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Police Records and the
National Press in France
Issues in the Methodology of
Data-Collections from Newspapers

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**Fillieule: *Police Records and the National Press in France.
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from Newspapers***

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Introduction ¹

Over the past two decades, quantitative studies have become increasingly important in the works of historians and political scientists as a systematic source of historical data. First and foremost, it is in the study of social unrest and political violence that these sources have been relied upon. Most of the empirical studies in the field analyze conflict events aggregated over spatial and temporal units and attempt to isolate longitudinal series of data, using newspaper accounts as sources².

At the same time, a literature has also developed, however, which attempts to demonstrate bias in such sources and most scholars recognize that newspapers neither fully inventory nor accurately describe conflict events (Dantzger, 1975; Snyder & Kelly, 1977; Glasgow Media Group, 1976, 1980; Kielbowicz & Scherer, 1986; Fransozi, 1987 ; Rucht & Ohlemacher, 1992; Koopmans, 1995). To date, the extent and exact nature of the inaccuracies in newspapers remains largely unknown.

One way to get a more exact measure of these inaccuracies is to compare newspaper accounts to other, more exhaustive sources. In France, the archives of the national police contain materials on protest events which are quite useful in this respect³. These materials serve as the basis for my research on changes in

¹ - A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Workshop, "Protest Event Analysis: Methodology, Applications, Problems", Wissenschaftszentrum-Berlin, June 12-14, 1995.

² - One can distinguish these works according there empirical ground. First, studies which concentrate on cross-national studies of multiple conflict events (see Feierabend and Feierabend (1966) ; Bwy (1968) ; Gurr (1968) ; Tilly (1969) Paige (1975) ; Kriesi and alii (1995) ; second, national studies on multiple conflict events (see Eisinger (1973) ; Kriesi and alii (1981) ; Tilly (1986) ; Tarrow (1989) ; Rucht and Ohlemacher (1992) Fillieule (1996) ; third, works dedicated to single conflict events, mainly on race riots in the United States (see : Downes (1970) ; Wanderer (1969); Spilerman (1970) ; Mc Adam (1982) ; Olzak (1992). See also Inverarity (1976) on lynchings, Jenkins and Perrow (1977) on farm workers movements, Walsh and Warland (1983) on march against nuclear plants and Le Saout (1996) on *anti-Pershing* movement in Europe. On protest event analysis, see Olzak (1989) and Rucht, Koopmans and Niedhart (eds) (forthcoming).

³ - That doesn't mean that police archives are not biased but only that they are more accurate and cover much more protests and document them in a systematic way. However, even if we

forms of political engagement in France during the eighties. From these archives, I have constructed a database of almost 5,000 protest events that occurred between 1979 and 1989 in the cities of Marseille, Nantes, and Paris⁴. This number, while considerable, does not represent the most part of the protest events which took place in France in this period. Based on various press and police sources, I estimate that in this period, for cities of 200,000 plus inhabitants, an average of 10,500 protest events per year took place. In the city of Nantes, for example, there were 1,766 events between 1979 and 1991, which means an average of one event every three and a half days. In Paris, in the same period, there were nearly 1,000 protest events a year, which means an average of three events per day. And starting at the end of the seventies, the pattern is one of increasing frequency. In other words, the construction of a truly complete database on protest events has only just begun⁵. Nevertheless, the approximately 5,000 events already coded permit us to draw certain tentative conclusions. In this paper, I hope to offer certain insights into the question of the selectivity of newspaper sources, by comparing data derived from samples of both newspaper accounts and police records. I begin by defining what I mean by protest event. This first step in my analysis is a crucial one on which all subsequent steps depend⁶. I then describe the police records and their limits. Finally, I compare the data derived from these records with that obtained from two national French newspapers: *Le Monde* and *Libération*.

have never found any evidence of it, one may doubt whether all events are covered by the police.

⁴ - Fillieule 1993, 1996; Favre and Fillieule 1994.

⁵ - All protest events which occurred between 1979 and 1989 in Marseille (the second largest city in France) and Nantes have been fully coded and entered into the database. Only a portion of Paris events from this period (approximately 10,000) have been coded and entered.

⁶ - I do not argue that this definition is superior to others; on the contrary, a plurality of definitions seems inevitable since any given definition is a reflection of the specific question posed and the nature of the materials informing the research

I - The Definition of a Protest Event

The French national police have developed a very broad definition of a protest event. A protest event, for them, includes any type of gathering of people, either in public or private space. Hence, included in the term are events as diverse as soccer matches, rock-concerts, Labor Day parades, religious processions and, from time to time, picket lines. For both practical and theoretical reasons, which, because of time, I won't go into here, I define a protest event much more narrowly, using the following criteria:

- The Number of Participants: I have excluded events involving only one individual. Beyond this, I do not set a minimum on the number of participants for we do not know what number of people is required before protest events occur⁷. Moreover, the police, whose records I use, paid as much attention to small gatherings as they do to mass demonstrations. Nevertheless, it should be noted that only a minuscule number of events contained in the police records involved fewer than ten people. In addition, the database I have constructed from police records is flexible; participant thresholds can be set differently should we, in the future, wish to compare our results to those of other researchers whose definitions include higher minimums.

- The Expressive Dimension of Protest Events: All protest events have an expressive dimension both for the participants themselves and for their audience, by the public assertion of pre-existing or newly-formed groups, by the presentation of vague or precise demands. This second criterion allows us to eliminate those gatherings of people brought together by something other than a common goal (for example, the people in a market place, the crowd which gathers in Times Square on News Year's Eve to watch the ball drop).

⁷ - The threshold most commonly used in the literature on social movements is ten. See, however, the *Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence* which, in the 1970s, used a threshold of four people; on the higher end of the scale is Spilermann (1976) whose threshold is thirteen, and Tarrow (1989) who sets the minimum at twenty, except for actions involving violence. Finally, Rucht and Ohlemacher (1992) set the threshold at three people.

- The Political Nature of the Event: This third dimension of the definition is the most difficult to nail down; it's also the most important. Should we count as protest events the celebration of Joan of Arc in the city of Orléans, with its "folkloric" parades, and the annual march of J. M. Le Pen⁸ on the same occasion in Paris ? Is there an accurate sociological criterion to use in this instance, or should we be guided by the meanings that the participants themselves give to their actions? Things become even more complicated if we consider that many events, which, at first glance, appear to be apolitical may in fact be the sign or expression of a socio-political crisis. Lacking a perfect answer to these questions, I have included here all events characterized by or leading to the expression of demands of a political nature. The political nature of the protest event can be either latent or manifest, that is, partially or completely unknown to the protagonists.

- The Nature of the Organizers: This dimension of the definition is even more difficult to nail down, since almost all social actors today, including even governmental actors, can resort to protest events as a strategy. Certain social movements become institutionalized even to the extent of becoming political parties, while certain parties are quite marginal to electoral politics and have less access to institutional arenas than do certain powerful social movement organizations. Moreover, some social movements do not target the State or elites, but rather other groups or movements (take, for example, the anti-racist and anti-Le-Pen movements). Because of this, we need to set aside such distinctions as institutional vs. non-institutional groups, elites vs. challengers, insiders vs. outsiders. In addition, protest actions are often the result of political work done by changing configurations of actors; this heterogeneity makes the selection of events by virtue of their organizers even more difficult. Finally, as we all know, despite the legal forms and names attributed to various groups (unions, parties, interest groups, social movement organizations, etc.), the

⁸ - J. M. Le Pen is the leader of the *National Front*, the French extreme-right political party .

frontiers are constantly shifting depending on circumstances and various interests⁹. In light of these issues, the only events excluded from my database are those which were clearly initiated by government actors: for example, in June 1989, the city government of a small town in the Paris suburbs organized a rally in Paris to protest against the problems created by a stone-pit. (Fortunately, there were only seven such government-initiated events among the 5,000 coded thus far).

- The Form of the Event. Now I come to the question of whether or not to include the form of an event as a criterion. Scholars have taken just about every position possible on this question. Some studies concentrate on one particular type of action (strikes, violent actions), others focus on all forms of non-institutionalized public action (this is the catch-all approach of Tilly's *contentious gatherings* ; then there is Tarrow's (1989) approach -what he calls a middle road - which is to include strikes, demonstrations, petitions, rallies, and violent action, and to exclude protest events which do not involve collective demands directed at other actors. My own definition is not far from Tarrow's and I include public marches, rallies, occupations, obstructions of public thoroughfares (e. g. barricades), sit-ins, and "operation rescue" style actions. Eliminating certain of these modes of expression would be methodologically unwise, since it would prevent us from investigating the relationship between contesting groups and these different forms of action.

More precisely, in any given event, modes of action intermingle and overlap. An event can start as a march and often ends as a rally or blockade (planned or unplanned). Moreover, in certain cases - for example, the anti-war movement during the Gulf War - it often happens that, over a period of several days, action

⁹ - In France, when considering the way public space has constructed itself, one should note that parties, unions, and non-profit organizations have developed simultaneously, during the Second Empire (1850-1870). It was only later that they were treated by the law as different entities. So, for example, unions and non-profit organizations were assigned a separate legal status at the end of the nineteenth century; 1884 for the former and 1901 for the latter. As a result, during this intermediary period, numerous non-profit organizations adopted the legal status of a union.

shifts from one mode to another: march, occupation, rally, blockades... In such cases, using an overly-narrow definition forces one to ignore the fact that often many modes of action are practiced during a single event. Moreover, if only one form of action is coded - say, for example, a march going from point A to point B - one loses the ability to think in terms of repertoires of action. That is why, in my database, when an event includes multiple modes of action, I coded up to three such modes¹⁰.

In conclusion, given that the unit of analysis here is the protest event, I define an event as a distinct action undertaken over a continuous period of time, with no interruption exceeding a day. Hence, an occupation of a building, for example, which continues uninterrupted for several days is coded as one event; on the other hand, if demonstrators protest for two hours every day for several days in front of an Embassy, each two-hour protest will be counted as one event. In the latter case, although we may know that the purpose of the Embassy demonstration has not changed from day to day, we do not know whether the actors may change. The choice to code separately such events then, although to some extent arbitrary, nevertheless helps reduce the problem of uncertainty over actors. Finally, I should note that I do not count strikes as protest events since these do not fulfill some of the criteria of my definition of such events. I also exclude terrorist acts (bomb attacks, kidnappings, etc.) since they are not systematically tracked by the police records I use. The disadvantage of excluding terrorist acts is that it then becomes impossible to follow the full process of radicalization of some movements. The potential distortion this creates in a study of protest events in France, however, is limited by the fact that very few French social movements have adopted terrorist modes of action, at

¹⁰ - Protest events including only one mode of action are by far the most common; they represent 74% of those in Marseille, 63% of those in Nantes, and 78% of those in Paris. Rallies and marches are the most commonly-used mode of action. Events including three or more modes of action are rare (5-10% of the total, depending on the city).

least since the end of the 1970'. There are basically only two such groups : le *Front de Libération national Corse* (FLNC) and *Action directe*.

In one sentence then, I define a protest event as follows: *an event in which a non-governmental actor occupies a public space (public buildings, streets) in order to make a political demand, to experience in-process benefits, or to celebrate something, which includes the manifest or latent expression of political opinion.*

II - Methodological Problems in Using Police Records

In France, protest events result in a considerable production of police documents. These are divided among five different archives:

- 1) The archives of the Office of Public Security cover protest events in Paris (archived at the Prefecture of Police in Paris).
- 2) Records concerning events occurring in cities of 10,000 plus inhabitants are archived at the National Office of City Police and, for each local subdivision, at the direction of urban police.
- 3) Records concerning events occurring in small towns (less than 10,000 inhabitants), where the soldiers of the police militia (that is *la gendarmerie nationale*) are in charge of public order, are concentrated in Paris.
- 4) Records concerning events which fall under the jurisdiction of the Republican Security Forces (CRS) are archived at the Central office of the CRS in Paris. Most of the time, these documents cover violent protest events.
- 5) Finally, one can notice, also at the national level, the archives of the Central direction of the General Intelligence Service of the Ministry of the Interior (*Renseignements Généraux*). We might have had some access to these sources but we decided not to utilize them because of their lack of reliability (the data

we wanted to work on were systematically collected by the police officers themselves, so that it was impossible to check their value).

A comparative test was conducted on all but one of these archives over a period of six months (January-March and June-July 1991) to determine which were the best for my purposes. (I decided not to request permission to use the archives of the National Gendarmerie). I completed this test by coding the most important of the non-national French newspapers, *Ouest-France*, which covers Brittany and the Loire region. I draw two conclusions from this accuracy test : one, in cases where events are tracked by the police, both the dates and the locale of the event are accurately noted¹¹. Two, by far the most complete sources are the archives of each local subdivision of the direction of urban police and, for Paris, those of the Police Department¹². In Nantes, for example, of the 147 events listed in 1991, 50 are listed in no other source. Hence, I decided to concentrate on these archives which normally exist for most of the cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants (yet with some exceptions).

The Ministry of the Interior has actually set guidelines detailing the kinds of information about events it would like to see recorded in the *main courantes*; hence, each *main courante* contains the same type of information with respect to each event: date, location, and duration of the event; modes of action; description of the event as it unfolds (these descriptions always include the route taken, the mention of any admission of some protestors to an interview with the public authorities (*délégations*), if any, and the public appearance and actions of any public officials); the nature of demands made; the identification of organizing groups; the identification of the people taking part in the event

¹¹ - About one hundred events are reported by these different sources. For none of them we have noticed any difference concerning the date, location, and identification of demonstrators.

¹² - These archives, in Paris as well as in the rest of the country are called the "*main courantes*". La main courante est un document de forme et de contenu variable d'un lieu à l'autre (cela va du simple registres aux mentions manuscrites au fascicule dactylographié, comme à la préfecture de police de Paris) où sont portés à mesure tous les événements qui appellent une intervention policière.

(mostly in terms of their job); and finally any possible intervention by the police (arrests, court trials, etc.). This last category of information is particularly important since it allows one to know, in most cases, under what conditions violence erupts, and whether it is initiated by protestors or the police¹³. The main advantage of the *main courante* is that the information reported does not vary, no matter how unimportant the event might be politically and no matter how few the participants. This allows for a systematic study of small events and means that it is not necessary to exclude a whole category of events due to insufficient information.

On the other hand, the *main courantes* pose three types of problems which are difficult to resolve:

2-1. The Accuracy of "Soft" Data. Some types of information on the *main courantes* may not be accurate - specifically, information pertaining to "organizing groups," "participants" and "demands." The police officers who fill out the information on "organization groups" and "participants" get this information from several sources: banners (which often give information -- for example, their jobs, the groups they belong to -- about the participants¹⁴), flyers collected throughout the course of the event (which may list precisely the

¹³ - In fact, given that these documents were never meant to be opened to the public or to researchers (they are not deposited in the local or national archives), the temptation to paint police activities in a overly-favorable light is not always as important as it might seem at first glance. However, one should note that the police generally tends to downplay their errors and use of violence in general. But, due to the internal war that often oppose the different police corps (CRS/Gendarmes and Urban police), the *main courante* are full of critics aimed at the gendarmes and CRS action in the field. Because we have worked also on the CRS archives of the 80', that are very critical to the Urban police, we have acquired a good understanding of the hidden meaning of the bureaucratic style of the *main courantes*.

¹⁴ - In Marseille, for example, for almost all the big events, records contain a very systematic account of the texts written on the banners and slogans. This constitutes an invaluable source of information because through it one can establish what groups participated in the event. It would, of course, be a mistake to think that these records are exhaustive. The fact that they represent only a partial record became clear during the course of a class I and Nonna Mayer taught at the Institute for Political Studies. One of the class assignments we gave students was to attend an anti-racism march which took place that semester and to note down the kind of information recorded in the *main courantes*. The march was called by more than forty organizations; although the information gathered by the different teams was very similar, it nevertheless differed on some points.

demands) For small events, the police may get the relevant information by simply meeting with the organizers, since the police in most cases know the leaders of the protest event (except in Paris). As a consequence, the information given in the *main courantes* about organizers, participants and demands is not a reflection of categories established by the police, but is rather a reflection of the self-definitions of the groups involved in the event. I am aware of the limits inherent in any attempt to create categories and typologies, given that both individuals and collective actors may claim many identities simultaneously. These dynamics are even more present during events which are acting out a political opinion, because individuals and collective actors attempt to present themselves as representatives of larger categories.

Moreover, the demands expressed during an event do not correspond to the full range of goals held by organizations and participants¹⁵. The meanings which make up the action can take multiple forms, a reality impossible to capture in a longitudinal study and which would require an in-depth, even ethnographic study of each event. Using direct action can be a means of challenging the "State" in order to gain recognition and/or concessions of some kind. It can also be a means of offering participants the image of a unified group, to increase the legitimacy of the leaders (hence the need to turn out in large numbers); a means of appealing to various publics, spectators, media, commentators and...why not?... sociologists. Nevertheless, if police records do not allow us to identify all of the goals which motivated our 5,000, or so events, it is still possible to measure, based on the demands put forward by the SMOs themselves - as these were communicated during the event (via flyers, banners, etc.) - whether protest events of the 1980' in France embody materialist or non-materialist values, radical or more limited "corporatist" demands, etc.

15 - Who has not, when attending a demonstration, seen a lone individual carrying a sign with which she attempts to attract attention for his/her cause. For a funny illustration of that, Sempé's picture of the protestor brandishing a sign which reads: *Will exchange a charming, 3-room apartment, kitchen, bathroom, for a 5-room apartment Tel. 127.41.23* (Sempé 1983).

2-2. Coding Events within a Limited Geographic Area. Most people would concede that any hope of producing an exhaustive inventory of protest events - especially when these number in the thousands each year - is an illusion. That is why most recent studies of protest events work from samples (Kriesi 1995; Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992). Our main concern lies not with the exhaustiveness of any given sample but rather with its representativeness. Generally, researchers using newspaper accounts have constructed a sample based on one or several days of the week. My approach has been to code all protest events occurring within a particular area. My study, when completed, will include all events which occurred in nine French cities; among the nine are Paris (where one out of every ten protest events occurs), Marseille and Lyon: the three largest cities in France. The other six cities were selected based on the availability of usable *main courantes* and on certain characteristics of the cities themselves¹⁶. This sampling strategy only makes sense given the highly centralized nature/form of the French state, which results in a considerable homogeneity in the practices which make up protest events (whether these be the practices of participants or of the police) as well as in types of SMO's involved. In a separate study (Fillieule 1996), a comparison of protest events in Marseille and Nantes demonstrates the lack of regional variation in types of events in France¹⁷.

2-3. Temporals Gaps in Sources. Unfortunately, there are no complete police records for protest events before 1979, except for Paris. Hence, studies based on such records in France cannot go as far back in time as can studies based on newspaper accounts. This limitation is all the more unfortunate because the research conducted by Tartakowsky (1994), based on a combination of newspapers and some remaining police sources has provided us with a rather good understanding of protest events from 1919 to 1968. Hence, what remains

¹⁶ --These six cities are respectively Nantes, Strasbourg, Lille, Rennes, Bordeaux and Grenoble.

¹⁷ - One should except Corsica for which it a very specific study would be necessary.

to be studied are the 1970'. And for this decade the only available records cover either events in Paris and those followed by the CRS (in general, the latter only documented events which were either extremely large or involved violence).

III - Using Police Records to Test the Quality of Newspaper Sources

Studies of protest events based on police records are rare because getting access to these sources is difficult¹⁸. Data from such records can be used to test the quality of newspaper sources: their completeness, accuracy, and reliability. And a comparison of data from these two sources can help us locate any possible problems or limitations of any press studies or which may have resulted from sampling strategies. I will now discuss some of the results of just such a comparison. I compare the data derived from a sub-sample of my database with data pulled from the coding of articles in two newspapers, *Le Monde* and *Libération* for the sixth-month period between January and June 1989. This period was selected for three reasons: one, it was a period in which many protest campaigns occurred. Two, political life was influenced by two important elections (one mayoral, the other for the European Parliament) which occurred in this period. Three, the events of *Tien An Men* square occurred in this period. I will now make an attempt to specify validity as a function of events characteristics and media sensitivity. The latter, I assume, is heavily dependent upon the course of internal and international political life.

Scholars have identified two types of bias: the selection of news (i.e., differential completeness of reporting), and the distortions in their content (i.e. inaccurate reporting and unbalanced interpretations of events). Because my focus is on protest events, I will here put a primary emphasis on the probability that events are reported in newspaper sources.

¹⁸ - see, however, research currently underway by Mc Carthy and Mc Phail (1995) on police permits in Washington D.C., Della Porta on Florence (1993) Wisler on Geneva and Zurich, Hocke (1995) on Freiburg/Breisgau (Germany) and Gentile on Switzerland.

3 - 1. Types of Events. First of all, Table I shows the extent to which newspaper accounts report on only a small number of the protest events documented in police sources. *Libération* and *Le Monde* report on only 2% of events, and even if we combine the data from the two papers, the total arrived at is only 3% of events. These low numbers are not, of course, very surprising. Finally, if we just consider the total number of events which took place in Paris, Marseille, and Nantes (758), only 9.6% (73) appear in one of the two newspapers.

TABLE I:
Number of Events in France from Jan. to Jun. 1989

| Estimation of Protest Events (19) | <i>Libération</i> Events | <i>Le Monde</i> Events | Events in Both Papers | Events in one or Both Papers |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 4400 | 104 (2%) | 80 (2%) | 31 (1%) | 153 (3%) |

Focusing exclusively on these 73 events, one can say something about aspects of events which are either not reported on or which are reported on inaccurately in newspaper accounts. To begin, "hard" news is not so well reported, especially as concerns the number of participants and information related to violence (e.g., description of the violent incident, number of people injured or arrested, whether charges were filed, whether protestors were brought to trial, etc.). What is noteworthy here is not so much the differences between police records and press records but rather the total lack of systematicity in it, both between papers and within each paper. Focusing for a moment on the question of the numbers of participants, it seems that newspaper accounts give either the number of police present, or the number of organizers (that is the highest), or an average of the

19 - One should remind that I estimated that in the eighties, for cities of 200,000 plus inhabitants, an average of 10,500 protest events per year took place. Yet, traditionally, less protest events happen to occur from January to June than from July to December. That is why our estimation for 1989 is of 4400 (for more details, see Fillieule, 1996).

two. This lack of consistency makes the use of newspaper accounts problematic, especially when one considers the number of participants as a reliable indicator of the level of mobilization in a given place or a given period²⁰.

The next thing to determine is whether newspapers, in deciding whether or not to cover an event, do so on the basis of some characteristic of the event itself. If newspapers are always sensitive to the same kind of protest events, there should be a clear difference between events being reported and those not. However, if one compares data derived from police records with that taken from newspapers, it seems factors often thought to influence coverage do not in fact do so. Such factors include: the occurrence of violence, the nature of the participants and organizers, and the type of demands made. In fact, two features of events explain the majority of press accounts bias: location (Paris/province) and number of participants.

Le Monde and *Libération*, respectively, report on 6.2% and 11.2% of events occurring in Paris, but both report on only 1% of those occurring in Marseille and, on 0% of those occurring in Nantes (Table III). This suggests that newspaper coverage of events is almost entirely focused on Paris; events in the other large cities of France (such as Marseille, the second largest city in the Country!) go largely unreported. This almost total neglect of events outside Paris may be an artifact of the extreme centralization of the French state. Such centralization means that a large majority of state agencies to which movement actors address their demands are located in Paris; This is the reason why non-Parisian organizers of protest events, conscious of this fact, attempt whenever possible to demonstrate in Paris.

20 - On that question of the number of demonstrators, one should note an interesting difference between *Libération* and *Le Monde*: If in *Libération* no number is given in 37,5% of the events, even implicitly, it is only the case in 6,25% of the events covered by *Le Monde*.

TABLE II

| | PARIS | | | MARSEILLE | | | NANTES | | |
|------------------|--------|------|-----|-----------|------|-----|--------|------|-----|
| | police | Libé | L.M | police | Libé | L.M | Police | Libé | L.M |
| number of events | 499 | 56 | 31 | 191 | 1 | 3 | 68 | 0 | 0 |

This finding, however, should be tempered in part because the most determinant variable is the number of participants. As Table IV shows, the average size of events covered by the press is much greater than the average size of all events documented in police records. This Table also shows that the average size of Parisian events reported on in the press is much higher than for province events. This suggests that the number of participants required before a Paris event is covered is larger than the number required before an event in the rest of the country is covered. The reason for this is clear : the frequency of protest events in Paris and the fact that they are generally larger than those in the provinces creates what we might call a "routinization effect".

TABLE III

| (in average number of people involved in protest events) | POLICE FILES | PRESS FILES |
|--|--------------|--|
| PARIS | 546 | <i>Libération</i> : 9985 <i>Le Monde</i> : 13492 <i>Le Monde+Libération</i> : 11738 |
| MARSEILLE and NANTES | 244 | <i>Libération</i> : 4557 <i>Le Monde</i> : 2135 <i>Le Monde + Libération</i> : 3346 |

Based on what we know about how newspaper coverage varies as a function of certain features of events, we can draw several conclusions. One, if one wishes to study protest events in France as a whole, the use of national newspapers is not advisable. Even if a large number of participants increases the likelihood that an event in the provinces will be covered, it remains that many of the large events which took place in the first six months of 1989 were not covered by the press.

Second, Graph I seems to lend support to the idea that the press covers only the largest protest events. But the most striking finding shown in the graph, however, is the similarity of the two lines at the 100-person mark and beyond. This indicates that although the number of events recorded in the press is smaller than that captured in police records, in percentage terms the sources tell us the same story.

{see graph 1, p. 26}

Third, the strong under-representation in the press of events involving under 100 people should be noted. Often, small events are considered of little interest because of their minimal impact on governmental officials or the public²¹. But things are not that simple. I measured in France the growth of small events involving fewer than 50 people. In Nantes, for example, protest events involving 20 or fewer people have grown from 20% of the total events at the beginning of the 1980' to over 30 % at the beginning of the 1990'. This increase in protest events is all the more interesting given that mass protests organized by unions are in decline and protest events organized by political parties have all but disappeared in France.

3 - 2. Media sensitivity to political issues is an equally important determinant of the likelihood an event will be covered by the press. It is necessary to distinguish between two cases. First, when an event involves a theme which is, at that moment, already the focus of media attention, its chances for receiving coverage increase. This dynamic was visible, for example, during the Tien An Men events which took place between April 18 and mid-June 1989 and which were covered extensively by the press. In this period, in Paris, actions in support

21. What is all the more unreasonable that, in France, information about protests are systematically collected by the prefets and are sent to the Ministry of Interior as an indicator of social conflict.

of the Chinese students involved in Tien An Men even when very small, were often mentioned, although sometimes only briefly.

Second, when a political event of great importance (such as elections or international events like the Gulf War) occurs, there is a reduction in the number of events covered by the press. This dynamic is visible, for example, during the local elections at the end of March 1989 and during the elections for the European Parliament in mid-June 1989. It is tempting to simply conclude that protest events receive less coverage when certain national or international events move to the forefront of the political scene. Things, however, are not quite that simple. I have in fact shown, elsewhere, that during certain elections or international events, the actual number of protest events which take place diminishes (Favre and Fillieule 1994; Fillieule 1996).

In a similar vein, some have argued that when a protest campaign becomes exceptionally large, the press appears to report almost exclusively on protest events organized by this movement²². Here again, however, what in fact happens is that the overall number of protest events actually taking place diminishes. Graph II, which displays protest events in Paris during the Gulf War illustrates this point. When the anti-war movement mobilized, the number of protest events linked to other themes declined substantially and did not return to pre-movement levels until the anti-war movement faded away. This is why it is necessary to systematically compare the number of events covered by newspapers to the number of events which actually took place, if one wants to measure the extent of the bias caused by the media themselves.

{see Graph 2, p. 26}

22 - Unfortunately, it does not mean that big protests campaigns are well reported by the press. On the one hand, the press begins to pay attention to protest campaign as far as these campaigns have already reach a certain degree of mobilization (that is what one call usually the "critical mass effect". On the other hand, when these campaigns last a long time, media attention begins to decrease even if protest remains at a light level of mobilization (that is the "ceiling effect" of Dantzger (1975)).

What follows is just such a treatment of the first six months of 1989 and, in particular, the general strike of government workers in Corsica, a strike which, in March and April, moved to the forefront of the media scene. As Graph III shows, during these two months, the press covered Paris protest events with much less frequency, although these events had not actually declined in size or number. Hence, the conflict in Corsica did indeed result in a considerable scaling-back of the coverage of Paris protest events. This finding is extremely important because it shows that the variation in the number of protest events indicated in the data drawn from newspaper sources are not determined primarily by changes in the actual number of events but rather by the shifting focus of newspapers on X or Y protest campaign. The problem here is that this type of bias has no systematicity but rather varies depending on the public events of the moment. One conclusion to draw from this is that any medium or long-term "trends" in number of events that might appear in newspaper data may in reality be simple artifacts of media inattention in certain periods. In that respect, our evidence seems to indicate that the temporal and spatial patterns of newspaper reporting do not correspond to real-life patterns. The problems this poses for research are even more serious when that research in question involves cross-national comparisons, since political life varies from country to country (e.g. election cycles).

{see Graph 3, p. 27}

3-3. Evaluating Sampling Strategies. Another way in which comparisons of police and newspaper data can be useful is in sampling strategies. In some recent studies, scholars working with newspapers have constructed their samples from all events reported on a single day of the week (Kriesi et al 1995; Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992, to some extent). Since Kriesi's study involves France, with

data for France drawn from *Le Monde*, I focus on this work in particular (Duyvendak 1994; Koopmans 1995).

To evaluate the wisdom of using one day a week and - as is the case in this study - Monday in particular, as a sampling rule, we must first know if protest events are equally distributed along the week or not. Tartakowsky (1994) writes that, between 1919 and 1934 in France, 17% of union protest events in his sample took place on Sunday. Those who protested most often on Sunday were government workers since, unlike other categories of workers, they did not have the right to strike. More than two-thirds of the events took place between Monday and Saturday, on average evenly spread across the week. In contrast, 50% of all events involving political demands took place on Sundays between the same period.

In the 1980', we find that there continues to be a larger number of events during the week. Beginning on Monday, the number of events steadily rises until on Thursday, it peaks; it then declines steadily from Friday through Sunday. The pattern, however, differs when we compare Paris to province. A greater proportion of Paris-based events occur Friday and Sunday than is the case for Marseille and Nantes. In contrast, the number of participants in the week-end events is considerably higher in all three cities than on other days. Hence, events which take place on Sundays seem different from others and mainly involve, as in previous periods, demands which are more tied with "generalist" issues than with "corporatist" problems (unemployment, wages, etc.). In short, the day on which an event occurs is not independent of the type of demand made during the event or the type of group organizing the event.

If we return now to our sample of Parisian events occurring in the first six months of 1989, we can determine the quality of a sample made up of news coverage of week-end issues. First, as Graph IV shows, *Le Monde* does not give equal attention to events on all days of the week. In fact, it writes at less length

about events which occur on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. In contrast, Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays are better covered.

{see Graph 4, p. 27}

According to police records on events in Paris, weekend events represent 15% of all events in any given week. According to *Le Monde*, these events represent 16% of the week's events, with the number of participants averaging 26,5000 (in contrast to an average of 13, 492 for the rest of the week). Keeping in mind Koopman's reasons for choosing weekend events (1995), this data tells us two things: one, events are not more numerous on weekend days than on other days of the week, and the day in the week on which there are the most events is Thursday. Second, it is true that the number of participants on Saturdays and Sundays is clearly larger than on other days.

I return now to a point touched on briefly above: namely, the special character of weekend events. According to Table V, the majority of events which occur between Monday and Friday (69%) are organized by unions, and revolve around generally "corporatist" themes (wages, layoffs), whereas on Saturday and Sunday, the type of event which dominates involves more "political" themes (anti-racism, diplomacy, etc.). One can see this clearly looking at the type of organizers involved in protest events happening on Saturday and Sunday.

TABLEAU III
Paris Jan. to Jun. 1989
Police Records (N = 499)

| week end | | | rest of the week | | |
|----------------------|----|------|----------------------|-----|------|
| international groups | 33 | 43% | unions | 287 | 68% |
| political parties | 14 | 18% | international groups | 66 | 16% |
| unions | 11 | 14% | political parties | 24 | 6% |
| religious groups | 5 | 7% | anti-racist groups | 10 | 2% |
| anti-racist groups | 4 | 5% | religious groups | 8 | 2% |
| other groups | 9 | 8% | other groups | 28 | 7% |
| Total | 76 | 100% | total | 423 | 100% |

Deciding to construct a sample in a particular way means that particular bias must be controlled. In focusing exclusively on weekend events, it is reasonable to assume that one is capturing the most part of the so-called new social movement events. This approach allows one to explore a particular category of events and movements, but prevents one from comparing, say, the rate or pace of this type of movement with other movements like the labor movement. In addition, when one's research involves cross-national comparisons, since the "week" is a culturally constructed category, one should inquire into the cultural meaning of the week-end in different countries under research.

Before bringing this discussion of sampling to a close, I would like to make one last, seemingly-obvious point. If one is going to focus on weekend protest events, it is of course necessary to code those issues of a newspaper which actually purport to cover weekend news. What issues actually carry such news, however, can vary from paper to paper. Take *Le Monde* for example. The Sunday/Monday edition, the edition used for the French case in the Kriesi study discussed above, does not, in fact, contain weekend news. This edition is printed on Saturday morning between ten and noon (the front page). Hence, for the most part, it covers Friday news. It does, sometimes, print information about protest events planned for the upcoming weekend, but does so in a completely random way... Consequently, one has to ask what consequences this might have had for a database constructed out of the Sunday/Monday edition of *Le Monde*. And the question is all the more crucial in the case of this comparative study: we know that week-end events have some characteristics that others have not. The French database is the only one, as far as we know, in which these week-end events are heavily under-reported. Here is a strong bias that was, unfortunately, not foreseen.

Summary

In this paper, I give a brief summary of my on-going research, a study based on police records of protest events in France in the eighties. I also discuss the limits of newspaper sources through a systematic comparison of data on protest events drawn from the press and police records. Based on this comparison, the following conclusions seem warranted: the number of events covered in the press is only a small fraction of the events which actually take place (less than 4%); the size and location (Paris/province) of an event has a significant effect on the likelihood that an event will be covered by the press; the press interest in reporting an event also varies depending on what other events are occurring simultaneously on the national or international scene. This latter point in particular leads me to conclude that any "trends" derived from newspaper data are highly suspect, since, in many instances, they may reflect variation in press attention rather than variation in the incidence of protest events themselves. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of sampling strategies common in the literature and in particular the serious limits of certain of these strategies.

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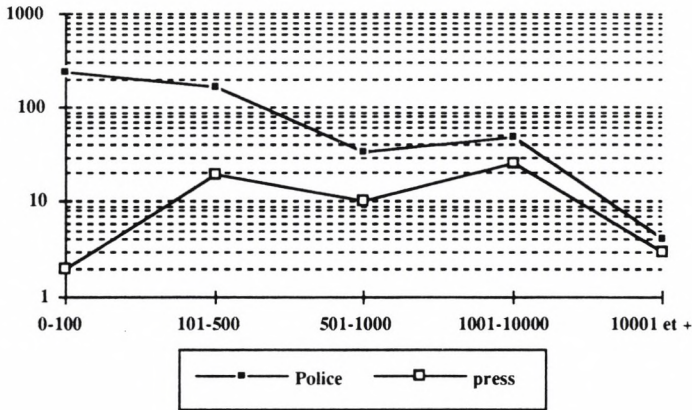
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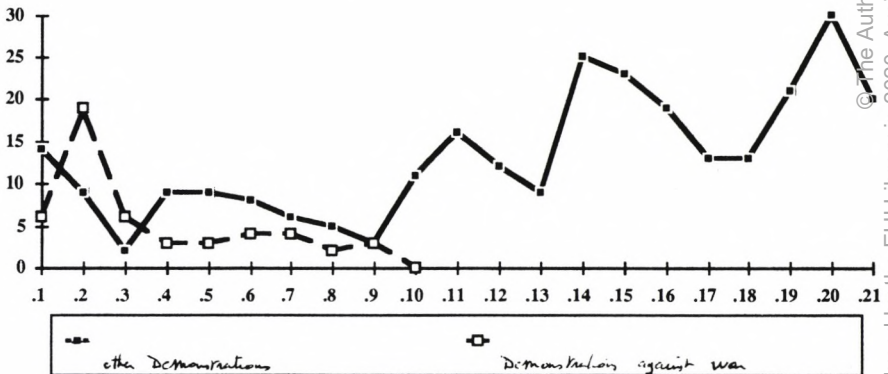
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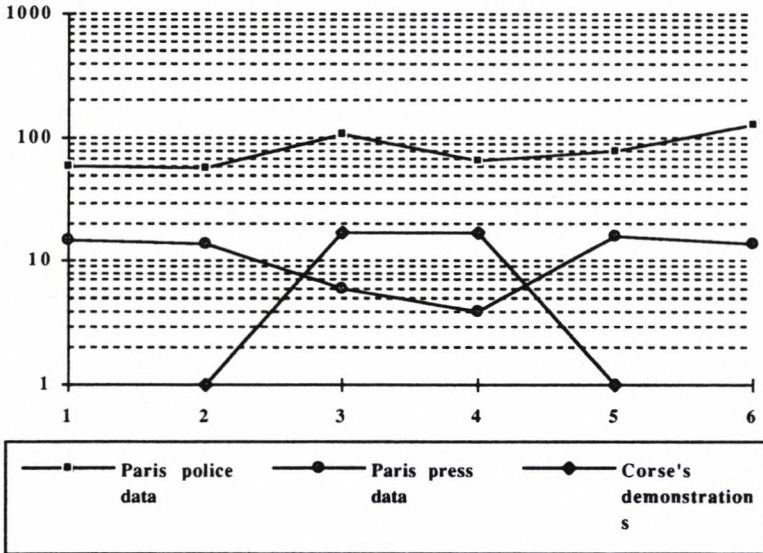
GRAPH I:



GRAPH II: Street Demonstrations in Paris, Jan 7 to June 2 1991 (weekly count)

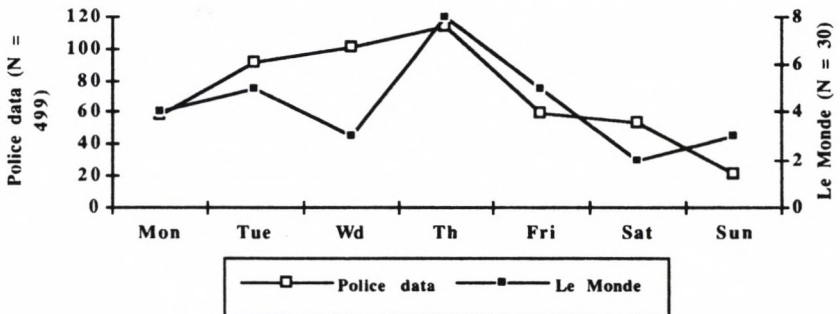


GRAPH III:
Number of protest events from January to June 1989



GRAPH IV:

Number of Protest Events per Day in Paris: January-June 1989





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