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| <b>Citation</b>          | Higonnet, Patrice. 2006. Terror, trauma and the 'young Marx' explanation of Jacobin politics. <i>Past and Present</i> 191, no. 1: 121-164.   |
| <b>Published Version</b> | <a href="https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtj010">doi:10.1093/pastj/gtj010</a>  |
| <b>Accessed</b>          | February 18, 2015 1:26:51 AM EST   |
| <b>Citable Link</b>      | <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3229106">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3229106</a>  |
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# PAST & PRESENT

NUMBER 191

MAY 2006

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Published by  
Oxford University Press  
for the Past and Present Society

## TERROR, TRAUMA AND THE 'YOUNG MARX' EXPLANATION OF JACOBIN POLITICS\*

Tocqueville in the 1850s wrote of France in the 1780s that never had tolerance been more accepted, authority been more mild, or benevolence been so widely practised. Nonetheless, he went on, 'from the bosom of such mild mores would spring the most inhuman of revolutions'. And even for those of us who deeply admire the French Revolution's message of civic equality, the Terror of the Year II (1793–4) seems not just ominous and horrendous, but also out of place. Auschwitz, Dresden and Hiroshima — after the Great War of 1914–18 and the Great Depression of the 1930s: we can see why these wartime tragedies happened, given the awful events that preceded them. But what of the Terror after the Enlightenment — after Voltaire, Boucher, and Madame de Pompadour? Isser Woloch has rightly described the 'sequence' from 1789 to 1793, from liberalism to terror, as an eternally fascinating 'enigma'. Why the French Revolution occurred is something of a mystery. And why it failed so dramatically is also deeply perplexing.<sup>1</sup>

Historians have pondered over the cause and nature of the Terror of the Year II ever since it occurred. And yet the many valuable (though often conflicting) explanations which have been offered to account for it have somehow fallen short. Many of them are too narrow or too vague. They are seldom wrong in any simple sense, but they need to be reconceived. I propose that there is an extant and even ancient frame, the 'young Marx explanation', which, if rejuvenated by reference to the theory of collective trauma, can enable us to renew these accounts, first by identifying new ground for research, but principally by making it possible to integrate the seemingly irreconcilable points of view

\*I am indebted for comments on this article to Bernard Bailyn and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie; Serge Aberdam, Gao Yi, Bernard Gainot and Jacques Guilhaumou; Lynn Hunt and William Sewell; David Bell, Sudhir Hazareesingh and Gerard Livesey; and Juliet Wagner.

<sup>1</sup>Tocqueville, quoted in E. M. Cioran, *Joseph de Maistre* (Paris, 1957), 43; Isser Woloch, *The New Regime* (New York, 1994), 432.

about why the unanimity of 1789 gave way by 1792–4 to a divisive and self-destructive intolerance.

## I

A first step is to review explanations, past and present, that range from culture and ideology (Rousseauian Jacobinism was bound to end as it did) to circumstance (where the circumstances might be social, political or institutional). For many reasons, it is important to have these various answers in mind — however biased or incomplete they may have been: first, because explanations of Revolutionary terrorism are suggestive in their own right since they indirectly chronicle two centuries of historiographic effort; second, because their very number speaks to the importance of the Terror as a historical event, and of course any understanding of the French Revolution must subsume an understanding of the Terror; and third, because the variety and incompatibility of extant accounts underscore the interest of any explanation that aims to reconcile opposing points of view.

As regards larger ideological explanations, a good place to begin is with François Furet, since his is the dominant mode of explanation today. This brilliant historian was unambiguous: for him, the ‘revolutionary government’ ‘was written in the logic of Montagnard policy’. The Terror, taken as government policy by the Convention, does not originate in September 1793 at all, but in the past (both recent and distant):

The circumstances surrounding this celebrated vote indicate that before becoming a set of repressive institutions used by the Republic to liquidate its adversaries and establish its domination on a basis of fear, the Terror was a demand based on political conviction or beliefs, a characteristic feature of the mentality of revolutionary activism.<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective, the Terror is the illegitimate child of the Enlightenment — begotten, perhaps, on the Enlightenment by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The year 1793 is embedded in 1789.<sup>3</sup> Furet’s first and most talented disciple, Keith Baker, gives us a new (and, it must be said, extreme) version of this same ideological

<sup>2</sup> François Furet, *Revolutionary France, 1770–1880*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Oxford, 1992), 134. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds.), *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 137.

<sup>3</sup> For Cassirer, ‘Rousseau is a true son of the Enlightenment, even when he attacks and triumphs over it’: cited in Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, 1994), 61.

causal perspective. What, he asks, was the implication of the path chosen by the National Assembly in September 1789 over the issue of the king's suspensive veto? At stake here, he argues in a historical version of 'path determinacy', was the setting aside of

a discourse of the social, grounded on the notion of the differential distribution of reason, functions, and interests in modern civil society, in favor of a discourse of the political, grounded on the theory of a unitary general will . . . it was opting for the language of . . . civic virtue, rather than of commerce; of absolute sovereignty, rather than of government limited by the rights of man — which is to say that, in the long run, it was opting for the Terror.<sup>4</sup>

For Baker, the Terror is due not only to the Revolution's emphasis on the communitarian or even collective liberty of the ancients (a theme associated with Benjamin Constant and to which we shall return), or to the Enlightenment as such, but also to a combination of the two. The Enlightenment with its principle of rebirth occasions the messianism of the Revolution, whose aim then becomes the imposition of a communitarian definition of liberty as 'liberty to' (in the words of Isaiah Berlin), not 'liberty from'. Furet and Baker are 'discursivists' who have elaborated their views in the context of the 'linguistic turn'. They seek to define 'symbolic systems' and the 'potential play of discursivity'. Influenced as they have been by this 'turn', they have worked in a Saussurian manner to present language and texts as parts of a generative rather than a mimetic system.<sup>5</sup>

Their work has been highly influential. And yet, three decades after their argument was first put forward, we can now wonder about its scope, novelty and foundations. It is worth noting, for example, that the discursivists have as a rule been reluctant to consider the sociological conditions which allowed the Rousseauian discourse to surface before and during the Revolution. Neither Furet nor Baker (unlike Darnton with his work on Grub Street, or Chartier with his work on books and reader response) has been particularly interested in seeing precisely how ideas might have spread through eighteenth-century French society.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990), 305.

<sup>5</sup> As lucidly described by Gabriella Spiegel, 'History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', in Keith Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (London, 1997), 181.

<sup>6</sup> Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 2001), likewise works to show the extent of this linguistic

It may well be that the one truly new element which the discursivists have put forward concerns the compatibility of an ancient message with recent Habermasian modes of thought. (That argument, it will be remembered, has to do with the emergence of civil society and the absolutist and monarchic monopolization of politics in the second half of the seventeenth century, with, as its indirect effect during the eighteenth century, the creation of a new 'public sphere' colonized in turn by a new 'public opinion'.) For political-cultural historians, writes Harold Mah, 'the problem of the French Revolution, what ultimately explains its dynamic, is the instability of representing the public as a mass subject'. Mindful of Habermas's influence, Mah goes on to say that they 'describe a "public" that has made in the course of the Revolution, a transition from a spatialized form to the form of a mass subject, an unstable transformation that issues, for these historians, in the Revolution's most extreme, harrowing development: the Terror'.<sup>7</sup>

Plainly stated, however, this message, as it stands, does not really move us much beyond the age-old 'C'est la faute à Voltaire, c'est la faute à Rousseau'. So this new discursivist argument — again, as it stands — seems largely familiar to readers of J. L. Talmon. For this Eastern European Jewish scholar, born in 1916 and deeply marked by the effects in his lifetime of left and right totalitarian barbarisms, the Terror was little more than a perverse and quasi-religious consequence of Enlightenment thinking. 'Saint-Just', he wrote, 'developed a mystical faith in the power of his Republican Institutions to check man's anti-social arbitrary urges, to regenerate the French people and to reconcile all contradictions in a perfect harmony founded upon virtue'. For Talmon, 'the central problem of Jacobinism . . . is at bottom Rousseau's problem of the general will, with an equally strong emphasis placed on active and universal participation in willing the general will (as well as) on the exclusive nature of the general will'. Talmon's stance is very reminiscent of Baker's explanation, which likewise emphasizes the hegemony even before 1789 of a Rousseauian 'political' discourse, as in his interpretation of Sieyès's pamphlet 'What Is the Third Estate?'. And Talmon's sensibility, in

(n. 6 cont.)

turn in society at large by focusing on the use of a language of action in ballet and in the treatment of the hearing-impaired.

<sup>7</sup>Harold Mah, 'Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians', *Jl Mod. Hist.*, lxxii (2000), 19.

turn, was not dissimilar to the view of many nineteenth-century historians — Lamartine, for example, who also saw the root cause of the Terror in 'l'invasion de l'idée nouvelle' (the invasion of new ideas). Men had hearts, but ideas did not. 'Systems', wrote Lamartine, 'are brutal forces which do not even feel pity for those they crush'.<sup>8</sup>

True enough, in the past, some ideologically minded historians tried to anchor their argument in the social. Conspicuous in this respect was Hippolyte Taine, whose ideological/prosopographic explanation does start from a social explanation. But in its original form, this ecumenical precedent is not promising: for Taine, Jacobinism is no more than a doctrinal disease arising from a combination of ideology and social maladjustment; and Enlightenment rationalism was a utopian abstraction which might have remained relatively innocuous had it not intersected with the interests of psychopathic and marginal lawyers without briefs, doctors without patients, untenured holders of useless university degrees, and so on. Augustin Cochin can also be mentioned here: for this pre-First World War student of the sociology of American politics, French revolutionary politics were at the intersection of, once again, Enlightenment principles with the machinations of electoral manipulators (the agents of a new 'democratic sociability' that mirrored in reverse the absolutism of the *Ancien Régime*), first in the Dauphiné's elections to the Estates General, and then in the national assemblies of the Revolution.<sup>9</sup> Furet has made a great deal of this *grand ancêtre*. But it is difficult to follow this lead as confidently as we would like.

Pre-Revolutionary French ways of thinking about daily life — that is to say, the nature of French culture (with a small c) — have also been invoked to explain Revolutionary terror. Tocqueville himself often moved from an institutionalized approach, as will be seen, to a broader and more diffused cultural explanation: 'Political societies', he explained, 'are not what their laws make

<sup>8</sup> J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952; New York, 1960 edn), 143, 84. 'La fureur des idées est plus implacable que la fureur des hommes, car les hommes ont un cœur et les idées n'en ont pas. Les systèmes sont des forces brutales, qui ne plaignent pas même ce qu'elles écrasent . . . Ainsi s'ensanglantent les causes les plus pures': Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire de la Révolution française, 1793* (Washington DC, 1869), 98.

<sup>9</sup> Cochin's attempt to provide a sociological shell for a Rousseauistic explanation of the Revolution and of the Terror was very important to Furet, whose ideas, however, are far more convincing when set in a Habermasian mode.

of them, but what sentiments, beliefs, ideas, habits of the heart, and the spirit of men who form them, prepare them in advance to be, as well as what nature and education have made of them'.<sup>10</sup> In brief, the *Ancien Régime*, like all *anciens régimes*, was bound to die, but the French, being French, chose to kill it in the most terrible way, that is to say, terroristically.

Tocqueville considered this truth morosely, but his peculiarly British contemporary Thomas Carlyle did so almost joyfully. For this lapsed Presbyterian Scot, the French — a Latin race — had turned their back on true, Godlike values, and so the Terror arose, spectral, from their past:

The harvest of long centuries was ripening and whitening so rapidly of late; and now it is grown white, and is reaped rapidly, as it were, in one day. Reaped in this Reign of Terror; and carried home, to Hades and the Pit! Unhappy Sons of Adam: it is ever so; and never do they know it, nor will they know it.<sup>11</sup>

Culture corrupts, and French culture, it is well known, corrupts absolutely.

In that context, many historians — both French and Anglo-American — have insisted on the religious specificities of French life; though in truth, the emphasis here has been placed less on religious doctrine or religious ideology as such than on *neo-religious*, ethno-cultural assumptions, such as the quest for transcendence, or on the traditionally sanctioned rejection of social pluralism. Restated, this is to say that the Enlightenment (or religion) did not matter as much as fundamental and atavistically neo-religious, monistic and 'French' ways of thinking which move from one ideological statement to the next. Thus the philosophizing words that Robespierre may have found in the texts of Mably and Rousseau matter less than the atavistic, neo-monarchic and neo-Catholic assumption that only the Enlightenment — or more particularly Robespierre's own version of it — had a right to rule. In this view, the genesis of a 'dialectic of the Enlightenment' has less to do with the Enlightenment than with its antecedent French cultural frame. The problem here is 'the French idea of freedom'.

<sup>10</sup>Tocqueville to Claude-François de Corcelle, 17 Sept. 1853, in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. James Toupin (Berkeley, 1985), 294.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (1837; New York, 1934), pt 3, bk 5, ch. 1, p. 633.



Many writers have placed religion, or 'French neo-religion', at the heart of their explanations. In Lucien Jaume's perspective, first we have Bossuet and then we have Robespierre — which is in a sense to restate the views of Edgar Quinet, in whose mid nineteenth-century perspective the present was a mere restatement of the past:

The French Revolution, like any other event, has a relation to what preceded it. It is weighed down by the burden of its French past. It often replicated it at the very moment that it struggled against it. Not to see this is to deny the very soul of history.

For Quinet, the Revolution was yet another French war of religion. Robespierre was not just a dictator, but a pope. The Reformation and the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre were necessary preconditions of the Revolution and of the Terror. 'It is the issues of religion and politics, that is to say, of political liberty, which alone unchained the storm; it is on account of these issues alone that blood flowed'. And again,

Terror has been the fatal legacy of French history. The arms of the past were used to defend the present. Louis XI's iron cages . . . the scaffolds of Richelieu, the mass proscriptions of Louis XIV, here is the arsenal whence came the Revolution. With the Terror, new men became again, without realizing it, the men of former times.<sup>12</sup>

Terror, it seems, or at any rate Jacobinism, can be plausibly derived either from too much religiosity or from not enough religiosity.

Of the circumstantial (as opposed to the ideological) explanations of the Terror, the most straightforward have to do with military matters. Alphonse Aulard, at the end of the nineteenth century, gave the classic formulation of this reasoning: the Terror was a rational response to military circumstance. Unsurprisingly, this perspective has appealed to many republican and nationalist historians. (In 1892 Aulard was the first scholar appointed to the new university chair dedicated by the Third Republic to the history of the French Revolution.) But, curiously, the same argument was also used by the socialist Jean Jaurès, who — much to his credit — combined social and political factors to explain the fratricidal elimination of 'factions' the one by the other. For Jaurès, the Revolution, in the autumn of 1793 and especially the spring of 1794, was like some 'monstrous cannon'

<sup>12</sup> Edgar Quinet, *La Révolution* (Paris, 1865), 71, 146.

that had to be manoeuvred with 'surety, rapidity and decision'. Any quarrel between those who served it would have led to chaos: 'La mort rétablit l'ordre et permet de continuer la manœuvre'. (Death re-establishes order and allows manoeuvring to go on.) Robespierre might have been wrong to go on with the Terror after the victory of Fleurus in June 1794, but he had been right in April to execute Danton. Simone Weil, in the mid 1930s, argued in the same way, comparing Stalin's dictatorship to the Terror of 1794. 'The need to wage armed struggle against an inner and outer enemy', she wrote of Russia but with France in mind as well, 'resulted in the deaths of the best leaders and forced the country to hand itself over to a bureaucratic, military, and police dictatorship'. (Many explanations of the Terror of 1794 have had their emotional origin in a particular understanding of Leninist and Stalinist communism.)<sup>13</sup>

As might be expected, this exculpating explanation of the Terror (as a gesture of Revolutionary self-defence) has also been favoured by the many humanistic leftists who have been simultaneously and contradictorily sympathetic to terrorizing Jacobinism and to the rights of man. Thus, in 1980, William Sewell wrote of 1793–4: 'This was the period of the "reign of terror", when the Parisian sections and the Committee of Public Safety horrified Europe by their intrepid cruelty and miraculously saved the Revolution from what seemed certain defeat'.<sup>14</sup> Arno Mayer's recent work is set in this same mode, but for him extremism, though always detestable, finds its audience in military circumstance.

'Social-circumstantial' or class explanations of the Terror have also fascinated many historians. In the 1820s, for Mignet, the Terror marked the moment when the plebs acceded to power at least indirectly, since the bourgeoisie was now eager to please the Revolutionary crowd. Likewise, for Émile Ollivier, the French prime minister at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, 'the Terror was above all a Jacquerie, a regularized pillage, the vastest enterprise of theft that any association of criminals has ever organized. Some of its leaders, like Robespierre, had clean hands;

<sup>13</sup> Jean Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française*, ed. Albert Soboul, 6 vols. (Paris, 1972), vi, 428. Francine du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil* (New York, 2001), 75. This interpretation has been presented anew in Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980), 101.

most of them killed only in order to steal'. Engels spelled out the social argument in more vigorous — and scatological — detail: writing at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian war, at a time when Marx did not want Parisian socialists to upset the apple-cart of the newly republicanized bourgeoisie, Engels explained that pointless class conflict had caused the Terror:

Thanks to these endless small terrors of the French, we can now have a better understanding of the Reign of Terror. We take it to mean the rule of the people who inspire terror. On the contrary, it is the rule of people who are themselves terror-stricken. Terror implies mostly useless cruelties perpetrated by frightened people to reassure themselves. I am convinced that we can attribute almost in its entirety the reign of Terror anno 1793 to petit-bourgeois philistines who have soiled their trousers from fear, and to the dregs of the population.

This way of seeing structured Marxist thought from Jaurès, Mathiez and Lefebvre, to Soboul and — up to a point — Michel Vovelle: given the class nature of French society, terror was a useful and, more critically, an *unavoidable* political development.<sup>15</sup>

In a darker vein, many rightist commentators have also relied on social arguments, but, of course, differently understood. For Hippolyte Taine, Enlightenment principles were much to be deplored, but he also believed — quite wrongly — that the Jacobins who subscribed to them were nearly without exception socially or psychologically marginal:

Jacobins are madmen. From their behaviour, the physician would immediately recognize the sort of lucid madmen who are not locked up, but who are all the more dangerous for it. [Here Taine interjects a footnote to Docteur Trélat's *La Folie lucide*.] A physician might give us the technical name for their disease; it is the delirious ambition of the madhouse . . . Take out the Revolution, and Marat would probably have ended up in the madhouse.

Although his chapter on the nature of the Terror is entitled 'Caractère général du gouvernement révolutionnaire et du personnel de la Terreur' (On the general character of the Revolutionary Government and of the perpetrators of Terror), Taine's approach is not relevant to that title. Instead, it is essentially prosopographical, social and anecdotal. The Terror occurred because

<sup>15</sup> For Mignet, see Gustave Le Bon, *The French Revolution and the Psychology of Revolution*, intro. Robert A. Nye (London, 1980), 215. 'La Terreur a été surtout une Jacquerie, un pillage, régularisé, la plus vaste entreprise de vol qu'aucune association de malfaiteurs ait jamais organisée. Quelques-uns de ses chefs, comme Robespierre, sont restés les mains nettes; la plupart n'ont tué que pour voler': Émile Ollivier, *1789 et 1889*, intro. Maurice Agulhon (Paris, 1989), 112. Engels to Marx, 4 Sept. 1870, in Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, *Briefwechsel*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1950), iv, 453.

psychopaths took upon themselves the ideologized 'droit divin des purs', and terrorized others in the name of their (sick) ideas.<sup>16</sup>

Curiously, leftist historians have at times echoed Taine's diagnostic, but from the other side of the left/right fence. Here again, the revolutionary players are acting from personal motivation, and especially from fear.<sup>17</sup> For Albert Soboul, 'the will to punish had been since 1789 one of the essential traits of the revolutionary mentality: as Georges Lefebvre has shown, the *defensive reaction* and the *punitive will* of both masses and of the far-seeing leaders of the Revolution was confirmed in their opposition to *aristocratic conspiracy*'. Richard Cobb has gone even further and sees terror as a response of frightened men:

Aided and abetted by peddlers of slander and by secret informers, the force of credulity gives us the key to understanding the public's acceptance of the Reign of Terror and all the rapid, inexplicable shifts in policy among top revolutionary figures. Who knows if Committee members themselves were not dupes of their own imaginings? By dint of talking continually about Pitt and Cobourg they ended up believing in the 'foreign plot', and it is a known fact that they thought themselves constantly in danger of assassination.

Of the Great Fear of July 1789, when peasant riots broke out in most of France, Georges Lefebvre wrote, 'In the drama of peasant life, it is written in letters of fire'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> 'Les Jacobins sont des aliénés. A de pareils signes, le médecin reconnaîtrait à l'instant de ces fous lucides que l'on ne renferme pas, mais qui ne sont que plus dangereux . . . Même le médecin dirait le nom technique de la maladie, c'est le délire ambitieux bien connu dans les asiles . . . Supprimez la Révolution, et probablement, Marat eût fini, à l'asile': Hippolyte Taine, *Les Origines de la France contemporaine*, vii, *La Révolution, le Gouvernement Révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1901), pt 1, 205.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Tackett also develops this idea in his 'Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of Terror', *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, cv (2000).

<sup>18</sup> 'La volonté punitive constituait depuis 1789 l'un des traits essentiels de la mentalité révolutionnaire: face au *complot aristocratique*, s'affirmaient, ainsi que l'a montré Georges Lefebvre, la *réaction défensive* et la *volonté punitive* des masses comme des dirigeants clairvoyants de la Révolution': Albert Soboul, *La Révolution française*, intro. Claude Mazauric (Paris, 1982), 358. For Soboul, see also his *La Civilisation et la Révolution française* (Paris, 1982), 278: 'La spontanéité révolutionnaire des masses paysannes et citadines, soulevées par la misère et le complot aristocratique, avait jeté bas l'Ancien Régime dès la fin de juillet 1789 . . . [et] libéré les autonomies locales'. For Richard Cobb, see his 'Some Aspects of the Revolutionary Mentality (April 1793–Thermidor, Year II)', in Jeffrey Kaplow (ed.), *New Perspectives on the French Revolution: Readings in Historical Sociology* (New York, 1965), 314. For Georges Lefebvre, see his *The Great Fear of 1789, Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (1932), intro. George Rudé, trans. Joan White (New York and London, 1973), 209. Claude Mazauric has developed this theme of fear also: 'En l'an II c'est sur les ruines

Just as recent sociological and Habermasian speculation has ennobled older ideological explanations of the Revolution, political and circumstantial explanations can also be made more subtle and complex. Richard Cobb promisingly presented his circumstantial facts as a kind of political-social system, arguing that the terror deployed by the *armées révolutionnaires*

was more than a method of repression; it was an entire political system, a way of ruling, one might even say a way of living. For one grew accustomed to the Terror and habit removed its force. To be effective the Terror had to be uncertain, sudden, mysterious; it had to strike with surprise and with speed. In October 1793, however, it became administrative, acquiring a bureaucracy, ministers and an extensive personnel scattered throughout the departments.<sup>19</sup>

George Rudé's version of a Revolutionary popular movement, Cobb continues, was wholly inadequate:

What is so often clothed over and 'historicized' as something called the 'popular movement' . . . was frequently cruel and cowardly, base and vengeful, barbaric and not at all pretty to watch. Professor Rudé's Crowd is somehow altogether too respectable; one hesitates to credit all these worthy shopkeepers and all these honest apprentices, family men too, with such horrors, and, in identifying the assailants, one is in danger of leaving the assailed out of the picture.<sup>20</sup>

This is a sophisticated account, based on a deep knowledge of Revolutionary archives.

Ideological, national and social explanations of the Terror, though usually separate, have at times been juxtaposed or even combined, as appears from the work of Jaurès described above, and more so from that of Mathiez, who stood at the convergence of international Marxism and national French academic traditions. On the one hand, for Mathiez, 'there are really no

(n. 18 cont.)

de l'opposition fédéraliste, vite relayée par l'action royaliste écrasée à son tour, que la violence populaire, sauvage, à l'image d'une France rurale et boutiquière a pu céder le pas à l'organisation légale de la *Terreur*, canalisant et limitant peu à peu, non sans contradictions ni aberrations cependant, les effets de l'affrontement entre "les deux Frances"; elle permit ainsi de transformer l'angoisse et la peur populaire en volonté politique et en capacité d'action': Claude Mazauric, *Jacobinisme et Révolution: autour du bicentenaire de Quatre-vingt-neuf* (Paris, 1984), 62.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Cobb, *Les Armées révolutionnaires: instrument de la Terreur dans les départements, avril 1793 (floréal an II)*, 2 vols. in 1 (Paris, 1961-3), ii, 465 — in English as Richard Cobb, *The People's Armies. The armées révolutionnaires: Instrument of the Terror in the Departments, April 1793 to Floréal Year II*, trans. Marianne Elliott (New Haven and London, 1987), 313.

<sup>20</sup> Cobb, cited by Nye in his introduction to Le Bon, *French Revolution and the Psychology of Revolution*, p. xlii.

cases of a country that was fighting a foreign war aggravated by a civil war whose leaders did not have recourse to summary and rapid justice in order to repress complicity with the enemy, plots and revolts'. But this empiricist argument did not preclude reference to social fact: Mathiez also relied heavily on societal explanations to explain the rise of the Terror. And thereby, incidentally, he misstated the record: historians now agree that, Saint-Just notwithstanding, the Montagnards did not really intend to reshape French society, even in the spring and early summer of 1794. But Mathiez insisted that they did, and felt that recourse to terror was a consequence of the Jacobins' social will: 'Terror had heretofore been considered even by its most fervent authors a temporary expedient that would disappear with the coming of peace. But now Saint-Just presented it altogether differently, as the necessary precondition for the creation of a democratic republic'.<sup>21</sup> In this new context, terror — he thought — became the instrument of class struggle, not of the plebs against the bourgeoisie, but of the left bourgeoisie against the bourgeoisie proper.

In this social domain of the problem, as so often happens, 'les extrêmes se touchent' (extremes meet). Horrified conservatives and progressive-minded ultra-leftists have relied on the same social factors, if with different emphases. So it was, for example, that Cobb, who liked to think of himself as a *titi parisien*, as the *camarade anglais* of the 1950s French communist historians, was in the end rather close to Taine — the horrified and racist professor of history, a native of the Ardennes for whom Frenchmen of the Midi were quasi-Arabs. For Cobb, like Orwell, another passionate and English enthusiast of Parisian low life, ordinary people could behave just as Taine had said they did: 'In a climate of fear and hatred, small shopkeepers and peaceable umbrella vendors can become ferocious brutes who drown and shoot without pity and take macabre pleasure in totting up the toll of their victims'.<sup>22</sup>

Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century explanations of the Terror emphasized ideas, culture, war or social class; but more recently, ambient political and institutional circumstances have

<sup>21</sup> Albert Mathiez, *La Révolution française*, ed. Armand Colin, 3 vols. (Paris, 1959), iii, 78, 146.

<sup>22</sup> Cobb, *Les Armées révolutionnaires*, ii, 367; Cobb, *People's Armies*, trans. Elliott, 251.

also been invoked. This argument takes various forms. At its loftiest, it is that *all* revolutions have an inevitable dynamic which will lead to tyranny, as Albert Camus and Patrice Gueniffey have both argued. For the latter,

Terror [in 1793–4] emerges from revolution itself, from the revolutionary dynamic, from the dynamic inherent in all revolutions. In one way or another, all revolutions have their Jacobins. In that sense, the Jacobin is an archetype: he is the revolutionary dynamic made concrete. As opposed to what Auguste Cochin believed, he is the truth of every revolution rather than the hideous and hidden face of democracy.

Some historians have gone even further: for them, the problem is not revolutionary upheaval but upheaval of any kind, especially in premodern societies. For Lucien Febvre, 'to study the real causes of the plague of 1630, together with its Terroristic side aspects, is to contribute something to the understanding of other Terrors, that of 1793, for example' — a fruitful idea to which we shall return.<sup>23</sup>

Other political explanations have been conceptually similar but narrower in scope. For Jean Tulard, terror arose because the Jacobins wished to rule but realized that their only (and rather wobbly) support was from the Parisian sans-culottes. Being few in number, they had no choice: 'Understanding themselves to be a small minority . . . the Montagnards organized a regime outside the law in order to terrorize the entire country and to keep it from rallying to the Girondins . . . who, from their provincial refuge, were trying to organize a movement of resistance'.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, for Braesch, the Terror was an essentially populist and Parisian political argument that had to do with French habits, institutions and centralization, but had little connection to French culture or social forms generally: 'The terrorist regime did

<sup>23</sup> 'La Terreur est le produit de la révolution elle-même, de la dynamique révolutionnaire, de la dynamique propre à toute révolution. D'une certaine façon, toutes les révolutions ont leurs Jacobins. Le Jacobin est en cela aussi un archétype: il est la dynamique révolutionnaire en acte, non pas la face cachée et hideuse de la démocratie comme le croyait Auguste Cochin, mais la vérité de toute révolution'. Patrice Gueniffey, 'La Terreur: accident ou fatalité des révolutions?', manuscript. For Febvre, see Lucien Febvre, 'La Terreur', *Annales ESC*, vi (1951), 523: 'R. Baehrel conclut: quand admettra-t-on qu'étudier la France de 1630, c'est d'abord étudier la Peste de 1630 et non la journée des Dupes? Et qu'étudier la Peste de 1630, ses causes réelles, ses manifestations terroristes — c'est peut-être aider à la compréhension d'autres terreurs: celles de 1793, par exemple'.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Tulard, Jean-François Fayard and Alfred Fierro, *Histoire et dictionnaire de la Révolution française, 1789–1799* (Paris, 1987), 1113.

gradually extend to the whole of France, but it was inaugurated in Paris, and the Paris Commune (a sans-culotte organ) contributed in a major way to the spread of terror in the provinces through its agents in outlying *départements*'.<sup>25</sup> Tocqueville's first explanation of the Terror — like his explanation of what went wrong with the *Ancien Régime* — is also essentially political and institutional. As Simone Weil was to put it in conscious exaggeration, 'Le régime de Louis XIV était vraiment déjà totalitaire',<sup>26</sup> and Tocqueville is the *grand ancêtre* of this institutional kind of explanation. For him, bad governmental and absolutist habits were a curse that could not be remedied, all the more so because the French had internalized their social effect so completely: 'Given its characteristics, this Terror could not exist anywhere but in France. It is the product of general causes which local causes pushed beyond all limits. Born of our mores, our character, our habits, of centralization, and of the sudden destruction of all hierarchy'.<sup>27</sup> For Tocqueville, the Terror arose at the intersection of social democratization (as this was understood in France), and of a new religion, namely the passion for egalitarian democracy. In his view, class war, centralized government and the ambiguous impact of the *philosophes* had all been relevant first to the ruination of the *Ancien Régime* and then to the Terror in 1794.

In an age concerned with image, terror has also been recently described as a way of forcing spectators to choose: those who are forced to be terrorists — even if by association only — can never back out of the revolution that gave rise to it. Danton, it is said, was indifferent to the prospect of the September massacres because they would have the positive effect, he thought, of drawing a line of blood in the sand that could never be erased. In this same mode of self-fashioning, some historians have proposed the idea of terror as a Durkheimian sociological holocaust: here, terror is the symbolic affirmation of the destruction of the *Ancien Régime*. Indeed, Michelet, that most famous and nationalist of all French historians, described with admiration a visionary

<sup>25</sup> Frédéric Braesch, *La Commune du dix août 1792: étude sur l'histoire de Paris du 20 juin au 2 décembre 1792* (Paris, 1911), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Simone Weil, *L'Enracinement* (1942/3), in *Œuvres*, ed. Florence de Lussy (Paris, 2000), 1100.

<sup>27</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, ii, *Fragments et notes inédites sur la Révolution*, ed. André Jardin (Paris, 1953), pt 2, 226.



project of which Albert Speer might have been quite proud. It was, he wrote,

a [Revolutionary] monument for the combustion of the dead that would have simplified everything . . . At its centre, a large pyramid with plumes of smoke at its apex and four corners. An immense chemical apparatus that, without engineering horror or disgust, would have abbreviated the processes of nature, and would certainly have carried an entire nation, if need be, from the sickly and soiled condition that is called life to the peaceable condition of our final rest.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, in a recent, sophisticated and postmodern interpretation (and quite compatible with the argument presented here), William Reddy has suggestively ascribed the whole issue to emotions. For him,

Neither the class analysis of the new social history, nor the elaborate social nominalism of the revisionists offered any grounds for such an insight [into the anxieties of the Jacobins]. Richard Cobb long ago, and eloquently, complained of the lack of purchase of class concepts on the experience of the Terror . . . Furet's much discussed idea of 'discourse' taking on a kind of independent political power in the early 1790s is important as far as it goes. What it does not address is the question of how real people could have lived such an abstraction. The history of the Revolution cannot be understood without an adequate theory of emotions.

Hannah Arendt's sensibility was similarly inclined, even if her concern was set in a less emotive and more Habermasian mode: Robespierre, for her, accepted recourse to terror because this bourgeois universalist's dominant response to the unprecedented complaint of the poor was not indignation or even hatred (as it would be for the thermidoreans in 1795 or Guizot in the 1840s), but pity. 'Robespierre', she writes, 'once compared the nation to the ocean; it was indeed the ocean of misery and the ocean-like sentiments it aroused that combined to drown the foundations of freedom'.<sup>29</sup>

## II

Historiographically, then, interpretations of the Terror are and have been widely varied. Moreover, the hold of these theories on the imagination of historians has been so strong as to condition

<sup>28</sup>J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution*, ed. Gérard Walter, 2 vols. (Paris, 1952), ii, bk 21, pp. 928–9.

<sup>29</sup>William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001), 199; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1965), 90.

not just their interpretation of the material at hand, but their very choice of subjects, dates, places and things. Michelet, for example, in his multi-thousand-page history of the Revolution, mentioned Benjamin Constant just once, and in passing, as an obtuse and obstinate defender of bicameralism. Furet, in his five-hundred-page history of France from 1780 to 1880, cites Constant repeatedly, indeed ceaselessly, more often than Voltaire and Rousseau, and, invariably, eulogistically. For this modern French liberal, Constant is *the* completely perspicacious student of the Revolution, at once hostile to Burke's debilitating nostalgia and to Rousseau's proto-totalitarian vision of 'democratic universalism'. Conversely, Michelet dedicated more than twenty pages to the Fête de la Fédération on 14 July 1790, as the apotheosis of Revolutionary nation-building, but Furet considers that event in four dismissive lines. Michelet despised Robespierre as the evil (and dictatorial) genius of terroristic deviation, but Furet writes about him rather sympathetically as the hapless and inadvertent embodiment of the Revolution's democratic (and tragically terroristic) purpose: 'This deputy, with his tendency to the abstract, who identified so completely with the idea of man's universality, also possessed immense talent as a tactician'.<sup>30</sup>

This judgement is notably different from that of Jaurès, who praised Robespierre for striking down Danton and the Hébertists in March and April 1794, but nonetheless concluded that Robespierre's great failure was his inability to stop the Terror in May, June and July, when, after the victory of Fleurus, it was no longer a rationally defensible policy: 'What Robespierre lacked, however great he may have been, were precisely the qualities that were needed to resolve this problem'.<sup>31</sup> Albert Soboul sees the case differently: for him, Robespierre's ability or inability as a tactician was irrelevant. The Law of Prairial, which structured the Great Terror of June and July 1794, was not Robespierre's work at all (as Jaurès argued), but that of the Committee of Public Safety as a whole. Terror was not a private choice but an ineluctable necessity because caused by war, conspiracy, and

<sup>30</sup> Furet, *Revolutionary France*, 144.

<sup>31</sup> 'Il manquait à Robespierre, quelque grand qu'il fût, précisément les qualités nécessaires à la solution du problème': Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution*, vi, 488.

the fundamental and unbridgeable gap between sans-culottes and Jacobins. For Jaurès, Hébert was a dishonest villain who distracted the sans-culottes from their allegiance to the Revolution, and a bearer of a universalist message. For Soboul, Hébert has very little to do with the case.

It is relevant to the role of evidence in these historical judgments that, despite the accumulation of empirical evidence, every current of historical interpretation since the Revolution has had conceptual antecedents that were developed at the time, or shortly thereafter, by observers who had very little evidence to work with. Recent social interpretation of the Terror, for example, would not have surprised either Barnave (whose *Introduction à la Révolution française* was first published in 1843 and was a model for Marx at that time, even though it was written in 1793) or Bonaparte, who wrote at Saint Helena that the terrorism of 1793–4 had been socially fated:

A general rule: there can never be a social revolution without terror. From its very principle, every revolution of this kind can only be and has to be a revolt. Time and success alone can ennoble it. But once again, you can only establish such a revolt by terror.<sup>32</sup>

Mme de Charrière, the author of *Caliste* and Constant's first female mentor, was basically of the same mind, even if she compounded personal contempt with social disdain: 'What are the constituent parts of Jacobinism?', she asked in 1800, and answered: 'the manipulation by a few fanatics and by a horde of ambitious men of the envy of the poor who want to be rich. How numerous were the old scores that were settled then'. Chateaubriand, a self-styled genius whose only true rival, he thought, had been Napoleon, was similarly inclined, though for him, 'non-talent' mattered even more than low social ranking. 'How curious', he suggested,

that the agents of Terrorism whose name was inscribed in the Almanach des Muses should have been so large: the vanity of unrecognized mediocrities produced as many revolutionaries as did the wounded pride of dwarfs and cripples: how similar the revolts of those that are infirm either in mind or body.

<sup>32</sup> 'Règle générale: jamais la révolution sociale sans terreur. Toute révolution de cette nature n'est et ne peut être dans le principe qu'une révolte. Le temps et le succès seuls parviennent à l'ennoblir; mais encore une fois, on n'a pu y parvenir que par la terreur'. Napoléon, *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, ed. Comte de Las Cases, 8 vols. (Paris, 1823), vi, 94.

And Engels's thought on the revolutionary bourgeoisie's reliance on terror as a means to ingratiate itself with the violence-prone sans-culottes was anticipated by Danton's 'Soyons terribles pour empêcher le peuple de l'être'. (Let us ourselves terrify to keep the people from becoming terrifying.)<sup>33</sup>

Edmund Burke would likewise not have been surprised by the ideological perspective which holds that ideas and irreligion have been the errant handmaidens of rampant individualism, a state of affairs that necessarily led to political violence. For him, the very existence of civility in civil society — indeed of civil society itself — depended on religion, tradition, inheritance and a corporate feeling of solidarity for 'the little platoon we belong to in society'. Remove this as the French did, he predicted in 1790, and soon you will have 'plots and assassinations . . . preventive murder and preventive confiscation, and that long roll of grim and bloody maxims which form the political code of all power not standing on its own honor and the honor of those who are to obey it'. Burke's was a broad mind. Barruel's was quite narrow, and so it was that the author of *Les Helviennes* presented us in 1797–9 with the first developed if also trivial ideological-conspiratorial explanation of terror and revolution. Terror, he argued, was the handiwork of Enlightenment-minded freemasons or, at times, of unenlightened Jansenists, whose aim was to wage against throne and altar:

In this conspiracy against property and society, we find the same principles once more, with the same hierarchy of adepts and of their roles; the same consistency of sectarianism with the same goals: their irreligious sophists of all types despoil the clergy; the sophists of bourgeois jealousy despoil the nobility; the sophists of banditry despoil bourgeois merchants and all rich bourgeois; the atheistic sophists break the ultimate ties of society.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Isabelle de Charrière, *Œuvres complètes*, vi, *Correspondance, 1800–1805*, ed. Jean-Daniel Candaux (Geneva, 1984), 167; François-René Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (Paris, 1951), bk 9, ch. 16, p. 334.

<sup>34</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1987), 68. Abbé Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme*, 4 vols. (London, 1798), i, 452–3: 'Dans la conspiration contre la propriété & la société, mêmes principes encore, même graduation dans les adeptes & les rôles; même constance dans la secte, à tendre au dernier but. Leurs sophistes irreligieux de toutes les classes, dépouillent le Clergé; les sophistes de la jalousie bourgeoise, dépouillent la Noblesse; les sophistes bandits dépouillent les bourgeois marchands et tous les riches bourgeois; les sophistes athées brisent le dernier lien de la société'. Raoul Girardet, in his *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris, 1986), comments usefully

Our modern scepticism about this kind of reasoning also finds a contemporary antecedent in the objection of the former Constituant, Mounier: 'For [true and] complicated causes, commentators substituted simple explanations which were within the reach of minds that were both lazier and more superficial'.<sup>35</sup>

And as for terror born of national necessity, no explanation was more common at the time. Without 'co-active' force, thought Robespierre, what would befall the new Republic? 'Should tyranny reign but for a single day, not one patriot would live to the morrow. One or the other must prevail'.<sup>36</sup> Marat, half populist, half Jacobin, likewise believed that 'sacrificing two hundred thousand heads' (the numbers varied from week to week) would save a million. He was, in this respect at least, in complete accord with his sometime rival, the sans-culotte extremist Roux, an *enragé*, who asserted on 27 July 1793: 'It is only by freezing the soul of traitors with terror that you can ensure the independence of the fatherland'. This view of life was recycled by Hébert: 'The sword of the people must flash over the heads of conspirators, terrorize their accomplices, and also terrorize the enemies of the patrie'.<sup>37</sup> Danton's friend Marc-Antoine Baudot thought the same: 'Terror was a necessity of the times. Should we repent for having thought so? Not me in any case. Among those who hate us are royalists of all hues, their hatred is an (unavoidable) consequence, it is in the nature of things'.<sup>38</sup>

(n. 34 cont.)

on Barruel and quotes from the same work: 'Dans cette révolution française, tout, jusqu'à ses forfaits les plus épouvantables, tout a été prévu, édité, combiné, résolu, statué: tout a été l'effet de la plus profonde scélérateuse, puisque tout a été préparé par des hommes qui avaient seuls le fil des conspirations longtemps ourdies dans des sociétés secrètes, et qui ont su choisir et hâter les mouvements propices aux complots [sic]' (pp. 32–3).

<sup>35</sup> Mounier, quoted in Alice Gérard, *La Révolution française: mythes et interprétations, 1789–1970* (Paris, 1970), 24.

<sup>36</sup> Robespierre, 5 Feb. 1794, quoted in Soboul, *La Civilisation et la Révolution française*, 32.

<sup>37</sup> 'Sacrifier six cent têtes pour en sauver trois millions trois cent milles, est un calcul trop simple que dicte la sagesse et la philosophie; c'est ce que pense tous les citoyens sensibles, et ce qu'avouent tous les citoyens courageux': Marat, cited in Gerd Van Heuvel's very useful 'Terreur, Terroriste, Terrorisme', in Rolf Reichardt et al. (eds.), *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich, 1680–1820*, iii (Munich, 1985), 103. Hébert, quoted in Jacques Guilhaumou, 'La Formation d'un mot d'ordre: plaçons la terreur à l'ordre du jour', in Michel Glatigny and Jacques Guilhaumou (eds.), *Peuple et pouvoir: études de lexicologie politique* (Lille, 1981), 170.

<sup>38</sup> Marc-Antoine Baudot, *Notes historiques sur la Convention nationale, le directoire, l'empire et l'exil des votants*, repr. of 1893 edn (Geneva, 1974), 254.

Social explanations, ideological reverie, practical necessity: those who lived the Revolution were quite able to orchestrate these various themes to explain their times, as would, later on, their historians. Camus's (and Gueniffey's) humanistic argument on the inevitability of violence and injustice in all revolutions, for example, was anticipated by Fichte, who nevertheless thought that successful revolutions were worth the trouble: 'Violent revolutions are always a bold bet by mankind: if they succeed, the achieved victory is well worth the discomfort they occasion. If they fail, so do you get driven through suffering to greater sufferings'. Similarly, the connection between the brutality of the Terror and the brutality of the *Ancien Régime* was made early on by Mme de Staël: Why had the slaves of Saint-Domingue become murderous as free men? Because they had been so badly treated by their masters before the revolution. And why had Jacobins and sans-culottes been so violent in 1793? The answer, she suggested, had nothing to do with the mistakes that her father, Necker, was often said to have made; the fault was in the lesson that the French had drawn from the bad habits of an ancient and corrupt monarchy: 'The horrors of the Revolution have to be attributed above all else to the absolute absence of private and public morality'.<sup>39</sup>

As for considering the Terror to be a divine punishment, de Maistre is, among the Revolutionary actors, the one whose sensibility most clearly prefigures Carlyle's. For this mystical Savoyard Catholic, the Terror was the fated punishment of ungodly hubris:

Never did Robespierre, Collot, or Barère think of establishing the revolutionary government or the Reign of Terror: they were led imperceptibly by circumstance and such a sight will never be seen again. Extremely mediocre men are exercising over a culpable nation the most heavy despotism history has seen, and of everyone in the kingdom, they are certainly the most astonished at their power.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> 'Gewaltsame Revolutionen sind stets ein kühnes Wagemuth der Menschheit; gelingen sie, so ist der errungene Sieg des ausgestandenen Ungemachs wohl werth; misslingen sie, so drängt ihr euch durch Elend zu grösseren Elenden hindurch'. J. G. Fichte, 'Zurückforderung der Denkfreiheit', in his *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. J. H. Fichte, 8 vols. (Berlin, 1845), vi, 5. Germaine de Staël, *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la République en France*, ed. Lucia Omacini (Geneva, 1979), 37, cited in Daniel Sussner, 'An Impoverished View of the Terror?' (Harvard University term paper, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Joseph de Maistre, 'Considerations on France', in *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, ed. Jack Lively (New York, 1965), 49.

Most current historical interpretations of the Terror, then, are not new. And it is worth noticing that contemporary judgements — like their historiographical avatars — have often been deeply prejudiced by the personal situation of those who made them. Burke, for example, as a liberal traditionalist, had no choice but to emphasize the drastic and dictatorial effect of irreligion and social atomism on the cult of liberty. He was also driven to consider the supposed Constitution of the *Ancien Régime* as a viable base for gradual reform, which it patently was not. Similarly, Mme de Staël (a Protestant and a foreigner), who despised Jacobinism but wished to praise the Enlightenment, had no choice but to sidestep ideology and point instead to the sad effects on French social life of pre-Revolutionary church and state.

Clearly, then, many witnesses of the Terror theorized from their own existential situations, and so have historians. Just as it is sensible to assume that Robespierre and Saint-Just were sincere in considering their terroristic actions an appropriate response to a real and present danger, so Furet's insistence on the effect of a totalizing ideology makes more sense if we remember his trajectory through French communism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a path which he rejected vigorously after Stalin's death. Likewise, it is useful to remember that the vestigial prestige of the 'social interpretation of the Revolution' was more vivid for those historians who were still solidly ensconced in leftist French politics. (Mathiez was briefly a communist, as was Mazauric, a speechwriter for Georges Marchais, one of the last Stalinist leaders of the French Communist Party.) Tocqueville would not have written as he did without 1848 and its sequels, just as Taine would not have hated Jacobins had he not also known and hated the Communards of his day. And in this same vein, it could also be said, today, that the memory of the horrors of the twentieth century and our own attendant concern for human rights explain our current interest in the terroristic, downside of the Revolution rather than its many and incontestable achievements.

A description of the variety of explanations that have been brought to bear on the origins of the Terror of the Year II is a necessary first step to some greater understanding. The issue is not that the older explanations are irrelevant. To the contrary, nearly all approaches, historical or historicized, including the most monocausal ones (as in Talmon's work on Rousseau), are in some

way useful. It surely matters, for example, that Aulard could show that 93 per cent of terroristic prosecutions involved accusations of treason or related issues. It is of great interest that Robespierre owned the works of Mably. Every local study is likewise useful, and it is important to remember that what explains the Terror at Lyon will not serve so well at St-Étienne, and may or may not hold for the French nation as a whole. And there is food for thought in Donald Greer's finding of the 1930s that several *départements* were hardly terrorized at all. (A handful witnessed no executions, and another dozen had fewer than ten such trials.)<sup>41</sup> No 'macrohistorian' can afford to overlook such 'microhistories'.

And yet, the multiplicity of these explanations, and their repetitiveness and subjectivity, does imply that we are, to some extent at least, marking time in our effort to understand the rise and course of terror in 1789–93. Eclecticism can provide a way out of this dilemma: Crane Brinton, a wise and able student of revolutionary zeal taken as a syndrome, was, at times, of this mind. In the Terror, he explained, there

certainly [went] the desperate necessities facing men who wage a war in some measure not of their choice; there went the hatred of the poor for the rich, of the failure for the success; there went the simple and eternal desire of men to rule other men; there went the desire of overeducated and underexperienced men to realize the paper Utopias of eighteenth-century thought; and there went the religious fanaticism of men borne in a frenzy of hope beyond the petty decencies of common sense. All this, and much more is the Terror. But omit a single one of these elements, and you no longer have the Terror.<sup>42</sup>

That may well be, especially if we think of the Terror empirically, and as described in the actors' conscious understanding of what it was they felt they had to do.

### III

But despite its apparent merits, an encompassing explanation of this particular type does not suffice, and my principal argument in these pages is that a more organic and integrated view of the Terror of 1794 can be found, an explanation that has its origins in Marx's work of 1843 on the 'Jewish question'. Marx's interpretation of the French Revolution is incomplete, as will be

<sup>41</sup> Greer, cited in Hugh Gough, *The Terror in the French Revolution* (Basingstoke, 1998), 77.

<sup>42</sup> Crane Brinton, *A Decade of Revolution, 1789–1799* (1934; New York, 1963), 12.



seen, but it is quite straightforward.<sup>43</sup> In his view, the French Revolutionary bourgeoisie worked to its own destruction because its twinned cultural purpose could not be sustained. On the one hand, the origin of the Revolution was in the decline of feudalism and the emancipation of the individual: in other words, as society grew more open, 'each individual could affirm his liberty by becoming more bourgeois'. But that was only one half of the picture, because 'by definition, the existence of one person as bourgeois presupposes the existence of other people as non-bourgeois'.<sup>44</sup> How then could Jacobinism reconcile its completely sincere defence of individual, particularist rights with its equally sincere defence of universal values? The answer is that it could not do so, though it desperately tried to work towards that self-appointed goal by redefining the nature of true civic equality. 'Robespierre, Saint-Just and their party fell', Marx wrote,

because they confused the ancient, realistic and democratic republic based on real slavery with the modern spiritualist democratic representative state which is based on emancipated slavery, on civil society. What a terrible mistake it is to have to recognize and sanction in the Rights of Man modern civil society, the society of industry, of universal competition, of private interest freely following its aims, of anarchy, of self-alienated natural and spiritual individuality, and yet subsequently to annul the manifestations of the life of that society in separate individuals and at the same time, to wish to model the political head of society after the fashions of the ancients.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> And has been admirably described by François Furet, *Marx and the French Revolution* (Chicago, 1988), and Eberhard Schmitt and Matthias Meyn, *Ursprung und Charakter der Französischen Revolution bei Marx und Engels* (Bochum, 1967). These historians, however, did not use this frame for a general interpretation either of the French Revolution or of the Terror. It may be that this is so because Furet's purpose was perhaps only to show that the 'vulgar Marxists' (Soboul and Mazaauric especially) did not really know the foundational texts of their own 'catéchisme révolutionnaire'. Thus Furet's point of departure did not include, even if it did not preclude, speculations on what further use might be made of Marxist thinking on the subject.

<sup>44</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge, 1971), 186.

<sup>45</sup> Karl Marx, *The Holy Family* (Moscow, 1965), 164–5. The dates of the first glosses on the young Marx argument, it may be added, are significant: Marx's early emphasis on self-alienation (and a compensatory terrorism) as a key to Jacobin self-alienation could hardly be endorsed with enthusiasm before the Second World War and this for a simple reason: true enough Marx's early insight on the origins of the Terror was indeed adumbrated in his *On the Jewish Question*, as has been said. Nonetheless, the other youthful, neo-Hegelian statements on which it was also based (Marx was born in 1818) were not known until the middle decades of the last century: Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* appeared only in 1927, and the *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* in 1939. It was only with the publication of

For the Jacobins, experientially, in this early Marxist view of life, the only way out was denial — and after that, terror. As Marx explained in 1844,

The *classical* period of political understanding is the French Revolution. Far from identifying the principle of the state as the source of social ills, the heroes of the French Revolution held social life to be the source of political problems. Robespierre regarded great wealth and great poverty as an obstacle to *pure democracy*. He therefore wished to establish a universal system of *Spartan* frugality. The Principle of politics is the *will*. The more one-sided, i.e. the more perfect, *political* understanding is, the more completely it puts its faith in the omnipotence of the will. The blinder it is towards the *natural* and spiritual *limitations* of the will, the more incapable it becomes of discovering the real source of the evils of society.<sup>46</sup>

Mme de Staël liked to think that Napoleon was Robespierre on horseback: both needed terror to ensure their rule, civil or military. Marx agreed, but from a different point of view: for him, as Maximilien Rubel pointed out, where ‘Hegel’s Napoleon was the soul and spirit of an age . . . the Napoleon of the Holy Family completes the Roman parodies of the French Revolution, which had destroyed liberal society’.<sup>47</sup>

In brief, for Marx, the Jacobins were terrorists because ‘Terror [in 1793–4] wished to sacrifice [civil society] to an ancient form of political life’. True enough, the ‘hammer blows’ of the Terror, as he wrote elsewhere, did a great deal to weaken the vestiges of feudalism; but in the main, the Terror of the Jacobins was and had to be a sterile act. What mattered was their situation between caste and class, and the basic contradiction of their world view. Philosophically minded readers will recognize Marx’s views on this subject as a ‘socializing’ variant on Hegel’s cultural notion

(n. 45 cont.)

these texts (which obviously were not known to the early Marxist historians of the Terror and which came to Albert Soboul as a great surprise) that newer neo-Marxist views could take shape — see Schmitt and Meyn, *Ursprung und Charakter der Französischen Revolution bei Marx und Engels*; Avineri, *Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, 185; François Furet, *Marx and the French Revolution*, trans. Deborah Kan Furet (Chicago and London, 1988), 1. Of great relevance also to the fortunes of the young Marx explanation was the often bitter rivalry between state-sponsored Marxists and their more liberal communist opponents, Gramsci, Benjamin, and especially Georg Lukács, who intuited Marx’s interest in the theme of self-alienation in his *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* of 1923, written when he was as yet unaware of the still unpublished *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*.

<sup>46</sup> Marx, in an article of August 1844, cited in Avineri, *Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, 190, and in Furet, *Marx and the French Revolution*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> Maximilien Rubel, *Karl Marx devant le Bonapartisme* (The Hague, 1960), 30.

of 'absolute freedom'. There, the Jacobins, whose universalism has outstripped the cultural possibilities of their time, fly forward into the practice of terror, again, from weakness. The deaths they inflict and their own are historically meaningless: 'It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water'.<sup>48</sup>

The young Marx's explanation of the Terror, then, is suggestive, but to start from it to explain the Terror historically may seem paradoxical, if only because Marx did not do much with his insight and never wrote about the French Revolution in a sustained way. Although his explicitly historical works on 1848 and 1871 focused largely on French history, and, indeed, on the history of Paris, where he had lived for a few months in 1844–5, the author of *Das Kapital* never wrote his intended history of the French Revolutionary decade. As a dramatist and as an avid reader of Sophocles, Marx did ascribe to the Terror of 1793–4 a certain kind of grandeur: 'Unheroic as bourgeois society is', he wrote, 'it nevertheless took heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war and battles of peoples to bring it into being'.<sup>49</sup> But on the whole, Marx, as a nineteenth-century libertarian, saw little use for force or even censorship in modern politics, be they those of 1789 or those of his own day. Where a writer's work is censored, he wrote,

the writer is exposed to the most dreadful terrorism, the jurisdiction of suspicion. Tendentious laws, laws that do not supply objective norms, are laws of terrorism, as they were thought out by necessity of the state under Robespierre and by the corruption of the state under the Roman emperors. Laws that take as their criteria not action as such, but the state of mind of the actor, are nothing else than the positive sanction of lawlessness.<sup>50</sup>

To consider the politics of Jacobin terrorism in any detail, then, would have been from Marx's point of view largely a waste of time. For him, politics, whether parliamentary or terroristic, when structured in contradiction to nascent social fact — as was true for the Jacobins of the Year II — did not and could not matter all that much. They had to fail. But other factors may have been more relevant to Marx's unwillingness, or inability, to historicize more completely his view of Jacobin Terror. Writing

<sup>48</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford, 1977), 360.

<sup>49</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1963), 16.

<sup>50</sup> In 1842, as quoted in Avineri, *Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, 188.

as he did in a Hegelian-Victorian mode of confident expectation, Marx, to say the least, was not ideally situated to understand the Terror as a dehumanizing catastrophe. For him, the social or political disasters of his own time — or of the recent past, as in 1792–4 — did not seem to be catastrophes at all. For example, British imperialism — blowing up Sepoys with cannon fire — was from his point of view not as bad as it might seem because such colonial terrorism merely accelerated an inevitable and (eventually) salutary progression of primitive societies towards the proletarianized industrialization of the European model. Likewise, the defeat of workers in June of 1848 and of the Communards in 1871, and the onset of the Terror in Revolutionary France, seemed to Marx (as to Lenin) to be so many stepping stones leading towards proletarian victory. In that context, and given the fact that Marx was not much concerned with the anguish of either English factory workers or Egyptian fellahin, it is too much to expect that he should have had sympathy for the French bourgeoisie which he so earnestly despised. There are many references to Robespierre as a state terrorist in his work, but none to Danton, who allowed the populist September massacres of 1792 to happen in order to appease the plebs. Robespierre's ideological contradictions fascinated Marx, but Danton's more human dilemma did not: self-conflicting ideology did not suffice to explain that demagogue's desperate gamble. Therefore, Marx's solution as a historian was simply to leave the history of Danton — and of the Revolution — unwritten.

But the catastrophes of our own times have sharpened our historical awareness of what it meant, not just structurally but also psychologically, to have lived through the sudden and destabilizing death of the corporatist *Ancien Régime* in 1789–91, and then the collapse of the Jacobin world view, with the ensuing Terror of 1793–4. We can sense better than Marx could what life was surely like for those who lived in a time of violence and revenge when, in the words of Barras, 'Il [fallait] guillotiner ou s'attendre à l'être'.<sup>51</sup> Marx did not sense this. By contrast, Klee's and Benjamin's 'angel of history', turned towards the past and, witness to catastrophe after catastrophe, is all too great a presence in our own lives: 'The storm irresistibly propels him to the future to which his back is turned', wrote Benjamin, 'while the pile of

<sup>51</sup> 'You must either guillotine others, or expect to be guillotined yourself'.

debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress'.<sup>52</sup> It is this contemporary way of seeing that enables us to build on Marx's insight by reading back from our own sensibility to the French Revolution as a traumatizing moment.

In justice to the young Marx, a first point must be that his view of the causes of Jacobin terrorism had many merits: it compares very favourably, for example, with the interpretation of 1794 that was given both by Marx's predecessors and by his Marxist successors, especially his most efficacious disciple, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov. For Lenin, who never overcame an early fascination with the Russian terrorism which had been the cause of his brother's undoing, the Jacobins were ruthless men who did not hesitate to use state terrorism because, for them, any means were worth using to secure their history-sanctioned ends. Bolsheviks, he thought, should follow their example. Trotsky, as we might expect, was on this score of a similar mind to Lenin, and he explained in his *Defence of Terrorism* of 1920 that 'the highest degree of energy is the highest degree of humanity'.<sup>53</sup> Walter Benjamin concurred with that discouraging perspective: for this Marxist surrealist,

the use of violent means to just ends [is] no greater problem than [what] a man sees in his 'right' to move his body in the direction of a desired goal . . . If positive law is blind to the absoluteness of ends, natural law is equally so to the contingency of means.

For Benjamin, the terrorism in the French Revolution provided an ideological justification for the Stalinist politics of his own time: 'Violence is a product of nature, as it were a raw material, the use of which is in no way problematical, unless force is misused for unjust ends'. Violence was everywhere in life, he thought, and 'law-creating violence' was much to be preferred to the banal but relentless 'law-preserving' violence of "'bourgeois" regimes', a point which Richard Wolin has ably contrasted to Max Weber's critique of the 'ethic of ultimate ends'.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, in Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, revised edn (Berkeley, 1994), 1 (author's trans.).

<sup>53</sup> 'By way of Bolshevism', wrote Furet, 'the Jacobin party enjoyed an illustrious twentieth century': Furet and Ozouf (eds.), *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 715; Trotsky, cited in Eugene Schulkind, *The Paris Commune of 1871* (New York, 1974), 295.

<sup>54</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1978), 278–9; Richard Wolin, 'The Folly of Walter Benjamin', *New Republic*, 24 Jan. 2000, 41.

In the Leninist, Trotskyite, and Benjaminian view, then, the Jacobins were terrorists from their morality, strength of character and sense of history. 'I call for Terror from the depths of my lungs', wrote the communist poet Aragon in 1931. Conversely, in this same perspective, the Parisian Communards of 1871 — whom the Situationists of the 1960s much admired — were failures because they were far too compassionate. Their second error, thought Lenin (their first having been to respect private property), was the unnecessary magnanimity of the proletariat: instead of annihilating its enemies, 'it endeavored to exercise moral influence on them'.<sup>55</sup> (This draconian view of Jacobin Terror, like every other, can be bolstered by reference to Revolutionary chapter and verse, as in a message from Collot and Fouché at Lyon, where hundreds of prisoners and, by accident, two policemen had been executed by cannon shot: 'Some few individual destructions, some ruins must be ignored by those who see in the Revolution only the freeing of the peoples of the earth and the universal happiness of posterity'.)<sup>56</sup>

Marx's view on the Terror of the Year II was far more humane and profound than the Leninist argument that followed it, as it was also than what preceded it — a juxtaposition best made in contrast to the speculations of Benjamin Constant, Marx's most gifted 'bourgeois/aristocratic' predecessor and the author of the 'Liberty of the Moderns and the Liberty of the Ancients'. Marcel Gaucher has rightly emphasized the importance of these pages to Constant's entire view of the world, which, in the end, he thinks, revolves on a single and central issue, namely 'the practical question of how to organize a viable and secure government, and, underlying that problem, the more fundamental question of why the Revolution had veered toward terror and dictatorship'.<sup>57</sup>

Like everything else in his life, Constant's answers to this question were — to say the least — inconstant. At some selected moments, he insisted (as Mme de Staël, another Swiss, had also done, and as Tocqueville, an Anglophile, would soon do) that the

<sup>55</sup> Aragon, quoted in Alain Gérard, *Par principe d'humanité . . . : la Terreur et la Vendée* (Paris, 1999), 470; V. I. Lenin, 'The Lessons of the Commune' (1908), in his *The Paris Commune* (New York, 1931), 18.

<sup>56</sup> Cited in Louis Madelin, *Fouché, 1759–1820*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1913), i, 136.

<sup>57</sup> Marcel Gaucher, 'Benjamin Constant', in Furet and Ozouf (eds.), *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 924–5.

French as a people had fallen into bad political and social habits during the *Ancien Régime*. For Constant, the French suffered from what he labelled 'l'éducation monarchique'. Monarchy, he wrote, 'displaces rather than eliminates ambition. By taking it out of the path set by law, it pushes it towards arbitrary (or illegal) acts'.<sup>58</sup> And the step was a short one from absolutist arbitrariness to terrorist lawlessness. Far more interesting, however, and far more relevant to the work of Marx, was Constant's celebrated distinction between the freedom of the ancients (which consisted of the right to participate in the affairs of the polis) and the freedom of the moderns, which was, as it were, its opposite: from time to time, modern man might wish, perhaps, to vote and act politically; but his principal concerns pertained not to politics but to private life. The tragedy of the Revolution, for Constant, was that it had tried to impose the older liberty of the citizen onto a society of modern and private persons:

The confusion of these two liberties has been amongst us, in the all too famous days of our revolution, the cause of many an evil. France was exhausted by useless experiments, the authors of which, irritated by their poor success, sought to force her to enjoy the good she did not want, and denied her the good she did want.<sup>59</sup>

The similarity of 'Constant's brilliant hypothesis' (as Max Weber described it in his *Methodology of the Social Sciences* of 1904)<sup>60</sup> to Marx's thought is obvious, but with an enormous dissimilarity nonetheless: in Constant's perspective, the Jacobins were merely confused, or perhaps, like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, misinformed. For Marx, by contrast, the point about 1789 was not that the Jacobins of 1791–2 *did not* know what they wanted, but rather that they *could not* know what they truly

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin Constant, *De la force du gouvernement actuel*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. L. Omacini and E. Hofmann, 2 vols. (Tübingen, 1998), i, 5, 343.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns', in Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontamara (Cambridge, 1993), 309. Constant presented the most explicit version of this concept in 1819. But he had been nursing this idea for over two decades. For example, he had criticized Fichte's *Der geschlossene Handelsstaat* in these same terms in 1804: 'Dieu les bénisse avec leurs idées spartiates au milieu de la civilisation moderne, des besoins devenus partie de notre existence, des lettres de change, etc. Ce sont des fous qui, s'ils gouvernaient, recommenceraient Robespierre, avec les meilleures intentions du monde'. Benjamin Constant, *Journal*, in *Œuvres*, ed. Alfred Roulin (Paris, 1957), 311.

<sup>60</sup> Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (1904), ed. and trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York, 1949), 104.

wanted (bourgeois class rule) until both sans-culottes on the left and property owners on the right pressed them to present a clearer and more modern answer.<sup>61</sup>

The young Marx's structural argument, then, even in its original and largely 'non-historicized' form, has great merit; and over the years it has made a great deal of sense to many observers of the Revolution who have wanted to think of Jacobin Terror not as the Leninist work of determined conspirators, or as the bumbling of a confused bourgeoisie, but as the defence of lucid but desperate and bitterly disappointed men and women, of 'bourgeois universalists', who after 1792 found themselves suddenly unable to convince their bourgeois peers, and also unable to give up either half of their universalist/individualist message. Revealingly, many cultural historians, of the left or of leftist origins and inclination, have in one way or another worked from that starting point. In 1949 Maurice Blanchot concurred in this non-Leninist view of Jacobin frailty: 'The terror they [Robespierre and his friends] personify does not come from the death they inflict on others but from the death they inflict on themselves'.<sup>62</sup> Hannah Arendt, who considered the genesis of terror from a related and similarly neo-Hegelian point of view, said of the terror of 1793–4 and of that of Leninist Russia that the one was perhaps modelled on the other: 'Even the language in which the hideous process was conducted bore out the similarity; it was always a question of uncovering what had been hidden, of unmasking the disguise, of exposing duplicity and mendacity'. But the two terrors were nonetheless quite dissimilar — 'The difference is marked. The eighteenth-century terror was still enacted in good faith'<sup>63</sup> — which is another way of saying that although Lenin criminally intended from the beginning to use terror to neutralize irreconcilable enemies of the people, Robespierre by contrast stumbled into terror from an innocent failure to understand the nature of modern class politics.

<sup>61</sup> Constant's debt to eighteenth-century interpretations of these two concepts of liberty is described in Luciano Guerci, *Libertà degli antichi e libertà dei moderni: Sparta, Atene e i 'philosophes' nella Francia del Settecento* (Naples, 1979), 11–13.

<sup>62</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha, trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster and Robert Lamberton (Barrytown, NY, 1998), 376–7.

<sup>63</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 95.



The young Marx argument, then, has always been of great promise, and in recent years Marx's emphasis on the structural contradictions of Jacobinism and on its place in the unfolding of 'bourgeois modernity' has inspired a good deal of 'post-Marxist', libertarian thought. Joan Scott's essay on the fate of Olympe de Gouges (in her *Only Paradoxes to Offer*) insists on both the achievement and the limits of Jacobin universalism. Women's Jacobin clubs were few, but they did exist; women were not granted political rights, but as regards inheritance, for example, their legal situation was vastly improved. Similarly, Jean-Pierre Gross, in *Fair Shares for All*, aims to show that Jacobins worked very hard to bridge the gap between their propertied particularism and their universalist message:

Inasmuch as politics as we understand them today are not so much concerned with abstract concepts of liberty and equality as with material needs and the means to satisfy them (food, jobs, housing, schools, stable prices, taxation, and so on), then Jacobin egalitarianism in practice was concerned with the very stuff of politics.

And James Livesey, in his important *Making Democracy in the French Revolution*, argues that the Directorials did not reject Jacobin universalism but instead tried to adapt it to the late eighteenth-century realities of French commercial and agricultural life.<sup>64</sup>

#### IV

These are very welcome additions to our understanding of Revolutionary politics; but the young Marx account can also be used to reinterpret known evidence as well as serving as a guide to the expansion of existing knowledge. Historicizing Marx's insight on the French Revolution as a traumatizing experience is a problematic ambition, to be sure. Of course, the evidential basis of analyses of trauma (PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder) has been widely questioned. Moreover, it is problematic

<sup>64</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996); Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice* (Cambridge, 1997), 201; James Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). My own work on Revolutionary suicide, as a phenomenon common to Girondins (Roland), Montagnards (Couthon and Robespierre), sans-culottes (Roux), and Communists (Babeuf), similarly emphasizes the general acceptance of universal values by the entire political class of the Revolution regardless of social origin.

to apply to collectivities a concept that has been considered medically in its relevance to injured individuals. The field is in its infancy, and both political scientists and anthropologists have only begun to use the concept of trauma to consider what can be learned from the study of dehumanization in our own times, as in genocides in Africa or political holocausts in Indonesia and Central America. The lesson that historians can draw from such studies (or in their own domain, from events like the Shoah or the Black Death of 1348) is still in debate.

And yet the application of the concept of trauma to other moments of French history is not altogether new: it has been used, for example, to explain the disorientation of the French in 1940, with the sudden and total defeat of their army, and with eight million people on the roads, homeless and hungry, despairing of their leaders, and helpless in the face of enemy air attacks. Likewise, Jay Winter has daringly but convincingly applied trauma as a way of thinking about the First World War, in a manner that has relevance to France in its Revolutionary decade. The Great War, he suggests, brought into question the central values of the pre-war middle class. Leaders were incompetent. Politicians lied. Lectures on sacrifice and patriotism were no more than cruel charades: it was not sweet to die for one's country in that war. In the ensuing cultural gap, modernism gained an audience. Psychological and cultural disorientation, argues Winter, were rampant, deployed as they were by the universalization of violence at a time when politics and social life had become extensions of the war, with intolerable casualty lists, shortages, inflation, widowed women in factories, cripples in the street, and so on. Hence, for Winter, the relevance of the notion of trauma, a medical and psychiatric tool, to historical analysis.<sup>65</sup>

From 1940 and 1914–18 back to the wartime years of 1792–9, the gap is perhaps not as wide as might at first appear. For the men — and women — of 1791–2, the decomposition of the Jacobins' universalizing purpose and the ruin of their Enlightened hopes brought into question their newly acquired and constructed sense of self, their social purpose and their understanding of world history. For decades, at least since the 1750s, these readers of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* had yearned to be the Jacobinical

<sup>65</sup> Jay Winter, 'Setting the Framework', in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1999), 15–16.

Saint-Preux. The memory of Rousseau was 'engraved on their hearts'.<sup>66</sup> For these advocates of American and Graeco-Roman liberty, for these admirers of Greuze's and Sedaine's familial values, who had worked very hard to reshape their lives to fit a Jacobinical world view, 1792, with the collapse of constitutional monarchy, the resurgence of Catholic enmities on the right, and the rise of sans-culottes on the left (the terms 'left' and 'right' were invented at this time) was a jarring, disorienting political and cultural catastrophe. Benjamin Constant, after 1794, described Rousseau not just as 'a sublime genius' but as the source of all misfortunes. He wrote in 1819:

It is difficult not to regret the time when the faculties of man developed along an already trodden path, but in so wide a career, so strong in their own powers, with such a feeling of energy and dignity. Once we abandon ourselves to this regret, it is impossible not to wish to imitate what we regret.<sup>67</sup>

Jeremy Popkin has commented that the French Revolution inspired 'a tremendous number of personal memoirs, many of which demonstrated the profoundly disturbing impact of that event on notions of personal identity'. Richard Cobb in his study of counter-revolutionary terror emphasized the personal and emotional dimension of political choices: with respect to the rightist terrorist, 'His personality was much more important than whatever confused positive programme he might enunciate'.<sup>68</sup> Feminist historians have familiarized us with the anxieties that beset the Jacobin warrior whose body belonged to the nation just as women's bodies belonged to the nation's heroes.<sup>69</sup> We can extend this insight: the realization that the entire reshaping of the Revolutionaries' sense of self might have been

<sup>66</sup> As in Mme de Staël's pre-revolutionary judgement in 1788: 'J'ai suivi la marche qu'il m'a tracée, et c'est par l'admiration que ses écrits doivent inspirer, que je me suis préparée à juger son caractère'; cited by Daniel Sussner in his illuminating 'Futur Antérieur: Engraving Rousseau onto Historical Memory' (Harvard University paper, 2003).

<sup>67</sup> Constant, 'Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns', 317.

<sup>68</sup> Jeremy Popkin, 'Facing Racial Revolution: Captivity Narratives and Identity in the Saint-Domingue Insurrection', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, iii, 4 (2003), 527; Richard Cobb, *The French and their Revolution*, ed. David Gilmour (New York, 1998), 250.

<sup>69</sup> Lynn Hunt sees the Jacobins' detestation of Marie Antoinette in this light. 'Through the rejection of her and what she stood for, republican men could reinforce their bonds to one another': Lynn Hunt, 'The Many Bodies of Marie-Antoinette', in Dena Goodman (ed.), *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen* (New York, 2003), 134.

useless or misguided was more than many Revolutionaries could bear, and it is striking to see how common the theme of suicide was in the thought and action of the Revolutionary party. Jacobins were voluntarists who expected a great deal from politics. Private rage and then discouragement and fright were their traumatized reaction to unforeseen — and as Marx pointed out, unforeseeable — political obstacles.

It is also worth noticing the parallel between the sequence of social euphoria in 1789–90, traumatic disappointment in 1791–2, traumatized agitation in 1792–4 and flight to safety in 1794–9, and the political and legislative innovations of the time: from the universalizing constitution of 1791 that cheerfully listed all the social iniquities that had for ever been abolished; to Condorcet's anguished constitutional draft of 1793 which provided for a right to rebellion against abusive authority; to the Directorials' intricate constitutional legalities whose first aim was to make any political movement more or less impossible.<sup>70</sup> The comparative study of revolutions over time has highlighted many suggestive similarities among these upheavals, ranging from a drift to puritanical levelling to 'thermidorean reaction';<sup>71</sup> but the distinctive feature of the French decade of revolution must surely be its accelerating and psychologically destabilizing rhythm from unprecedented universal joy in 1789–90 to unprecedented traumatizing conflict and brutalizing civil war<sup>72</sup> to sudden reversal on 9 Thermidor: 'So it was', Jean-Clément Martin has written, 'that the system leapt forward into a spiral of fantasy and denunciation'.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, revised edn (New York, 1997), 155, gives us a frame that is useful in both its indications and its warnings: 'Recovery (from trauma) unfolds in three stages: the central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life. Like any abstract concept, these stages of recovery are a convenient fiction, not to be taken too literally . . . But the same basic concept of recovery stages has emerged repeatedly, from Janet's classic work on hysteria [1892, by Pierre Janet (1859–1947), a pupil of Charcot] to recent description of work with combat trauma, dissociative disorders, and multiple personality disorder'.

<sup>71</sup> In this respect, Crane Brinton's *Anatomy of Revolution* (New York, 1938) has had innumerable sequels.

<sup>72</sup> Whose historiographic sequels inflect Gérard's *Par principe d'humanité . . .*'.

<sup>73</sup> Jean-Clément Martin, 'Les Mots de la violence', in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau et al. (eds.), *La Violence de guerre, 1914–1945: approches comparées des deux conflits mondiaux* (Paris, 2002), 34.

A sense of the Revolution as a traumatizing trajectory from good to bad helps us to grasp the contrast between the initial, extraordinary, universalist and libertarian enthusiasm of 1789–90, when in the lines of Wordsworth, 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven', with its desperate and traumatized inversion in 1793–4. 'How did our hearts burn within us, at that Feast of Pikes', wrote Carlyle of the Revolution's sunnier moments,

when brother flung himself on brother's bosom; and in sunny jubilee, Twenty-five millions burst forth into sound and cannon-smoke! Bright was our Hope then, as sunlight; red-angry is our Hope grown now, as consuming fire . . . Yes, Reader, here is the miracle. Out of that putrescent rubbish of Scepticism, Sensualism, Sentimentalism, hollow Machiavelism, such a Faith has verily risen; flaming in the heart of a People.<sup>74</sup>

Trauma is a particularly useful concept for understanding the Terror because it is a psychological syndrome which describes a private reaction to dehumanizing violence (in war, in accidents, in rape); and violence was everywhere inscribed in French life after 1789. As Jean-Clément Martin has put it: 'The whole of the Revolution is like an experience of unnamed violence'.<sup>75</sup> And this mood was in clear reversal to what had come before: widespread rural unrest in France had been rare since the middle decades of the seventeenth century, when peasant uprisings had gradually died out even though material conditions steadily worsened during the last years of Louis XIV. Similarly, eighteenth-century Paris never saw the likes of the Gordon riots. Militarized violence was likewise largely unknown in France between 1715 and 1789, when wars were fought in Germany or Italy, and overseas. Nor was there any religious effervescence or millenarian movement comparable to the English Methodism. The French subjects of Louis *le bien-aimé* (the beloved) perceived themselves as law-abiding and in particular contrast to the English, who — as the vogue for both national histories and Shakespearean theatre reminded them — periodically executed their monarchs and fell into bloody civil wars. Suicide was known in Paris as an

<sup>74</sup> Carlyle, *French Revolution*, pt 3, bk 3, ch. 1, pp. 566–7.

<sup>75</sup> Martin, 'Les Mots de la violence', 28. The centrality of violence to the decade of revolution is also the central leitmotif of Simon Schama's *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989): 'From the very beginning — from the summer of 1789 — violence was the motor of the Revolution' (p. 859).

'English malady'. British politics were thought very rough, and British elections corrupt and lawless.

But all of this ceased suddenly in 1789. In July the Parisian crowd that had attacked the Bastille now lynched prominent royal officials — public murder which Barnave condoned with his celebrated 'Ce sang était-il si pur?' (Was this blood so pure?). Sans-culottes with their pikes defined themselves precisely as votaries of direct action, as the tolerated architects of a populist violence that culminated in the September massacres of 1792, a popular form of terrorism which was duplicated one year later by the legalization of state terrorism in September 1793. And so it was that in late 1793 traumatized Jacobinism became a religion of violence and revenge, with festivals as its high masses, and with its fêtes as celebrations of Revolutionary martyrdom: 'Marat, cœur de Jésus' (Marat, heart of Jesus). For Richard Cobb, 'Revolution and death' were

always meaningful, in a society in which murder is so frequently the ultimate answer in a political dispute and in which the politics of vengeance take on new forms, increased bitterness and a greater degree of impunity, with each year of the revolutionary period, each successive year providing yet more to avenge, as the corpses of the recently slain pile up in shallow graves, in the extension of the old cemeteries, or simply disappear downstream, towards the sea.

In his shrewd appraisal of the sudden rise to fame of a locksmith who had saved a Conventionnel from an assassin's bullet, Antoine de Baecque rightly concludes that 'Geffroy's sacrifice offers to those who recognize it the immortality of the soul: this is the way Terror poses as the Last Judgment, and rewrites politics in the rhetoric of religion'.<sup>76</sup>

Reference to the ubiquity of violence, liminality and trauma as the contexts of social life sharpens our understanding of the Revolutionary moments of 1789–94 in many ways. Victims of trauma, as we now know, rehearse their experiences ceaselessly. The thirst for vengeance and lawlessness in 1795–9 and again in 1815 fits well into this scheme, as do some of the curious myths of the Directorial period, such as the legend of the 'bals des guillotines', dances where only relatives of victims were allowed. Though

<sup>76</sup> Cobb, *The French and their Revolution*, ed. Gilmour, 346. Antoine de Baecque, *La Gloire et l'effroi: sept morts sous la Terreur* (Paris, 1997), 167 — in English as Antoine de Baecque, *Glory and Terror: Seven Deaths under the French Revolution*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York and London, 2001), 135.

such balls never existed, they were thought to have existed even at the time by those who believed it perfectly sensible to suppose that victims' relatives would want to rehearse their grief, however grotesquely.

Agency likewise acquires greater scope if the political circumstances of 1792–4 are set in the context of an ambient and changing culture (small c) rather than of Culture (capital C and Rousseauian). Jacobins (whether bourgeois, nobles, lay or clerical) found themselves as a class in a traumatizing situation of contradiction. But as *individuals*, they understood that larger constraint very varyingly. Among the activists, for Robespierre and Saint-Just, ideology mattered just as Talmon and Furet explained. For Carnot and Lindet, Aulard's explanation fits best. For Collot d'Herbois and Billaud-Varenne, who were Jacobins close to the sans-culottes, social factors may have weighed more. And for the population at large, especially in the countryside, pressured by urban bands, the army and the populist *armées révolutionnaires*, reaction ranged from indignation to feelings of powerlessness and fear.

The sense of having been involved in what we now label a traumatic experience serves to explain some of the reactions not just of the Terror's victims but of its perpetrators. Richard Cobb's archivally based findings take on greater relief if set in a clinical perspective. For Cobb, the decision to be a terrorist or not brought together social fact, political circumstance and private character, his central point being that terrorists were neither psychopaths nor heroes but ordinary people in exceptional circumstances. In a version of the banality of evil argument, Cobb saw popular terrorists as individuals caught up in systems that legitimized atrocities.

They [the so-called 'Marats' who had terrorized the city of Nantes] were, however, neither criminals nor brutes. Circumstances had made them ferocious, and if a parasol vendor or a former *procureur* had reached the point where he could push old men, women and children into the water, it was due to his position as a member of a besieged terrorist minority in a town deeply hostile to the Revolution.

'It would be wrong', wrote Cobb,

to look for the origins of the Terror . . . in certain obscure psychological motives peculiar to the traditional popular mind, the mind, for instance, in which a fear of the plague can create an atmosphere of panic and mutual alarm among bourgeois and artisans . . . The justification for the

Terror lay in certain circumstantial facts. It did not reflect a permanent state of mind or a natural disposition to violence. It was as impermanent and evanescent as the revolutionary man himself.<sup>77</sup>

The passage becomes more vivid if we substitute ‘traumatized’ for ‘evanescent’.

Taine’s argument, too, becomes more pointed. But where he saw social marginality and a neo-racist disgust with Mediterranean activism, we can now see instead the wild behaviour of disoriented individuals. Javogues did indeed become a drunken and obscene terrorist, but before the Revolution he was a respectable and respected resident of a typical small French provincial town — just as were Timothy Tackett’s *dramatis personae* in his book on the first year of the Revolution.<sup>78</sup>

Thinking about trauma also helps us to gauge the reactions of many Jacobins after Thermidor, reactions that range from plain denial to suicidal yearnings — beginning with Robespierre and Lebas in Paris. Historians have ordinarily taken the rejection of terror by nearly all Jacobins after the fall of Robespierre as a cynical ploy to exculpate themselves. That it may well have been, especially for the confirmed and, as it were, practising terrorists (Barras, Bourdon, Tallien) who were prominent in Robespierre’s overthrow and who quickly moved from left to right after 9 Thermidor. But often accounts of Jacobin remorse have a ring of authenticity: ‘Qui a fait nos actes?’ (Who committed our actions?) queried Baudot, a puzzled friend of Danton. It is a striking fact that the terrorists of 1794 had as a rule been mild-mannered men before 1789, as they would be once again after 1799. Bronislaw Baczko’s exemplary account of the thermidoreans’ condemnation of Revolutionary vandalism as a key to redefining what had happened (that is, that everything should be blamed not on them but on those who had vandalized aesthetically admirable if politically incorrect monuments) is an important tool for understanding Directorial politics. But we can also ask why it was that ex-Jacobins sincerely believed this

<sup>77</sup> Cobb, *People’s Armies*, trans. Elliott, 241; Cobb, ‘Some Aspects of the Revolutionary Mentality’, 324.

<sup>78</sup> Colin Lucas, *The Structure of the Terror: The Example of Javogues and the Loire* (Oxford, 1973), 64–7. Annie Jourdan has likewise read the period of the Terror as a ‘desocialization of the individual’, in her *La Révolution, une exception française?* (Paris, 2004), 196.



account of their traumatizing past.<sup>79</sup> Physicians who have dealt with trauma have commented on the propensity of the traumatized to 'disconnect mind and body'; and here too is a fact that will not surprise students of Jacobinism, who have often insisted on the propensity of their subjects to highly abstract thought, as in Robespierre's well-known 'Périssent les colonies plutôt que les principes!' (I would rather that we should lose our colonies than our principles.) Pierre Janet's concept of dissociation, a concept that 'lies at the heart of the traumatic stress disorders', has great relevance to the Jacobins' sense of self, and the terms that are used to describe it clinically today have an oddly relevant historical ring: 'Though dissociation offers a means of mental escape at the moment when no other escape is possible', has written the best-known student of traumatic events, 'it may be that this respite from terror is purchased at far too high a price'.<sup>80</sup>

An emphasis on disappointment and trauma helps us recover the sensibility of the Revolutionary lives we study. It can also help, as has been said, to make sense of the many explanations of the Terror, beginning with the frailest contemporary interpretation, the Furet–Baker 'discursivist', neo-Rousseauian interpretation of an inevitable drift to proto-totalitarian terror. That argument focuses on the contrast between, on the one hand, the richness and variety of pre-Revolutionary French social and cultural life, and, on the other hand, the Rousseauian, monolithic, and thus necessarily intolerant nature of Revolutionary thinking — that is, between 'the heterogeneity of civil society and the homogeneity of the public sphere'.<sup>81</sup> The problem here is the discursivists' magisterial indifference to social fact. (Ironically, the discursivists accuse the Jacobins of ignoring social fact, which is precisely what they themselves do as historians in their approach to Jacobinism.) Never do they ask what drastic social event could have so radically propelled Jacobinism from tolerance to intolerance. But the improved 'young Marx' explanation is of use precisely on this issue. Why did Jacobins who initially cared about local dialects and respected the Catholic Church drift to a dramatically reversed

<sup>79</sup> Bronislaw Baczkó, *Comment sortir de la Terreur: thermidor et la Révolution* (Paris, 1989). The thermidoreans' sense of puzzlement is a central concern for Sergio Luzzatto in his *Il Terrore ricordato: memoria e tradizione dell'esperienza rivoluzionaria* (Turin, 2000), and his *L'Autunno de la Révolution* (Paris, 2001).

<sup>80</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 238.

<sup>81</sup> I am indebted to James Livesey for this argument in general and this formulation in particular.

condemnation of these same facts and values? In the original Furet–Baker view, the message has to be (implausibly) that, unbeknownst to one and all, terror was already present everywhere in French society in 1789. To insert trauma, liminality, and the shock caused by the collapse of their world view between the tolerant Jacobinism of 1789 and its intolerant derivative in 1793 is to make quite plausible a discursivist and ideologized argument which, in its originally stated form, must now appear excessive and improbable. Lefebvre opined that war ‘revolutionized the Revolution’. But so did the collapse of the Revolution’s initial optimism.

Lynn Hunt’s suggestive *Family Romance of the French Revolution* (on the Jacobins’ efforts to reconstitute a symbolic family to replace the executed father-king) also takes on heightened relief in the context of an explanation that emphasizes traumatic shock. Starting from a cartoon of the thermidorean period showing Robespierre, the arch-terrorist, standing in a sea of graves as he executes the executioner, Hunt speculates on the Incorruptible’s deeper motivations. She finds Sade’s murderous impulses useful as a point of reference to explain mainstream Jacobin behaviour and Robespierre’s own character as well:

Sade’s rage for a social order that is not social, that has no affective content, not even men’s desire to exchange women, is the ultimate reductio ad absurdum of the revolutionary problem of passing on its own patrimony . . . In Sade’s rendition of the family romance of fraternity, the brothers feel no guilt in their society without a father; they make their own laws based only on their own desires.<sup>82</sup>

That may well be, but traumatic disorientation could also serve as a complement to her way of seeing.

The same might be said of Le Bon’s explanation of the Terror, which in a pre-Freudian way also invoked dark unconscious forces. When authority strains and cracks, when crowds are given the ability to act politically, the masses will be masses, feminine, hysterical, dentated and murderous: ‘The leader acts [on them] especially through suggestion. His success depends on his fashion of provoking this suggestion. Many experiments have shown to what point a collectivity may be subjected to suggestion’.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley and London, 1992), 148.

<sup>83</sup> Le Bon, *French Revolution and the Psychology of Revolution*, 110.

Feminine? Perhaps, but traumatized, surely. For Georges Gusdorf in 1978, 'the Terror was *not* the unchaining of collective sadism, of joy in killing'.<sup>84</sup> But many others have thought precisely that, and we must ask why.

An argument that works from Marxist contradiction considered as a traumatizing cultural catastrophe also has relevance to the weighing of the continuity and discontinuity in the history of the Revolution. Here the argument, broadly stated, has in the past oscillated between, on the one hand, a Tocquevillean view of an administrative continuity that transcended change and, on the other hand, an ideological view of discontinuity where the Terror serves as an isolated dry run for the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century. For Tocqueville, Napoleon's centralism was an extension of pre-Revolutionary administrative practice, and his authoritarianism no more than a restatement, made necessary by the secular inability of the French for self-government. But for Talmon (and for Furet and Baker), Jacobinism's Rousseauian emphasis on a general will and its rejection of Montesquieu's vision of limited government and intermediary bodies were the ingredients of an altogether new phenomenon. For Tocqueville, then, the Revolution was a mere interruption in the 'longue durée' of French institutions. For Furet, Jacobinism was the novel refiguration of unprecedented tyranny. The solution here may be to reframe the issue and see it as a doubled problem: on the one hand, the gradual and secular, continuous transformations of French society, both economic and cultural; on the other, the traumatizing and Revolutionary collapse of the world view that pre-Revolutionary social change had brought to the fore. Cultural and institutional discontinuities in 1789–92; Terror; and, after 1794, a post-traumatic flight to the security of well-worn administrative habit. In this view, Robespierre's invocation in 1794 of Rousseau's general will does not speak to the force of ideology. It speaks instead to the surprised psychological disarray of this hitherto banal, bourgeois lawyer. And looking forward, the notion of a traumatized and formerly Jacobinical bourgeoisie can also be of use to explain the spectacularly easy rise to power of 'Napoleone de Buonaparte' — an Italian nobleman! — a rise which had as its precondition the deep

<sup>84</sup> Georges Gusdorf, 'Terror', in his *La Conscience révolutionnaire: les idéologues* (Paris, 1978), 279; italics added.

disappointment of erstwhile Jacobins (of whom the Emperor had himself been one at Valence-sur-Rhône). And in the context of Bonapartism's triumphant popularity, it is surely worth mentioning that the two most adulated political figures in modern French history, Bonaparte and Maréchal Pétain, both of them often represented as Christlike figures in popular imagery, came to the fore after traumatizing catastrophe, and that both also vanished almost unnoticed when the chaos that had brought them forward finally receded.<sup>85</sup>

Finally — and paradoxically — a metahistorical explanation of terror (that terror emerges directly or indirectly from the intolerably painful and traumatizing, violent collapse of a universalist and universally held world view) also brings into sharper relief the work of those historians which it might at first glance appear to marginalize most completely, namely the authors of local studies.<sup>86</sup> Their particularist point of view suggests, ordinarily, that an abstract cause, however deeply felt in Paris, could not have had such drastic effects in places far removed from the capital; and once again we must bear in mind those *départements* with their own agendas, it would seem, where no one was condemned to death. But historians of slavery have a ready answer to this kind of claim: in a situation of traumatizing fear and violence, it was hardly necessary to whip every slave or break up every African-American family. Anxious anticipation and fear are as a rule all the more oppressive for being vague, imprecise, unchartered and elusive. It does surely matter that some plantation owners were more patriarchally inclined, or cruel, than others. But these individual variants, however critical for those who lived them — or for those who describe them today — also found true meaning within much larger contexts; and in Revolutionary France, the accelerating descent into traumatizing and then legalized violence and terror was that universal frame for local events, even in those places where, ostensibly, 'nothing happened'. In this respect, Revolutionary France can be imagined as a vortex with its centre in the capital, and with its provinces on the edge, close or far, depending on local circumstance, of a

<sup>85</sup> I owe the reference to this Christlike iconography to Vanessa Schwartz.

<sup>86</sup> Studies of local and regional Terror are legion. They include Lucas's exemplary *Structure of the Terror*, for the Loire, and W. D. Edmonds, *Jacobinism and the Revolt of Lyon, 1789–1793* (Oxford, 1990).

process whose *raison d'être* was elsewhere. Locally, Jacobins and anti-Jacobins did not actually need to be at each other's throats to know what would surely happen if Revolutionary authority were questioned. That some regions remained tranquil and others did not is obviously of great interest, but whatever did — or did not — happen cannot be fully understood locally. Though ordinarily self-started or organized as part of regional networks that were not dependent on the capital, local Jacobin clubs did nonetheless see Paris as a 'société mère', and its Parisian politics of violence and terror were their touchstone. That local Jacobins were aware of national circumstance, from a utopian first to a traumatizing last, is indisputable: Jacobins and anti-Jacobins alike were everywhere avid purchasers of print in its various forms: books, engravings, newspapers and pamphlets. Many clubs began their meetings with a collective reading of the Parisian press, and the timing of their meetings was often set to coincide with the arrival of the daily stagecoach. In the provinces, the terms 'jacobin' and 'sans-culotte' were, it is true, often interchangeable; but people everywhere understood the differences among Barnave, Robespierre and Brissot, or between any of them and Marat. The fall of the Bastille in 1789, the flight of the king in 1791, the fall of the monarchy and the September massacres in 1792, the execution of the father-king and the expulsion of the Girondin deputies in 1793, were Parisian events that immediately shook the entire nation. Local circumstances in 1794 did matter greatly, then, but as catalysts to a systemic traumatizing chaos. The nationwide decline of attendance in the clubs on the eve of Thermidor shows quite well that in all parts of France, however socially or economically different, everyone understood in the late spring of 1794 that the rule of law had been suspended and that the Terror had become an ungovernable and universally threatening system.

★            ★            ★

In some troubling sense, the implication of an outline that emphasizes the relativity of empirical explanation might seem to be typically postmodern; and in some obvious measure, these pages do indeed set classical historiography against itself. Where even modernist historians in the first half of the twentieth century had continued to argue in terms of a master narrative, the argument here can be seen to deny any determining specificity

to any one historical event. To this objection, one could respond, first, with the words of Max Weber, who wisely explained, when much was still to be learned about the history of the French Revolution, that 'genuine [historical] artistry manifests itself through its ability to produce new knowledge by interpreting known facts according to known viewpoints';<sup>87</sup> and second, that — for better or for worse — frames of reference are more suited than master narratives to the historical sensibility of our own time. For the contemporaries of E. P. Thompson, Marxism was no more than 'a general illumination' which subsumed some not too clear reciprocity of base and superstructure. If we turn to 'experience', wrote the author of *The Making of the English Working Class* in reference to the Marxist thinking of the 1950s and early 1960s, 'we can move . . . once again into an *open* exploration of the world and of ourselves. This exploration makes demands of equal theoretical rigour, but within [a] dialogue of conceptualization and empirical engagement'.<sup>88</sup> And so it may also be, today, that a modulated Marxist frame informed by recent work in allied disciplines can re-create for us, as regards the Terror of the Year II and the larger trajectory of the French Revolution, that same 'dialogue of conceptualization and empirical engagement' which inspired historians of previous generations.

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<sup>87</sup> Weber, *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. Shils and Finch, 112. Here, Weber may have been echoing Nietzsche's grandiloquent but very suggestive *On the Uses and Abuses of History*: 'The genuine historian must possess the power to remind the universally known into something never heard of before, and to express the universal so simply and profoundly that the simplicity is lost in the profundity and the profundity in the simplicity': Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, intro. J. P. Stern, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, 1983), 94.

<sup>88</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York and London, 1978), 167; see also E. P. Thompson, 'History and Anthropology', in *Making History: Writings on History and Culture* (New York, 1994), 218.