

The First Total Terror
Carla Hesse, University of California, Berkeley
(©2008)

Working Paper for Stanford Conference on Terror and the Making of Modern Europe (April 2008)

Do not cite or circulate without the author's permission (chesse@berkeley.edu)

La sévérité des peines convient mieux au gouvernement despotique dont le principe est la terreur, qu'à la monarchie et à la république, qui ont pour ressort l'honneur et la vertu.

(Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois*, VI: 9)

Un gouvernement républicain a la vertu pour principe; sinon, la terreur. Que veulent ceux qui ne veulent ni vertu ni terreur?

(St. Just, *Institutions républicaines*, 1793-94)¹

Si le ressort du gouvernement populaire dans la paix est la vertu, le ressort du gouvernement populaire en révolution est à la fois la vertu et la terreur: la vertu, sans laquelle la terreur est funeste; la terreur, sans laquelle la vertu est impuissante.

(Robespierre, *Discourse on Political*)²

On September 5, 1793, the National Convention, under the pressure of insurgency by militants from the Parisian sections, declared (but did not decree) “terror” to be “the order of the day.” From the fall of 1793 through the spring of 1794 the effort to terrorize enemies of the Republic into submission was instrumentalized by the government through a new series of legislative, judicial and military measures—most notably, the creation of ‘revolutionary armies,’ the decree of a ‘law on suspects,’ the declaration of ‘revolutionary government,’ and not least, the laws of Ventôse and Prairial which strengthened policing powers and ‘streamlined’ revolutionary justice. But terror was not simply an instrument of repression and vengeance. Terror lay that the heart of the

transformative aspiration of the revolutionary government of the Year II (1793-94), the aspiration to create a new moral and social order that would be hospitable to a radically egalitarian Republican constitution.

Terror was, in the language of the day, “salutary” and by 1793 it had emerged as perhaps the most powerful animating concept of revolutionary French Republicanism at the moment of the Republic’s inception. Faith in the transformative powers of terror was not new to revolutionary political culture, it drew upon many separate, though not entirely separable, strands of eighteenth-century thinking about the meaning of terror, and many ritualized practices of inculcating fear; these meanings, institutions and rituals— political, juridical, religious, scientific and aesthetic— came centrally into play during the Revolution. By the Year II they coalesced into a unprecedented political phenomena that ultimately eluded the grasp of any and all of the many actors in the revolutionary drama who had played a part in conjuring what came, retrospectively, to be called ‘The Terror’ into being.

I. Absolutism and Anti-despotism

Terror, of course, lay at the very foundation of pre-modern forms of European political sovereignty (in both their Anglo-Saxon and their Gallo-Roman guises), and especially of monarchical sovereignty in its absolutist incarnation. It can be found at the heart of both the Hobbesian worldview and, more pertinently, in eighteenth century French theories of sovereignty descending from Bodin and Bossuet.³ No theorist of French absolutism argued that a sovereign should or could rule through terror alone. But the use of terror, in the absolutist universe of reasoning, was not the enemy of the law: it

was recognized that in some cases, cases in which the law could not command respect, fear was a necessary instrument of obedience. In the last decade of the seventeenth century, the tutor to Louis XIV's son, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, paraphrases Romans 13: 4, in order to explicate the 'properties of royal authority' in the following manner: "The King is God's minister to thee, for good. But if thou do that which is evil, fear: for he beareth not the sword in vain. For he is God's minister, an avenger of evil actions."⁴ Even in the presence of love, fear was a royal weapon that never lay far from the throne.

Subjects of the French sovereign were forcefully reminded of this in 1766 at the famous "*séance de la flagellation*," of the *Parlement* of Paris where Louis XV restated the essential elements of absolutist doctrine and warned his Judges that they challenged the prerogative of the King at their peril: "[S]overeign power resides in my person only.... to me alone belongs legislative power..." he observed, and he was thus,

.... Convinced that the officers of my court will never lose sight of these sacred and immutable maxims, which are engraved on the hearts of all faithful subjects, and that they will disavow these extraneous ideas, that spirit of independence and these errors, the consequences of which they could not envisage without terror.⁵

Terror as a mode of exercising sovereign authority was thus a normative element of the political discourse of absolutism—it lay at the heart of the power to legislate and to impose the law.

If terror was at the core of absolutist theories of sovereignty, the political use of terror came to be viewed as the essence despotic government by absolutism's opponents. The article on the *Vingtième* tax in the *Encyclopédie* offers a typical example of how

terror became emblematic of tyranny in the discourse of anti-despotism, here describing the Crown prerogative to impose taxes at will as a

.... Droit monstrueux qui soumet la vérité, la raison & le savoir, à l'erreur, à l'ignorance & à la sottise, qui livre la vie, la liberté, l'honneur & la fortune des citoyens, au fanatisme, à la cruauté, à l'orgueil & à toutes les passions de quiconque a le moyen de payer ce droit effrayant, qui fait à-la-fois l'opprobre & la terreur de l'humanité.⁶

(A monstrous right that submits truth, reason and knowledge to error, ignorance and stupidity, that gives the life, liberty, honor and wealth of citizens over to the fanaticism, cruelty, pride and every passion of those who impose this frightful tax with is the terror of humanity.)

Montesquieu's famous aphorism, in *De l'Esprit des Lois* was the touchstone for the anti-despotism discourse on terror:

“La sévérité des peines convient mieux au gouvernement despotique dont le principe est la terreur, qu'à la monarchie et à la république, qui ont pour ressort l'honneur et la vertu.”⁷

(Extreme punishments are more suitable to despotic governments whose principle is terror, than to a monarchy or a republic, who make use, rather, of honor and virtue.)

Terror, in Montesquieu's conception was the enemy of law, and hence of liberty. Overly harsh punishments and excessive threats, he observed paradoxically, produce fear not only in those upon whom they are imposed, but also in those upon whom the sovereign relies to impose them. Of late Rome, he writes, that

“Le sénat pensoit que des peines immodérées jetteroit bien la terreur dans les esprits, mais qu’elles auroient cet effet qu’on ne trouveroit plus personne pour accuser ni pour condamner, au lieu qu’en proposant des peines modiques, on auroit des juges et des accusateurs.”⁸

(The Senate believed that extreme punishment would put fear into people’s minds, but the actual effect was that no one would, under these circumstances, either accuse or convict any one of a crime. More modest punishments invite citizens to accuse and to convict.)

Eighteenth-century constitutionalists, who understood the process of legislation—the making of law—as a deliberative activity could not conceive of justice in the absence of speech. The absolutists, for whom legislation was an executive function—a process of ‘giving’ rather than ‘making’ law—silence was a measure of success.⁹

The eighteenth-century constitutionalist discourse of anti-despotism, however, co-existed in an unstable relationship with a more positive assessment of the uses of terror within respect to the exercise of justice—this was in the arena of criminal law. Edmund Burke, more eloquently than any thinker of his age, articulated the theory that the terror of physical punishment, and in particular the theatrical and exemplary uses of capital punishment, had the sublime power to create new men, or at least to shore up the virtues of the old. And, it was with reference, in particular, to execution that he writes that “...whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling,” and as a consequence he was in “great doubt whether any man could be found, who would earn a life of the most perfect

satisfaction, as the price of ending it in torments, which justice inflicted in a few hours on the late unfortunate regicide.”¹⁰ In this passage, Burke was, in fact referring directly to the horrific execution of the French regicide, Damiens who attempted to murder Louis XV in 1752. The death penalty, enacted through horrific public execution, was, in Burke’s view, “the King of terrors.”¹¹

II. The Physiology of Fear and the Aesthetics of Terror:

The transformative aspirations of revolutionary law—the project of creating a new moral and social order that would be hospitable to a Republican constitution—brought a several other strands of eighteenth-century thinking about the meaning of terror centrally into play during the Revolution. These were the physiological and the aesthetic rather than the political and the juridical. Terror was understood not simply an instrumental tactic of repression; its violence is exemplary, its targets are proximate and often innocent, and its aims symbolic. It works through the emotions rather than rational calculation to produce a new view of the world by transforming the individual psyche.

A closer look into the *Encyclopédie* provides a fruitful point of entry into the wider discursive field of the concept of ‘terror’ in the late eighteenth-century. The word appears in that vast archive of the eighteenth-century mind nearly three hundred times, scattered across nearly as many different entries, including one devoted to terror itself. But usage concentrates almost exclusively around four general themes: 1) law, politics and war 2) religion and myth, 3) aesthetics and 4) science, and most especially physiology.¹²

Terror was the most intense of the passions because it was the work of the soul, or alternately, the imagination and therefore limitless in its sources and power. Terror was a physiological response to the witnessing, imagining or anticipating of pain:

“Dans la peur, la terreur, l’effroi, l’horreur, le front se ride, les sourcils s’élèvent, la paupière s’ouvre autant qu’il est possible, elle surmont la prunelle et laisse paroître une partie blanc de l’oeil audessus de la prunelle, qui est abaissé, et un peu cache...”¹³

(Confronted by terror, the face wrinkles, the eyebrows rise, the eye lids open as wide as possible, they roll about the lashes and reveal the whites of the eyes, the pupils mostly hidden.)

Terror, it was thought, had imaginary causes and physical effects. It was the work of the soul rather than the organs.¹⁴ “Terror panique” (generalized anxiety) was understood as a disorder of the “melancholic,” related to hypochondria.¹⁵ It produced muscular constrictions, chills, miscarriages, epileptic seizures, and it could be fatal to children.¹⁶

Notwithstanding, belief in the salutary effects of terror could be found in many eighteenth-century French arenas of discursive exchange and social experience—political, juridical, religious, and pedagogical. But nowhere were the positive virtues of ‘terror’ more central than in debates about art, and especially in the heated and much publicized debate among the philosophes about the moral value of the theater. Significantly, the article on ‘*Terreur*’ in the Encyclopédie, written by Louis de Jaucourt, had nothing to say about politics or law, but much to say about the genre of tragedy—its power to produce moral effects in spectators through the incitement of the emotion of

fear. De Jaucourt begins by acknowledging that “Il semble assez difficile de définir la *terreur*....” He forges ahead nonetheless:

Elle semble pourtant consister dans la totalité des incidens, qui en produisant chacun leur effet, et menant insensiblement l’action à sa fin, opere sur nous cette apprehension salutaire, qui met un frein à nos passions sur le terrible exemple d’autrui, et nous empêche par-là de tomber dans ces mêmes malheurs, dont la représentation nous arrache des larmes; en nous conduisant de la compassion à la crainte, elle trouve un moyen d’intéresser notre amour-propre par un sentiment d’autant plus vif du contre-coup, que l’art de la poésie ferme nos yeux sur une surprise aussi avantageuse, et fait à l’humanité plus d’honneur qu’elle ne mérite. On ne peut trop appuyer sur les beautés de ce qu’on appelle *terreur* dans la tragique. C’est pourquoi nous ne pouvons pas manquer d’avoir une grande opinion de la tragédie des anciens: l’unique objet de leurs poètes étoit de produire la terreur et la pitié.”¹⁷

(Roughly: It is difficult to define *terror*...It seems to result from a “totality of incidents” which each produce an effect, and unconsciously converge in a final action. It produces a salutary apprehension that reigns in our passions by the horrible example of another’s fate and prevents us, thereby, of falling into the same unhappiness; the dramatization produces tears in the spectator, which, in turn produces both compassion and fear; it finds a way of effecting our pride with a counter thrust; may the art of poetry guard this advantageous secret which bestows more honor on humanity than it deserves. We cannot rely too little upon

the beauties of what is called terror in tragedy, which is why we hold the great classical tragedies in such high regard: they produce fear and pity.)

De Jaucourt, along with many of the other contributors to the Encyclopédie adopted this view of the morally edifying virtue of tragic fear directly from Aristotle's Poetics. As one of Aristotle's most perceptive commentators writes, according to Aristotle, "Tragic fear purged the narcissistic temptation to make inflated claims for humanity."¹⁸ Tragedy was thought to produce moral effects in spectators through the incitement of the emotion of fear. It worked its moral magic through empathetic experience rather than mere sympathy. D'Alembert offered an even more instrumental theory of classical tragedy, but the moral point was the same: "La terreur et la crainte de la vengeance... nous font haïr et éviter le crime."¹⁹ (Terror and the fear of vengeance turn us away from crime).

In an age deeply saturated in the language of moral sensibility, terror was the emotion most capable of producing instantaneous moral effects within the psyche. Tragic theater, melodramatic and gothic novels, and more generally the aesthetics of the sublime were the crucial sources of republican pedagogical theory and practice. And this aesthetic and moral theory converged with the juridical language of the Hobbesean sovereign to create a politics of the sublime. Invocations of the salutary effects of spectacular punishment—especially the death penalty enacted through public execution (what Burke called the "King of Terrors")—in deterring crime are scattered throughout dozens of articles in the *Encyclopédie*. Thus, the article on the verb "to govern" ("Governer") notes that "On retient les hommes dans leur devoir par le charme des approbations et par la terreur des châtimens."²⁰ (The devotion of men is produced by the pleasure of approbation and the terror of punishment.) Terror was instrumental in uncovering crimes:

“On présente l’accusé à la question pour tâcher de tirer de lui la vérité par la terreur des peines.”²¹ (Torture is critical mostly in the anticipatory terror it produces rather than in its enactment.) The Encyclopédie article on classical satire (“Comédie”), similarly observes that “C’étoit sans doute pour entretenir une terreur si salutaire, que non-seulement les poètes satyriques furent d’abord tolérés, mais gagés par les magistrats comme censeurs de la république.”²² (It was undoubtedly to inspire a salutary terror that the satirical poets were not only tolerated, but paid by the magistrates of the republic.) Terror was considered at once the most powerful and the most diffuse of the human emotions, and the emotion most capable of producing instantaneous moral effects within the psyche. Tragic theater, melodrama, and more generally the aesthetics of the sublime thus percolated into late eighteenth-century criminal jurisprudence and were to become crucial sources of republican penal theory and practice.

There was, however, a dissenting Enlightenment viewpoint on the moral benefits of terrifying spectacles and particularly the public executions. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in response to D’Alembert on the virtues of theater, of course, wrote that “La tragédie mène à la pitié par la terreur; soit; mais quelle est cette pitié? Une émotion passagère et vaine, qui ne dure pas plus que l’illusion qui l’a produite.”²³ (Roughly” Tragedy leads to pity by way of terror. Fine; but what is this pity? A vain and ephemeral emotion that lasts no longer than the illusion that produces it.) Rousseau here, was echoing, Cesare Beccaria. “Quel est le but politique des châiments?” Beccaria writes, “La terreur qu’ils inspirent aux autres hommes.”²⁴ But, he continues, further on,

Le frein le plus puissant pour arrêter les crimes n’est pas le spectacle terrible mais momentané de la mort d’un scélérat, c’est le tourment d’un homme privé de sa

liberté.... L'impression causée par la peine de mort ne compense pas, si forte soit-elle, l'oubli rapide où elle tombe....En règle générale, les passions violentes saisissent vivement, mais jamais pour longtemps....il faut des impressions durables plutôt que fortes....²⁵

(What is the political aim of punishment? The terror that it inspires in others.... The most powerful deterrent of crimes is not terrifying spectacles—the death of the criminal; rather it is the torment of the man deprived of his freedom.... The impression made by the death penalty, as strong as it is, does not counter the oblivion into which it rapidly falls.... In general, violent passions have a quick impact, but not a lasting one, True reform results only from long labors....)

For all of their differences, however, let us note that the Burkean and Beccarian theories of moral reform shared a common belief in the deterrent, as well as the morally beneficial, effects of terror. They differed merely in their theories of best means to produce its full effects.

III. Meanings of Terror in and around 1789

The question of the relationship of the French Revolution to political “terror” might be posed in the following manner: how did the prerogative power of the sovereign—its terror—refract within the democratic struggles of the French Revolution, as sovereignty devolved from the King to the people? After the fall of the Bastille, the multiple strands of enlightenment discourse on terror—penal, political, physiological and aesthetic—were put into play within the vanguard of the revolutionary movement.

Notably, Camille Desmoulins, in the wake of the lynchings of Foulon and Berthier, defended the terrible acts of ‘*La Lanterne*’ for producing a “terreur salutaire,” thereby putting *complotistes*, counter-revolutionaries, and aristocrats more generally, on notice as to the fate that awaited them were they to remain indifferent to the suffering and rights of the people.²⁶ This democratization of the absolutist discourse of sovereign terror, was countered, however, in what would later prove to be one of the Revolution’s deepest ironies, by none other than Robespierre, who in one of his earliest speeches concerning criminal reform, advocating the abolition of corporal punishment and especially the branding of criminals, deployed the constitutionalist discourse of antidespotism to indict the barbarism of sovereign practices of juridical terror.²⁷ Indeed, in his early speech and pamphlets, Robespierre repeatedly denounced terror as an attribute of despotism.

It fell to Michel Le Peletier St. Fargeau, in his preamble to the *Projet de loi sur le Code Pénal* (1791) to weave brilliantly the Beccarian and Montesquieuan discourses on terror into a sufficiently stable political and juridical settlement. Montesquieu’s notion that lesser punishments, legitimately—as opposed to arbitrarily—imposed, were of the greatest effect dovetailed smoothly with the utilitarian critique of the spectacularly harsh punishment as either means of criminal deterrence, an instrument of moral reform, and a mechanism of political legitimacy. As St. Fargeau argued, following Beccaria and Rousseau, and contra Burke, the spectacle of execution, produced only the most ephemeral of effects, and risked, rather, hardening popular sensibilities to violence. This did not however, mean that St. Fargeau did not see the salutary effects of terror. It was rather, that public execution was not terrifying enough. More terrifying still (*pace*

Beccaria), was to be deprived of liberty and condemned to a life of long labor.

Punishments of this kind, he writes:

...sont encore plus efficaces...car bientôt l'impression du spectacle d'un jour est effacé; mais une punition lente et de longs travaux renouvellent sans cesse aux yeux du peuple, qui en est témoin du souvenir de lois vengeresses, et fait revivre à tous moments une terreur salutaire.²⁸

(...are much more effective...because the effects of spectacles disappear as soon as they end, but slow punishment and long labor every day renew before the sight of the people, a reminder of the power of the law and reawaken its salutary terror.)

Robespierre, as is well known, famously shared these views, and went further still, arguing that the death penalty, even for crimes of treason, should be abolished. In other words, the populist rhetoric of a salutary terror effected by means of public lynching, which was ventriloquized by Camille Desmoulins in the guise of the lynching post, was very much at the margins of revolutionary discourse from 1789 to the fall of the monarchy. It was not the Burkean sublime, but rather the utilitarianism of Beccaria that initially animated revolutionary penal theories of the beneficial moral effects of terror.

IV. The Girondist Crisis and the Jacobin Instrumentalization of Terror:

In his article on the Terror in the *Dictionnaire Critique de la Révolution française*, François Furet identified the six weeks between the fall of the monarchy on August 10 1792 and the seating of the Convention as the moment in which terror entered onto the

center stage of the Revolution. For Furet, the key was the shift of the locus of power from the Legislative Assembly to the Paris Commune. The September massacres, and the the invasion of the Assembly on September 5, demanding terror as the order of the day, lend credence to this view. And further evidence of the migration of the populist rhetoric of Parisian terror into the National Convention is most famously, Danton's endorsement of the migration of popular justice into the Palais de Justice with the creation of the revolutionary tribunal on March 10, 1793, "Soyons terribles pour éviter au peuple de l'être" (Let us be terrifying so that the people need not.)²⁹

However, critical analysis of the discursive spread of terror among revolutionaries, both within and beyond the National Convention, points to a second, and more politically critical, turning in the transformation of Jacobin understandings of the terror—and that moment was the Girondin crisis. If one systematically examines, for example, the pattern and chronology of the invocation of terror in the *Oeuvres Complètes* of St. Just, it tellingly reveals (and it is only one of many indicies) that it was only in the fall of 1793—with the trial of the Girondins and the declaration of "revolutionary government"—that the language of terror became central to Jacobin political rhetoric. And it was only in the fall of 1793 that terror as a political concept was transformed in Jacobin discourse from an attribute of tyranny into an instrument of revolution and an engine of moral reform. Thus St. Just, famously, rewrites Montesquieu in that moment: "Un gouvernement républicain a la vertu pour principe; sinon, la terreur. Que veulent ceux qui ne veulent ni vertu ni terreur?"³⁰ (Republican government has virtue as its animating principle, and if not virtue, then terror. What does one seek, who seeks neither virtue or terror.) Here we democratic absolutism in its most brutal articulation.

More consequentially, it is only in that same moment that Robespierre, too, is transformed from a denouncer of terror as a principle of despotism, into its most eloquent proponent, as a necessity of the Republic in peril. Here, most notably, is the way he put it in the *Discourse on Political Morality* in the winter of 1793-94:

Si le ressort du gouvernement populaire dans la paix est la vertu, le ressort du gouvernement populaire en révolution est à la fois la vertu et la terreur: la vertu, sans laquelle la terreur est funeste; la terreur, sans laquelle la vertu est impuissante. La terreur n'es autre chose que la justice prompte, sévère, inflexible; elle est donc une émanation de la vertu; elle est moins un principe particulier qu'une conséquence du principe général de la démocratie appliqué aux plus pressants besoins de la patrie.³¹

(Roughly: If the mainstay of popular government in times of peace is virtue, in times of revolution the mainstay of government is at one and the same time virtue and terror: without virtue, terror is benighted; without terror, virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing more than prompt, severe and unbending justice; it thus emanates from virtue. It is less a defining principle than a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to the most pressing needs of the fatherland.)

How can we account for this transformation in Robespierre's views? Let us note, first the difference between the formulations of St. Just and Robespierre: St. Just merely conflates Montesquieu's two principles of despotism and republicanism. Robespierre, however, does not. Robespierre, who knows his Montesquieu well, is careful not to construe terror as an animating principle of republicanism, but rather as a contingent

consequence of the animating principle of democracy in a moment of extremis—or more accurately, a moment of emergence or foundation (of a democratic republic).

Robespierre thus rewrites Montesquieu along new lines—lines that reshape the Hobbesian idea along what will become Marxian lines: sovereign presence is refigured as sovereign immanence—terror is not a foundational principle of democracy but rather a contingency of its emergence.

Careful attention to this passage Robespierre's speech offers insight in how we might best understand the terror of the Year II: *as a political phenomena rather than as an ideology*. Timing is thus critical to understanding the meaning of Jacobin terror. It was only with the Girondin crisis, which is the say with the loss of the *institutional* legitimacy of the National Convention, and with the turning of the Republic against itself (civil war) that sovereign terror emerges in its democratic incarnation. This process of the transvaluation of the concept of terror from its absolutist to its revolutionary form, during the period that later came to be known as the “reign of terror” has been conceptualized (wrongly in my view) as a phase of consolidation and institutionalization of the political power by the Committees of Public Safety and General Security. While not contesting this narrative of the institutional centralization of power in the key committees of the National Convention in the Year II, it had little to do with the spread of terror as both a discursive and as a political phenomenon.

The phenomena of the terror was, rather, a result of the *delegitimization* of the Convention with the expulsion of Girondin and the *dipersion*, rather than concentration of democratic sovereign authority. Though there is no doubt that terror was instrumentalized by the revolutionary government as a weapon against its enemies, what

made the terror so unprecedented, so unlike the absolutist terror of the former regime, was not that a centralized sovereign deployed fear as a political weapon, it was rather, that after the ‘Revolution’ of May 31-June 2, sovereignty was located everywhere and nowhere. It is this form of terror—the result of a dispersion rather than a concentration of democratic sovereignty—what we might call “total” as opposed to “absolutist” terror that emerged from the revolutionary crisis. Total terror is a result of power unmoored from a fixed source or location.

V. The Degree Zero of Terror:

The journal of the glassworker Jacques-Louis Ménétra captures this phenomenon vividly:

Pendant cet espace la terreur planait sur la France et particulièrement à Paris....Tout était dans le plus grand désordre...Le voisin dénonçait d’un sang froid son voisin. Les liens du sang étaient oubliés...L’on s’observait. L’on n’osait nullement dire sa façon de penser. L’on était tous les jours sous les armes.”³²

(At this time terror spread across France and especially across Paris...Everything was in chaos. Neighbors denounced neighbors in cold blood; ties of family were forgotten. One watched oneself; one dared not to speak; one was always armed....)

In his 1824 Memoirs, the former Girondist deputy, Antoine-Clair Tibaudeau perceptively Reflected further upon this phenonemon total terror:

Les ennemis de la Révolution ont fait remonter la terreur à la première exécution populaire qui suivit la prise de la Bastille. Ils ont raison dans leur sens, puisqu’à

leurs eux c'est la révolution tout entière. En effet, une nation ne brise point ses fers sans porter l'éprouvante dans l'ame de ceux qui la tenaient enchainée. La joie publique les contriste, et les triomphes de la liberté les glacent d'effroi. Comme les révolutions populaires, [44] le despotisme a aussi sa terreur; sous le despotisme, c'est le grand nombre qui tremble; dans les révolutions, c'est le petit nombre. La terreur y change et de marche et de but suivant que le peuple est plus ou moins irrité par la résistance ou les complots de ses ennemis.³³

(The enemies of the Revolution argue that the Terror began with the first lynching after the fall of the Bastille. They are correct within their own terms, because they view the Revolution in its entirety as a Terror. But a nation does not break its chains without incurring the disapproval of those who bound them. Public joy saddens them and the triumph of liberty fills them with fear. As with popular revolutions, despotism produces terror and under a despotic government it is the majority who tremble; in Revolutions it is the few. The terror changed its course and its aims depending on how threatened the people felt by the resistance and plots of its enemies.)

In Thibaudeau's view the culture of terror did not emerge from popular violence, neither in 1789 nor later. Nor were its causes delusional—an irrational fear of a fictional plot. It was the work, first and foremost of the political elites of both the old regime and the new:

Ce furent les résistance des ennemis intérieurs et extérieurs de la révolution qui amenèrent peu à peu la terreur. Elles firent naître l'exagération du patriotisme. Elle commença dans les classes supérieures par la chaleur et la violence des discours, et finit dans les basses classes par l'atrocité des actions.³⁴

(It was the resistance of the internal and external enemies that gradually created the terror and inflated patriotism. It began with the upper classes and the violence of their speeches and ended with the lower classes and the atrocity of their actions.)

Yet what made the Terror of the Year II unique was not that it was democratic—the terror of the many over the few that had played itself out from the fall of the Bastille through the spring of 1793. It was, rather, that with the purging of the Convention in May of 1793 terror became total, because from that moment on: “En effet rien n’était indifférent, la place où l’on s’asseyait, un geste, un regard, un murmure, un sourire.”³⁵ All political bonds, all social trust evaporated.

En France sous le règne de la terreur, personne n’en était exempt, elle planait sur toutes tes têtes, et les abattait indistinctement, arbitraire et rapide comme la faux de la mort. . . . rien ne fut plus éloigné d’un système de terreur. Sa marche, malgré sa rapidité, ne fut que progressive; on y fut successivement [46] entraîné; on la suivit sans savoir où on allait; on avança toujours, parce qu’on n’osait plus reculer et qu’on ne voyait plus d’issue pour en sortir. . . . qu’elle passa toutes les bornes, qu’elle fut atroce, qu’elle immola et amis et ennemis, qu’elle ne put être avouée par personne. . . . La terreur était trop violente pour durer; elle finit sans préméditation comme elle avait commencé.³⁶

(In effect, nothing remained indifferent—the place one sat, a gesture, a look, a murmur, a smile. . . . Under the reign of Terror in France, no one was exempt, it hovered above all heads, it struck without discrimination, arbitrarily and rapidly, and like a near death. Nothing could be further from this phenomenon than the

systematic view of the Terror. Despite the speed of its pathm it was not progressive; it accrued without anyone realizing, it acelerated because there was no turning back and no one could see a way out. It exceeded all limits; it is atrociousness it immolated both friends and enemies and could be renounced by no one, It was too violent, and it ended, just as it had begun, without premeditation.)

Thus to speak of a “system of Terror” controlled by the Committee of Public Safety or the Paris Commune was, in Thibaudeau’s view, misguided. During the “Reign of Terror” no one and nothing reigned but terror itself. The Thermidorian denonciation of the period of revolutionary government as a ‘reign of terror,’ carried the constitutionalist association of terror with despotism into the post-revolutionary era.

Conclusion:

Following Hannah Arendt, and her brilliant essay, On Violence, the problem of political terror has, in recent historical and theoretical discussions, been understood in essentially two ways: as either systematic rule by fear—what she calls “absolute terror” (e.g. despotism or totalitarianism) or as “instrumental terror” (i.e., the use of symbolic violence as a means towards an end). As Arendt correctly observed, while the Soviet regime systematized fear as a form of governance, the Jacobins embraced the weapon of terror only in desperation, and only in the, limited, instrumental sense, as a means to achieve a constitutional end. While agreeing with Arendt’s interpretation of the Jacobin project, this paper suggests, however, that it fails to grasp fully the political phenomena of the terror in the Year II.

The French Revolution was the crucible that transformed the archaic terror of the old regime sovereign to a new and distinctively modern form of revolutionary terror: the political weapon of those whose sovereignty has yet to be defined. Indeed Edmund Burke and Mme de Staël were the first to characterize revolutionary “Terrorism” as a theory of political immanence—in the Year II the violence of emergent sovereignty gave shape to the modern notion of political terror as transformative rather than repressive, a notion that Fredrick Engels would later come to celebrate as “perpetual revolution.”

And although the French revolutionary terror did evolve from an “instrumental” terror, governed by a logic of repression, into a terror of ungovernable proportions, it did not do so in the absolutist sense. The ‘Reign of Terror’ was not systemic. It neither sought nor succeeded in institutionalizing itself. It was the stuff of events rather than institutions. Without any of its actors intending to do so, the Year II produced a political phenomena that I am describing as ‘total terror’—by which I mean the fear of all by all. Neither absolute nor instrumental, this form of terror can only be understood phenomenologically as an unwitting outcome of a contingent political crisis in which power dispersed democratically in the absence of any shared source or principle of legitimation. This ‘total terror’ was tragic only in the sense that it was an unwitting, rather than intended consequence of human actions. But as a collective experience I believe it should be described as ‘festive’ rather than ‘theatrical.’ Which is to say that it was a form of terror that Rousseau might have recognized as truly democratic, and of lasting, rather than ephemeral consequence.

¹ St. Just, Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 1139.

² Get citation.

³ * Get cites: Keohane, Derathé, etc

⁴ Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, Politics Derived from the Words of Holy Scripture (1st ed. 1709); quoted from the excerpt reproduced in, Keith Michael Baker, et. al. eds., The Old Regime and the French Revolution. University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization 7 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 32.

⁵ Transcript of the Royal “*séance de flagellation*,” at the *Parlement* of Paris, March 3, 1766, reproduced in, Keith Michael Baker, et. al. eds., The Old Regime and the French Revolution. University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization 7 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 49.

⁶ Encyclopédie, article on the *Vingtème*: 17:864.

⁷ Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois*, VI: 9.

⁸ Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois*, VI: 14.

⁹ Rousseau, in the chapter of the Social Contract on the law-giver, was manifestly on the ‘absolutist’ side of the spectrum: “Celui qui rédige les loix n’a donc ou ne doit avoir aucun droit législatif...” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social*, Livre II, Chapitre XVII, in Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964) vol. III, p. 383.

¹⁰ Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Orgins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (Oxford: Oxford University Press ‘World Classics,’ 1990), Part I, Section VII, p. 36.

¹¹ Edmund Burke, Ibid. See Thomas Laqueur, *

¹² An ARTFL full-text search for occurrences of the word “terreur” in the Encyclopédie produces the following subject distribution: 1) law and politics (34 occurrences), 2) religion and myth (45 occurrences), 3) war (54 occurrences), 4) aesthetics (57 occurrences), and 5) science, especially physiology (77 occurrences).

¹³ See, for example, the Encyclopédie, article on passion.

¹⁴ See, for example, the following usages in the Encyclopédie: allarme 1:277; allarme; froid 7: 329.

¹⁵ See, Ibid, maladie; passion.

¹⁶ See, Ibid, feu 6:466; froid 7:329; grossesse 7: 963; epilepsie 5:795; enfans 5: 659

¹⁷ Louis de Jaucourt, “Terreur,” in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, eds., Encyclopédie, (Fauche: Neuchatel, 1765), vol. 16, p. 184.

¹⁸ Jonathan Lear, Open-minded, p. 53.

¹⁹ Jean la Rond d’Alembert, Lettre à M. Rousseau, in Melanges, II, 1759. *retrieve exact citation from artfl.

²⁰ Jean la Rond d’Alembert and Denis Didert, eds., Encyclopédie, article on “Gouverneur,” 7:79”.

²¹ Jean la Rond d’Alembert and Denis Didert, eds., Encyclopédie, article on “Question” (torture), 13: 703.

²² * Jean la Rond d’Alembert and Denis Didert, eds., Encyclopédie, article on ‘Comédie’ 3:666.

²³ * complete citation: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Lettre à d’Alembert (1758), (Paris: Editions du Pléiade), vol. V, p. 23.

²⁴ Césaire Becarria, Des délits et des peines (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1965), p. 97.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 128-129.

²⁶ Camille Desmoulins, Discours à la Lanterne (1789), get page citation.

²⁷ See Robespierre, Discours sur le marc, get citation.

²⁸ Michel Le Peletier St. Fargeau, Rapport sur le porject du Code Pénal fait au nom des comités de consitution et de législation criminelle, par Michel Le Peletier St. Fargeau, à l’Assemblée Consituante (séances des 22 et 23 mai 1791, reproduced in, Pierre Lascoumes, Pierrette Poncela, et Pierre Lenoël, Au nom de l’ordre: Une histoire politique du code pénal (Paris: Hachette, 1989) p. 333.

²⁹ Get citation.

³⁰ St. Just, *Institutions républicaines* (1793-94), in the Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 1139.

³¹ Get citation.

³² Jacques-Louis Ménétra, Journal de ma vie (Paris: Montalba, 1982), pp. 261 and 265.

³³ C. Thibaudeau, Mémoires sur la Convention et le Directoire, 2 vols. (Paris: Baudouin, 1824), Vol. 1, p. 43.

³⁴ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 46.

³⁵ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 47.

³⁶ Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 46 and 57-58.