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The Gordon Riots Revisited

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Résumé de l'article

Les protestations au *Catholic Relief Act* (loi de réhabilitation des catholiques) de 1778 ont suscité en Grande-Bretagne les émeutes et les polémiques les plus violentes du XVIIIe siècle, dont les *Gordon Riots* en 1780. Elles ont donc donné naissance à différentes interprétations historiques. Les premières études ont exagéré le manque de maturité politique et les vieux préjugés de secte du peuple, ainsi que l'anarchie et la dégradation des troubles eux-mêmes. Mais George Rude soutient, dans une première recherche sur les mouvements de foule britanniques, que l'agitation a été mieux ordonnée et réfléchie que ne l'ont pensé les historiens. En replaçant les troubles dans le contexte d'un mouvement radical d'ensemble. Rudé retrace dans la rébellion qui a suivi la loi de réhabilitation des catholiques le radicalisme de l'Association protestante fondée à Londres et l'esprit anti-autoritariste naturel à l'Anglais de naissance. D'abord dirigée contre les églises et les écoles catholiques, l'agitation aurait dégénéré en révolte sociale contre la richesse et la propriété.

Notre interprétation est différente. Comme Rudé, nous croyons que les rébellions étaient souvent inspirées par l'Association protestante et qu'elles s'accompagnaient de beuveries et d'une atmosphère quasi-de-fête. Néanmoins, elles constituaient une protestation organisée contre la communauté catholique et le Parlement qui résistait à la pression populaire. En effet, l'élude de cas montre que les protestataires ne frappaient pas aveuglément, qu'ils s'attaquaient aux églises, aux maisons et aux écoles catholiques de même qu'aux propriétés de ceux qui soutenaient la loi de réhabilitation. Le saccage des prisons et des distilleries s'éloignait de l'objectif premier mais on a pu en exagérer le caractère violent et désordonné. D'autre part, on ne peut affirmer avec certitude que les *Gordon Riots* (troubles de Gordon) aient été un mouvement social contre les riches. Même s'il y avait parmi leurs victimes un nombre considérable de catholiques notables et des membres du Parlement qui supportaient la loi, les rebelles voulaient d'abord déstabiliser la communauté catholique et intimider le Parlement. Afin de bien atteindre ce but, ils lui donnèrent certains aspects d'un mouvement de protestation sociale. Dans l'atmosphère carnavalesque de l'événement, ils jetèrent parfois du ridicule sur la hiérarchie sociale. Bien plus, le sac des prisons, dans l'intention d'en délivrer les rebelles emprisonnés, montra une sorte de mépris à la Bertold-Brecht pour le système carcéral et la loi en général. Mais dans les derniers soubresauts de la rébellion, l'hostilité sociale de la foule était locale et bien définie. Elle était dirigée contre le racolage des marins, l'emprisonnement pour dettes et le péage sur les ponts. Ainsi donc, il s'agissait d'un soulèvement contre certains usages précis et non pas d'un soulèvement social généralisé. Les troubles n'étaient pas, non plus, intimement associés au radicalisme politique. Même si certains radicaux de Londres sympathisèrent avec les protestataires au début des troubles, d'autres, sous l'influence de la Philosophie des Lumières, s'y opposèrent clairement. En fait, plusieurs s'inquiétèrent profondément des événements, craignant que les excès commis ne compromettent les mouvements de masse en général. Fondamentalement, les réactions à la loi brisa l'alignement politique traditionnel. Idéologiquement, l'Association protestante a été remarquablement opportuniste, cherchant l'appui des conservateurs pro-ministériels, bien qu'évangelistes, aussi bien que des radicaux qui s'inquiétaient des accrocs à la liberté en Grande-Bretagne et en Amérique. Finalement, les protestations contres les catholiques en 1780 opposèrent une élite sociale cosmopolite au peuple plus traditionnaliste qui craignait l'émancipation des catholiques. En somme, les *Gordon Riots* se sont nourris de sentiments populistes et nationalistes qui ne cadraient pas avec l'alignement politique conventionnel. Il reste à se demander comment on pourrait concilier de telles forces dans le discours politique contemporain.

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The Gordon Riots Revisited

NICHOLAS ROGERS

Résumé

The 1780 protests against the Catholic Relief Act were the most violent and controversial disturbances of the eighteenth century and have predictably given rise to several historical interpretations. Early studies sought to emphasize the political immaturity and deep sectarian prejudices of the common people and the anarchy and degenerate character of the riots themselves. By contrast, George Rudé, in his first exploration of British crowds, insisted that the riots were more orderly and purposive than historians had assumed. Set within the context of the emergent radical movement, the riots, according to Rudé, drew their inspiration from radical elements in London's Protestant Association and from antiauthoritarian notions of the "Englishman's birthright." Directed initially against Catholic chapels and schools, the disturbances developed into a social protest against the rich and propertied.

This essay adopts a different approach. Like Rudé, it endorses the view that the riots seldom deviated from the cue of the Protestant Association. Despite the drunkeness and almost festive air which accompanied the disturbances, the riots constituted a disciplined reprisal against the Catholic community and a Parliament that refused to bow before popular pressure. Indeed, the pattern of violence reveals that rioters acted discriminately, directing their anger at Catholic chapels, houses, and schools and at the property of those sympathetic to Catholic relief. Only with the sacking of the gaols and distilleries did the disturbances deviate from their original objective and, even then, the degree of looting and lawlessness can be easily exaggerated.

At the same time, the Gordon riots cannot be categorically viewed as a social protest against the rich. Although the targets of the crowd included a disproportionate number of prominent Catholics and parliamentary supporters of the Relief Act, the prime aim of the rioters was to immobilize the Catholic community and to intimidate Parliament. To be sure, elements of social protest did accompany the disturbances. In the carnivalesque freedom of the occasion participants sometimes showed a sardonic disrespect for rank. Moreover, the opening of the gaols, initially to rescue imprisoned rioters, denoted an almost Brechtian contempt for the prison system and the law in general. In the final phases of the riot, however, the social hostilities of the crowd were essentially local and concrete, directed against crimps, debtors' lockups, and toll bridges. That is, they addressed the customary oppressions of the poor, not a generalised form of social levelling.

Nor were the riots closely associated with radical politics. Although some London radicals sympathised with the protesters in the initial stages of the disturbances, others, influenced by Enlightenment ideas, clearly did not. In fact, many were deeply troubled by the riots, fearing their excesses would prejudice popular movements in general. Basically the protests against the Catholic Relief Bill cut across traditional political alignments. Ideologically the Protestant Association was remarkably protean, drawing support from proministerial, but evangelical, conservatives as well as from radicals troubled by ministerial incursions upon liberty in Britain and America. Ultimately the anti-Catholic protests of 1780 pitted a cosmopolitan social elite against a more traditional rank and file fuelled by an evangelical fear of an incipient Catholic revival. In sum, the Gordon riots drew upon populist, nationalist sentiments that did not square with conventional political alignments. It remained to be seen how these forces could be accomodated in contemporary political discourse.

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la loi en général. Mais dans les derniers soubresauts de la rébellion, l'hostilité sociale de la foule était locale et bien définie. Elle était dirigée contre le racolage des marins, l'emprisonnement pour dettes et le péage sur les ponts. Ainsi donc, il s'agissait d'un soulèvement contre certains usages précis et non pas d'un soulèvement social généralisé.

Les troubles n'étaient pas, non plus, intimement associés au radicalisme politique. Même si certains radicaux de Londres sympathisèrent avec les protestataires au début des troubles, d'autres, sous l'influence de la Philosophie des Lumières, s'y opposèrent clairement. En fait, plusieurs s'inquiétèrent profondément des événements, craignant que les excès commis ne compromettent les mouvements de masse en général. Fondamentalement, les réactions à la loi brisa l'alignement politique traditionnel. Idéologiquement, l'Association protestante a été remarquablement opportuniste, cherchant l'appui des conservateurs pro-ministériels, bien qu'évangélistes, aussi bien que des radicaux qui s'inquiétaient des accrocs à la liberté en Grande-Bretagne et en Amérique. Finalement, les protestations contres les catholiques en 1780 opposèrent une élite sociale cosmopolite au peuple plus traditionnaliste qui craignait l'émancipation des catholiques. En somme, les Gordon Riots *se sont nourris de sentiments populistes et nationalistes qui ne cadraient pas avec l'alignement politique conventionnel. Il reste à se demander comment on pourrait concilier de telles forces dans le discours politique contemporain.*

No Popery Down with it George the 3rd is a Roman Catholick

1780 handbill[1]

"A time of terrour" was how Dr. Johnson described the Gordon riots.[2] Many contemporaries would have agreed. The disturbances that gripped London in June 1780 were the most tumultuous and destructive of the century. In the wake of the Commons' refusal to repeal the Catholic Relief Bill of 1778, hundreds of buildings were ransacked, Lambeth Palace, Downing Street, and the Bank of England were threatened with destruction, and the forces of law and order were paralysed, prompting finally military intervention of an unprecedental nature. In the carnage that followed, over two hundred people were shot dead in the street; as many died in hospital or were treated for wounds. "Figure to yourself every man, woman and child in the streets, panic-struck," wrote one military volunteer, "the atmosphere red as blood with the ascending fires, muskets firing in every part, and consequently women and children lying sprawling in the streets; all the lower order of people stark mad with liquor, huzzaing and parading with flags."[3] It was an unforgettable sight which, as contemporary comment testifies, left an indelible imprint on the popular consciousness.

What are we to make of this extraordinary riot? What does it reveal about popular belief at a time of burgeoning radicalism, religious revivalism, and a divisive war? The first scholarly work on the Gordon riots, published at the time of the general strike, focussed principally on the problem of order. Like some contemporaries, it detected a

1. Public Record Office (PRO), WO 34/103/368.
2. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Oxford, 1980), 1054.
3. British Library (BL), MS 27,828 f. 127, cited by J. Paul de Castro, *The Gordon Riots* (London, 1926), 145.

distinct change in the nature of the riot after the destruction of Newgate and other gaols. What began as an anti-Catholic protest became a frenzied bacchanalia of outcast London, a spontaneous uprising of the rabble against authority and the institutions which shaped their lives.[4] This theme of degeneration has remained a salient one among those who have wished to sensationalize the riots, or to propound the virtues of a policed society.[5] Nor is it absent from those who, linking the anti-Catholic agitations of the Protestant Association to the excesses that followed, have sought to emphasize the immaturity, volatility, and dangers of early mass movements, Writing in 1949, for example, Sir Herbert Butterfield compared the charismatic hero, Lord George Gordon, to Hitler, and lamented that so enlightened a measure as the Catholic Relief Bill should have offended "not only rational prejudice, but deep dark passions, strange as Nazi hatreds, and as baffling as anti-semiticism."[6]

The first major challenge to these interpretations came from George Rudé. Fresh from his study of the crowd during the French Revolution, Rudé embarked upon a detailed examination of the Gordon rioters and their victims. From this research Rudé concluded that the 1780 disturbances were not the product of mass hysteria, whipped by religious fanatics and sectarian fury, degenerating into looting and arson. Throughout the unrest rioters seldom deviated from their original objectives. Drawing upon a long-standing tradition of anti-Catholicism which had become embodied in notions of the Englishman's "birthright," they directed their fury upon leading Catholics, their chapels, and their sympathizers. This did not mean that the rioters were simple surrogates of the Protestant Association and their radical allies in the city. Lord George Gordon and his city supporters doubtless orchestrated the riot and, initially at least, gave it moral support. But the disturbances, Rudé argued, were essentially local and spontaneous, drawing principally upon small employers, journeymen, and apprentices from the neighbourhood.[7] In fact the "respectability" of the rioters — "sober workmen" was how Rudé ultimately characterised them[8] — vitiated the notion that the riots were the product of some urban malaise or criminality. This conviction was reinforced by the argument that the rioters expressed both a rudimentary political consciousness and a class bias. Rudé noted that the riots were not directed at the Catholic population as a whole, but at the wealthier ones in the city and the northwest parishes around Holborn. "Behind the slogan of 'No Popery'," Rudé argued, "there lay a deeper social purpose: a

4. De Castro, esp., 235-36.
5. Christopher Hibbert, *King Mob* (London, 1956); Leon Radzinowicz, *A History of the English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750*, 4 vols. (London, 1956), 3, ch. 4.
6. Herbert Butterfield, *George III, Lord North and the People* (London, 1949), 374-79: for a similar emphasis, without the Nazism, see Eugene Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organization, 1769-93* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), ch. 4, "Children of Darkness."
7. The central argument is set out in George Rudé, "The Gordon Riots: A Study of the Rioters and their Victims," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 6 (1956): 93-114, reprinted in *Paris and London in the 18th Century* (London, 1970), 268-92. See also *Hanoverian London 1714-1808* (London, 1971), 178-80 and 220-27 and *The Crowd in History, 1730-1848* (New York, 1964), ch. 3 and 13-15.
8. *Paris and London*, 283.

groping desire to settle accounts with the rich, if only for a day, and to achieve some kind of social justice."[9] Indeed, his subsequent work led him to situate the Gordon riots on a libertarian-radical vector which anticipated the labour movements of the nineteenth century. "For all the illiberal forms they assumed," Rudé concluded in *Ideology and Popular Protest*, the Gordon riots were "cast in a radical mould, drew on a long radical-Protestant tradition and were inspired (if not promoted) by the most radical elements of the city."[10] In saying this he reasserted his differences with Edward Thompson, who had earlier argued that the popular agitation of 1780 revealed "something of a mixture of manipulated mob and revolutionary crowd." Libertarian in inspiration, but swayed by demagogic and inexperienced leaders, the Protestant Association precipitated "a spontaneous process of riot" which "deviated from original objectives and ultimately degenerated into looting and arson."[11]

We might begin to explore these issues by examining the ideological aspects of the riot, for they have some bearing upon the fanaticism and hysteria which is said to have informed it, and also upon its radical affiliations. Popular hostility towards Catholics was, of course, legion. English men and women were reared on Catholic atrocities; state services and popular holidays like 5 November celebrated the nation's deliverance from popery and arbitrary rule and, in London, the Monument still commemorated the papists' purported responsibility for the Great Fire. This deep-rooted antipathy towards Catholics, and particularly towards perceived Catholic forms of rule, formed a basic stratum of belief and prejudice upon which the riots would emerge. During the crisis the *Remembrancer* emphasized that anti-Catholicism was deeply inculcated from infancy "by reading the Book of Martyrs and other legends."[12] Indeed the protesters left no doubt that this was the case. One magistrate recalled that when he remonstrated with the crowd before Palace Yard on 6 June, "they quoted scripture and talked of the cruelty of papists and the persecution their forefathers had undergone for them."[13]

Yet if popular anti-Catholicism was a necessary cause of the disturbances, it was hardly a sufficient one. Since the seventeenth century, and certainly since 1745, the popular fear of Catholics had been declining, although it was periodically invoked during invasion scares. Within London itself, the Irish Catholic population of approximately twenty-five thousand lived on reasonably amicable terms with their neighbours.[14] Aside from the odd sectarian scuffle, the last major anti-Irish riot occurred

9. *Paris and London*, 289.
10. Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (London, 1980), 139.
11. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Pelican ed. (London, 1970), 77-78.
12. *Remembrancer* 10 (1980): 64. See also the *London Courant*, 12 June 1780.
13. PRO, PC 1/3097.
14. Figures concerning the size of the Catholic population vary a great deal. The 1767 returns listed only ten thousand, but Eamon Duffy has claimed there were at least twenty-five thousand in 1746. See Le Sourd, *Les Catholiques dans la Société Anglaise* (Lille, 1978), vol. 1, chs. 2-3 and Eamon Duffy, "Richard Challoner 1691-1781: A Memoir," in *Challoner And His Church*, ed. Eamon Duffy (London, 1981), 13.

in 1736. Moreover, the Catholic Relief Act of 1778 was, strictly speaking, a quite modest measure which passed both houses of Parliament with little debate or dissension.[15] Essentially the act repealed two Williamite statutes against the growth of popery, thereby granting Catholics freedom of property and commerce and exempting their priests from the threat of "perpetual imprisonment" if they celebrated mass or educated Catholic children.[16] The only crucial proviso was that Catholics had to take an oath of allegiance to the Crown and renounce Jacobitism and the temporal authority of the pope to qualify. As the supporters of the act emphasized, the act did not repeal all the penal statutes against Catholics;[17] nor did the act give Catholics rights to political representation or office-holding. Rather, it was a gesture of amity to those loyalist Catholics whose only dissent from the constituted political order was one of religious conscience.

The act was, nevertheless, viewed with considerable misgivings outside of Parliament. Since the 1760s there had been a perceptible religious revival in the metropolis, inspired principally by Methodism and often militantly anti-Catholic. One contemporary recalled that in the years 1765-78, "Field Preachers inveighed with the utmost vehemence against Popery.... The Flying Book of Martyrs was rummaged from the beginning to the end to find out instances of pretended Popish cruelty."[18] This was in response to the renewed confidence and growth of the Catholic church, which under Bishop Challoner had developed permanent self-supporting missions, new schools, and a prosletysing ministry that warned servants and tradesmen of the dangers of religious "enthusiasm."[19] In the eyes of many Protestant zealots, the 1778 act simply abetted the Catholic cause. Especially galling was the elimination of the one-hundred-pound reward for the successful conviction of practicing Catholics, a clause that killed the campaign against Catholics by petit-bourgeois zealots like the master carpenter, William Payne, soon to become one of the staunchest supporters of the Protestant Association. Deprecating the prosecution of popery by such "common informers," the act purposefully reserved the surveillance of Catholicism to the urbane, cosmopolitan social elite who dominated Parliament, the bench, and the corridors of power.[20]

15. *Parliamentary History* (1777-78), 19:1137-45.
16. 18 Geo III, c.60. The statutes repealed were 11 & 12 Wm III.
17. One commentator calculated that there were still sixteen penal statutes against Catholics on the books, including those which subjected priests celebrating mass to a stiff fine and one year's imprisonment. See *A Defence of the Act of Parliament lately passed for the relief of Roman Catholics* (London, 1780), 21n.
18. James Barnard, *The Life of the Venerable and Right Reverend Richard Challoner* (London, 1784), 162-63.
19. Eamon Duffy, "Challoner," 9-15; Sheridan Gilley "Challoner as Controversialist," in *Challoner And His Church*, 107-08; James Barnard, *Challoner*, 194-95. Four new Catholic charity schools were founded between 1764 and 1780: Lincoln's Inn Fields (1764), Hammersmith (1765), Virginia St, Wapping (1778), and Moorfields (1780). See T.G. Holt, "Some Early London Catholic Schools," *London Recusant* 5 (1975): 46-54.
20. Payne was singled out for criticism by Burke in 1780. There were also allusions to his anti-Catholic activities in the original debates on the 1778 act. See *Parl. Hist.*, 19:1137 and 1145, and 21:710. Payne's activities and outlook are admirably traced in an unpublished paper by Joanna Innes of Somerville College, Oxford, entitled "William Payne of Bell Yard, Carpenter, c. 1718-1782: the Life and Times of a London informing constable," to appear in her *Inferior Politics. Social problems and social policies in eighteenth century Britain* (Oxford, forthcoming). See also Barnard, *Challoner*, 156-93.

The 1778 Catholic Relief Act thus signalled the victory of religious urbanity over religious evangelism. In practical terms it endorsed the aristocracy's right to preside over the future of English Catholicism and denied middling citizens the right to challenge Catholicism in the courts. To Protestant zealots who equated Catholicism with idolatry, persecution, and foreign slavery, this was national treachery.[21] It was especially so because of the political conjuncture in which it took place, that of the American war.

Officially the Protestant Association distanced itself from the bitter disagreements over the war and parliamentary reform that informed metropolitan opinion during the late 1770s. In 1779 it formally declared it was "not formed to promote the views of party, or to embarrass the measures of government at this important crisis."[22] Unofficially it played upon popular anxieties. Although the government had endorsed the 1778 Relief Act to cement Catholic loyalty at a time when France had entered the war, the association took the opposite view. Noting the anti-Gallican and antiministerial feeling that had surfaced during Admiral Keppel's trial in February 1779, it questioned the sagacity of this policy, focussing upon the perfidy both of the French and of Catholics.[23] In this context, repeal was seen as a manifestly loyalist but nonpartisan measure, safeguarding English liberties from the Catholic threat within and without at an important crisis in national and imperial politics. At the same time, the rhetoric of the Protestant Association sometimes sailed closer to the radical wind. Various supporters linked the Relief Act with the Quebec Act and with ministerial incursions upon British liberty in America. The Reverend Dr. Bromley, for example, minister of the Fitzroy Chapel and a Middlesex associator, called "the Quebec bill a most wicked and pernicious piece of business, and thought the late act to take off restraints from Papists an arrow shot from the same quiver."[24] Others agreed. "The seas of Protestant blood, wantonly shed in this ruinous and calamitous war," wrote another, "too strongly prove that the subversion of civil and religious liberty is the grand point where all operations center."[25] The campaign for repeal was thus also projected as part of the larger struggle against ministerial oppression.

But not all radicals saw the issue this way. Wilkes believed the modest concessions granted to Catholics in 1778 to be quite unexceptional. The same was true of the Duke of Richmond, the most radical nobleman in the Westminster Association. He was not prepared to place the Relief Act in the same category as the Quebec Act of 1774, for there was a crucial difference between the conditional toleration of Catholics reared in the British system of liberty and subject to loyalty oaths and registration, and the

21. Gerald Newman has emphasized the idea of the Protestant Association as "a popular counterforce against what was felt to be the un-English conduct of the upper classes." His interpetation differs from mine, however, over the political ramifications and religious context of this polarity. See Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism* (New York, 1987), 208-09.

22. *An Appeal From the Protestant Association to the People of Great Britain* (London, 1779), 3.

23. Ibid., 55-58.

24. Cited by John Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots: London Supporters of Revolutionary America 1769-1782* (Kingston and Montreal, 1987), 156.

25. *Protestant Packet or British Monitor* (Newcastle, 1780), 167-68. Thanks to Joanna Innes for this reference.

maintenance of a state-endorsed Catholic establishment. The latter institutionalised Catholicism in a manner that was intrinsically inimical to liberty, whereas the first, as one correspondent in the radical *London Courant* asserted, allowed freedom of conscience to flourish in "liberty and ease."[26] This line of argument was pushed still further by progressive Dissenters such as Joseph Priestley. As far as he was concerned, English Catholicism had shed its persecutory spirit with the inexorable rise of the Enlightenment and was a declining force. Consequently the objectives of the Protestant Association could only be counterproductive, stoking the embers of religious discord and bigotry and giving Catholicism a new lease on life. It was far more politic to counter Catholicism through religious toleration and proselytising than to "imitate that church in the very thing for which we condemn it."[27]

The radicals were thus divided on the issue of repeal and this division ran through the ranks, as the debates in London's common council reveal.[28] In view of this, it is impossible to regard the Protestant Association, still less repeal, as radical. Rather one should regard it as a protean, populist movement, rooted in the evangelism of the metropolis, and cutting across orthodox political alignments. It attracted figures across the political spectrum, from ministerialists such as Alderman Evan Pugh and the philanthropic merchant John Thornton, to moderate opposition MPs like Charles Barrow of Gloucester, to city radicals like Frederick Bull. It did, however, adopt radical forms to press for repeal, holding monthly general meetings, distributing handbills,[29] advocating instructions, and embarking upon mass petitioning. Radicals sometimes eyed this strategy with suspicion and deliberately distanced the PA from the Association Movement.[30] In view of the violent Scottish resistance to the Relief Act, some feared that Lord George Gordon's fanaticism would throw popular associations into disrepute at a critical moment in the campaign for parliamentary reform. Their fears were not unfounded.

Although Lord George Gordon was ultimately acquitted of high treason for fomenting the riots of 1780, there is little doubt that he intended to apply as much

26. *London Courant*, 11/13 June 1780.
27. Joseph Priestley, *A Free Address to Those who have petitioned for the Repeal of the late act of parliament in favour of Roman Catholicks* (London, 1780), in *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, ed. J.T. Rutt, 24 vols. (London, 1817-31), 22:499-513.
28. *Morning Chronicle*, 1 June 1780. In the debate on the motion to petition Parliament for the repeal of the 1778 act radicals led the debate. The motion was moved by Josiah Dornford and seconded by James Sharp, common councilman for Lime Street. The two major opponents of the petition appear to have been Charles Lincoln, common councilman for Lime Street, and Alderman John Sawbridge. Sawbridge agreed to present the petition along with Alderman Frederick Bull, but only because he saw himself as a delegate of the city, not out of personal conviction. Sawbridge's actions have sometimes been misrepresented by historians. See John Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England 1700-1780* (London, 1979), 88.
29. One author claimed that "every diuretic hole and corner of our streets has been papered with their handbills." See *Fanaticism and Treason, or, a Dispassionate History of the Rise and Progress and Suppression of the Rebellious Insurrections in June 1780* (London, 1780), 26.
30. In April 1780 an attempt was made to annex repeal to the political agenda of the Middlesex Association. It was rejected. See *London Evening Post*, 11/13 April 1780.

popular pressure as he could to the campaign for repeal. The decision to call a mass meeting on 2 June 1780 was controversial, and it was only under the threat of Lord George's resignation as president of the association that the motion passed.[31] As a result, some fifty thousand members of the Protestant Association assembled in St George's Fields and marched upon Parliament to present their monster petition. Approximately seventeen thousand remained to hear the outcome.

The move to beseige Parliament in such a manner was an audacious leading lights of step. The Protestant Association knew the plan was technically illegal and had advised Gordon that this was so.[32] Earlier petitions had been presented by delegates, not by such overwhelming numbers. The numbers certainly overwhelmed the Westminster justices, who with some seventy-six constables were quite unable to control the crowds. Before the Commons several MPs were forced publicity to swear that they would repeal the act. In the approaches to the upper house, which was sitting to hear the Duke of Richmond's motion on annual parliaments, their lordships were jostled, heckled, and assailed with the cry of "No Popery." The lobby of the Commons became so tumultuous that Lord George Gordon was invited to placate the crowd and to urge it to disperse. Instead he reported those members in opposition to the petition and reiterated his belief that only repeal would prevent violence. Faced with an intransigent Commons, the message was clear. It only took a little prompting from the leaders of the populace to generate plans for retribution. As one printer deposed, "general cry among them was they would have redress, or else."[33]

Although Sir George Savile's residence was originally targeted for destruction because he was the author of the Relief Act, the crowd quickly turned its attention to the principal places of Catholic worship. On the first evening the chapel of the Sardinian ambassador in Lincoln's Inn Fields was burnt to the ground; that of the Bavarian ambassador in Warwick Street was ransacked before troops and cavalry arrived to save the building. The following evening the crowd focussed its attention upon the chapel in Ropemakers' Alley, Moorfields, but the city marshall managed to dissuade it from destroying it.[34] The rioters returned, however, the next day and began sacking the chapel, despite the presence of a file of soldiers from the Tower under the direction of Lord Mayor Kennett. The mayor justified his refusal to read the Riot Act on the grounds that there were innocent women and children in the crowd, but the truth was that he feared popular retribution.[35] Such action was taken against a number of Westminster magistrates who apprehended or examined rioters in the subsequent week.

In the first four days the pattern of rioting was fairly predictable. The main targets remained the chapels and schools, in Westminster, the City and the East End. The

31. *A Narrative of the Proceedings of Lord George Gordon* (London, 1780) 2; see also the testimony of James Fisher and Erasmus Middleton in PRO, TS 11/388/1212 and 1213, and Gordon's own narrative in BL, Add. MS 42,129, ff. 5-6, 11.
32. PRO, TS 11/388/1212.
33. PRO, SP 37/14/189. One of the leaders active in the Commons' lobby was William Payne; see PRO, PC 1/3097.
34. *Carrington and Payne's Law Report* (1833), 5:286.
35. PRO, PC/2/138-41; Rex v. Kennett, *Carrington and Payne's Law Report* (1833), 5:282-96.

houses of prominent Catholics were also threatened, including those of their leader, Lord Petre, and William Mawhood, a wealthy woollen draper and personal friend of Bishop Challoner. But few at this stage were harmed, despite the fact that "the general conversation at the alehouses" foretold an attack upon "the Private Houses of Roman Catholicks."[36] The only other victims of collective violence, in fact, were Sir George Savile, whose house in Leicester Fields was partially ransacked on 5 June, and two Westminster tradesmen, Sampson Rainforth, JP and Stephen Mabberley, who were responsible for the arrest and committal of fourteen rioters apprehended outside the Sardinian chapel. In other words, the crowd scarcely deviated from the original cue of the Protestant Association. To underscore its solidarity with Gordon it sported blue cockades and paraded the Catholic relics of the Moorfields chapel before his house in Welbeck Street, burning them in the adjacent fields.[37] It awaited the return of the Commons on 6 June when it hoped that the repeal of the Relief Act would once more be considered.

But the Commons once more refused to bow to popular pressure. It deplored the intimidation of the House, urged the Crown to prosecute the rioters, recommended compensation for the Catholics, and promptly adjourned until 8 June. At this point the riots escalated. After the crowd had dragged Lord George Gordon's chariot through the streets in popular triumph, it broadened its jurisdiction to include not only Catholics but members of the establishment. Lambeth Palace was threatened; so, too, were the residences of the archbishops of Canterbury and York. Crowds also directed their anger to leading members of the government and the opposition who were known to be sympathetic to the act. They included Lord Rockingham, Burke, Dunning, Lord North, and Lord Mansfield, the lord chief justice who had earlier discouraged the prosecution of Catholics and had disparingly dismissed the efforts of men like Payne to pursue them in the courts. In other words, the whole cosmopolitan hierarchy, the powerful men whose tolerant or errant attitudes were undermining "true Protestantism," came under review.[38] As my opening quote suggests, this hierarchy could also include the king, who was suspected of having converted to Catholicism. "Damn ye King and ye Pope," exclaimed one small card picked up by the authorities. "Dethrone him or else he will Massacre you all," suggested one handbill. To the "True Protestant" who wrote it, George III deserved to lose his head for abandoning his coronation oath.[39]

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36. PRO, SP 37/20/41 and 47; E.E. Reynolds, ed. *The Mawhood Diary*, Catholic Record Society no. 50 (London, 1956), 150-51; James Langdale, "Thomas Langdale, The Distiller," *London Recusant* 5 (1975): 42-45.

37. William Vincent (Thomas Holcroft), *A Plain & Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances in the cities of London and Westminster and the borough of Southwark*, 2nd ed. (London, 1780), 24. Gordon's servant is said to have asked them "for God's sake to go away and that his Lordship would not support their cause if they went on so." PRO, SP 37/20/271.

38. The notion that the rioters and supporters of the Protestant Association were "True Protestants" was affirmed in a handbill before Parliament on 6 June, entitled "True Protestants no Turncoats." See Vincent, *A Plain & Succinct Narrative*, appendix G.

39. PRO, WO 34/103/325, 368. See also *B.M. Catalogue of Prints and Drawings*, nos. 5534, 5669, and 5680-81.

The anger of the crowd therefore swung dramatically against the Anglican establishment. What is more, in sheer defiance of the Commons' resolution that the attorney general prosecute the rioters, the crowd wreaked vengeance upon the law. Magistrates who brought rioters to account or intervened to protect supporters of the act had their houses pulled down. Only those who publicly recanted were spared. When Justice Charles Triquet found himself the subject of crowd reprisals in Bloomsbury Square, he begged his assailants "to distinguish between their friends and Enemies, that he was as great an Enemy to Popery as they could be."[40] By this means, and by humouring the crowd with a few shillings, he saved his house.

The reprisals of the populace did not end there. On the evening of 6 June a crowd assembled before Newgate and demanded the release of the rioters who were confined there. Receiving no satisfaction from the keeper, Richard Akerman, it broke in, released all prisoners, and fired the building. From there the assailants moved on the New Prison, Clerkenwell, where they again demanded freedom for the Gordon rioters. The keeper, Samuel Newport, told them there was none in the jail, but "the Mob told him they were determined to take them out, and to break open all the gaols in London that night."[41] Forcing open the gates they released all but one murderer, whom they refused to set at large, being "an improper object of their charity."[42]

The opening of the gaols on the evening of 6 June and the following day was clearly designed to frustrate the course of justice against "true Protestants," although it clearly had wider social ramifications, denoting an almost Brechtian contempt for the iniquities of the prison system and perhaps even for the law in general. It was at this stage in the disturbances that panic gripped the propertied classes in London. People evacuated their homes and middle-class sympathy for the rioters, where it existed, quickly evaporated. Even the leading activists of the Protestant Association began to have misgivings about the riot and distanced themselves from its activities, although without necessarily renouncing repeal.[43] Lord George Gordon, who tried to intercede with rioters in the city on 7 June, is said to have told them that he had no objection to their pulling down Roman Catholic chapels, but that they should not have "touched private property."[44] In the newspapers the condemnation of the rioters as a lawless, licentious mob became

40. PRO, PC 1/3097
41. PRO, PC 1/3907
42. *A Narrative of the Proceedings of Lord George Gordon*, 33.
43. The common council of London petitioned once more for repeal of the Relief Act on 7-8 June, although the motion encountered more opposition than it had done in May. See Corporation of London Record Office (CLRO), Journals of Common Council, 63:29, 61 and 69, and *London Courant*, 10 June 1780. One radical who flamboyantly continued to support the riot was William Moore, a printer and writer formerly associated with the *North Briton*. In *The Thunderer*, published 8 June, he congratulated the Protestant Association on their noble cause, declaring it had "long been the design of both the court and ministry to establish arbitrary power and the Roman Catholick religion in England, and to overturn the laws and constitution of the British Empire." He then reiterated many of the old themes of Protestant martyrology. He was arrested by Alderman John Wilkes. See PRO, WO 34/103/231-33, and BL, Add. MS 30,866, f. 242.
44. PRO, SP 37/14/163 and 193; see also Gordon's account in BL, Add. MS 42,129, f. 52.

almost universal, whatever their political complexion, and some began to argue that religion had become a pretense for looting and plunder. As the radical Duke of Richmond later stated, "Robbers, thieves, felons, and all the rabble which form part of the mob in great and populous cities, took an advantage of the large numbers of people who collected themselves upon that occasion, and under the pretext of religious reformation, committed the most horrid, criminal and daring outrages, not only against private property but against the laws of their country."[45] It is upon this kind of testimony that the degeneration thesis has been built.

It is difficult to determine how anarchic the riot became in its final stages. After 6 June contemporary accounts were quite alarmist, and Protestant associators, in particular, had a vested interest in distancing themselves from the disturbances. Some looting did go on, more than the legal records reveal, for the Crown prosecution was more successful in collecting evidence for constructive treason or capital felony under the Riot Act than it was for offences against property.[46] Even so, it was probably not substantial. Contemporaries were closer to the mark, however, in emphasizing the amount of drinking which accompanied the riots. Quite apart from Langdale's distillery in Holborn, which was broken into by the mob on 6 June and became the scene of a drunken frolic, there was plenty of drink to be had. Pulling down houses was hard work. It took a crowd anything from one to three hours to throw out the furniture, rip out the windows and floor boards and pull off the tiles from the roof. Not surprisingly "captains" frequently called for pails or barrels of beer to help the men along.[47] One justice testified that at the destruction of a pub in Long Lane, Southwark, he saw Oliver Johnson give "liquor to the populace" and drink "some himself, which made him very sick; he drew towards me, there was a pump, he leaned his head against the pump and puked a great deal; it came out of his mouth like water, half a pint, I suppose, or more."[48] Riots were sometimes carried out in a revelrous mode, and we should not exaggerate (as I think Rudé does) the sobriety and respectability of the participants. Francis Place recalled "the lower order of people stark mad with liquor, huzzaing and parading with flags." One apprentice confessed to his master of the "fine fun" he had been having pulling down the chapel of the Sardinian ambassador; another rioter told of the good times he had making "no less than six fires."[49]

This is not to suggest that the riots lost all direction. Rudé is essentially correct in suggesting that the disturbances hardly deviated from their original course. After the second adjournment of the Commons on 6 June, the crowd turned its attention to Catholic houses. It did so with a strong sense of ritual and legitimation. Crowds

45. *Gazetteer*, 20 June 1780.
46. Rudé cites fifteen brought to trial for theft at the Old Bailey, of whom seven were not guilty; Rudé, *Paris and London*, 282.
47. *The Proceedings on the King's Commission of the Peace, Oyer and Terminer and Gaol Delivery for the City of London* (Dec. 1779-Oct. 1780), 622 (hereafter *Old Bailey*); *The Proceedings on the King's Special Commission of Oyer and Terminer for the County of Surrey 10 July 1780*, ed. Joseph Gunrey (London, 1780), 57 (hereafter *Surrey*)
48. Ibid., 69.
49. BL, Add. MS 27,828, f. 127; *Old Bailey*, 542 and 591.

sometimes rang bells upon arrival. Following statutory precedent the captain called for the "book," that is, the Book of Common Prayer, or a Protestant Bible, and searched the house for Catholic books, rosaries, or crucifixes.[50] Some care was taken to ensure that the resident was truthful. When Charles Lee heard that the crowd was about to sack his house in Golden Lane, he hung out blue ribbons and revealed his Bible, but the crowd remained unsatisfied, and "made a ring," he testified, and "swore me to my religion."[51] Similarly crowds were attentive to the possibility of malicious accusations by factious neighbours. Elizabeth Curry of East Bermondsey, for example, whose house was next door to a chapel and who drew suspicion upon herself by removing some of her effects, pacified the crowd by kissing her Book of Common Prayer; but two of her neighbours charged that a crucifix was hidden upstairs. The crowd did not believe them, however and, "persisting it was spite," threw the accusers out of the house.[52]

In carrying out these procedures, crowds assumed the place of authority. In their own eyes they did what the Anglican establishment should have done, that is, to immobilize the Catholic foe in their midst. These extralegal forms of action were quite discriminatory. As the Crown prosecutors themselves admitted, they were directed at Catholics, or at those directly involved in upholding the Catholic Relief Act and in frustrating popular resistance to it.[53] But did the riot have any clear social overtones? In what sense could it be termed a social as well as politico-religious protest?

Rudé's arguments on this score appear to me to be somewhat misleading. It is true that the geographical incidence of destruction was weighted towards the wealthier areas rather than the parishes and districts in which the majority of Catholic workers lived. At least half of the victims lived in Holborn and the City, a noticeable number in Southwark, and relatively few in the riverside parishes of Whitechapel, Wapping, and St. George-in-the-East, or in the crowded alleys of St Giles-in-the-Fields.[54] Most lived in middling property or better, although they were not necessarily well off, for over half (58 per cent) lived in houses rated between ten and twenty-nine pounds per annum and less than a quarter at forty pounds or over.[55] Even so, there is little doubt that the victims of the riots were richer than the average London Catholic and indisputably more substantial than the rioters themselves.

Yet it would be wrong to infer from this that the rioters systematically embarked upon a form of social levelling, a rough justice against the rich. Social resentments did

50. PRO, KB 8/79/228, SP 37/20/289; *Old Bailey*, 532 and 626. The statutory precedent was 3 Jac. 1, c. 5.
51. *Old Bailey*, 622.
52. PRO, KB 8/79/199-201.
53. PRO, TS 11/33/1213.
54. My figures, derived from PRO, WORK 6/110 and 111, suggest the following geographical distribution: Holborn division, forty-four (including five from Bloomsbury); City, thirty-one; East End, twenty; Southwark, seventeen; Clerkenwell, fourteen; Westminster, ten; Bermondsey and Rotherhithe, five.
55. George Rudé, "Some Financial and Military Aspects of the Gordon Riots," *Guildhall Miscellany* 6 (1956): 31-42. Rudé's analysis in his earlier article on the Gordon riots tended to exaggerate the wealth of the rioters. See *Paris and London*, 287.

Yet it would be wrong to infer from this that the rioters systematically embarked upon a form of social levelling, a rough justice against the rich. Social resentments did surface during the disturbances. "Protestant or not," the shipwright William Heyter is said to have exclaimed that "no gentleman need be possessed of more than £1000 a year, that is money enough for every gentleman to live on." Such explicit comments were unusual, as the justice's comments on this case revealed.[56] Nevertheless, rioters did reap the advantages of their sudden superiority in the streets by asserting their rights to the traditional festive gratuity with a sardonic confidence and momentary contempt for rank. "O God bless this gentleman," mocked rioters to an apothecary who had been forced to concede half-a-crown; "he is always generous." Others dispensed with such civilities. "Damn your eyes and limbs," exclaimed a discharged sailor to a well-to-do cheesemonger in Bishopsgate; "put a shilling in my hat, or by God I have a party that can destroy your house presently."[57] Not surprisingly, in the heady atmosphere of the riot, the houses of a few wealthy tradesmen and masters were threatened, whatever their religion. Peppit, for example, was charged with "threatening his Master's House saying there was no King, no Government, every Man for himself." G. McCannon asked for a guard on 8 June to protect "a very large Estate," perplexed why the "daring armed licentious rabel" had singled him out.[58] Yet the murmurings against the rich did not generate anything resembling a "jacquerie," a ritual pillaging of the privileged. Aside from the magistrates, the vast majority of the gentlemen, merchants, and manufacturers whose houses were actually attacked were Catholic.[59]

The pattern of rioting, in fact, followed logically from the militant Protestants' declared objectives and from the war of nerves that had ensued between the crowd and Parliament. When the Commons refused to consider the petition for the repeal of the Relief Act, crowds sacked the most obvious symbols of Catholicism, the chapels, threatening at the same time to immobilize the Catholic community. After the second adjournment they tried to do just that. As far as they were able, the rioters focussed their attention upon the most visible and influential members of the Catholic community. They attacked the houses of gentlemen and tradesmen who were likely to give financial support to the foundation of new chapels and schools.[60] They destroyed large distilleries such as Thomas Langdale's in Holborn, thought to harbour a chapel. Similarly alehouses were a favourite target of the crowd because these were centres of sociability and also of

56. *Surrey*, 11. Doubts were raised about whether Hayter really said this, and two deponents, a boatbuilder and a ropemaker, both described as "substantial tradesmen," denied that he did. PRO, SP 37/21/275-76, 308-10. Baron Eyre refused the jury's plea for mercy, stating to them "the danger of extending mercy to the Person who had disclosed Principles so destructive to society." An attempt to obtain a royal pardon also failed and Heyter was hanged.

57. *Morning Chronicle*, 30 June 1780; *Old Bailey*, 452.

58. PRO, PC 1/3097, WO 34/103/223.

59. Thrale, the Southwark brewer, was one exception. His distillery was saved by his manager's foresight in "amusing the mob with meat and drink and huzzas." See Hibbert, *King Mob*, 100n.

60. William Mawhood, for example, the woollen draper whose house was threatened three times during the riot, had contributed towards Richard Dillon's chapel in Moorfields. The chapel was destroyed by the rioters. *Mawhood Diary*, 117n.

religion. It was not unusual in the 1780s for alehouses to rent rooms for religious meetings. Indeed, what is instructive about the victims of the rioters is not so much their wealth — as we have seen the majority were no richer than the average middling tradesman — but the crucial role they played in servicing the Catholic community. Over a quarter were involved in the drink trade, principally as publicans. A further quarter were food retailers, dealers, or pawnbrokers.[61] Five of the 124 victims who were compensated for the destruction of their property were schoolmasters. One was a newsman. In other words, it was not the gentility or wealth of the victims that is striking, especially if one eliminates the parliamentary supporters of the Relief Act and the justices, but their intermediary status within the Catholic community, as sources of information, sociability, and credit.

Precisely which houses were pulled down, of course, depended upon a variety of factors. One was clearly the disposition of military forces, whether regulars or, after 6 June, volunteers. St. James, Piccadilly, had a large Catholic population, but it was too close to the Westminster barracks and to the Horse Guards for comfort.[62] On the other hand, Holborn and the city of London had more accessible targets because of their jurisdictional complexities and because the forces of law and order were either overextended, defunct (as was the case with the city militia), or sympathetic. Quite apart from Lord Mayor Kennett's supine attitude, some marshalmen simply refused to act. As one told Thomas Gates, the uppermarshal, "he would not come to protect any such Popish rascals" because he had sworn the oaths of allegience, abjuration, and supremacy upon taking office.[63]

Southwark was also a riot-prone area until the South Hampshire regiment arrived and the hastily formed volunteer association moved into action.[64] So, too, was the East End, where the chapels in Virginia Lane and Nightingale Street were pulled down, although the Catholic population here was poor, organizationally less important, and openly resistant to further destruction. Among other things the Irish coalheavers of Wapping threatened reprisals upon dissenting meeting houses if further damage ensured.[65] But in addition to the military logistics of the riot, local factors could come into play. Neighbours sometimes remonstrated with crowds to save popular Catholics. In the case of Thomas Dodd, they blocked the doorway, "begging the mob not to fire the house."[66] Similarly, Nicholas Hilyer attempted to intercede on behalf of a Catholic

61. PRO, WORK 6/110 and 111, Particulars of losses sustained during the Gordon riots. The breakdown of the 124 whose occupational status can be identified is as follows: esquires or gentlemen, 14.5 per cent; professions or "genteel" trades, 9.2 per cent; food and small-ware retailers, 18.5 per cent; drink trade, 26.6 per cent; brokers and dealers, 7.2 per cent; artisans, 16.9 per cent; and labourers or lodgers, 4.8 per cent.
62. In this respect it is worth noting that attacks upon property in the vicinity were frequently frustrated by the cavalry or repulsed by fire.
63. CLRO, Repertories of the Court of Aldermen, 184:209-10.
64. See *Surrey*, 44-45.
65. PRO, SP 37/14/147-48. So, too, did the Irish chairmen in St. James and Covent Garden, with the result that the Swallow Street meeting house had to be guarded.
66. *Surrey*, 104.

neighbour in East Bermondsey, while a fishwomen deplored the sacking of Captain Alexander French's house in Rotherhithe, declaring that he had been charitable to the poor.[67] The local standing of Catholics could thus complicate the political imperatives of the riots, but it could also reinforce them. Catholics who had been officious in bringing neighbours before the law might find themselves in double jeopardy. Such was the case of John Lebarty, an Italian who kept a pub and slop shop in St Katherine's Lane near the Tower. He had incurred unpopularity through his duties as parish watchman, and the attack upon his house was accompanied "by a sort of rough music," with a cacophony of frying pans, tongs, and bells.[68]

In a number of respects, however, the disturbances did move beyond their original boundaries. In the final phase, the riots began to centre upon crimping and spunging houses and the tolls of Blackfriars Bridge. Crimping or recruiting houses had long been unpopular during wartime in riverside parishes and engendered a full-scale riot some fourteen years later.[69] Spunging houses, temporary lockups for debtors seeking to raise bail before a suit came to trial, were equally detestable. In the opinion of Richard Holloway, a debtor often found himself "marred in and surrounded by a set of wretches, whose daily bread depends upon the misfortunes of others."[70] According to one account, no less than twenty were burnt down in the borough on 8 June.[71] As for the tolls raised to pay for Blackfriars Bridge, they had originally been scheduled to expire in 1770, and then in 1778; but the city of London ultimately decided to make them permanent in order to finance other projects.[72] To small traders south of the river they remained a smouldering grievance, and the tollhouse was pulled down on the evening of 7 June in a swathe of destruction that included King's Bench Prison, the Surrey Bridewell, and the Fleet.

The social grievances which emerged during the final phase of the riot, then, were specific and concrete. They addressed the petty exactions and humiliations that might oppress the small traders, artisans, and mariners in their everyday lives, ones which had been given considerable publicity since the 1770s as part of an informal radical agenda. But how are we to interpret some of the other actions of the crowd — the attacks upon the Inns of Court, the Bank of England, and the Pay Office, for example? Do these not suggest a more portentous challenge to authority, as some contemporaries suggested?[73]

The raids upon the Inns of Court, in fact, paralleled those upon the gaols. The initial objectives of the crowd were specific. As one contemporary remarked, the popular

67. Ibid., 5-7.
68. *Old Bailey*, 508-11; PRO, KB 8/79/221. P.B. Clayton and B. R. Leftwich, *The Pageant of Tower Hill* (London, 1932), 229.
69. *The Autobiography of Francis Place*, ed. Mary Thale (Cambridge, 1972), 34-35; John Stevenson, "The London 'crimp' riots of 1794," *International Review of Social History* 16 (1971): 40-58.
70. Richard Holloway, *A Letter to John Wilkes Esquire* (London, 1771), 28.
71. *A Narrative of the Proceedings of Lord George Gordon*, 45.
72. See CLRO, Misc. MS 348.5; *Reasons Humbly Offered for an Immediate Discontinuance of the Tolls on Blackfriars Bridge* (London, n.d.), found in Guildhall Library, London.
73. The *Remembrancer* 10 (1780): 13, said the raid on the bank was "the most serious circumstance in the whole riot."

fury against the Temple and Lincoln's Inn was prompted "by something more than their levelling idea of destroying every public building."[74] They sought out a number of parliamentary supporters of the Relief Act: Dunning and the master of the Temple, the bishop of Lincoln, whom they confused with the bishop of Peterborough, the most outspoken episcopal supporter of the 1778 bill. The attacks upon public institutions like the Pay and Excise offices and the Bank of England were more symbolic. They were the culmination of the dialogue between crowd and authority, the last outburst of anger against a perfidious establishment. The attack upon the bank, in particular, was spontaneous rather than planned. The rioters did not cluster in the alleyways surrounding the bank and attempt to smoke out the troops and volunteers who defended it. They paraded flamboyantly before its gates, led by a man on a drayhorse caparisoned with the fetters of Newgate. In the last analysis this was an act of transgression rather than of subversion, redolent of misrule.

What conclusions, then, might we offer about this most complex riot, the most formidable commotion in England since the Western rising of 1685? In the first place I would emphasize the extent to which the rioters adhered to their original political objective, the repeal of the Relief Act. The rioters saw themselves as the shock troops of the Protestant Association, exerting political pressure upon an intransigent Parliament and underscoring the unpopularity of a measure which they regarded as detrimental to English liberty and its sense of national identity. Whether that affiliation was acknowledged by the supporters of the association or not, the crowd shared the same fears about the growth of popery. There was a basic convergence of belief which, once invoked by Lord George Gordon's audacity, could not be dispelled. In a limited sense this was a "licensed" demonstration. The Protestant Association orchestrated the riot in its initial stages and the crowd presumed, with some justice, that its huge following would support or connive at its actions, especially in the city where its supporters were politically well placed. But the crowd always retained some autonomy from its political leaders. It did not simply follow their writ. It operated within well-established conventions of popular politics which had allowed it a crucial, though subaltern, role.

Since midcentury there had been a rough and often fruitful concordance between crowd action and "progressive" elements in the metropolis. Crowds helped to create the space for libertarian politics; their interventions tipped the political balance of forces in ways which helped to amplify arguments about liberty and parliamentary reform. But, *pace* Rudé, these developments were contingent rather than structurally determinant, and in 1780 they came unstuck. The reasons were partly ideological and partly the result of changing political practice. As we have seen, the campaign for the repeal of the Relief Act confounded contemporary political alignments. While there were radical resonances to the repeal campaign, the Relief Act was not viewed by all radicals as yet another ministerial incursion upon liberty. Those influenced by Enlightment ideas, in particular, regarded the qualified toleration of domestic Catholics to be perfectly reasonable and, indeed, consonant with Britain's libertarian status. These divisions were compounded by the fear that the conventional modes of crowd action, its festive, rambunctious street politics, might not be compatible with the new modes of association

74. *Fanaticism and Treason*, 74.

generated by the Middlesex elections of 1768-69, the American war, and the parliamentary reform movement. It was a debate as to where the "sense of the people" might best be constituted and where the boundaries would be drawn.[75] In a word, the Gordon riots unsettled the partnership between crowd and radicals. It forced its problematic status upon the popular consciousness.

One should not, therefore, exaggerate the radical lineaments of the Gordon riots. The repeal campaign was populist and nationalist, first and foremost. It was a protest against the religious urbanity of the cosmopolitan establishment which arrogated to itself the right to determine the future growth of British Catholicism. To the Gordon rioters it was a major betrayal of Britain's Protestant and libertarian heritage, a sell-out of all they stood for.

In reconstructing popular notions of anti-Catholicism, some historians have emphasized their traditional and reactionary nature. Colin Haydon has recently argued that the Gordon riots resembled a Catholic *grand peur*.[76] "Everything about the tumults of 1780 was old fashioned; the aims; the symbolism; the xenophobia in wartime; and above all, the old mythology of Popery." This seems to me to be too categorical. It is true, of course, that the rioters were able to draw upon a deep reservoir of anti-Catholicism. They invoked the Book of Martyrs and paraded the relics of Catholicism in a manner redolent of a seventeenth-century religious riot. In some instances their actions touched deep religious anxieties. One Catholic woman in Spitalfields declared that "she still hoped to see the day when she should be enabled to wash her hands in the blood of heretics."[77] Yet in a disturbance replete with rumours of an American plot, a French plot, a ministerial plot, and a patriot plot, there were no verbal or written expressions of impending Catholic massacres. Compared to the blacklash againt Jacobitism in 1745, the symbolism of the Gordon riots was less traditional, with few pope-burnings, devils, or "Scarlet Whores," and a more muted emphasis upon Protestant martyrology. The imagery, in fact, was altogether more secular and political, focussing upon the court's "Scottish" connections, the king's renunciation of his coronation oath, and so on.[78] It is conceivable, of course, that the crowd remained immune to this symbolism, but the popular resistance to the arrest of the radical writer, William Moore, noted for his denunciations of the corrupt, pro-Catholic court in the *Thunderer*, suggests it did not.[79] The popular Protestantism of 1780 thus appears more self-confident and libertarian than its earlier manifestations. Drawing upon a substratum of traditional hostilities about Catholics, it also addressed the anxieties which surrounded George III's controversial policies.

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75. I have developed this argument in "Crowd and 'People' in the Gordon Riots," in *The Transformation of Political Culture in Late Eighteenth Century England and Germany*, eds. A. Birke and E. Hellmuth (Oxford, forthcoming).
76. Colin Haydon, "Anti-Catholism in Eighteenth-Century England c. 1714-1780," D. Phil. diss., Oxford University, 1985, 288-89.
77. *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 7 June 1780.
78. For the Scottish connection, particularly with respect to Lord Mansfield, see PRO, WO 34/104/31-32.
79. BL, Add. MS 30,866, f. 242.

In a sense, then, I am arguing for a more political interpretation of the Gordon riots than has been offered by previous authors. While the riots did get out of hand, we cannot use the drunkeness and arson to deprecate the political consciousness of the participants. Nor can we characterize the demonstrators as a "licensed mob" operating on behalf of external interests. They shared the political passions of the Protestant Association even if their actions embarrassed its members. On these issues I side with Rudé. Where I disagree with that pioneer historian of the crowd is on his ideological and social interpretation of the riot. The disturbances of 1780 were not directed at the rich; they were directed at the most visible and influential members of the Catholic community, and at the cosmopolitan quality who believed in a qualified toleration for the rejuvenated Catholic church which had emerged under Bishop Challoner. Outside of this context the social protests of the crowd were concrete and specific, directed at crimps, spunging houses, and tolls. As for the ideological dimensions of the riot, they did not follow a radical-libertarian vector. On the contrary, the Gordon riots drew upon populist, national sentiments that did not square with conventional political alignments. It remained to be seen how these forces could be accommodated in contemporary political discourse.