

George Rude (1910-1993)

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OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE

George Rudé (1910-1993)

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I FIRST MET GEORGE RUDÉ when he taught in the Graduate Programme of Social and Political Thought at York University. He used to come down from Montréal on a Thursday evening in preparation for a seminar on comparative revolutions on the following day, before travelling back east to resume his teaching responsibilities at Concordia. It was a gruelling schedule for a man in his 60s, and by December it had taken its physical toll. But Rudé was always ready to talk about crowds and popular politics and to share with younger scholars his copious knowledge of British and European history. He was a good raconteur and an attentive listener, and our conversations still ring in my memory.

George Rudé was not British by birth. He was born in Oslo, moving with his parents (a Norwegian engineer and the daughter of an English banker) to England when he was nine years of age. There he received a typical upper-middle-class schooling before going to Cambridge to read modern languages. Rudé came late to history. For many years he taught French in a succession of British secondary schools. A committed Communist from 1935 until the 1960s, this was not easy, and there were occasions when his political commitments cost him his job. His path to a university post in history was also a tough one. Rudé fell out with his doctoral supervisor, Alfred Cobban, over politics. He also encountered considerable opposition to his initial university appointment in Australia. But in his late 40s he began to carve out a name for himself in the new and rapidly expanding field of social history.

Rudé sometimes claimed he was simply a historian of riot. This self-effacing description was incorrect, but it was not altogether inapt. Rudé's singular contribution to social history was his rediscovery of the 'crowd,' its faces, actions, motivations, and basic humanity. His studies of the crowd in the French revolution remain classics. Together with Albert Soboul and Richard Cobb, Lefebvre's 'three

musketeers,' Rudé helped push the history of that revolution in new directions, humanizing the faces that had so often been reified as the 'People' and pinpointing the critical interventions of the *menu people* in the making of its own history. In *The Crowd in the French Revolution* Rudé delved skilfully into the actions, motives and social composition of the insurgents who stormed the Bastille in 1789 and contributed subsequently to the revolutionary journées. In the process he transformed our understanding of the social context of the French revolution, an interpretation that still holds weight against postmodernist incursions.

Within the English context Rudé turned his sights to the Gordon riots of 1780, restoring popular agency to an incident which had hitherto been dismissed as blind, anti-Catholic fanaticism. He then threw aside the heavy weight of Namierite orthodoxy to produce a highly original monograph on the Wilkite movement and its place in British radicalism, one upon which the next generation of social historians would build. From this vantage point, Rudé moved forward in time to produce, in conjunction with Eric Hobsbawm, the definitive study of the agricultural labourers' revolt of 1830. He subsequently wrote a probing book on those transported to Australia for political or 'protest' crimes in Britain and Canada. This was followed up with a venturesome foray into the social history of crime in the early 19th century based on three county studies; one that allowed him to reflect further on the class dimensions of crime and the criminal process. Here he concluded that while the criminal justice system was a direct expression of class rule, the prevalence of 'acquisitive' and 'survival' crimes over those committed to redress social injustices undercut any explanation of crime as 'class war.'

Rudé's approach to popular history was pre-eminently 'pointillist' involving the amassing of small details about the lives of ordinary people into a collective portrait. This predisposed him to addressing the sociological rather than cultural questions of popular history, but it did not detract him from ignoring the importance of collective ideas or ideologies as a 'material force,' to use his own phrase. Indeed his *Ideology and Popular Protest*, which served as a sort of auto-critique of his earlier forays into crowd history, addressed the reproduction of popular ideologies quite explicitly. In particular, it underscored the dialectical relationship between 'inherent' and 'derived' beliefs that Rudé saw as critical to an understanding of popular interventions in the era of the democratic revolutions.

Along with Hill, Hobsbawm, and Thompson, all members of the Communist Party of Great Britain's Historians' Group in the post-war years, Rudé promoted a new interest in history 'from below.' This was a grassroots history that recovered the active agency and experience of ordinary people in the past. It was a painstaking and arduous recovery, one that involved an oblique approach to the past, a sifting of hitherto unexplored sources, and a reading against the grain of many others. History 'from below' constituted an important moment in the evolution of social history. It consolidated the struggles of the 'common people' in the making of their own history; it refined our knowledge of class formation; it detonated economic and technologically-directed Marxist history; and it turned traditional political

history upside down. Rudé will be remembered for his many contributions to this emancipatory project; in particular, for his studies of popular struggle in 18th-century London and Paris and for his sympathetic portraits of those protesters who ended their days as convicts in Australia. He will also be remembered for his bonhomie, his dedication to teaching as well as to scholarship, and for his undogmatic but engaged approach to historical studies. He will be especially missed in Australia and Canada where he spent so many years teaching and writing history.

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