the actual connections between them. For example, in Part One, I will find a family resemblance between the use of the term “patriot” by the revolutionary movement in the American colonies and the “Patriot” Whigs in England, but have not yet found evidence of a direct link between them.<sup>9</sup>

But sometimes, as we will see, there *are* connective fibers: such as the evidence that revolutionaries from one country were reading about other revolutions; travelled from one revolutionary country to another; or marked themselves as heirs of other traditions by explicitly adopting their terms of discourse and forms of contention (Anderson 1991:80).

This paper will examine three such terms: the term “patriot”, which appears in different forms in France, the Netherlands, and America in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; the word “convention,” which dates from the English Glorious Revolution of the seventeenth century and spread to the American colonies and then to France in the next century; and the term “terrorism,” which has two meanings, the first derived from

---

<sup>8</sup> For example, Agulhon, in tracing the etymology of the “Marianne” symbol in French revolutionary iconography, returns to Roman antiquity and ignores the important source of the female symbol of liberty in the American revolutionary tradition. Compare the iconography in Kammen 1986, pp. 175-180.

<sup>9</sup> In a personal message, Isaac Kramnick points out that many colonial pamphlets of the 1770s cited Bolingbroke, author of *The Patriot King*, and associated with the “patriot Whigs” – more commonly called the “country party”. They cite Bolingbroke and the country party as enemies of executive despotism. See Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 1992, especially the pamphlets that cite St. John, Henry, Viscount Bolingbroke. I am grateful to Professor Kramnick for this information.

its adoption as official policy by the Jacobins when they came to power in France in 1792 and the second from Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The second meaning – non-state violence – overwhelmed the first, which had tended to disappear even in the country of its birth.

## PATRIOTS

As the Old Regime approached its end, the French term "*patriote*" was first used to erect a boundary between supporters of the revolution and their enemies.<sup>10</sup> It, of course, derives from the French word *patrie*, which was at first used to designate the town or village where one was born and only later came to be refer to national communities.<sup>11</sup> Surprisingly, however, although the root of the term was French, the term "patriot" in its revolutionary usage made its way to France through a circuitous route. We first find it a half-century before the revolution as an adjective used for the Whigs who opposed Walpole's long tenure in office after 1725. Even after transmuting from "Patriot Whigs" into the Patriot Party, the goals of these dissidents remained largely negative and hardly revolutionary. But when the term crossed the Atlantic after mid-century, probably through the medium of a newspaper, *The Craftsman*, it took on a more subversive meaning.

---

<sup>10</sup> Note, however, that the term appears in French political thought in the 1770s, when part of a ceremony in the election of the king which appeared to require the consent of the people was suppressed. See Keith Michael Baker, *The Invention of the French Revolution* 1990, pp. 110-111, for this episode.

<sup>11</sup> This and further French etymological information comes from *Le Trésor de la langue française informatisé* at <http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm>, visited August 22, 2011.

The colonists who rebelled against British control called themselves Whigs, because they identified with the Radical and Patriot Whigs in England who favored more lenient colonial policies than the governing Tories. But they soon turned the adjective “patriot” into a noun to designate those who were willing to take vigorous action against the mother country. “Patriots,” according to Gordon Wood, “were not simply those who loved their country, but those who were free of dependent connections” (Wood 2002:94). Beginning with opposition to the Stamp Act and the non-importation agreements against British duties in the 1760s, ordinary people began to organize themselves into patriotic associations to oppose British policies.<sup>12</sup> Although its British usage had no particular social texture (in fact, the “Patriot Whigs” were mainly upper-class gentlemen), in America the term took on a plebeian ring – at least to their opponents. “The patriots, Tories charged, seemed to regard as important ‘no law, no friendship, no alliance, no ties of blood,’ and to be bent on dissolving all society ‘under the specious show of an exalted kind of virtue’”.<sup>13</sup> In Robert Munford’s Virginia play, *The Patriots*, loyalists “betray their uneasiness with electoral developments in the colony, ‘when coxcombs and jockies can impose themselves upon it for men of learning’” (Ibid. 1991).

Despite the plebeian association of the term in America, it spread to the European middle class through the press. Godechot points out that 29 German newspapers

---

<sup>12</sup> The first to use the term “patriotic” were probably the mechanics of Philadelphia, who formed a “Patriotic Society”, the first nonreligious pressure group in Pennsylvania’s history (Wood 1991:244).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Gordon Wood, in his *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991:214) from the Boston *Evening Post*, April 13, 1767.

founded in the 1770s used the word “patriotic” on their mastheads. The new American state constitutions were published at least five times in France after 1776 and once in Holland (Godechot 1965:44-5). It was in that country that the term “patriot” made its first appearance in capital letters – as the name for the name of the movement that launched the Batavian revolution of the 1780s.<sup>14</sup> Here the influence of the American revolution was felt in both high and low politics: high, from when, in 1780, the Dutch were “dragged willy-nilly into war with England”, because the colonists had negotiated a secret commercial treaty with the city of Amsterdam; and low, when the conflict elicited a pamphlet war between the Orangists, who favored peace with England, “and the so-called Patriots, who favored the American cause” (Te Brake 1985:203).

Ironically, it was the American would-be ambassador to the Netherlands, John Adams, who was present at the founding of the Dutch Patriot Revolution, and helped make the connection. Arriving in the Netherlands in 1781, Adams formed an alliance with “a group of political dissidents who, like the American rebels, called themselves “patriots” (ibid.). These dissidents launched a pamphlet war to insist on Adams’ recognition by the Court. His chief Dutch ally in his effort to gain recognition for the new Republic was a republican, J.D. van der Capellen, “an outspoken advocate of the American cause whose radical politics had gotten him expelled from the provincial Estates of Overijssel” (Te Brake 1985:203). With a clear republican reference, Van der

---

<sup>14</sup> The term “patriot” was first used by the Dutch during the war against Spain in the sixteenth century and referred – as in French – to “love of country. It was only during the Batavian revolution that it took on the meaning of an anti-royal revolutionary movement, as in America. See Schama 1977 and Philippa 2009.

Capellen published an attack on the House of Orange, *Aan het Volk* (To the People), urging the Dutch to

...take up arms, all of you, choose yourselves those who must command you, and proceed with modesty and composure, *just like the people of America* where not a single drop of blood was shed before the English attacked them, and Jehovah, the God of Liberty, who led the Israelites out of the house of bondage and made them a free people will surely support our good cause (quoted and translated by Te Brake 1985:204; emphasis added).

The use of the local petition drive turned out to be the modular form of action of these Dutch Patriots, and they went from success to local success until, in 1787, the Stadhouder called in Prussian troops, funded with English money, to restore his rule (Te Brake 1985:199). At that point, and threatened by Orangist mobs who were out for revenge, the leading Patriots escaped to the Austrian Netherlands and to France, where we again find the term “patriot” in revolutionary guise.

### *From Patriotes to Citoyens*

It is unclear why middle and upper-class French liberals began to call themselves “patriots” in the 1780s but, when they did, it took on the militant republican meaning similar to the American and Dutch examples – including willingness to take up arms on



behalf of the *patrie*.<sup>15</sup> The link to the Dutch and American revolutions was explicit. For example, Godechot remarks on the close connection between the Girondins and the “foreign Patriots who had taken refuge in France, especially from the Netherlands”.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the 1770s, enthusiasm for the American cause had been widespread, almost adulatory. “Here in America,” R.R. Palmer points out, “were men who could be noble, who were both lovers of humanity and fervid and determined patriots” (1940:108).

By the 1780s the term began to invest official discourse.<sup>17</sup> This led to the fateful decision of July 5, 1788 “authorizing all Frenchmen to publish their views on the meetings of the Estates” which, in effect, “cemented the party of the Patriots” (ibid.). Among these was a certain Marquis de Lafayette, who probably brought the term back with him from America, where he had served briefly in Washington’s army, and may have popularized its use among his friends in the clubs that were pushing for the constitutionalization of the monarchy. But we also find it among radicals, like Robespierre, whose first pamphlet, in the spring of 1798, was called *Les ennemies de la patrie démasqués* (ibid.). “A good revolutionary was called a patriot,” writes Palmer,

---

<sup>15</sup> The *Trésor de la langue française* defines the term as “One who loves his country and is willing to take up arms on its defense”. <http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm>, visited August 22, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Godechot points out that the ministry of foreign affairs was given to Lebrun-Tondu, who had connections with Dutch patriots from when, before 1789, he was the managing editor of one of the most important Patriotic journals in the Austrian Netherlands (1965:161).

<sup>17</sup> In 1787, Palmer found a circular of the Academy of Chalons-sur-Marne offering a prize “for the best essay encouraging patriotism in a monarchy” (1940:108). Godechot writes that Loménie de Brienne, in 1788, “decided to support those who were beginning to be called ‘Patriots’ or the ‘National Party’ after the example of the American and Dutch revolutionaries” (Godechot 1965:85).

“and his qualities were called virtue, which meant public spirit and a love of his country” (Ibid.).

After the first flush of revolutionary success, and especially after the defeat of the Girondins, the execution of the King, and the ascendancy of the Jacobins, the term patriot appears to give way to a new one: “citizens.” The term “*citoyen*” was not unknown under the Old Regime, having appeared in a controversial pamphlet of 1775 called *Le Catéchisme du citoyen*, which “emphasized the need for a citizen body fully conscious of its rights and obligations” (Baker 1990:123). Of explicit or implicit Rousseauian derivation, the *Catéchisme* called for the nation to exercise sovereign legislative power (pp. 123-124). But in its post-1789 incarnation, the term came to be associated with natural rights, that is “the exercise of political rights as the expression of liberty in society” (Vovelle 2004:20).

Yet there is an ambivalence in the universality of the term “citoyen” from the beginning. The Abbé Sieyès, that paragon of Third Estate rights, argued, on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1789, that “all the inhabitants of a country must exercise the rights of a passive citizen...but not all of them have the right to take part actively in the choice of public policy: not everyone is an active citizen” (Ibid.). The first revolutionary constitution only gave the vote to property-holders and, of course, only to male property-holders. And while the Convention of 1792 was chosen by universal manhood suffrage, the Constitution of the Year III returned to the limited suffrage. It was in the popular societies and sectional assemblies that the term “citizen” became a substitute for

“monsieur” and a symbolic mark of austerity, simplicity, republican virtue, disdain for the aristocracy (Hunt 1984) and, ultimately, a term of division and differentiation.

## CONVENTION AND CONTENTION

If “patriots” became “citizens” in the course of the French revolution, and if that term was a source of division and differentiation, the opposite was the case for the word “convention,” which was progressively institutionalized and routinized after its origin in 17<sup>th</sup> century England. We encounter the term in three revolutions: the British “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, the American revolutionary and constitutional period, and, in its most radical form in the French revolutionary Convention of 1792-1794. The term declined in use in Britain after its spectacular entry in 1689; shifted to a legal concept in France; and became a routine mechanism for constitutional revision before relapsing into the gaudy ritual of the presidential nominating convention in America.

But there were differences, even in the Convention’s origins: the English gentlemen who met in a Convention Parliament to overthrow a king were uneasy with the illegality of the procedure and never went back to the mechanism again; the Americans who used it to create a federal Constitution did so in the name of natural rights; and the French, who thought they were copying the American model in calling a Convention that would write a constitution actually produced a government by convention.

*England: Without the People*

In English, the word “convention” has a long etymology, deriving from the latin word *conventio*, an assembly of people, which led to the medieval latin term *conventus*, for coming together, to the French term *convention*, which meant both an agreement and a generally understood way of doing things.<sup>18</sup> Thus the term’s contemporary double meaning: something is “conventional” when we expect it to happen; and “conventions” are regularly-scheduled events at which decisions are made.

But nothing could have been less “conventional” and more irregular than the meeting of English parliamentarians in February 1689 (Caplan 1988; Harris 2006). “So far as the English were concerned,” writes Bruce Ackerman, “the ‘Convention’ was a name for a legally imperfect body, such as one or both Houses of Parliament meeting without the consent of the King” (1994:1060-1061). The Catholic King James II was in flight, James’s “loyal parliament” would not have agreed to his abdication, and the Pretender, William of Orange, and his wife Mary, had not yet arrived in London. Protestant members of Parliament asked William to summon an assembly to justify the removal of the Catholic King. This assembly was the “Convention Parliament,” which asked William, along with his English wife, Mary, to take the throne.

But these English gentlemen – many of them Peers, clearly uneasy about how they had seen King James off the premises -- decided that “the Convention’s work required ratification by a *legally perfect* Parliament, with William and Mary sitting in their proper place” (Ackerman: 1061). Anything less would have been illegitimate! And

---

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.myetymology.com/english/convention.html>

so, on February 23, 1689, William converted the Convention into a regular Parliament which duly chose him and Mary as dual monarchs and passed the Resolution of Right establishing Protestantism at the state religion. So uneasy was the British elite with their illegal action that the term "convention", in the sense of an irregularly-convened assembly with constitutional powers, largely disappears from British politics after 1689.<sup>19</sup>

### *The United States: With the People*

Not so in the United States. Here, conventions – along with committees, popular juries and crowds -- arose as "a continuation of the revolutionary tradition of popular constitutionalism" (Frank 2010:24; Wood 2002: 144-145). The patriots who called conventions as instruments of revolutionary transition did bow courteously in the direction of their British forbears, "following the historical example of the Glorious Revolution, which for the colonists epitomized constitutional change through popular action" (Frank:26). But in contrast to the British reticence to accord the Convention legitimacy, it was the very illegality of the convention that gave it a superior claim in America. As Jason Frank writes; "it provided the theological supplement of that which is 'beyond' or 'prior to' the law" (ibid.).

The Articles of Confederation, which more or less regulated the states' relationships until the federal Constitution was passed, required a unanimous vote of all thirteen states for their amendment. But the founders were not willing to follow this

---

<sup>19</sup> The exception that demonstrates the marginality of the term to the British political tradition was the convening of a "People's Convention" by the British Communist Party in 1940-41.

endless and possibly futile procedure: They “blandly excluded state legislatures from *any* role in ratification, and went on to assert that the approval of special constitutional conventions meeting in only nine of the thirteen states would suffice to validated the Convention’s effort to speak for the People” (Ackerman 1991:41).

Logically enough, it was in the Massachusetts ratifying convention that the convention took on its classical American form: extralegal but constitutive of the authority of the people. Delaware and Pennsylvania were the first to call special conventions to draft constitutions in 1776 but neither was submitted to the voters (Ward 1995:277). It was Massachusetts, which had had a constitution since 1691, that in 1778, submitted a draft constitution to the towns for approval. It failed for lack of a bill of rights, for narrow representation, and for insufficient separation of powers (Ibid.). It was only when a certain John Adams redrafted a new one that was sent to the towns and approved in 1780. This was followed by Jefferson’s *Notes on Virginia*, in which he argued that for government to be legitimate, “the people must delegate persons with special powers....special conventions to form and fix their governments” (ibid).

The constitutional convention that produced the federal Constitution in 1787 was originally called only to resolve border disputes between a few states under the unworkable Articles of Confederation, its delegates unexpectedly began to write a super-legal document, “a machine,” in historian Michael Kammen’s words, “that would go of itself” (Kammen 1987).

The tradition continued through the nineteenth century in a cascade of state conventions. Here, unlike the case in Britain, calling a convention effectively proclaimed “that a group of patriots in a Freedom Tavern might speak for the People with *greater* democratic legitimacy than any assembly whose authority arose only from its legal form” (Ackerman 1995:1061). The point is not simply that the Americans were more daring than their British predecessors: The convention was the expression of a country that came to take the idea of natural rights so seriously that its founding document referred to “inalienable rights”. Rather than being built on the idea of restoring historical rights – as in Britain -- the convention became the act of a legally-anomalous body that “paradigmatically expressed the higher-lawmaking will of the American People” (Ackerman, p. 1061).

At the heart of this departure was not less legalism than in Britain – on the contrary, the majority of the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention were lawyers; it was the growing conviction that claiming the “Rights of Englishmen” was not going to get them very far. By 1776, writes Daniel Rodgers,

the claim that men were by original nature free and independent of each other...possessed of a fund of natural, original rights which their descendants could turn back to and reclaim whenever the scales fell from their eyes – all this (to the alarm of many of the more cautious patriots) reverberated up and down the colonies (Rodgers 1987:53).

“All power is vested in, and consequently derived from the people,” the Virginia Convention of 1776 had proclaimed” (Ibid., p. 85). From that time onward, Americans embraced the convention as the mechanism through which natural rights would be brought down to earth. The illegality of the Philadelphia convention did not deter its members from making the claim – proclaimed in the Constitution’s opening line -- that they spoke as “We the People.” That claim came close to hoisting them by their own petard. For once having made the claim that they represented The People, the delegates had no choice but to consult them on the outcome of their deliberations. “Only in one extraordinary political act,” writes Rodgers, “the popular ratification of their constitutions – was the grandeur of the slogan of the people’s sovereignty joined to a deed reflecting the grandeur of their words (ibid., p. 86).

But ratification was a near thing, and it took all the eloquence of Hamilton, Madison, and Jay -- plus a good deal of crude politicking – to entice the states of the South to enter the Union. And after that first “hazardous experience with constitutional plebiscites, the framers of American politics abandoned the gesture [of popular ratification] in ill-disguised haste” (p. 87). It was only in the Jacksonian period, as the suffrage expanded and a new generation of leaders and voters arose, that constitutional acknowledgement of the people’s sovereignty was expressed in a wave of state constitutional conventions wedded to a rise in popular politics. “Turned loose in a constitutional convention,” Rodgers notes,



talk of the People served as a powerful instrument of constitutional dismantlement; on the stump the same words formed a powerful language of mobilization.... The rhetoric of a sovereign people, possessed of unitary will, and the practice of partisan political mobilization were two sides of the same phenomenon (p. 89).

The pace and the rhetoric of state constitutional conventions reflects both this wave of populism and its contradictions. "Between 1829 and 1880, it was an unusual political year that did not witness the calling of a revisory state constitutional convention somewhere in the United States", writes Rodgers (*ibid*). "Between 1844 and 1853, when the convention era was at its apogee, more than half the existing states summoned a constitutional convention into being" (p. 94). Figure 3 traces the number of these conventions and their general geographic provenance: the industrializing states of the Northeast; the slaveholding states of the South; the "old" new states of the Middle West, and the "new" new states of the West. "In the constitutional convention", concludes Rodgers, "that abstraction called the People found its reification" (p. 96).

Figure 3 here

But was it new men, anxious to push open the doors of power by revising state constitutions, who called for constitutional revision? Or was it those who – possessing social and economic power – demanded the legitimation of that power by constitutional modification? Populism in America – as we have had occasion to learn in recent years – has always had more than one face. In Rhode Island, in what came to be called "the

Dorr War, a constitutional convention was fed by a challenge to the power of vested agrarian interests by new men who had made money in the first years of the Republic and demanded legislative representation for themselves and for others" (Rodgers, pp. 102-106). But in Kentucky during the same period, when western debtors pushed for a constitutional convention to challenge the power of the banks, the convention that resulted in 1850 actually occupied itself with passing a number of articles aimed at preserving slavery (Ibid., pp. 97-99).

Excluding the conventions held by new states entering the Union, a larger proportion of state constitutional conventions came from the South than from the North and were dominated by slaveholders whose leaders were fearful that an anti-slave national coalition would strip them of their property. When Lincoln's election seemed to guarantee that such an assault was imminent, under the same natural rights doctrine that had inspired the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776, the slave states set in place a revolutionary government under the banner "We the people of the Confederate States" (Rodgers, p. 109). That experience did not end the use of the convention to revise state constitutions. But its use by the southern states to secede from the union tainted the term. After the Civil War, "Northern efforts to appease Southern demands were often expressed in proposals for extraordinary 'conventions'. In response, radical Republicans "sought to discredit the very idea that 'conventions' might legitimately revise preexisting constitutional procedures" (Ackerman 1995:1062, note. 86). The ultimate fate of the convention was to transmute into the most institutionalized

expression of conventional politics: the presidential nominating convention (Chase 1973).

*France: Beyond the People*

Not so in France. If the American convention ended up conventionally nominating Presidential candidates, the French one – at least in the short run – led to a revolutionary government.<sup>20</sup> A few short years after the Americans organized the convention that produced the federal Constitution, the French Provisional Executive Council “decreed election of a new constitutional assembly to be elected by universal suffrage” (Godechot 1965: 156). Godechot links this decree to its American predecessor, a claim I cannot yet verify (Ibid.). But what was certainly true is that, following the imprisonment of the King, a Convention was elected by manhood suffrage to abolish the Monarchy, maintain the institutions that had been created by the Constituent Assembly, and write a new and more democratic constitution (Ibid, p. 160). That Constitution established universal male suffrage, proclaimed the right of self-determination of peoples, and affirmed the social rights of the citizens (Godechot 1965: 165-6). But in the conditions of civil strife and external attack that the Convention faced after 1792, the Constitution of the Year I (1793) was never put into effect.

But, in the interim, the Convention became the country’s legislative institution, ordering the *levée en masse*, fixing prices, voting the execution of the King, and

---

<sup>20</sup> It is remarkable that Mona Ozouf and Francois Furet, in their thousand page *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, published on the bicentennial of the revolution did not include an entry for “Convention,” despite the fact that the Convention was for some time the actual legislative body of the Republic.

establishing the committee – the Committee of Public Safety, dominated by the Jacobins – that instituted and oversaw the Terror, and governed the country until its overthrow in July 1794. Even after the overthrow of the committee and the execution of its leading figure, Maximilien Robespierre, the Convention continued as the country's central governing institution in its "Thermidorian" incarnation. What had been intended as a temporary constitution-writing assembly, like the Philadelphia convention, turned into an institution, governing in the name of popular sovereignty and instituting the Terror.

#### FROM "THE TERROR" TO TERRORISM

"The Terror", writes Michel Vovelle, "proceeds from revolutionary violence of which it is at the same time the theorized expression and, in a certain way, the negation, or at least its management (Vovelle 2004:110)." What can the historian of the French revolution have meant by this paradoxical statement? The first thing to understand is that "The Terror" was a system of repression put into force by the Convention during the most radical phase of the French revolution only for an 18-month period, before the Jacobins, who were its primary implementers, themselves fell victim to it (Gough 2010: ch. 8). The second is it should not be extended to the *mass* violence of 1791-2, when the Parisian crowd was demanding the end of the constitutional

monarchy, or to all forms of violence in the course of the revolution, beginning in 1789.<sup>21</sup>

Much like historians of the French revolutions, contemporary students of terrorism disagree over the scope of the term, to the point that one student, Charles Tilly, in his book, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (2003), discarded the term altogether because of the futility of distinguishing it from political violence in general. But the term spread remarkably quickly in the nineteenth century, with the growth of gunpowder, bomb-making capacity, cheap travel and communications. Table 2 shows us how remarkably similar were the terms adopted for organized violence across Europe with rough estimates – based on dictionary information – of when the term first appeared in each language. So common has the term become, and with so many meanings that as precise a scholar as Charles Tilly threw up his hands and decided not to use it at all (2003).

---

<sup>21</sup> François Furet argued, in brief, that before becoming a set of repressive institutions used by the Republic to liquidate its adversaries and establish its domination on the basis of fear, the Terror was a characteristic feature of the mentality of revolutionary activism along with the related idea that the Revolution was threatened by an aristocratic plot that only prompt measures could thwart (Furet 1989:137). Furet's extension of this linkage to the dawn of the revolution reflects, not an empirical statement, but an inference that seems to have been based more on his campaign to "end" the revolution in 1989 than on actual fact. For a more balanced view and a differentiated account of the various sources and forms of violence during the revolution, see Martin 2006. For an account of the revisionist campaign to "finish" the revolution, see Kaplan 1993.

Table 2

“Terrorism” in Major European Languages and Date of First Recorded Appearance

Country	translation	Estimated Date of First Appearance <sup>22</sup>
England	terrorism	@
Italy	terrorismo	@
Germany	terrorismus	@
Netherlands	terrorisme	Late 1870s
Portugal	terrorismo	@
Russia	terrorizm	1880
Spain	terrorismo	@

We need not go so far as Tilly. Terrorism is the deliberate use of political violence with two main derivations:

- The first, like The Terror in the French revolution, is *state terror*: “Government by intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power in France during the Revolution of 1789-94” (OED Compact Edition, II, 1971, p. 216). Although it was a response to the non-state violence of the street in the midst of civil and international war, The Terror was clearly a deliberate policy of the

---

<sup>22</sup> Dutch: M. Philippa et al. 2009. Other sources to be added.

revolutionary French state that went well beyond previous cases of official violence in its deliberate, systematic, and legalized destruction of political and social enemies. State terror was indeed adopted by the totalitarian states of the twentieth century, but between the French experience and the bloody reigns of Hitler and Stalin, few regimes were as organized around the project of purification to the same degree as the First French Republic.

- But by the middle of the nineteenth century, another usage began to appear in Europe, after the Mazzinian Italian, Carlo Pisacane, coined the term “propaganda of the deed” in a political testament he published after failing in an assault on the southern Italian town of Sapri (

Pisacane never used the term “terrorism” but the term “propaganda of the deed” diffused rapidly across anarchist circles in Europe, mostly from west to east (Chaliand 2002). In Russian, it seems to have been first used in the “French” sense by the exiled social democrat, Alexander Herzen, to criticize the policies of Peter the Great. A figurative usage came from Russian conservatives in the 1860s who condemned radicals like Chernyshevsky, who was said to have “terrorized” young minds with his novel, *What Is to Be Done?* (Verhoeven 2008: 101), published in 1863. In the same decade came the first serious attempt at Tsaricide, by a penniless aristocrat, Dimitrii Karakazov. Karakazov’s attempt on

the Tsar came to be considered as the “prologue” to revolutionary terrorism.<sup>23</sup> But the term seems to have come from a of The People’s Will, Nikolai Morozov, who published a pamphlet called “The Terrorist Struggle” and from G. Tarnovsky, who wrote “Terrorism and Routine,” both in 1880. The term passed into common usage as *terrorizm* when the group that successfully assassinated Tsar Alexander in 1881 identified themselves as “terrorists” (Verhoeven 2008: 100-101).<sup>24</sup> At that point, terrorism took on its modern meaning: “A policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted” (OED 1971, p. 216).

Russian terrorism had a double goal: first, to terrorize those in power who were attacked; and second, to demonstrate to the people the power of the deed. Albert Camus, in his play, *Les Justes*, captures this double goal, in the words of one of the members of a revolutionary socialist group that is planning to execute a Grand Duke:

All of Russia will know that Grand Duke Serge has been executed  
by a bombe by the combat group of the Revolutionay Socialist  
Party to hasten the liberation of the Russian people. The imperial  
court will also learn that we are determined to exercise terror until

---

<sup>23</sup> Claudia Verhoeven reports that in his writings Karakazov used the term “factual propaganda,” which suggests at least that he had heard of Pisacane, who first used the term “propaganda of the deed” in 1857, but neither, to my knowledge, ever referred to themselves as ‘terrorists.’

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Claudia Verhoeven for help in tracking down this Russian itinerary. For a detailed analysis of the Karakazov episode, see her *The Odd Man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, Modernity, and the Birth of Terrorism* (2009).



the land has been returned to the people. Yes, Stepan, the hour approaches (Camus 1977:19).

Because terrorism was adopted by individuals and small groups and did not require a formal organization, its diffusion was in some ways easier than that of its competitors on the Left – the Socialists and Social democrats. The Russian model diffused broadly to areas where primitive capitalism had barely penetrated largely peasant societies – to Italy, Spain, and the possessions of the Ottoman Empire. But it even spread to the United States, where President William McKinley fell to a bullet fired by anarchist Leon Czolgosz in 1901. From that point on, the original “state terror” meaning declined and the second usage – the employment of methods of violence by non-state actors to strike terror amongst their opponents --became dominant.

And what of France, the country to which we owe the original term “The Terror”? Even here, despite its long experience with the first meaning of the term – state terror—it is the second meaning – the use of organized violence by non-state actors – that has come to dominate the culture, especially in the past decade. Figure 4 demonstrates that “terrorisme” has increased in use in French culture, as the French original – *La Terreur* – at first remained steady and eventually began to decline.

Figure 4 here

1688/2011

This paper has not claimed to be a history of either the origin or the diffusion of revolutionary practices, non even of the three terms – patriots, conventions, terror/terrorism – that I have examined. My goals have been more modest, but still pretty bold:

*First*, I tried to show how the words employed by revolutionaries often emerge from ordinary language and from routine politics. When some eighteenth century country gentlemen used the term “patriot” to describe themselves, they were trying to draw a boundary between themselves – “patriot Whigs” – and the foreigners who had come to England with the Hanoverians and the corrupt regime of Horace Walpole; they were decidedly *not* attempting to produce a template that American, Dutch, or French rebels would use to contest monarchy in general.

*Second*, I wanted to show that – once employed successfully in one revolution, terms like patriots, conventions, and terror diffused elsewhere. The American patriots who called constitutional conventions were certainly thinking of the Convention Parliament – at least as first; and the French Republicans who elected The Convention in 1792 to write a new constitution probably had in mind the Philadelphia Convention that had produced its own Constitution only a few years earlier. As for the Russian terrorists of the 1870s, although theirs was a

non-state, rather than statist form of terror, their call for purification through the execution of elites had more than a whiff of the Jacobins' reign of virtue.

But, *third*, once set loose from their origins, words like patriot, convention, and terror took on new meanings as they intersected with new political contexts. Take the convention: a hesitant and illegal expedient to get rid of one King and welcome another under the mantle of natural rights it became a font of supra-legal authority in America and a revolutionary institution in France. As for terrorism, we know how much more lethal and more widespread that practice has become in our own century.

*Finally*, revolutionary terms not only travel, but inspire and mobilize. Consider some of the words that electrified the Arab Middle East and North Africa in the first half of 2011:

- The practice of naming each revolution according to the date of its inception, which began in Egypt in January and spread to Bahrain and Libya in February;
- "*baltagiyya*" : an Egyptian word of Turkish origin used to describe the armed thugs who were sent to intimidate the protesters in Tahrir Square; It then spread to Bahrain, Morocco, and Yemen to describe plain-clothed police and thugs who were sent to repress the protesters;

- *"al-sha'b yurid isquat al-nizam"*: "the people want the overthrow of the regime", a term that spread across the region and gave rise to a number of variations;
- And, of course, there was the term Tahrir Square itself, a name that protesters tried to use in renaming spaces of occupation throughout the region.

Through the media, the internet, facebook, and twitter, the Arab revolution leapt across boundaries faster than any of the terms canvassed in this paper. They did so not through the power of communication, as is often claimed in the media, but through the power of the meanings of their actions. But that, of course, is another story.



Figure One

The effect of the “global day of occupation” on the number of U.S. Occupation Sites (begin dates)

## October 15: global day of occupation

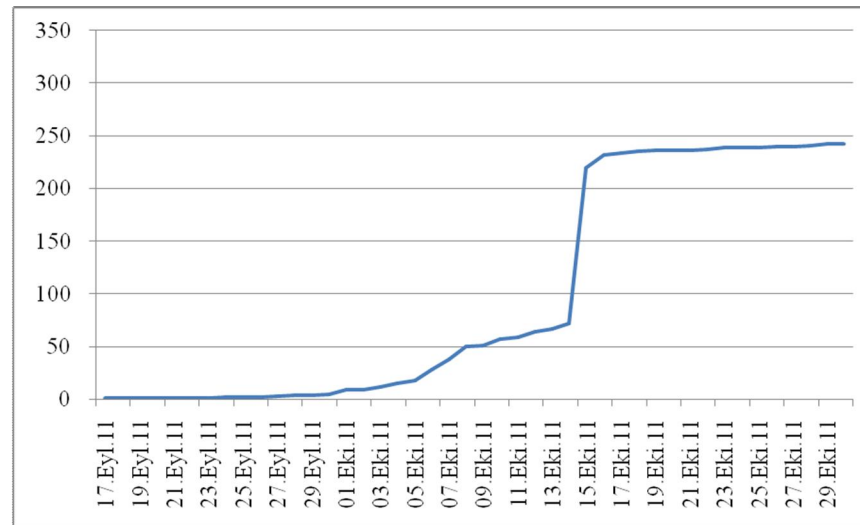


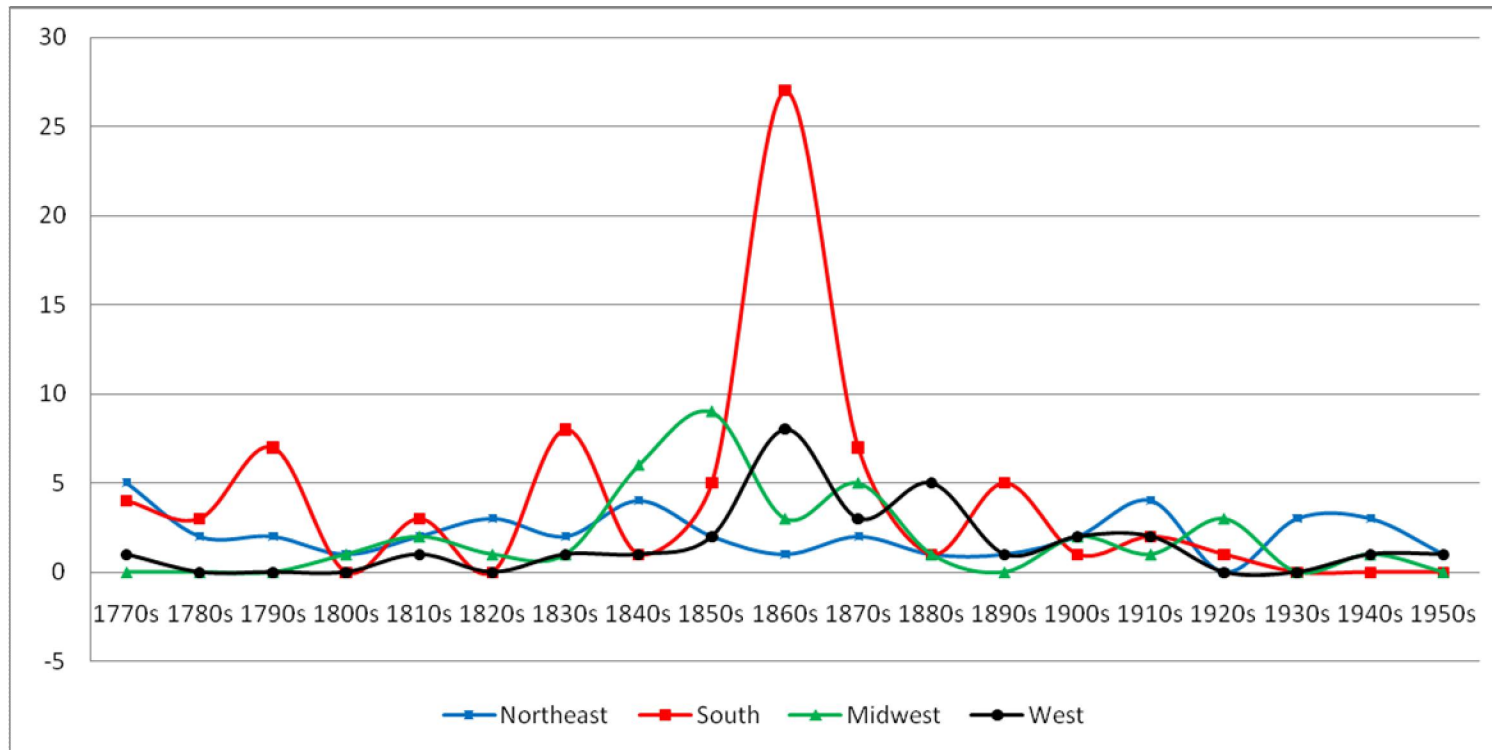
Figure 2

A Google Books analysis of "building occupations, 1960-2008



Figure 3

Number of State Constitutional Conventions; By Large Geographic Region and Decade

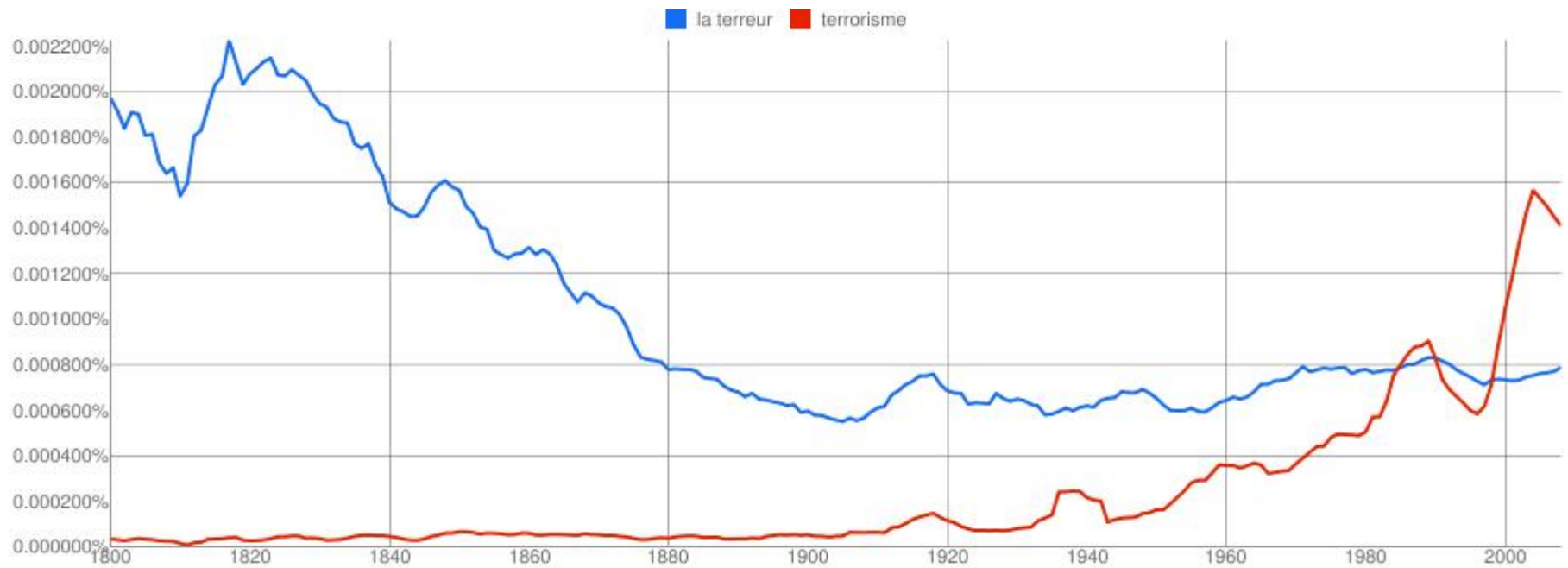


Source: Albert K. Sturm, *Methods of State Constitutional Reform*. Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1954, p.p. 114-115.



Figure 4

“La Terreur” and “Terrorisme” in an Analysis of French Book Publishing, 1800-2008



Source: The author's NGram analysis, August 25, 2011. Go to

[ngrams.googlelabs.com/graph?content=la+terreur%2Cterrorisme&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2008&corpus=7&smoothing=3](https://ngrams.googlelabs.com/graph?content=la+terreur%2Cterrorisme&year_start=1800&year_end=2008&corpus=7&smoothing=3).