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Virtue and Terror: Maximilien Robespierre on the Principles of the French Revolution

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This great purity of the bases of the French Revolution, the very sublimity of its object is precisely what makes our strength and our weakness; our strength because it gives us the ascendancy of the truth over deception, and the rights of public interest over private interest; our weakness, because it rallies against us all the vicious men, all those who in their hearts plot to despoil the people, and all those who have despoiled them and want immunity, and those who have rejected liberty as a personal calamity, and those who have embraced the Revolution as a career and the Republic as their prey: hence the defection of so many ambitious or greedy men, who, since the beginning, have abandoned us along the way, because they had not begun the journey in order to reach the same goal. One could say that the two contrary geniuses that have been depicted here battling for control of the realm of nature, are fighting in this great epoch of human history, to shape irrevocably the destiny of the world, and that France is the theatre of this redoubtable contest. Outside our borders all the tyrants surround you; inside all the friends of tyranny conspire; they will conspire until the hopes of crime are exhausted. We must suffocate the interior and exterior enemies of the Republic, or perish with her; yet, in this situation, the first maxim of your policy must be to lead the people by reason, and the people's enemies by terror.

If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the mainspring of popular government during a revolution is both virtue and terror; virtue, without which terror is baneful; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice; it is thus an emanation of virtue; it is less a principle in itself, than a consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing needs of the patrie.¹

Robespierre made this speech at the height of the French Revolution and his words need to be understood against the backdrop of that unprecedented time in human history. In August 1792 the monarchy had been overthrown. A new representative body, the National Convention, was installed on the basis of a democratic (male) franchise. Its first action was to declare France a Republic. While legislative power remained with the Convention, a proportion of the executive responsibilities of government devolved into the hands of the Committee of Public Safety, of which Robespierre was a member. The French armies were fighting a defensive war on several borders simultaneously against the foreign powers of Western Europe, including England, Austria, Prussia and Spain. Within France itself, the royalist and federalist uprisings of the previous year had, for the most part, been defeated by the revolutionary forces. Yet internal unrest continued, kept in check only by the recourse to terror, or the threat of terror, on the part of the revolutionary government. The nature of the revolutionary terror and the complex reasons why it developed are controversies that show no signs of abating.²

On the face of it, Robespierre seems an unlikely figure to be a revolutionary leader, and his own development into that role embodies the immense changes that the Revolution wrought. Before the Revolution he was a provincial lawyer, living an obscure and blameless life. Robespierre arrived at his place of pre-eminence in revolutionary politics through five years of dedicated political activity.³ In the first years of the Revolution he was notable mostly for his humanitarian beliefs, his unwavering support for the principles of liberty and equality and his strong opposition to the death penalty, which he considered a barbaric form of punishment. He never changed his belief that such were the goals towards which the Revolution should be headed, yet, as this speech makes clear, he came to believe that in order to ensure the survival of the Republic, the revolutionaries must be prepared to adopt the ruthless tactics that their enemies would not hesitate to use against them were their positions reversed. The Revolution, he said, should be prepared to use the weapon of terror against its enemies.

There was no historical precedent to guide him. Robespierre was consciously feeling his way towards a theoretical understanding of the nature of the Revolution and what its defenders must do to meet the challenges that confronted them. In a report made the previous December, he had said: 'The theory of revolutionary government is as new as the revolution that has led to it. We should not search for it in the books of political theorists ... who did not foresee this revolution.'

He went on to contrast normal constitutional government with the exceptional circumstances of revolutionary government:

The goal of constitutional government is to maintain the Republic; that of revolutionary government is to found it. The Revolution is the war of liberty against its enemies: the Constitution is the regime of victorious and peaceful liberty. ... Under a constitutional regime, it is sufficient to protect individuals against the abuses of public power: under a revolutionary regime, public power is obliged to defend itself against all the factions that attack it.⁴

Seven weeks later, in his speech 'On the principles of political morality', Robespierre set out the principles on which revolutionary government in time of war should be based. He included a passage that became some of the most quoted words of the French Revolution. These are the closing lines of the extract, where Robespierre brought together two very different concepts whose juxtaposition remains shocking – virtue and terror.⁵ In the views of many subsequent commentators these words were notorious as marking the moment at which the modern concept of revolution was forged in the crucible of the French Revolution. This was the concept that there could be a moral justification for using violence in the cause of bringing about a better world.

Robespierre began his report by developing his vision of the kind of society that the Revolution was intended to bring about. It would be founded on: 'The peaceful enjoyment of liberty and equality; the reign of that eternal justice whose laws are written, not on marble or stone, but in the hearts of all men, even in that of the slave who forgets them and of the tyrant who denies them' (352). He then posed a series of rhetorical questions. What kind of government was best suited to bring about such a society? He answered: 'Only a democratic or republican government – the two words are synonymous' (352). He then asked: 'What is the fundamental principle of democratic or popular government, that is to say, the essential mainspring which supports it and makes it work?' He answered: 'It is virtue' (353).

Robespierre depicted the Revolution as a titanic struggle between the people who were endeavouring to found a Republic based on virtue and those who conspired against it. The combatants were 'battling for control of the realm of nature ... to shape irrevocably the destiny of the world'. In time of conflict, virtue in itself was not strong enough to ensure the survival of the Republic. At such a moment of crisis it was necessary to resort to 'terror, without which virtue is powerless'.

Virtue was a key term in eighteenth-century political thought. It meant to put 'public interest over private interest'. To be politically virtuous entailed abnegation of self, dedication to the public good and the rejection of both financial corruption and personal and familial ambition. This concept had two main derivations. First, there was the classical republican idea of virtue as the highest quality of a citizen; this notion was familiar to many in the eighteenth century (including Robespierre) through the formulations of Montesquieu, who said, 'I have called *political virtue* love of the *patrie* and of equality'.⁶ Montesquieu saw the practice of this kind of virtue as an agonizing process, which entailed the denial of natural feelings: 'Political virtue is an abnegation of self, which is always a very painful thing.'⁷ This classical republican conception of virtue can be contrasted with the second derivation, which was the belief in natural virtue, an idea that came into vogue from about the mid-eighteenth century. It was founded on the idea that people naturally sympathize with their fellow human beings and find the truest happiness through promoting the happiness of others.⁸

Robespierre voiced the aspirations of many revolutionaries when he spoke of the Republic of Virtue. The idea that the Republic should be founded on political virtue was one that many revolutionaries held – or professed to hold. Where Robespierre differed from some of them was in the strength with which he held to this belief and his conviction that a revolutionary politician's virtue should be authentic, rather than just a form of words.⁹ Robespierre's report is haunted by fears of inauthenticity; of men who faked virtue as a means to their own self-advancement, who used the language of virtue to betray the Revolution from within while selling their services to royalists and foreign powers.

The concept of the Republic of Virtue was based on four distinct but interlinked elements. It was a political system, one that stressed equality through the participation of all citizens on the basis of their virtue. Secondly it was a moral system, founded on integrity, selflessness, political transparency and opposition to the institutionalized corruption of the Old Regime. Thirdly, it was an emotional community, a *patrie*, wherein citizens were linked by their love for their community and devotion to their fellows. Lastly, as Robespierre's words demonstrated, the Republic of Virtue was to be linked to terror and maintained, if necessary, by violence.

Robespierre distinguished between two aspects of republican virtue: these were virtue 'as it relates to the people and as it relates to the government' (355). Both were necessary for a republic. 'Happily virtue is natural to the people,'

so that, 'the people have no need for a great virtue; it suffices for them to love themselves' (355–6). However, the virtue of public functionaries, including political leaders, was much more problematic. They had the opportunity and the incentive to abuse their power for their own material benefit. Therefore:

The government must weigh heavily upon its parts If there exists a representative body, a highest authority constituted by the people, it is up to it to inspect and ceaselessly control all the public functionaries. But who will curb the legislature itself, if not its own sense of virtue? (356)

For Robespierre, the Terror was not principally a weapon that the government used against the people; rather, the Terror's principal targets were public functionaries, not excepting members of the government itself. He envisaged terror as a means by which the government could police its own activities and those of its agents. In Paris, the central locus of the Revolution, much of the Terror was directed at public officials, including politicians. Ironically, they had more cause to fear the recourse to terror than most of the Parisian population.

In making this assertion Robespierre had some specific groups of revolutionaries in mind, though he did not refer to them by name in this speech. Rather than overt royalists or opponents of revolution, these were men who were part of his own group, the Jacobins. Over the winter of 1793/4 two new factions had emerged among the Jacobins. These were the Cordeliers (extremists who called on support from the *Sans-Culottes* to demand an intensification of the Terror) and the Indulgents (including Georges Danton and Camille Desmoulins), who were trying to moderate the Terror and return to regular government. Robespierre introduced his attack on them with the words: 'The internal enemies of the French people are divided into two factions They march under the banners of different colours, and by different routes: but they march towards the same goal: that goal is ... the triumph of tyranny' (359). From this point on, the second half of Robespierre's speech was devoted to a lengthy description of the activities and motivations of these groups. He claimed that, despite their surface differences, they were secretly in league with one another and working in concert with France's external enemies to undermine the Revolution from within. The speech thus became a prelude to the arrest and subsequent execution of the leaders of these groups. It was therefore a contribution to what I have characterized elsewhere as the 'politicians' terror' – an internalized and particularly ruthless form of terror, whose principal victims were revolutionary leaders.¹⁰

How was it that the man who had been so opposed to the death penalty had come to see terror as acceptable – indeed, as necessary? Robespierre's thinking must be set within the context of the war. In this speech he was turning from the war against foreign soldiers, in recognizable uniforms, to the idea of the enemy within, French people who were opposed to the Revolution but who disguised themselves by adopting the rhetoric of men of virtue. In the minds of the revolutionary leaders external and internal enemies were acting in concert: 'Are not the enemies within the allies of those without?' Fear of conspiracy was endemic to the French Revolution.¹¹ One should not underestimate the extent to which the rhetoric of conspiracy expressed a very genuine degree of anxiety, even though those fears were often directed against the wrong targets. Much of Jacobin politics needs to be understood in relation to fears of conspiracy – both real and imagined.

Fear of conspiracy had some basis in reality: the revolutionaries had suffered a series of betrayals. The foreign powers sheltered many French nationals, *émigrés* who had fled France and hoped to overturn the Republic. Among their ranks were Louis XVI's two brothers. Moreover, two of the Revolution's leading generals, Lafayette and Dumouriez, had become *émigrés*. In Dumouriez's case this was only after his attempt to lead his soldiers to overthrow the Convention failed due to the soldiers' refusal to follow him. Other revolutionary leaders, including earlier leaders of the Jacobins, had subsequently been accused of having used their personas as leaders of the radical movement as a means to secure their own power, careers, wealth and personal ambition, rather than for the benefit of the people they purported to represent. Hence Robespierre's reference to 'so many ambitious or greedy men, who, since the beginning, have abandoned us along the way, because they had not begun the journey in order to reach the same goal'.

Robespierre's attitude to violence and terror shifted in response to a series of such events. A key moment came before the trial of the king in January 1793, when Robespierre had argued that the king – whom the revolutionaries regarded as a traitor to his people – must die to ensure the survival of the Revolution. Another turning point came in the weeks preceding the speech on virtue and terror. Robespierre had given some cautious support to Desmoulins' campaign to end the Terror and institute a committee of clemency, but this came to an abrupt end with the revelation that Fabre d'Églantine, one of the Indulgent group and a close friend of Danton and Desmoulins, had been manipulating Robespierre to distract attention from his own involvement in a major financial swindle involving the embezzling of funds from the East India Company.

The realization that he had been duped by Fabre seems to have traumatized Robespierre and changed his attitude towards the Indulgents, whom he now believed to have been acting from corrupt and self-interested motives rather than for the public good.¹²

What, then, did Robespierre understand by 'terror'? He claimed that terror wielded in the cause of virtue would be a form of justice, albeit harsh justice: 'Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice.' For terror to be justice it was essential that the men entrusted with the power to wield it be motivated by virtue, 'virtue, without which terror is baneful'. If not, the risk was that the men in power would act for personal motives – to ensure the continuation of their own power and to use violence against their personal enemies.

The Jacobin version of terror was a legalized terror, an official state policy, enabled by laws passed by the Convention. It was brought about in part to avoid situations such as the massacres carried out by crowds who entered the Paris prisons in September 1792. As Danton said, 'let us be terrible in order to stop the people from being so'.¹³ The resort to terror also emerged out of relative weakness and fear. The Jacobins had only a shaky legitimacy and innumerable opponents throughout France, ranging from intransigent royalists to more moderate revolutionaries who had seen power centralized and their politics superseded. Many people in France were already indifferent, if not openly hostile, to the Revolution. For many the Revolution now meant requisitioning of supplies, military conscription and the constant threat to their religion and traditional ways of life. Throughout the year of Jacobin rule, it was the *Sans-Culottes* who kept them in power. But the price of that support was the blood-letting.

Speeches about terror were not only about the recourse to actual violence, they were also, calculatedly, about the *threat* of violence. Annie Jourdan has stressed the ways in which the language of terror was used as a rhetorical device to intimidate enemies. Both Jean-Clément Martin and Jourdan have argued that much of what is commonly perceived as terror was more rhetoric than reality and that the revolutionary leaders envisaged the political violence which they established through legislation as being about enforcing justice.¹⁴

In the spring of 1794 the word 'virtue' was on the lips of all public officials, but it seemed increasingly meaningless in the face of the state violence and coercion that stood behind it. By the end of his life, even Robespierre began to doubt, not in the principle of virtue, but whether it was achievable. In his final speech, on 26 July 1794, he said: 'My reason, not my heart, is on the point of doubting this virtuous republic whose image I had traced for myself.'¹⁵ The following day he

was overthrown in a genuine conspiracy organized by other Jacobins. The day after that he was executed along with many of his friends and associates. The men who overthrew Robespierre were his fellow Jacobins, men who were as much – or in many cases more – tainted by the use of terror than Robespierre himself. Once he was dead, these surviving terrorists sought to bring about a collective amnesia regarding their own activities by laying all the blame retrospectively onto Robespierre. In the months that followed, the language of virtue began to go out of currency. Its emotional heights, along with the violent excesses committed in its name, would henceforth be associated with Robespierre and the Jacobin government. Never again was the idea of political virtue to enjoy the ascendancy accorded to it at the height of the French Revolution; other concepts, such as ‘class struggle’, would provide justification for future revolutionary terrors. In the popular imagination Robespierre rapidly became the embodiment of the French Revolutionary Terror. Yet he would never have been so influential had he not spoken for a wide swathe of society and government. When he spoke of conspiracies against the Revolution, of the threats to ‘the *patrie* in danger’ and the need for extreme measures, he voiced the fears of many at that time that France was about to be overwhelmed by foreign and internal enemies. The policies of the Jacobin Committees had, after all, been endorsed by the deputies of the Convention. Perhaps this is why he has been so vilified: in holding one individual culpable for the ills of the Terror, French society was able to avoid looking into its own dark heart at that traumatic moment.

Further Reading

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