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A Month for Riots and the Killer Omelet

By AMANDA FOREMAN

June has always been a popular month for riots and uprisings. The violent scenes unfolding in Turkey's Taksim Square join a crowded calendar that includes the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the Paris Uprising of 1832 and the Berlin Riots of 1953, to name but a few. It is not difficult to see how a combination of sunny weather and longer days might bring out the barricades. It takes a hardy rebel to brave the snow as well as bullets.



Thomas Fuchs

It also takes a particular type of individual—one with more resources than just a loud voice—who can transform the anger of the mob into a revolutionary movement. The first leaders to harness the power of the people were two Roman aristocrats, the 2nd-century B.C. Gracchi brothers, Tiberius and Gaius. If they are remembered at all today, it is because their campaign for political reform unleashed forces that ultimately destroyed the Roman Republic.

The Gracchi can also be thanked (or blamed) for inventing the concept of class warfare. Their proposed economic reforms pitted the landed gentry, the Optimates, against the Populares, the urban masses. Like all politicians, feeding their high regard for egalitarian ideals was a deep well of political ambition. As Tribunes of the Plebs, the Gracchi were not above goading and manipulating the masses against the Senate for their own ends. The tactic worked well until Senators figured out a way to hijack the Gracchi brothers' populist agenda and use it against them.

Tiberius was clubbed to death during a riot in 133 B.C. Twelve years later, his younger brother, Gaius, met a similar fate after leading a protest march through Rome.

The Gracchi not only created a new kind of politics, they also invented a new kind of politician: the Champagne socialist. However, as they discovered, there are inherent dangers in being for, but not of, the people. In the case of the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), it was an innocent request for an omelet that brought home this painful truth.

Before the French Revolution, Condorcet was the inspector-general of the mint and one of the Ancien Régime's most eminent philosophers and mathematicians. When the Revolution broke out in 1789, his well-known embrace of socially progressive views protected him from political persecution. Nor was the Marquis content to cheer from the sidelines. Condorcet became secretary of the new Legislative Assembly, where he put forward a number of admirable proposals on the abolition of slavery, universal education and political rights for women.

Nevertheless, when Condorcet's revolutionary fervor fell short of the fanaticism demanded by the Jacobins, his downfall was swift and complete. Hunted by the authorities, Condorcet became a refugee, moving by night from one safe-house to the next. He lived in a friend's attic for eight months, keeping himself sane by writing his monumental "Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind."

As time went on, Condorcet grew increasingly paranoid that the house was being watched. Finally, the fear became too much, and he went on the run. He spent two days sleeping rough before hunger forced him to seek refuge at an inn.

At first no one paid any attention to the mud-splattered traveler who sat in the corner, nursing a fresh wound on his leg. But then the innkeeper asked for his order. Condorcet replied that he would like an omelet. How many eggs? Condorcet took a wild guess, probably never having visited a kitchen before or seen how an omelet is prepared. His reply: 12.

The room immediately broke into an uproar as the other travelers recognized an aristocrat in their midst. Condorcet was dragged to a cart and carried off to prison. He died not long after, either from the injuries sustained during his arrest or by suicide. Condorcet had loved the people, but he had no clue as to how they lived.

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