The Revolutionary Symbology of French Wine

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July 14, 1789 was a harrowing day for Lieutenant Louis de Flue. Arriving at the medieval Parisian fortress of the Bastille a few days prior, the Swiss officer immediately noted that the defenders exuded a general feeling of uneasiness. Even the governor of the fortress, Bernard-René de Launay, shared the sentiment, confiding to de Flue of the garrison’s meager defenses and of the “impossibility of guarding the place if attacked.” On July 13, Flue and his soldiers noticed smoke from various fires springing up throughout the city. These fires had been set by Parisians protesting the government’s taxation policies. Fearing attack, the defenders sealed off the fortress completely. On the following afternoon, a mob of armed citizens and soldiers cut down the chains of the drawbridge of the Bastille, forced open the large door to the garrison, and entered the central courtyard. The defenders opened fire. After a few hours of back-and-forth combat, the defenders capitulated. The attackers rushed in and seized the weapons and personal effects of de Flue and his soldiers. De Flue was arrested by the crowd and dragged through the streets, all the while taunted and cursed by the burgeoning crowd. Some of the Parisians threw rocks while others brandished their swords and pistols at de Flue and his soldiers. Two of his men were assassinated en route. When the mob arrived at City Hall, de Flue was charged with being “the cause of blood being spilled” and was summarily subjected to an impromptu trial. De Flue explained that he had simply followed orders, but the crowd was unconvinced. The Swiss officer tried a different approach: “Not seeing any other means of saving myself and…what remained of my troops, I declared my willingness to serve the City and the Nation.” There was a cry of “bravo!” in response and the crowd broke into applause. “Instantly,” de Flue explained, “I was brought wine and we had to drink to the health of the City and the Nation.”

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Though the admission and accompanying toast secured de Flue’s freedom, he found the ensuing days vexing and uncertain as new accusations against him aroused suspicion. None of the accusations, however, merited an additional trial. De Flue likely believed that his pledge to the nation and city had saved his life as well as the lives of his soldiers. The toast had merely served as a social ritual, assuaging the suspicions of the crowd of protesters. In the context of the Revolution, however, wine was suffused with amplified political meaning. De Flue’s wine toast did not merely calm the rebelling crowd; it signified de Flue’s devotion to the French nation and implied his identity with the Parisians who had stormed the Bastille—the very attackers that de Flue had opposed mere moments before. This brief anecdote highlights the importance of wine as a politically charged symbol—a symbol that could convey multiple, sometimes contradictory values.

During the French Revolution, wine was an integral part of the social and cultural fabric of the French nation. As taxes on the cherished vin de table increased in the 1780s, commoners protested for a more just system of taxation that reflected the revolutionary values of liberté, égalité, and fraternité. Affordable wine became both a goal and gauge of the Revolution. Wine, and the accoutrement used to store and consume wine, were part of a multivalent symbology that recreated social and political hierarchies. As historian Lynn Hunt contends, “During the Revolution, even the most ordinary objects and customs became political emblems and potential sources of political and social conflict.” Wine was one such ordinary object that became suffused with political meaning as the Revolution progressed. The style and color of wine as well as the type of glass used to serve the beverage connoted national, regional, and political identity. Political conflicts over the economic regulation of

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wine, in part, sparked the revolutionary crisis, while its symbology reflected the political and cultural dynamics of the Revolution.

In the past decade, historians Noelle Plack and Rod Phillips have produced compelling studies emphasizing the role of wine in economic protests on the eve of the Revolution. Both historians argue that wine was at the forefront of revolutionary rhetoric concerning taxation. As Phillips notes, “Common people came to a regard a regular supply [of wine] at reasonable prices as one measure of the success of the Revolution.” Plack and Phillips have done much to highlight the significance of wine in the French Revolution, situating the economic dynamics of wine production within larger historiographical debates. Neither, however, study the revolutionary symbolism of wine holistically. Although Plack contends that wine was “symbolic of newly found freedoms,” she connects this symbolism explicitly to the economic quarrels over taxation, failing to address the political and social significance of the symbol. In his seminal work, French Wine: A History (2016), Phillips assigns more importance to the revolutionary symbolism of wine than Plack does; however, the bulk of his study is also devoted to the economic significance of the commodity. While Plack’s and Phillips’s work has shed light on the role of wine in inaugurating the revolutionary crisis, their scholarship does not unpack the full implications of wine symbology.

In contrast, historians Marin Demossier and Kolleen M. Guy have analyzed the symbolism of French wine in great depth, arguing that wine was inherently associated with national and political identity. As Demossier argues, “Drinking wine provided…a means of belonging to the nation by consuming one its main ingredients in a way that was impossible

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for other alcoholic products.” Although their scholarship does not address the French Revolution per se, Demossier’s and Guy’s methodology can be used to glean insights into the multivalent symbolism of French wine during the period, especially when welded with Phillips’ and Plack’s analysis. This paper uses a syncretic approach, combining both economic and symbolic methodologies to argue that wine was both an object of economic protest and a multivalent symbol in the context of the French Revolution. This paper also utilizes contemporary depictions of wine to contend that wine and wine iconography illuminates the political and social dynamics of the Revolution. As Guy contends, “To write the history of wine is to write the history of the French people, a history grounded in an ancient past…which serves as the repository for the accumulated historical memory of France.”

Wine was an essential commodity for the French in the late eighteenth century. The average adult male living in Paris on the eve of the Revolution drank approximately 300 liters of wine, 15 times the amount of beer and 50 times the amount of cider consumed. Addressing the National Convention in 1789, vigneron (wine grower) and legislator Etienne Chevalier claimed, “Wine is the basis of survival of the poor citizen of Paris. When bread, meat, and other foods are too expensive, he turns to wine.” One of the more radical Jacobin legislators, Jean-Paul Marat, even identified wine as one of the principal “necessities of life” in an article published in his periodical, Friend of the People. In a decree passed by the Assembly in 1793, wine was characterized as one of the most essential commodities of consumption, topped only by bread and meat. Profiteers convicted of monopolizing

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commodities including wine were liable to have their property confiscated and could be put to death. In September of the same year, the Convention instituted price maximums on wine, capping the price of purchase and sale. Such laws were implemented to make wine and other essential commodities more affordable for French citizens. By passing laws stipulating price maximums on wine and increased punishments for monopolists, legislators enlarged the scope of revolutionary ideals to include concern for the material prosperity of every citizen.

While price maximums and monopoly prohibitions on wine were welcomed by French commoners, indirect taxes levied on the beverage were a source of widespread protest. Throughout the 1780s and early 1790s, French commoners rallied against the indirect system of taxation instituted by the Assembly on various commodities including wine. As John Markoff has demonstrated, aides (taxes on alcoholic beverages) were the third most frequently listed grievance in cahiers de doleances (grievance lists) drawn up by rural parishes in 1789. Aides and octrois (municipal excise duties) were levied on wine transported into any city or town, including the metropole. By the time aides and octrois were levied on a barrel of wine, the price effectively tripled. These wine taxes were uniform regardless of the quality or value of the wine being taxed, and, as a result, poor and middle-class consumers of mediocre wine suffered a higher tax burden than their wealthy counterparts. These consumers essentially subsidized the wine purchases of France’s upper crust. In response to the high taxes, wine merchants smuggled their cargo across the customs wall into the metropole in ingenious ways. Some smugglers drilled holes through customs walls and poured wine through the channels into buckets inside the wall. Between 1785 and

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1788, authorities had discovered and sealed eighty such conduits.\textsuperscript{12} Other enterprising individuals filled balloons with wine and passed the vessels via rope to houses inside the customs wall. There were even reports of pipes that ran underneath sections of the wall through which wine was channeled.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{cache-pot.png}
\caption{Le cache-pot, 1816.}
\end{figure}

\textit{Commis} (customs officers) raided various wine cellars and establishments in an effort to crack down on the popular and illicit wine trade. Armed and uniformed, these \textit{commis} frequently conducted warrantless searches and seized or destroyed contraband. \textit{Le Cache-Pot} and \textit{Le Tour du Baton} are contemporary cartoons that demonstrate the contempt which most Parisians exhibited towards the \textit{commis}. In \textit{Le Cache-Pot}, a \textit{commis}, depicted as a rat, purchases a bottle of wine from a merchant. (Figure 1). The \textit{commis} is disguised as an elderly, haggard woman. While the transaction is taking place, another rodent \textit{commis} rushes into the cellar to arrest the startled seller (Figure 1). Although \textit{Le Tour du Baton} portrays the

\textsuperscript{12} Phillips, \textit{French Wine}, 121.
\textsuperscript{13} Plack, “Liberty, Equality and Taxation,” 11.
three characters in different colored costumes and presents a slightly different space than represented in *Le Cache-Pot*, the two images are undoubtedly part of the same series of cartoons. In *Le Tour du Baton*, the wine merchant, enraged at the unwarranted intrusion, produces a baton and proceeds to thrash the rodent *commis* (Figure 2). Their disguises removed, the rats appear dressed in formal attire and cravats, signifying their wealth and privilege. The wine merchant, by contrast, is garbed in plain trousers and a worker’s smock. His sleeves are rolled, exposing his brawny forearms. Dismayed at the merchant’s vigorous resistance, the rats try to flee. The merchant pins one of the rats down and brings his weapon back to deliver a forceful blow. The luckier of the two rodents escapes not through the door, but the window. In both cartoons, the *commis* are portrayed as sneaking and conniving rodents who use unscrupulous tactics to gain access to the wine cellar. The merchant, in contrast, is typified as a strong and honest worker. When the identities of the *commis* are exposed, the merchant pounces, flailing the rats with his baton in a moment of righteous indignation.

![Figure 2. Carl de Vink, *Le Tour du bâton ou les revenans bons du métier*, 1789-1815?](image)
Other contemporary images negatively characterized the *commis*. In one cartoon entitled “La Querelle des chats et des rats de cave,” *commis* wearing wigs and colorful suits, attempt to spike and set fire to a wine merchant’s stores (Figure 3). The merchant, sporting a red Phrygian cap and a workman’s apron, sics his cats on the *commis*. As in *Le Cache-Pot* and *Le Tour du Baton*, one of the *commis*, seeing that he and his clique are getting the worst of the fight, attempts to leave the cellar. Although the *commis* are dressed in fashionable and high-dollar garb, the cartoonist suggests that such guises are only facades, obscuring the rat beneath. In these cartoons, the wine merchants are depicted in simple clothes of a common artisan and engage in violence only in self-defense against the unjust and unprovoked aggressions of the *commis* agents. Wine, centrally situated in all the depictions, is characterized as a valuable commodity that must be defended at all costs. These contemporary cartoons were not simply vectors reflecting the public’s growing disillusionment with the tax system and the *commis*; as highly circulated media, such cartoons also influenced public opinion, further souring the reputation of the *commis*.

![Figure 3. La querelle des chats et des rats de cave, 1789-1790.](image)

Although public outcry against the indirect system of taxation and unscrupulous tactics of the *commis* had been growing for some time, tensions came to a head on July 11,
1789 when Jean Cerf, a Parisian local, was searched and detained at an excise barrier for concealing five bladders of brandy beneath his clothing. A crowd soon descended on the barrier, armed with batons, shovels, and pitchforks. After liberating Cerf, the armed protestors destroyed the barrier. Over the next three days, Parisians translated their longstanding grievances of the indirect tax system into popular action. Led by wine merchants and tavern keepers, armed groups of Parisians destroyed and burned barriers, intimidated *commis* agents, and transported loads of wine into the city tax-free.\(^ {14}\) In fact, the fires that Lieutenant de Flue observed from his post in the ramparts of the Bastille on July 14 were likely the smoldering remains of excise barriers ignited by emboldened protestors. Ultimately, these barrier attacks culminated in the Storming of the Bastille in which wine merchants acted as both leaders and participants. In total, 21 of the conquerors of the Bastille were later identified as wine merchants.\(^ {15}\) Wine was an object of intense, prolonged economic conflict on the eve of the Revolution. The Storming of the Bastille, the founding act of the Revolution, was prefaced by widespread protests on wine taxes and wine merchants played a prominent role in the taking of the fortress.

Although the regulation of wine was a pervasive issue that punctuated revolutionary rhetoric, wine conveyed multiple meanings, evoking national, regional, and political connotations. In late eighteenth century France, wine became associated with national identity as new viticulture techniques coalesced in the conceptual creation of terroir. Terroir generally describes the combination of soil, climate, topography, and the rather nebulous qualities of cultivation and vine care that together characterize wine produced in a certain vineyard. As Susan Pinkard demonstrates in *A Revolution in Taste* (2009), the concept of


terroir was engendered by a revolution in wine production during the eighteenth century. Wine growers and merchants realized that they could enhance the taste of wine by storing the liquid in bottles and allowing it to age. Bottled wines produced from good vineyard plots developed “a unique, multilayered taste and bouquet within which individual notes could be distinguished.”\textsuperscript{16} As it emerged during the eighteenth century, the idea of terroir distinguished wine as an authentic product, embodying the geology, climate, topography, and the nation in which it was cultivated. In \textit{When Champagne Became French} (2003), historian Kolleen M. Guy elaborates on the national connotations of wine consumption: “Consumption of champagne provides natural access to an authentic, organic France through the intermediary of French terroir.”\textsuperscript{17} By drinking wines grown in their own nation—unique products of French geology, climate, and topography—consumers signaled their French identity.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4.png}
\caption{Louis XVI, avoit mis le Bonnet rouge, il avoit crié vive la nation, 1792.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{17} Guy, \textit{When Champagne Became French}, 2.
In a 1792 illustration of King Louis XVI, the monarch is depicted wearing a Phrygian cap with a tricolor cockade (Figure 4). He drinks the words *vive la nation* (long live the nation) from a large wine bottle. In this context, drinking is identified as a civic act. By drinking a toast to the nation (in this case the cartoonist satirically portrays Louis actually consuming the toast), Louis signals his French identity. Louis’s Phrygian cap and tricolor cockade—both prominent revolutionary symbols of the sans-culottes—suggests Louis holds republican sentiments. Wine complements the revolutionary icons depicted in the illustration. As Demossier notes, “It was through eating and drinking that the French nation essentialized the link between wine and the public republican sphere, enabling a strong identification between the daily collective consumption of wine and the imaginary consumption of the nation.” In this cartoon, wine is both a revolutionary and national icon, quite literally symbolizing the nation in which it was cultivated and produced.

As it emerged in the eighteenth century, the notion of terroir connoted not only national identity, but as Marin Demossier points out, it also “emphasized regionalism.” Wines produced in regions like Burgundy, Bordelais, and Champagne all exhibited unique qualities and were valued differently by French consumers. In one contemporary illustration entitled *L’Accord fraternal*, members of the three estates are portrayed drinking wine together; however, their drinks of choice are different, identified by the color and type of glass used to serve the wine (Figure 5). The commoner holds a simple goblet generally used to drink red wine. The clergyman drinks out of a bulblike glass typically used for Burgundy wines. Rounding out the ensemble, an aristocrat, clad in military regalia, lifts a fluted glass of sparkling champagne. As this image demonstrates, the regional variation of French wine connoted economic status. Common Parisians favored red wines while members of the first

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19 For a full discussion of this illustration, see Guy, *When Champagne Became French*, 10-11.
and second estates, portrayed by the aristocrat and clergyman in *L’Accord fraternal*, preferred premium white wines from Champagne and Burgundy generally associated with the Bourbon monarchy.20


Champagne and other sparkling wines especially dominated France’s upscale wine market. Sparkling wines grew in popularity in France during the eighteenth century as producers discovered that they could carbonate wine by inducing a secondary fermentation and utilizing special grape-pressing techniques. Innovative winemakers employed such techniques to enhance the region’s blended wines. The region subsequently became a hotbed of luxury wines as *negoziants* (wine merchants) built impressive inventories, marketing the new wines to wealthy clients.21 The opulence, privilege, and status symbolized by the possession and consumption of Champagne and other sparkling wines attracted the enmity of French liberals during the Revolution. In 1794, the Assembly targeted the wine stores of enemies of the Republic—those identified as emigres or political dissidents—by drawing up

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inventories of luxury wine caches, seizing the stores, and disseminating them to French soldiers.\footnote{Phillips, \textit{French Wine}, 129.} Additionally, the consumption of luxury wines was strictly prohibited during the Terror.\footnote{Noelle Plack, “Intoxication and the French Revolution,” \textit{Age of Revolutions}, accessed December 8, 2019, https://ageofrevolutions.com/2016/12/05/intoxication-and-the-french-revolution/.} In this context, Noelle Plack’s assertion that wine functioned as a symbol of liberty is inadequate. Although the consumption of wine reflected the libertine ideals of the revolution in some cases, luxury wines signaled the privileged status of the \textit{ancien régime}. As Rod Phillips contends, “Like powdered wigs and frock coats, luxury wines became regarded by more radical revolutionaries as symbolic of counterrevolution.”\footnote{Phillips, \textit{French Wine}, 128.}

While luxury wines and, more importantly, those who purchased and consumed such wines aroused suspicion, \textit{vin rouge} (red wine) became increasingly associated with the revolutionary ideals of the new Republic. Red wine was the beverage of choice for Jacobins and sans-culottes mingling in taverns and cafes after work. \textit{Le Père Duchesne} (Father Duchesne), a radical Republican newspaper authored by Jacques Hébert, emphasized the revolutionary symbolism of red wine in an article idealizing the sans-culottes. In the article, Father Duchesne criticizes the wealthy who “build castles in the air,” sacrificing both “honor and country”:

\begin{quote}
What a damn difference there is between the fate of this pathetic character and that of the honest sans-culotte, who lives from day to day by the sweat of his brow. As long as he has a four-pound loaf in his bread box and a \textbf{glass of red wine} [emphasis mine], he’s content. As soon as he wakes up, he’s as happy as a lark, and at the end of the day, he takes up his tools and sings the revolutionary song, ‘La Carmagnole.’
\end{quote}

After a long day of labor, the sans-culotte returns home and shares the news he has gleaned on the street with his wife and children. “He tells how a traitorous general, a follower of Brissot, was guillotined. While telling his children about these scoundrels, he makes them promise to always be good citizens and to love the Republic above all else.”\footnote{“Père Duchesne Idealizes the Sans–culottes,” \textit{Liberty, Equality, Fraternity}, accessed December 5, 2019, http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/373.} In this article,
Hébert characterizes the sans-culotte as a resourceful, hard-working, upright man, who idolizes “the Republic above all else.” The sans-culotte’s consumption of wine signifies the commodity’s essentiality to contemporary French commoners as well as its revolutionary symbolism. Hébert’s characterizations of the sans-culottes mirror the depictions of the wine merchants in Figures 1-3. The wine merchants and the sans-culotte are romanticized as industrious and moral while the antagonists are portrayed as wealthy and deceitful. In all these depictions, wine is a prominent icon, cherished by the sans-culotte and defended by the wine merchants.

Figure 6. Jean-Baptiste Lesueur, *Repas républicain à Paris*, 1794.

Jean-Baptiste Lesueur’s 1794 illustration *Repas républicain à Paris* further situates red wine within the corpus of revolutionary iconography (Figure 6). In this illustration, men, women, and children gather to eat a meal in Paris. At the center of the illustration, a man pours a glass of red wine for a republican soldier while another woman motions for a refill. Several members of the coterie sport cockades, and one diner, pictured on the far left, wears a Phrygian cap. A marble figurine rests on the edge of the table decked in a laurel wreath,
traditionally a symbol of triumph dating back to Greek mythology. A tricolor ribbon, wrapped carefully around a vine, crowns the illustration. Lesueur’s work is suffused with the symbols of the French Revolution. Cockades, the tricolor ribbon, and the bottle of red wine—prominently centered in the illustration—are all part of a complex symbology that reflected political values.

Analyzed in this context, Lieutenant de Flue’s toast at the opening of this paper takes on a new character. Although the symbolic toast of wine placated the violence of the mob and calmed the Swiss officer’s nerves, it would be myopic to view the toast as a mere social lubricant. The consumption of wine connoted acute political meaning. By drinking a toast to the nation, de Flue signaled both his identity as a servant of the French nation and his devotion to the republican collective, dedicated to the revolutionary principles of liberté, égalité, and fraternité. De Flue’s toast assuaged the commoners’ suspicions and misgivings about the seemingly wealthy and aristocratic Swiss officer, while signaling his inclusion in their ranks.

The symbolic implications of wine were not inherent in the drink itself. Rather, the meanings associated with the consumption of wine were constantly negotiated by consumers, producers, and regulators. While a glass of red wine connoted republican values, a glass of champagne could signify wealth, greed, and aristocratic privilege. The various representations of wine produced during the French Revolution attest to the essentiality and symbolic significance of the valued commodity. Wine was central to the French Revolution. Protests over the regulation of the beverage inaugurated the revolutionary crisis. Not simply a vector of liberty, wine and the accoutrement used to store and serve the valued vin de table were part of a multivalent symbology that connoted national, regional, classist, and political identity. As a symbol, wine reflected the broader political conflicts of the Revolution
representing, in certain contexts, the ideals of counterrevolution, and in others, liberty that could be tasted.
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**Images**


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