

Revolutionizing Rousseau: An Analysis of the Political Thought of Jean-Paul Marat,
Georges Jacques Danton, and Maximilien Robespierre

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department
of Political Science

Chapel Hill 2008

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Abstract

Carl Najdek: Revolutionizing Rousseau: An Analysis of the Political Thought of Jean-Paul Marat, Georges Jacques Danton, and Maximilien Robespierre
(Under the direction of Michael Lienesch)

In this thesis, I investigate the influence of Rousseauian ideas on the political thinking of the French Revolutionary figures Jean-Paul Marat, Georges Jacques Danton, and Maximilien Robespierre. By analyzing the views of these writers on the concepts of 1) the general will, 2) public and private virtue, 3) revolutionary dictatorship, and 4) social control and coercion, it shows how they manipulated and transformed Rousseauian ideas into revolutionary ideology, and how they applied it in a chaotic political context. The study suggests that it is only by analyzing the political thought of Marat, Danton, and Robespierre that a more complete understanding of the Terror and a better understanding of its enduring legacy can be found.

Acknowledgements

While it initially seems that a Master's thesis is a largely individual product, this is by no means true. My entire collected experience, the people I have known, and the familial, social, and political environment in which I grew up, combined to make this work possible. While it is impossible to acknowledge all of the influential people in my life, a few especially important ones deserve special recognition. I am most grateful to my father and sister, Charles Najdek and Anica Smith, for raising me in my early, most formative, and, I suspect, most difficult years. I also would like to thank my fiancé, Courtney Hicks, for her kindness during this process. I would also like to mention all of my teachers I have had throughout the years but most especially Miss Deborah Burgess, Mrs. Lisa Polivick, Mrs. Becky Fairbanks, and the late Dr. T. Wayne Beasley for setting me on the path I am on now.

Revolutionizing Rousseau: An Analysis of the Political Thought of Jean-Paul Marat, Georges Jacques Danton, and Maximilien Robespierre

The French Revolutionary Terror lasted from September 1793 to July 1794, ultimately ending with the Thermidorian reaction. As one of the most influential and important events in history, the Terror has spawned an enormous amount of research, and regardless of bias, any researcher attempting to assess the importance, impact, or scope of the Revolution must deal with it. The Terror was an important event in its own right, changing the course of the French Revolution and expanding the conception of acceptable ends for government action. However, it was also important because it served as a prototype, being the first time a state created and used an apparatus of terror in order to force ideological conformity. Thus, it had an important impact on the world, providing a model of state violence that has been emulated from that time to today. By investigating the ideological foundations of the Terror and how these ideas were turned into policy, it is possible to understand better why the French Revolution radicalized and how terror has become an instrument of the modern state.

The Terror was a complicated event, and any attempt to reduce it to a simple explanation is doomed to be fruitless. Nevertheless, one of its most important causes was ideological. There is a common tendency, especially in early studies, to blame the Terror

on the theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. And while his thinking did provide some of the philosophical foundations for what became the Terror in the 1790s, the Terror was not the work of one thinker or writer; it was a collaborative effort. In this thesis, I intend to trace the complex origins of the Terror by investigating the influence of Rousseauian ideas on three thinkers who directly participated in its creation: Jean-Paul Marat, Georges Jacques Danton, and Maximilian Robespierre. In order to do so, I will investigate how each thinker interpreted and utilized Rousseauian concepts in a complex historical context, creating a revolutionary ideology that ultimately contributed to the creation of the Terror. It is my thesis that it is only in the interaction between Rousseauian theory and revolutionary practice that a more complete understanding of the Terror can be found.

This work will be done using both primary and secondary historical sources. Most of it will focus on speeches to the Jacobin Club and the National Convention, along with a small number of newspaper articles by the thinkers. These sources encompass much of what was said by these thinkers regarding the correct ends of society, the concept of terror, and its justifiable application. The secondary literature surrounding the Revolution is vast, and even the literature surrounding any one figure is sizable. It will be used to support, reinforce and challenge my arguments, but not generally as a source of primary interpretive material.

Rousseau and the Revolution

Gauging the extent of Rousseau's influence is a complex matter. While most researchers do not completely discount his influence, different writers have had different

views of his role. The early-twentieth-century historian Jules Lemaître is most famous for his universal disapprobation of Rousseau, blaming many of the problems of the Revolution on him.¹ His colleague Albert Meyneir, disagreed, claiming that the excesses of the Revolution were not directly Rousseau's doing, fixing most of the blame on Robespierre.² In the 1940s, André de Maday carried on these claims by attributing to Rousseau all of the good ideas in the Revolution – the National Assembly, *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, and the abolition of the monarch – while relegating the mistakes to his followers.³ In effect, the Revolution became in this interpretation Rousseauian when it was good and Robespierrest when it was bad. Writing in the Cold War context of 1952, J.L. Talmon returned to earlier themes, arguing that by fusing the general will and popular sovereignty, Rousseau doomed the revolution to totalitarian democracy. According to Talmon, Rousseau was almost completely to blame and the revolutionaries only took his philosophy to its logical conclusions.⁴

Breaking with the tradition of simply applying to Rousseau different levels of acclaim or blame, more recent writers like Joan McDonald have argued that the question of Rousseau's influence must be solved by studying the writings of the revolutionaries themselves. By searching their works for direct references to Rousseau, she concludes

¹ Jules Lemaître, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Trans. J. Mairet and C. Bigot, (London: The McClure Co, 1908).

² Albert Meynier, *Jean Jacques Rousseau, Révolutionnaire*, (Paris: Schleicher, 1912).

³ André de Maday, "Rousseau et la Révolution Française," *Annales de la Société J.-J Rousseau* 31 (1946-49), 169-207.

⁴ J.L. Talmon, *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1952).

that he was not a major influence, at least in the first three years of the Revolution.⁵ However, Robert Darnton finds that many of Rousseau's ideas were actually transmitted to the popular consciousness by other, more popular writers. Darnton argues that while Rousseau's explicitly political works were relatively uncommon before 1789, his fiction was almost ubiquitous, and these works possessed significant amounts of political content, specifically in the *Confessions of a Savoyard Vicar* and the fifth book of *Emile*. Additionally he finds that Rousseau had a profound impact on other authors, spawning a number of *Rousseaus du rieuseau* – “gutter Rousseaus” – who touted many of the same political and social beliefs albeit in a less successful style. He concludes that the high political and social ideals of the Enlightenment, including those of Rousseau, trickled down to the literate public through popular fiction instead of specifically political tracts.⁶ Lynn Hunt, by contrast, studies the use of language and rhetoric by the revolutionaries themselves, largely ignoring Rousseau, claiming that the French Revolution created a “dramatically new political culture.”⁷

Another set of interpreters regard Rousseau as a present but essentially unimportant factor, arguing that the logic of the Revolution and its radicalization was ultimately related to forces independent of individual ideological influence. The first of these were the Marxists, beginning with Marx himself, who attempted to discuss the

⁵ Joan McDonald, *Rousseau and the French Revolution 1762-1791*, (London: University of London, The Athlone Press, 1965).

⁶ Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995). This trend continued in the print media. Jeremy Popkin argues that increasing radicalization of pamphlets in the pre-Revolutionary era but ultimately downplays their importance, arguing that most of them represent the fringe views of minor nobility. The development of an uncensored print media post-1789 would see the full flowering of polemical, revolutionary articles. Jeremy Popkin, “Pamphlet Journalism at the End of the Old Regime,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22 (1989), 351-367.

⁷ Lynn Hunt, *Politics Culture and Class in the French Revolution*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 15.

Revolution according to a materialistic conception of history. The French Revolution was essentially a bourgeois movement, both in origins and in results, and the Terror an inherent result of materialist historical processes.⁸ In more recent times, François Furet refuted the Marxist claim, arguing that the radicalization of the Revolution was not due to class relations but rather to the conflict of two political traditions, authoritarianism and popular sovereignty.⁹ George Taylor argued that the Revolution “was essentially a political revolution with social consequences and not a social revolution with political consequences.”¹⁰ This argument diminishes the importance of Rousseau’s thought, since it is only concerned with his impact on political ideas and ignores the social changes which he so fervently advocated. Recently this thread has been joined by Charles Taylor, who argued that the radicalization of the Revolution was caused by an inability of the French people to deal with the concepts involved. It was outside of their “social imaginary” and therefore much of the ideological content was irrelevant because it neither motivated nor was understood by most people.¹¹

Nevertheless, in French Revolutionary thinking, Rousseau was everywhere. Cited directly or indirectly by writers such as Mercier, his political and social ideals were repeatedly propagated and popularized, influencing the way revolutionary thinkers thought, wrote, and spoke. That said, Rousseau was an incredibly complicated thinker,

⁸ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, (New York: International Publishers, 1964). ; Albert Mathiez, *The French Revolution*, Trans. Catherine Alison Phillips, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1928).

⁹ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Trans. Elborg Forster, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁰ George Taylor, “Non-Capitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 72 (Jan., 1967), 491.

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

and the leaders of the Revolution had very different ideas about how his ideas translated to the world, both philosophically and institutionally. As a result, each of these revolutionaries saw a different and necessarily partial picture of Rousseau's philosophy. They then combined that picture with different ideas of their own, adapting Rousseauian conceptions of society to something more practical. Historical events, primarily a royalist revolt in the Vendée and the threat of war with Western Europe, played a part in shaping – and radicalizing – their thinking. The result, transforming Rousseau's philosophy into revolutionary practice, was a Rousseauian revolutionary ideology.

In this study, I consider how the work of three thinkers, Marat, Danton, and Robespierre, created this ideology.¹² Analyzing their individual contributions, I intend to investigate how they developed as thinkers, coming to understand and misunderstand several different aspects of Rousseau's philosophy. Specifically I consider their different approaches to the concepts of 1) the general will, 2) public and private virtue, 3) revolutionary dictatorship, and 4) social control and coercion. Though not all of the thinkers dealt with every one of these themes in the same depth, I will examine how their interpretations of these ideas combined to create the Rousseauian revolutionary ideology that made the Terror possible.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

¹² While authors have defined the word ideology in many different ways, here it conforms to the definition set forth by Terence Ball and Richard Dagger in which ideology performs four important functions: 1) explaining the state of social, political, and economic conditions; 2) providing criteria for moral evaluation of social conditions; 3) orienting adherents by providing a sense of identity; 4) providing a rough program for political and social action. Terence Ball and Richard Dagger, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal* 6th ed., (New York: Person Education, Inc., 2006), 1-17.

While Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is not the originator of the concept of the “general will,” he is the most important of its proponents.¹³ In Rousseau's conception of society, the individual is not sovereign. Sovereignty rests in the collective entity of the people as a whole, and it is from them that the general will descends. About the character of the general will Rousseau wrote, “The first and most important deduction from the principles we have so far laid down is that the general will alone can direct the State according to the object for which it was instituted, i.e. the common good.”¹⁴ In contrast to the particular will that everyone possesses, which tends towards the individual good, the general will is the will of the people that aims at the common good. In order for a republic to function as Rousseau envisioned, the particular will must be subordinate to the general. Rousseau wrote, “In a perfect legislature, the private individual will should be almost nothing; the corporate will belonging to the government should be quite subordinate, and therefore the general and sovereign will is the master of all the others.”¹⁵

There are a number of characteristics to the general will. Perhaps the most important to the Revolution is that while the people can be mistaken about its content, and thus reach the wrong conclusion, it is impossible for the general will to be wrong. Since it is by definition that which aims to the common good, the general will cannot do harm to the people as a whole; it only seems to so when it is mistaken, having been

¹³ Denis Diderot (1713-1784) used the same term, *volonté general*, in his famous encyclopedia in 1755. Patrick Riley, in “The General Will before Rousseau,” traces its usage in theological texts to Blaise Pascal in the 1650s. Jonathan Israel, in *Radical Enlightenment: The Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, traces the concept of the general will in republican writing to Benedict Spinoza.

¹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the Discourses*, Trans. G.D.H Cole, (London: David Campbell Publishers Ltd., 1993), 199.

¹⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, Trans. Barbara Foxley, (Sioux Falls, SD: NuVision Publications, LLC, 2007), 444.

corrupted by the particular will. “Our [particular] will is always for our own good, but we do not always see what that is; the people is never corrupted, but it is often deceived, and on such occasions only does it seem to will what is bad.”¹⁶ Rousseau also explains that while the general will is inalienable, the commands of the rulers can pass for the general will, so long as the sovereign people, being free to oppose them, offers no opposition. “In such a case,” he writes, “universal silence is taken to imply the consent of the people.”¹⁷

The power of the state, according to Rousseau, is increased by the extent that the particular wills of the people are not in line with the general will. “Now the greater disproportion between the private wishes and the general will, i.e., between manners and laws, the greater must be the power of repression.”¹⁸ In a large state like France, which had some twenty-five million people on the eve of the Revolution, the power of the state had to be very strong so as to control for the vast number of particular wills. However, Rousseau also believed that as the power of the state increased so too should the power of the people to control it. “The greatness of the state gives the depositories of public authority greater temptations and additional means of abusing that authority, so that the more power is required by the government to control the people, the more power there be in the sovereign to control the government.”¹⁹ In the course of the Terror, the first part of this maxim, increasing of governmental power, would be realized, the second would not, for while the state was granted unparalleled power, the people did not gain corresponding control over the government.

¹⁶ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 202.

¹⁷ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 200.

¹⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, 443.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 397.

Virtue is critical in understanding Rousseau's overall project. Undergirding Rousseau's idea of the general will is the idea that virtue is to be the highest ideal of the citizen, both in public and private life. Public virtue, in Rousseau's political writings, is a requirement of a properly composed body politic. Its operation requires the subordination of the private will to the general will. Without it, the state will inevitably fail. Rousseau writes about this requirement in *The Social Contract*:

In fact, each individual, as a man, may have a particular will contrary or dissimilar to the general will which he has as a citizen ... his absolute and naturally independent existence may make him look upon what he owes to the common cause as a gratuitous contribution, the loss of which will do less harm to others than the payment is burdensome to himself ... he may wish to enjoy the rights of citizens without being ready to fulfill the duties of a subject. The continuance of such an injustice could not but prove to undoing of the body politic.²⁰

As to individual or private virtue, Rousseau provides a template in his famous treatise on education, *Emile*. Here he provides a list of what he considers to be virtues when he describes Emile as he was at the end of his education. Emile was:

Well formed, well developed in mind and body, strong, healthy, active, skillful, robust, full of sense, reason, kindness, humanity, possessed of good morals and good taste, loving what is beautiful, doing what is good, free from the sway of fierce passions, released from the tyranny of popular prejudices, but subject to the law of wisdom, and easily guided by the voice of a friend; gifted with so many useful and pleasant accomplishments, caring little for wealth, able to earn a living with his own hands, and not afraid of want, whatever may come.²¹

²⁰ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 194.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 397.

More than a list of attributes, virtue was a way of living, a way of acting towards one's self and one's fellows that contributed to society. "What is meant by a virtuous man? He who can conquer his affection; for then he follows his reason, his conscience; he does his duty; he is his own master and nothing can turn him from the right way... learn to be your own master; control your heart, my Emile, and you will be virtuous."²² While these lines may seem to favor the private person over the public citizen, Emile's education had been tailored to make his particular will concurrent with the general will. A virtuous man would never put his own interests above that of the people because he would realize that his true interest lay in the good of all.²³ "Extend self-love to others and it is transformed into virtue ... the more general this interest becomes, the juster it is and the love of the human race is nothing but the love of justice within us. What does it matter to him who has the greater share of happiness, providing he promotes the happiness of all?"²⁴

But virtuous citizens were not enough. Rousseau was not blind to how difficult it would be for a government organized on his ideas to survive. There would inevitably be times of strife, both internal and external, during which the normal apparatus of the state would fail to operate effectively or prove too cumbersome. In order to protect the state as a political entity, Rousseau realized that in times such as these there would need to be

²² Rousseau, *Emile*, 423.

²³ I use the masculine noun "man" in this instance because Rousseau considered this type of virtue to be possessed only by men. His idea of feminine virtue is quite different. This distinction was largely adopted by the thinkers of the French Revolution. As a result, equality for women was not a major goal for most during the Revolution.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

someone empowered to act unilaterally in accordance with the good of the state, a dictator, modeled on the Roman ideal:

In these rare and cases [of danger to the state due to inflexible laws], provision is made for the public security by a particular act entrusting it to him who is most worthy ... if the peril is of such a kind that the paraphernalia of the laws are an obstacle to their preservation, the method is to nominate a supreme ruler, who shall silence all the laws, and suspend for a moment the sovereign authority. In such a case, there is no doubt about the general will, and it is clear that the people's first intention is that the state shall not perish ... He can do anything, except make laws ... However this important trust be conferred, it is important that its duration should be fixed to a very brief period, incapable of being ever prolonged.²⁵

The power of the dictator was to be strictly temporary, at most six months, and with the specific intention of protecting the state. His role becomes possible because in the rare instances in which the existence of the state is threatened, the general will can be counted on to demand protection of the state at all costs.

Finally, Rousseau addressed the idea of social control. The general will subordinates people to society, but in doing so it ultimately subordinates people to themselves and their own good. He asks, "What then, strictly speaking, is an act of sovereignty? It is not a convention between a superior and an inferior, but a convention between the body and each of its members ... it can have no other object than the general good."²⁶ All considerations are subject to the execution of the general will. In order to assure the primacy of the common good, Rousseau makes his famous case for coercion. "In order then that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the

²⁵ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 290-292.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

undertaking, which alone gives force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that *he will be forced to be free.*"²⁷

Ultimately, this conception of control presupposes that the individual is expendable if the ends of the state demand it. Rousseau's injunctions regarding the acceptable limits of state power are clear:

Again every malefactor, by attacking social rights, becomes on forfeit a rebel and a traitor to his country by violating its laws he ceases to be a member of it; he even makes war upon it. In such a case the preservation of the state is inconsistent with his own, and one or the other must perish; in putting the guilty to death, we slay not so much the citizen as an enemy.²⁸

This explanation seems straightforward. Those who violate the social compact and threaten the existence of the state must be punished. Yet Rousseau immediately confuses the issue:

We may add that frequent punishments are always a sign of weakness or remission on the part of the government. There is not a single ill-doer who could not be turned to some good. The State has no right to put to death, even for the sake of making an example, any one whom it can leave alive without danger ... In a well-governed State there are few punishments, not because there are many pardons, but because criminals are rare; it is when a State is in decay that the multitude of crimes is a guarantee of impunity.²⁹

These seemingly contradictory passages encompass most of what Rousseau writes about punishment of those who harm the state, and while he assures the readers that his ideas

²⁷ Ibid., 194, [my emphasis].

²⁸ Ibid., 208.

²⁹ Ibid., 208, 209.

are consistent, it is difficult to ascertain any consistency. Criminals and others who refuse to be a part of the system Rousseau envisioned are not, in the general run of things, to be executed; they are to be forced to conform, forced to have virtue. Punishment is simultaneously necessary for the preservation of the state and a sign of its corruption.

Jean-Paul Marat

Jean Paul Marat (1743-1793) was the most radical thinker of the Revolution.³⁰ About fifteen years older than Danton and Robespierre, Marat spent most of his adult life as a physician, writing a number of well-known tracts regarding the treatment of diseases of the eyes and “gleets” (gonorrhea), and while he did write some on politics before the Revolution, he did not develop as a thinker until late in his life. Elected as a deputy to the National Convention in 1792, he was often a nuisance to more moderate leftists such as Danton and Robespierre, but he was unflaggingly popular with the masses. He was killed on July 17, 1793, murdered in his bathtub by Charlotte Corday, a supporter of his Girondin political enemies.³¹

Marat’s popularity with the Parisian people was primarily due to his newspaper, *L’ami du Peuple*, which had an extensive readership. As a newspaper editor, Marat was not a writer of high Enlightenment political theory. Being primarily a polemicist, he was not required to think in terms of either philosophy or policy. However, though he was neither systematic nor consistent, writing primarily for effect, he articulated a series of

³⁰ Including Jean Paul Marat in a study of the French Revolution requires some defense; by the time the Terror was fully functioning, Marat was already dead. Despite this fact, his ideology was one of the most important and lasting influences on the Revolution, especially the Terror.

³¹ Clifford D. Conner, *Jean Paul Marat: Scientist and Revolutionary*, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1997)

themes, common threads that shaped the course of the Terror. Among these are a paranoid distrust of those in power; a belief that the people are good and capable if not corrupted by those in power; and a strong belief in the efficacy of popular violence.

Taking the name of his newspaper as his moniker, “the friend of the people” sought to incite revolutionary upheaval by the masses. He describes his self-appointed task:

Having had greater confidence in the mock patriots of the Constituent Assembly than they deserved, I was surprised at their pettiness, their lack of virtue... Disappointed in finding that it [*L'ami du Peuple*] did not produce the entire effect that I had expected, ... I felt that it was necessary to renounce moderation and to substitute satire and irony for simple censure ... Outraged at seeing the representatives of the nation in league with its deadliest enemies and the laws serving only to tyrannize over the innocent whom they sought to have protected, I recalled to the sovereign people that since they had nothing more to expect from their representative, it behooved them to mete out justice for themselves.³²

Among the Revolutionaries, Marat came first in attempting to bring Rousseau’s philosophy to bear on revolutionary realities. Using his well-circulated newspaper, he spread Rousseauian ideas to the Parisian people, translating them into a rich rhetoric of fear and resentment to inspire popular political uprising. Put simply, the ideology that Marat created to transport Rousseau into the revolutionary context created the framework and defined the terms that came to dominate the Revolution during the Terror.

Marat conceived of the general will in two very different ways. First, he conflated the concept with his ideal republican government. For Marat, the best form of government was a participatory republic with universal manhood suffrage. In his speeches and newspaper articles, he espouses a vague notion of republicanism in which

³² Jean Paul Marat, *Journal March 19, 1793*, Cited in Louis R. Gottschalk, *Jean Paul Marat: A Study in Radicalism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 52, 53.

the people elect their representatives to the government, and they rule in accordance with virtue. In a letter to Camille Desmoulins, in which he explains the role of the newspapers in educating the citizen, he reveals his conception about how government should work: “In order to establish a truly free constitution, *i.e.*, one that will be truly just and wise, the foremost requirement is to have all laws approved by the people ... Nothing is more important for a victory of Liberty, for the happiness of the Nation, than to enlighten the citizens as to their rights, and to create a public opinion.”³³ The general will in this conception of the state really becomes nothing more than the will of all.

At the same time, Marat envisioned the general will in more practical terms, as the direct participation of the people. More than any other figure during the French Revolution, he popularized political violence. Often advocating for wild, uncontrolled outbursts against those whose politics he deemed unsatisfactory, violence was to be the voice of the people, the measure of their displeasure with legislators, and it was how they were to protect themselves from corruptions of the government. Violence was the people’s outlet to power. While they may be weak individually, as a mob they could accomplish almost anything. Marat would write:

Fellow citizens, in order to escape this terrible fate, we have but a single means: attach yourselves closely to you comrades-in-arms of the troops of the lines ... Let the guilty heads of your ministers fall under the avenging axe. And, above all, assemble yourselves without delay in order to invade the senate and demand with loud shouts the recall of the ruinous decree which the so-called fathers of our country have no doubt presented for confirmation with all speed.³⁴

³³ Marat, “Marat to Desmoulins: June 24, 1790,” *Voices of Revolt Vol. II: Writings of Jean Paul Marat*, (New York: International Publishers, 1927), 61, 63.

³⁴ Marat, “A Fair Dream and a Rude Awakening,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 39, 40.

In defining the people, Marat differs from Rousseau on one important point. Rousseau was suspicious of the cities, writing, “The French are not in Paris, but in Touraine ... In these remoter provinces a nation assumes its true character and shows what it really is.”³⁵ By contrast, Marat based his power in the working poor of the cities; his readership was among these people; the outlying *départements* generally ignored him.³⁶ Moreover, departing from Rousseau, who does not mention popular agitation or violence, Marat commonly incited the people to violence, urging them on with threats of torture and destruction by their enemies. At this, he was masterful; he created fear with his words. “They will murder you without compassion, they will rip open the bellies of your wives, and in order to choke within you the love of liberty, their bloody hands will explore the entrails of your children to find their hearts.”³⁷ In this quote, “they” is without antecedent. It refers simply to the enemies, a nebulous term invoked to cause fear. To combat these enemies, Marat urges the people to violence. Commonly calling for the heads of hundreds or thousands of people – he had a proclivity for hyperbole – he argued that society would not be changed “until the people will have attained mental clarity enough to spoil the game of the imposters who are deceiving them, until they have become ruthless enough to punish the criminals who hoodwink them.”³⁸ Through violence, the people were to prevent those in government from becoming corrupted and deal with them if they did.

³⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, 448.

³⁶ Michael L. Kennedy, *The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution: The First Years*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 59.

³⁷ Marat, “Are We Undone?,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 36.

³⁸ Marat, “Nothing has Changed,” in *Voices of Revolt* 41, 42.

To the extent that Marat had a systematic conception of virtue, it was a communitarian one. Most of his newspaper articles begin with a call to the people. Collectively the people were good; their actions were wise, representing the general will, and their conduct naturally virtuous. However, Marat feared that public virtue could easily be led astray by machinations of individuals in power. While the people as a whole are good, individuals are subject to their own wills and in Marat's work are almost universally depicted as evil. He writes about important revolutionaries of the early revolution:

Can Abbé Sieyès become the Keeper of the Seal? This upstart scoundrel who has sacrificed the cause of liberty to the flatteries of court! ... Lafayette, a traitor to his country, who was willing to aid the Monarch to set up an absolute dictatorship, and who makes effort after effort to restore despotism! And then Mirabeau! ... this wretched voluptuary, who would exhaust the wealth of all France, reduce the nation to beggary, and in the long run auction off the kingdom only in order to be able to satisfy his base lusts!³⁹

The difference between virtue and vice for Marat is not determined solely in the character of the actions themselves, but in their object. The virtuous are concerned with the people, the vice ridden consumed with themselves. "Beloved country!" he laments, "Is it possible that you have only a few honest hearts defending you from the treachery of scoundrels hired by the despot?"⁴⁰

Ever aware of the possibility of vice, Marat was quick to embrace Rousseau's conception of dictatorship, and he did so whole-heartedly. While the people were inherently good, they were also apt to be misled by corrupt magistrates. To protect the

³⁹ Marat, "A Fiendish Attempt by the Foes of the Revolution," in *Voices of Revolt*, 30, 31.

⁴⁰ Marat, "A Fair Dream and a Rude Awakening," in *Voices of Revolt*, 37, 38.

people, he sought to empower one virtuous man to the end of eradicating the enemies of the Revolution, internal and external. “Only one way remains for you to drag yourself from the brink to which your unworthy chiefs have brought you. That is to name a military tribune, a supreme dictator, to lay hands on the principal known traitors ... let choice fall upon the citizen who has shown to this day the most enlightenment, zeal, and loyalty.”⁴¹ Since the people were easily deceived, they needed to be represented by a person who had proven his loyalty to the Revolution and its principles. Through this mechanism, the Revolution would be purified. Such a notion was radically unpopular with virtually every other member of the radical left, to whom it seemed merely the specter of the king they had so recently vanquished. In order to please them, Marat eventually did reformulate its construction, though not its intent, from a single member to a committee.⁴² Although not the creator of the Committee of Public Safety, Marat did seek to empower it, and thus allow it effectively to run the Terror. Responding to grain profiteering, he wrote:

Only revolutionary means may be resorted to. I know of no other means that would be acceptable to even our weakest elements than that of equipping the Committee of Public Safety, which after all does not consist of patriots, with the power of investigating this matter and dragging the principal grain profiteers before a Court of State, to consist of five permanent members in good standing, and to indict them with treason before this court.⁴³

While Marat agreed with Rousseau about the necessity for such a power to take charge at times, he differs from him in one critical aspect. For Rousseau, dictatorship was always

⁴¹ Marat, “A Fiendish Attempt by the Foes of the Revolution,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 111.

⁴² Gottschalk, 100-139.

⁴³ Marat, “Guard Against Profiteers!,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 59.

to be of limited duration. For Marat, the Committee of Public Safety was empowered to an end, and it would not be finished until all of the traitors were rooted out of the system.

Marat did not live to see *le terreur* in its fully formed state. His early death makes understanding his conception of the Terror more difficult than with the other theorists of the Revolution. However, while it is impossible to know how Marat would have viewed the Terror, it is not difficult to imagine what means would have been permissible and what its ends would have been. More than any of the other revolutionary leaders, Marat popularized violence, making it an acceptable means through which policy could be enacted. Violence was intended to protect the people's lives and the Revolution itself from those who opposed the ultimate goal of the Revolution, freedom from centuries of tyranny and equality. To Marat, the benefits of using violence were great and the cost of not using it even greater. "The cutting off of five or six hundred heads would have guaranteed you peace, liberty, and happiness. A mistaken humanity has crippled your arms and held back your blows; it will cost you the lives of millions of your brothers."⁴⁴

Finally, the concept of social control in Marat's thinking is twofold. While the state existed to protect society from enemies that wished it harm, Marat believed that the people should protect themselves if the government threatened them or their interests. Unlike Rousseau, he did not believe that it was necessary to force people to be free because in his mind, they already were. For Marat, the people, specifically the poor, were inherently good and virtuous and would not seek their own interests over those of all. Therefore, they did not need to be coerced or controlled. By contrast, the government was dangerous; its power naturally corrupting its ministers, making them apt to place their

⁴⁴ Marat, "Are We Undone?," in *Voices of Revolt*, 35, 36.

interests before the general will. Put simply, Marat's conception of social control is bottom-up. Instead of the government controlling the people through repression, the people control the government through violence and fear. "You are lost forever if you do not hasten to strike down all the corrupt members of the city administration, of the Departments, all the unpatriotic Judges of the Peace, and the most contaminated members of the National Assembly ... Do not forget that the National Assembly is your most dangerous enemy."⁴⁵ For Marat the people were responsible for their own protection from governmental oppression through the action of political violence. "Citizens, your salvation rests with you alone ... the deliverance of all is the highest law of the state. You must trample on the suspicious and dangerous decrees of your deputies, who have so long shown themselves unworthy of your confidence."⁴⁶

Georges Jacques Danton

Despite his shared fate and political goals, Georges Jacques Danton (1759-1794) was markedly different from the other revolutionary leaders. Whereas both Marat and Robespierre were small, reedy men, Danton was huge and imposing. Terrifically ugly, he had a booming voice that could command a crowd. These differences in character produce a unique challenge when studying Danton. Although, he had a nebulous set of republican ideals around which he organized his thinking, he did not write a specific manifesto in which his ideas on government were outlined. In fact, throughout his public and private life, he wrote almost nothing down, making a study of his political theory difficult. While the other Revolutionaries were meticulous in their speeches, often

⁴⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁶ Marat, "Marat, The People's Friend, to the Faithful Parisians," in *Voices of Revolt*, 57.

publishing them after their delivery, Danton largely improvised them, and they were only published if someone else wrote them down. Therefore, his ideas must be assembled piecemeal from his speeches and actions. This is not to impugn his contribution. For Danton was less a philosopher of revolutionary principles than an implementer of them, shaping revolutionary ideology through its institutionalization in law and politics.

Before the Revolution, Danton was a moderately successful lawyer in Paris, though he was deeply in debt. Before 1789, he held the office of *avocet aux Conseils du Roi*, a minor legal position associated with the court. His first revolutionary activities were through his involvement with the early Cordeliers club, at that time mostly a group of polemical newspaper editors. Danton quickly distinguished himself as a thorough revolutionary. Rising to the leadership of the Cordeliers, Danton fretted about its lack of influence and subsequently became more involved with the Jacobins; however, the connection with the Cordeliers remained. Initially unable to secure an important office, he was elected to the National Convention in 1792.⁴⁷ As the Revolution was strained by both internal and external pressures, counter-revolution and war, Danton motioned for the creation of a revolutionary tribunal and five months later to give it almost unilateral power. Procedurally, Danton was the creator of the Terror.⁴⁸

While Danton is commonly associated with the political philosophy of the French encyclopedist Denis Diderot, he was also strongly influenced by the other major thinkers of the pre-Revolutionary era. At his death, he had sixteen volumes of Rousseau's work

⁴⁷ Before this, he was a minister of justice in the Paris Commune. While it provided a stipend and was moderately prestigious, he lacked any real power.

⁴⁸ Norman Hampson, *Danton*, (London: Gerald Ducksworth & Co. Ltd., 1978) ; Robert Christophe, *Danton: A Biography*, Trans. Peter Green, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967).

along with many of the other major political works from the era in his personal library. But Danton's greatest contribution to the revolution begins with his understanding of the laws, their relation to the general will, and how they served as the basis for political and social institutions. As a lawyer, Danton conceived of the general will in legal and institutional terms. "Prove that you desire a rule of law," he wrote, "but prove also that you desire the welfare of the people."⁴⁹ The laws were, for Danton, the general will of the people made manifest. Because they were the embodiment of the general will, they were supreme, representing the institutional basis for legitimate society. With this understanding of the laws, he always attempted to work within the system, devising and empowering many of the primary revolutionary institutions, most notably the revolutionary tribunal. Above all others, Danton was the creator of the institutions that made the Terror possible.

Danton's conception of the general will runs throughout his thinking on the ideal republic. Danton believed in widespread electoral political participation. While he does not specifically mention universal suffrage, he advocated that the people be able to elect any person they deemed fit into any office, instead of the various requirements that were proposed. Initially for Danton the people were capable of choosing their own elected officials. On the election of judges, he advises, "Let the people elect, at its own discretion, such talented men as may deserve its confidence ... The people does not want to have its enemies in public offices; give it therefore, the right to choose its friends."⁵⁰ However, his tolerance for the people's choosing of their own political officers was not

⁴⁹ Danton, "On the Troubles at Orleans," in *Voices of Revolt*, 37.

⁵⁰ Georges-Jacques Danton, "On the Election of Judges," in *Voices of Revolt* Vol. V: *The Speeches of Georges Danton*, (New York: International Publishers, 1927), 41.

unlimited; in fact, with the possible exception of Philippe Égalite, the former Duc d'Orleans, Danton had a strong distrust of nobility and all those contaminated by its trappings. He wrote to Lafayette, "Become a plain citizen once more and cease to afford grounds any longer for the just distrust of a great number of the people ... It is high time that those who signed the protests against the Constitution should cease to be representatives of the people."⁵¹

The laws also existed to protect the people from themselves, eliminating the need for revolutionary violence. "The law alone must govern, but the law must really be in force, the law must be terrible in order that the people, assured of legal redress, shall be peaceful and humane."⁵² Danton believed that the people's freedom to revolt against laws not in accordance with the general will would induce lawmakers to pay attention to the good of all instead of their own particular interests. His view of the role of popular violence is fully developed in his opinions regarding the September massacres. "Assembly, to recall those bloody days that made all good citizens tremble ... I shall say – and I am sure I shall have the approval of all those who witness these events – that no human power could at that time have halted the excesses of the national vengeance."⁵³ Good laws, as Danton defined them – those aligned with the general will – would limit the possibility that the people would enact their sovereign right to object in the form of violence.

⁵¹ Danton, "Accusing Lafayette," in *Voices of Revolt*, 28.

⁵² Danton, "On the Election of Judges," in *Voices of Revolt*, 39.

⁵³ Danton, "Creation of the Revolutionary Tribunal," in *Voices of Revolt*, 47.

Additionally, in order to incorporate the people into governing, Danton exhorted the members of the National Assembly not to act just in the interest of the people, but instead, to *become* the people. “The Convention is a revolutionary body; it must be peopled by the people itself.”⁵⁴ He also recognized the difficulties in ruling a republic, in subordinating the particular will to the general. To the assembly he said,

You are not a finished body, for you may constitute yourselves in accordance with your own wills. Beware, citizens, you are responsible to the people for its armies, for its blood, for its assignats; for if its defeats should so much lower the value of this money that the means of subsistence should be destroyed in its hands, who could retard the effects of its resentments and its vengeance?⁵⁵

As for Danton’s conception of virtue, it tends to be both public and private. Of the virtue of the people as a whole, he is generally quiet. Conflicted about the people, he believed them good and essential in the type of society he desired, but he feared their uncontrolled power. However, he respected what he saw as their inherent love of liberty, declaring, “liberty is always more strongly espoused in the lower orders than above.”⁵⁶

For Danton, there is such a thing as a good man. In fact, there can be little doubt that he thought of himself as just such a man. “I have preserved all of my native vigor, making a place for myself in the nation by my efforts alone, without ceasing for an instant, either in my private life or in the profession I have embraced, to prove I was capable of a combination of intellectual detachment, warmth of spirit and a firmness of

⁵⁴ Danton, “How Can France Be Saved,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 51.

⁵⁵ Danton, “Creation of the Revolutionary Tribunal,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 48.

⁵⁶ Danton, “The Transformation of the Committee of Public Safety into a Provisional Government,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 62.

character.”⁵⁷ A person can be self-made, successful, public, and separate from the people but still be good, uncorrupt and clean from the taint of tyranny. Danton believed in the republic, particularly as it was embodied in National Convention. Though the people were the foundation of sovereignty, most of Danton’s speeches are addressed to members of the National Convention. Because he believed in their personal capacities to be good men, it is in them that he trusted most of the actual work of ruling the country.

The most important component of Danton’s conception of public virtue is its inherently self-sacrificial nature. In order to assuage fear of his using the tribunal to become a dictator, he included in his motion to create the revolutionary tribunal a provision preventing him from ever sitting on it.⁵⁸ When advocating for free public education he explained, “no real expense is involved when money is expended in the public interest,” urging the Assembly to allocate the assignats.⁵⁹ This sacrifice extended to one’s very life, a fact he was called upon to test. While he argued in his defense at his trial, he knew the outcome before it was determined. He accepted it and attempted to make political use of it. About his impending death, he said to his tribunal, “My home will soon be in oblivion, and my name in the Pantheon! Here is my head!”⁶⁰ When his sentence of death was being carried out, a close witness relayed his final words to the executioner, “Above all, don't forget to show my head to the people. It's well worth

⁵⁷ Danton, “A Confession of Faith,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 30.

⁵⁸ He was for a short time, April-July 1793, placed on the Committee of Public Safety, but he vacated the position as soon as it was politically safe to do so.

⁵⁹ Danton, “On Free Public Education,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 67.

⁶⁰ Danton, “Danton’s Defense Before the Revolutionary Tribunal,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 76.

seeing.”⁶¹ In his final act, he reminds his killer to show how even the great Danton was subordinate to the state, the general will and the people. If they desired his death, it was not his place to prevent it. While this is an extreme notion of self-sacrifice, it was just this kind of activity that Danton seemed to want of others as well. He was, in his mind, the exemplar for all.

Danton attempted to institutionalize this self-sacrificial concept of virtue through the revival of the law of Valerius Publicola. This law, which was first passed in the Roman Republic after the expulsion of the Tarquins, “made it permissible to kill a man by jeopardizing one’s own life.”⁶² More specifically, it allowed citizens to kill immediately any person who spoke against the state, so long as the killer was willing to face execution if the victim was proven innocent. Though it never passed the Convention, Danton cited it several times throughout his career in order to prove his commitment to public virtue. This law specifically highlights the kind of self-sacrificial virtue in which Danton fervently believed. Only by staking their life on the health and well-being of the Republic could citizens be truly virtuous.

Danton’s conception of revolutionary dictatorship is institutional in nature as well, coming in the form of the revolutionary tribunal, essentially a court under the auspices of the Committee of Public Safety in which most standard legal practices were ignored. Seeing enemies everywhere, Danton genuinely feared for the safety of both the Revolution and France. “The enemies of liberty are raising their brazen brows; involved

⁶¹ Danton, cited in Hampson, 174.

⁶²Danton, “Danton’s Defense Before the Revolutionary Tribunal,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 83.

everywhere, they are everywhere *provocateurs*.”⁶³ As a result, the only goal of revolutionary government was the protection of the nation, and to this end, all must be sacrificed. “When a ship is in danger of foundering, the crew throw overboard everything that adds to the danger. Similarly everything that might injure the nation must be cast out from its midst and everything that might serve the nation must be placed at the disposal of the municipalities.”⁶⁴ With this goal in mind, Danton was prepared to empower the tribunal with almost any means. “In this matter, the welfare of the people demands great measures, terrible measures. I can see no mutual ground between the ordinary forms of justice and the revolutionary tribunal.”⁶⁵ More than any of the other revolutionaries, Danton understood the horrendous potential of this institution, but in response to foreign threats and a royalist revolt in the Vendée, he chose to empower it further giving it *carte blanche*. “Very well, then,” he boasted, “let us be terrible; let us make war like lions. Why do we not establish a provisional government which shall second the national energy by means of powerful measures?”⁶⁶

Danton’s thinking concerning social control developed as a response to the violent potential that he saw in the people. For Danton, Revolution required passion. There was a vital energy to it that is reflected in the power of his words. However, the Revolution was dangerous because it unfettered the people. “Revolutions unchain all passions. A great nation in the process of revolution is like metal boiling in the crucible:

⁶³ Danton, “Creation of the Revolutionary Tribunal,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 46.

⁶⁴ Danton, “The Struggle with the Domestic and Foreign Foe,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 34.

⁶⁵ Danton, “Creation of the Revolutionary Tribunal,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 47.

⁶⁶ Danton, “On the Transformation of the Committee of Public Safety into a Provisional Government,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 59.

the statue of liberty has not yet been cast; the metal is in flux; if you are unable to control the furnace, you will be devoured by it.”⁶⁷ The Revolution set loose the people, they had power, and they were willing to use it as they had shown during the September massacres. While Danton threatened the assembly with this type of action, it is clear that he much preferred the threat of popular violence to its execution and wished to leave the protection of the republic to the laws. “Until now the people has been agitated because one had to awaken it against its tyrants. From now onwards the law must be as terrible against those who infringe it as the people have been in pulverizing tyranny.”⁶⁸

Acutely aware of the danger that the people could pose when aroused, Danton feared them. From the beginning he had a more authoritarian nature than the others, and despite his avowed trust in the people, he found popular disorder disquieting. “Do your duty, therefore.” He told the people. “Let us have no dissensions, no quarrels; let us rise on the flood of liberty!”⁶⁹ Unlike Marat, for whom the threat was government, Danton saw the danger as hidden and insidious, coming from the people themselves. While in theory he agreed with the Rousseauian precept of forcing people to be free, in practice he sought to keep them from being too free, from using their power for violence too often. Thus in institutionalizing the Revolution, he made sure that the laws that liberated the people contained them as well. As he explained to the Assembly: “The most sacred duty you can fulfill to the people is say to it: Follow our instructions!”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Danton, “How Can France Be Saved?,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 52.

⁶⁸ Danton, cited in Hampson, 88.

⁶⁹ Danton “Unity and Strength,” in *Voices of Revolt*, 43.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

Maximilien Robespierre

One of the most important figures of the Revolution, Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) was influential with respect to the actual day-to-day operation of the Terror from his position on the Committee of Public Safety. While he served as a lawyer and judge in his home of Arras for many years, Robespierre's first important position was as a representative of the Third Estate in the Estates General when it was called in 1789. From that time until his death, it is accurate to characterize him as a professional politician. A small, unimposing man with the provincial accent of Artois, he initially found it difficult to achieve any influence, being constantly overshadowed by the more prominent figures of the early Revolution. As the Revolution progressed and these figures either died or were replaced, Robespierre was able to move into the political forefront. His relationship with the powerful Jacobin Club helped him navigate the complex elections that followed, as the legislative body dissolved itself and reformed a number of times, and he always managed to remain close to power. On July 27, 1793, the National Convention elected him to the Committee of Public Safety. A year later, as the Terror was dismantled by the Thermidorian reaction, he was executed.⁷¹

Over the course of the Revolution, it became apparent that, in order for a Rousseauian republic to survive in eighteenth-century France, the entire populace would have to undergo a radical transformation. People who had been for centuries little better than property now were to become citizens, full members of an active body politic. Robespierre's greatest contribution to the Terror was the relentlessness needed to attempt this task. While Marat and Danton created the philosophical framework and legal

⁷¹ Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006).

institutions on which the Republic was built, Robespierre's contribution lay in its political organization. From his position at the head of the Committee of Public Safety, he guided the Terror in its task of protecting the republic from enemies, both internal and external. Realizing that the transformation from subject to citizen was profound and tenuous, he ruthlessly and consistently attempted to eradicate all those who could possibly harm the republic. Robespierre's greatest contribution to the ideology of the Terror was the understanding that justice, force, and virtue would need to be combined in order for it to succeed. This mixture is what Robespierre called *le Terreur*.

Among all the theorists of the Revolution, Robespierre was the one who best understood Rousseau's conception of the general will. During the debates surrounding the Declaration of the Rights of Man, he submitted a draft that attempted to premise the republic on this fundamental principle. In the Articles of his proposed Declaration, he outlined his views:

XIV. The people is sovereign: the government is its product and its property, public officials are its assistants. The people may, if it wishes, change its government and revoke its representatives. XV. The law is the free and solemn expression of the people's will... XX. No portion of the people may exercise the power of the entire people; but the wish it expresses should be respected as the wish of a portion of the people, which should contribute to the forming of the *general will*... XXIX. When the government violates the people's rights, insurrection is, for the people and each portion of the people, the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties.⁷²

Robespierre shared Rousseau's conception of sovereignty. The people as a whole are sovereign; they lend legitimacy to the government by their tacit consent. Laws are created

⁷² Maximilien Robespierre, "Draft Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen," in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror* Ed. Slavoj Žižek, Trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 2007), 70,71 [my emphasis].

as an expression of the general will and are valid to the extent that they are truly representative of it. However, the people are the ones to make that distinction. They are free at any time to revoke the legitimacy of the laws by revolting against the government.

While Robespierre defines the general will much as Rousseau did, he formulates it in its negative construction. “XVII. The law can only forbid what is damaging to society; it can only order what is useful to it.”⁷³ Instead of the general will aiming for the good of all, Robespierre’s general will was to create laws that forbade that which could damage the republic. In the absence of insurrection that would signal the people’s disapproval, individuals were to “obey religiously the magistrates and agents of the government, when they are the voices or executors of the law.”⁷⁴ For Robespierre, the people only have power collectively; they can only act together as one. Otherwise, they are just individuals, subject to the laws. What matters, however, is that they are able to act.

While all of these thinkers thought that the private will should be inferior to the general will, Robespierre understood that this had to be true for the entire community and without exception. Since the people were sovereign, it was important that all citizens, both legislators and normal citizens, understood this concept. First, to the legislators, he entreated: “On all the objects of its [the National Convention] anxieties and all that might influence the progress of that revolution, we instigate solemn discussion; we entreat it not to allow any individual and hidden interest to usurp here the ascendancy of the

⁷³ Ibid., 70.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 71.

Assembly's general will and the indestructible power of reason."⁷⁵ According to Robespierre, if the legislators choose systematically to put their particular will ahead of the general will, the Revolution would grind to a halt. Speaking to general citizens whom he suspected were stockpiling grain for profit, he observed, "no man has the right to amass piles of wheat when his neighbor is dying of hunger... Everything essential to conserve life is property common to the whole of society... Any mercantile speculation I make at the expense of my fellow's is not trade at all, it is brigandage and fratricide."⁷⁶ The actions of every member of the society were subordinated to the general will; the health of the people and the Revolution itself depended on it. Therefore, the aim of the Terror, as led by Robespierre, was to force the primacy of the people over the individual.

Of all of the thinkers of the French Revolution, Robespierre was most concerned with virtue. Like Rousseau, Robespierre understood its foundational importance. Virtue allows the general will to be properly discerned and turned into law. As Robespierre explained the Convention: "It is true that this sublime sentiment [virtue] assumes the public interest over all private interests."⁷⁷ Virtue is the moral equivalent of the general will, and laws based in it will inevitably be good. By contrast, Robespierre believed that "bad laws and bad administration have their origins in false principles and bad morals."⁷⁸

Additionally Robespierre viewed virtue as a critical concept in the transition from the *ancien régime* to the republic. The moral qualities that were present under the

⁷⁵ Robespierre, "On the Principles of Political Morality," in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, 124.

⁷⁶ Robespierre, "On Subsistence," in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, 51.

⁷⁷ Robespierre, "On the Principles of Political Morality," in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, 110.

⁷⁸ Robespierre, "On Subsistence," in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, 49.

monarchy had no place under the republic, and they were to be replaced with republican virtue.

We want in our country to substitute morality for egoism, probity for honour, principles for practices, duties for proprieties, the rule of reason for the tyranny of fashion, contempt of vice for the contempt of misfortune, pride for insolence, greatness of soul for vanity, love of glory for love of money, good people for good company, merit for intrigue, genius for fine wit, truth for brilliance, the charm of happiness for the boredom of luxury, the greatness of man for the pettiness of great men, a magnanimous, powerful and happy people for an amiable, frivolous and miserable people; in short all the virtues and miracles of the Republic for all the vices and absurdities of monarchy.⁷⁹

Virtue is the cornerstone of Robespierre's conception of government, so much so that he could declare, "what is immoral is impolitic, that which is corrupting is counter-revolutionary."⁸⁰ The rules and *mores* that governed the old world had no relationship to those that would control the republic after the Revolution. The people, both individually and collectively, were to be transformed. "We want an order of things in which all base and cruel passions would be fettered, and all beneficent and generous passions awakened by the laws ... in which all souls would grow larger through the continual communication of republican sentiments."⁸¹

Given his Rousseauian background, it is unsurprising that Robespierre was concerned primarily with the people as opposed to the individual. Taken together, the people were inherently virtuous. "Virtues are simple, modest, poor, often ignorant,

⁷⁹ Robespierre, "On the Principles of Political Morality," in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, 110.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

sometime rough; the prerogative of the unfortunate, and the heritage of the people.”⁸² Yet while the people were virtuous, some individuals would not always be so incorruptible.

Therefore, it is necessary that legislators encourage individuals to be virtuous through the laws. Robespierre gives this advice to his fellow assembly members:

Since the soul of the Republic is virtue, equality, and your goal is to found and consolidate the Republic, it follows that the first rule of your political conduct should be to relate all your operations to the maintenance of equality and the development of virtue. ... Thus, anything that tends to arouse love of the homeland, to purify morals, to elevate souls, to direct the passions of the human heart towards the public interest should be adopted or established by you. Anything that tends to concentrate them on the abjectness of personal self, to arouse crazes for small things and contempt for great ones, *should be rejected or repressed by you.*⁸³

While the people as a whole are virtuous and therefore capable of determining the general will, the government, through the actions of the legislators, creates laws that foster virtue and prohibit or repress vice. It is through these actions that the republic constantly renews itself, using the inherent virtuosity of the people and by forcing more when necessary.

While Robespierre tried his best to distance himself from the concept of a revolutionary dictatorship, it was still important to him to assure safety from internal and external enemies. Defending himself against the charge of being a dictator on July 26, 1794, four days before his death, he explained to the Convention, “Yet that word *dictatorship* has magical effects; it blackens liberty; it disparages government; it destroys the Republic; it degrades all the revolutionary institutions, which are presented as the

⁸² Robespierre, “On the Principles of Revolutionary Government,” in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, 103.

⁸³ Robespierre, “On the Principles of Political Morality,” in *Virtue and Terror*, 112 [my emphasis].

work of a single man; it brings odium on national law.”⁸⁴ But while he disliked the notion of a dictator, Robespierre advocated for the power of the revolutionary tribunal and of the Committee of Public Safety, seeing them as acceptable vehicles for the protection of government without being dictatorial. He defends the necessity of such institutions from those who accused him of creating a dictatorship:

The function of government is to direct the moral and physical forces of the nation towards the goal of its appointing. The goal of constitutional government is to preserve the Republic; that of revolutionary government is to found it ... Constitutional government is concerned with civil liberty, and revolutionary government, with public liberty. Under the constitutional system, it almost suffices to protect individuals against abuse of public power; under the revolutionary system, public power itself is obliged to defend itself against all the factions attacking it. Revolutionary government owes to good citizens full national protection to enemies of the people it owes nothing but death.⁸⁵

For Robespierre, revolutionary government was created to use the apparatus of the state to destroy its enemies and protect its citizens. However, instead of being simply an expedient means for an expansion of the sphere of acceptable government action, he believed it sought not the interest of the government but that of the people. Moreover, it was a controlled experience. “It has its rules too, all drawn from justice and public order. It has nothing in common with anarchy or disorder; its purpose on the contrary is to suppress them, to introduce and consolidate the rule of the law. It has nothing in common

⁸⁴ Robespierre, “Speech of 8 Thermidor Year II,” in *Virtue and Terror*, 129.

⁸⁵ Robespierre, “On the Principles of Revolutionary Government,” *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, 98.

with arbitrary rule; it should not be guided by individual passions, but by the public interest.”⁸⁶

In the concept of social coercion, Robespierre’s conceptions of virtue and revolutionary government come together. While he does not explicitly state that he wishes to force people to be free, he does argue that “the greatest service a legislator can perform for men is to force them to be honest folk.”⁸⁷ Robespierre does not have a liberal conception of freedom. For him, to be free is to be able to participate in government as equal with one’s fellow citizens. Nevertheless, moral virtue – the virtue of “honest folk” – is a necessary precondition to participation and thus freedom, so while he does not explicitly advocate for the forcing of freedom, Robespierre thinks the government has an important role in morally guiding those who stray back into the flock. Government can instill virtue in those who do not possess it through legislation or terror.

The purpose of the Terror was social control through the creation of fear. For Robespierre, terror is more than physical coercion in the form of police, jails, and executions that protected the state from those who actively wish it harm. It is the means by which enemies are led to virtue and therefore back to society. When explaining revolutionary government, he defines the purpose of Terror in this way:

We must stifle the internal and external enemies of the Republic, or perish with it; and in this situation, the first maxim of your policy should be that the people are led by reason, and the enemies of the people by terror. If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the mainspring of popular government in revolution is virtue and terror both: virtue, without which terror is disastrous; terror without which virtue is powerless. Terror

⁸⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁸⁷ Robespierre, “On Subsistence,” in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, 55.

is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue ... The revolution's government is the tyranny of liberty over tyranny.⁸⁸

Robespierre's single-minded vision of ensuring the purity of the people as a whole blinded him to the cost in individuals. Seeking to ensure the protection of the Republic from all conceivable threats, whether they are in thought or in deed, he created an ideal, a vision of the perfect citizen that no one could obtain. The uncontrolled power of the Terror led it to seek to impose not just conformity but total governmental control.

Conclusion

Traditionally researchers of the French Revolution have been divided with respect to the Terror. Either they simply applied different levels of acclaim or blame to Rousseau or his followers, or they ignored them, arguing that the Terror was ultimately caused by some other factor intrinsic to the Revolution. Both of these explanations are problematic. The first either discounts the revolutionaries or overemphasizes Rousseau, who was dead, failing to understand the contextual importance of his ideas and language. The second discounts completely the impact of people and philosophy. The truth lies between these two. A full explanation must incorporate the influence of ideas and the contextual complexity of revolutionary events. In short, the ideology of the Terror was the result of the complex interplay between Rousseauian principles and the practical political thought of Marat, Danton, and Robespierre, all taking place in a chaotic revolutionary context.

The men who Victor Hugo would later immortalize as the "three gods" of the Revolution each had an important role in the development of the Terror.⁸⁹ Individually,

⁸⁸ Robespierre, "On the Principles of Political Morality," in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, 115.

⁸⁹ Victor Hugo, *Ninety-Three*, (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1888).

Marat popularized mass violence as a political tool; Danton procedurally created the Terror and empowered it to the ends of protecting society; and Robespierre used it as a relentless tool of oppression to force a uniform, republican conception of virtue on the people. Together, they shaped a complex revolutionary ideology that brought the political philosophy of Rousseau to the revolutionary context of eighteenth-century France. By combining their interpretations of Rousseau with their own original thinking on the concepts of the general will, public and private virtue, revolutionary dictatorship, and social coercion or control, these thinkers transformed abstract philosophy into public policy, albeit with horrendous results.

The French Revolutionary Terror only lasted eleven months, but it had had a lasting impact on the world. With the Terror, Marat, Danton and Robespierre vastly expanded the conceived sphere of government action. While the king had been absolute before the Revolution, his power had never approached that of the revolutionary state. Conceptualizing a state that could force total conformity on its citizens, they provided a prototype for state violence that has been emulated ever since. In the complex relationship between Rousseau and these revolutionaries, an unprecedented form of democratic violence and oppression came into the modern world. It is with us still.

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