

Diffusion in Cliometrics and Complexity: The role of popular societies in the dynamic spread of revolutionary ideas in 1789 France

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In this lecture, we consider whether popular societies were a place of diffusion of a plural thought during the French revolution. The motivation for this research is the following: should we believe the classic Cochin thesis (1921), advocated in modern times by Furet (1979) and Furet and Ozouf (1988), that Jacobin clubs were places of “brainwashing” and as such precursors of what was seen in the Soviet Union and Peoples Republic of China? Do historiographical sources on the popular societies corroborate this perspective, which constitutes the dominant historiographical view today?

Our examination of the historical evidence produces a far more nuanced picture than that drawn by these authors. The first step of our research has consisted in reading the collection of monographs of “Popular societies” gathered by historians for the bicentenary of the French Revolution under the title « Les Sociétés populaires à travers leurs procès-verbaux », published by the *Editions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques* in 2018, to identify the patterns of Revolutionary thought. To the best of our knowledge, this source is the most complete for understanding, at the local level, the way these societies of thought functioned in revolutionary France, from their beginning in 1789 to their end in 1795. These sources include the minutes of the deliberations, the correspondence, the list of newspaper subscriptions, the list of members, etc. They are an irreplaceable source for understanding intellectual currents at the local level, exhibiting the political and philosophical debates of the clubs and the sociological composition of their members. This source demonstrates that these popular societies were (i) places of philosophical and political debate about the ideal city, (ii) representative of the diversity of professions of French society at the time.

Reading the monographs of *Sociétés populaires* challenges the conventional wisdom of Cochin (1921), Furet (1979), and Furet and Ozouf (1988). These authors reject a democratic vision of the French revolution in favor of a vision of the Revolution as illiberal and ultimately authoritarian. These monographs reveal (i) an undeniable pluralism of ideas within the clubs and between the clubs, and (ii) a profound diversity in the sociological composition of these clubs. Deep heterogeneities and differences existed between the clubs. The clubs, even those affiliated with the Jacobin Club of Paris, were places of hearing, exchange, reflection, and transmission of ideas with significant philosophical differences existing between clubs in the same location. When single club was present in a location, we find intra-club pluralism. Our findings help challenge the conventional view that societies of thought were the vehicle of a uniform Jacobin thought. On the contrary, the monographs of popular societies provide evidence of a democratic impulse underlying debates over ideas. This intellectual diversity reflects a sociological diversity among club members that contrasts with the fixed society of ancient regime. We give evidence that these two characteristics of popular societies coincide with the diffusion of revolutionary ideas outside popular societies. The open question we address to the community in

Diffusions fundamentals is the following: *Were these two inner characteristics a necessary and sufficient condition for the diffusion of revolutionary ideas outside clubs?* Discussions with physicists and scientists specialized in diffusion fundamentals will help envisage innovative tools to analyze the process of diffusion of ideas outside clubs, more specifically how the internal characteristics of these clubs facilitated the external diffusion of revolutionary ideas, at the tipping point of the French Revolution. Interactions with physicists should help defining new methods to enrich the cliometric and complexity approach to revolutions and revisit conventional historical wisdom on the French revolution.

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