Maximilian robespierre: a visionary?

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Far from being the monster of historical legend, Robespierre was, in fact, a visionary at the mercy of circumstance.

History has a way of distorting the truth like none of the other arts. Myth becomes fact and voids in cultural knowledge are filled with hearsay and conjecture with the result that many of the great historical figures, from Henry VIII to Kaiser Wilhelm, have been made to play a posthumous role for which their lives were not the correct dress rehearsal. Clearly, there is a case to state that there must exist smoke to create a historical fire but in instances such as those outlined above, and that of the infamous French revolutionary Maximilian Robespierre, are out of all proportion to the deeds they enacted in their political lives. The negative historical portrayal of Robespierre, like Richard III before him, has been exacerbated by his short tenure in office; his influence upon the FrenchRevolution was limited, essentially, to twelve months, from July 1793 to July 1794; therefore the brevity of his influence upon the Revolution only served to increase the shadow he cast over posterity.

Moreover, his heydey coincided with the zenith of the Terror, and Robespierre’s association with this upsurge in violence in the provinces has severely curtailed any effort by his supporters to switch the focus towards his more visionary political achievements, as the following excerpt from Jones (2003: 58) underscores.

The ending of Terror as an instrument of government can be fairly precisely dated to the upheaval of 9Thermidor II (17 July 1794), which removed Robespierre and his supporters from power.

Robespierre's political testimony have largely been inserted by the men that usurped him and it is a view that persists to this day. The case of Robespierre proves, once again, that history is often the account of the victors over the vanquished.

The challenge within this essay is to evaluate the true role of Robespierre in the Revolution, to dispel the myths and to sift through the rhetoric and propaganda. The greatest dilemma will be in ascertaining whether Robespierre was indeed at the mercy of circumstance or whether he, in some way, engineered events to suit his broader political agenda. His status as a visionary is beyond question. His followers are testimony to this fact; historical legacy is always measured in imitation. It is prudent to chronologically examine the political career of Robespierre in light of his reputation as a monster of historical legend to gauge the verity of the accusations levelled against him.

It has been claimed with goodreason that the French Revolution was the most important single event in modernwestern history. It shaped not only the course of one country but set in motiona chain of events that catapulted the continent into the modern era, as Biddis(1994: 416) highlights. During the 1790's the policies pursued by France undoubtedly contributed to mass political mobilisation elsewhere in Europe. It is within this unprecedented and experimental context that Robespierre firstappears, in the midst of a national crisis and within a country that aimed tofollow in the parliamentary tradition of England without first sewing the seedsupon which the Glorious Revolution (1688) germinated.

Robespierre’s chief period of influence in the nascent Republic came during the period 17921794, although he was a formative figure in the embryonic years of discord before then, playing a key role in the establishment of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* , which causedLouis XVI to flee Paris on 5 October 1789. As George Lefebvre (1969: 210)detailed the essential work of the Revolution of 1789 may be found registered in the resolutions of the 4 August and in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.

Thus, Robespierre set out his stallearly on as a visionary in terms of egalitarian ideology and as an opponent ofautocratic rule. Furthermore, Robespierre was the most vocal opponent of theconcept of ‘ active’ and ‘ passive’ citizenry as promulgated in the *Declarationof Man* , correctly identifying that it was the passive citizens that made upthe core of the influential Paris mob.

The paradigm of nationwide electionwas also an important byproduct of the period of consolidation, which can betraced to 1791, and, again Robespierre was a key figure in its implementation. Henceforth, elections were to be held in the capital and in the countryside, incorporating municipal, judicial and clerical institutions. This was indeed a revolutionary concept and constituted a complete break with the feudal bonds of the past. AsJohn Hardman (1999: 21) highlights, the cumulative effect was total political revolution in France. Eventually, in July 1792, the legal straightjacket of citizenship distinctions was removed and Robespierre was as responsible as anyone for bringing it about.

Robespierre was motivated duringthis time (though many commentators use the word ‘ converted’) by the distorted democratic leanings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1968: 141), who advocated a morestringent form of representative government, claiming that the system inEngland did not make the people free, rather, it is only free during theelection of Members of Parliament; as soon as the Members are elected, thepeople is enslaved; it is nothing. Robespierre felt as if he was fulfilling Rousseau’s moralistic political testament, which rests upon the notion of interpreting national will without trusting the people to know what they *really* want.

Robespierre’s organic philosophical connection to Rousseau acts as an illustration of the effect of selective historical memory and the impossibility of shedding a type cast image. Whereas one man is considered a hero of the Revolution, posthumously relocated to the Pantheon in 1794, the other has since become the enemy of liberty and the instigator of brutal political repression in France. Furet (1981: 204) was keener to ally Robespierre with the wider eighteenth century Jacob in phenomenon, and he warned of the historical and ideological perils of, approaching Robespierre through Rousseau and seeing him as an admirer of the *Social Contract* grappling with the constraints of public safety Robespierre is not so much the heir of Enlightenment as the product of the new system called Jacobinism, the beginning of modern politics.

Despite his well founded and rigid political ideology, Robespierre was also a great opportunist. With the alienation of the King, the flight of thousands of nobles after the storming ofthe Bastille and the schism in the clergy after 1790, the traditional triumvirate that had ruled France for centuries had

vacated the political arenaand created a power vacuum. There is little doubt that any politician withambition caught up in such a vortex would be heavily influenced by the role offate. Furthermore, circumstance gradually ensured that Robespierre would bepermitted to practice his own vision of postrevolutionary France within the nascent leftist Jacobin Republic.

The war with Austria, declared on 20 April 1792 was a key moment in the perpetuation of the Revolution and a vital occurrence in the background to Robespierre’s seizure of power. The actions of extra territorial nation states such as Austria, Prussia and Britain were clearly beyond the control of Robespierre yet he used the impetus they broughtto the Republic to his own advantage, as the concept of perpetual war meant a hardening of revolutionary doctrine in the Convention and an opportunity tospread revolutionary ideology across the both the country and the continent. This siege effect of external threat and internal strife acted as a catalyst that propelled Robespierre and his vision to power, as Lewis (2005: 2345) ascertains.

The combination of foreign war and internal counter-revolution largely dictated the ideological course of the Revolution after 1792, pushing it to the left during the successive militarycrises from the spring of 1792 to the spring of 1794 then swinging the political pendulum back to the political centreground once those crises hadbeen overcome.

France was, therefore, moving inexorably towards a militant leftist environment during 1792, yet Robespierre was likewise aided in the administrative changes that beset the Republic atthis time. The fundamental

key to Robespierre’s success was the CPS (Committeeof Public Safety), a direct byproduct of the disorder that had reined since1789. According to Halsall (1997: Marxists. org website), the committee was among the most creative executive bodies ever seen – and rapidly put into effect policies which stabilised the French economy and began the formation of the very successful French army.

The CPS voted Robespierre a member in July 1793 though he was in effect its leader, in addition to controlling the formation of the police state in the capital. Moreover, the Jacobins found that Paris represented their nexus of influence and, as its most celebrated member Robespierre was virtually assured of electoral success in Paris.

Robespierre’s tenure as leader ofthe French Revolution can be seen as a continuation of the broader Jacobin policies of his predecessor, the Brissotins. Viewed in the context of the Brissotins’ draconian interpretation of power, Robespierre does not appear tobe a monster, rather a continuum of a core revolutionary ideology. As Bell(2001: 1217) explains: the construction of the nation required a laboriousprocess of national education.

At the behest of the Jacobin Left, was carrying the atmosphere within the Convention grew ever more volatile – certainly before Robespierre’s control of the political process. As Nigel Aston (2004: 38)details the separation between supporters and opponents of the was carrying events along a previously untested path with unforeseen and bloody results.

In March 1793 a revolutionary tribunal was inaugurated to try what were loosely termed counter revolutionary offences. Not to be proactive in the

cause of the revolutionary state wasbecoming sufficient to propel any individual into that category.

Much of the criticism aimed at Robespierre is in light of the actions of the Revolutionary Tribunal and itsrole as a catalyst during the Terror. Yet, as Broers (1991: 69) admits, bloodand gore are important parts of the truth, but they are not the whole truth. Robespierre ought not to be singled out as the instigator of a republic thathad long since divorced itself from reason and allied itself to terror, butmerely one proponent of a powerful but ultimately directionless revolutionaryzeal.

Even a cursory glance at themanifestation of Robespierre's power base reveals a radical split between ideology and practicality. Taken solely as a man of ideas, Robespierre can be viewed as a visionary, defender of justice and champion of meritocracy. Hisspeech to the Convention on 5 February 1794 (1993: 68) highlights his vision forthe Republic.

We wish an order of things whereall low and cruel passions are enchained by the law, all beneficent and generous feelings awakened where distinctions arise only from equality itselfwhere the country secures the welfare of each individual we wish in a word tofulfil the course of nature, to accomplish the destiny of mankind.

Moreover, Robespierre lived his own life by this maxim. He never used the trappings of power for his own economicends and was known in his lifetime as The Incorruptible. Robespierre lived arelatively moderate existence until his death as a lodger of fellow Jacobin, Maurice Duplay at no. 366 Rue SaintHonoré and surrounded himself with similarly fanatical yet austere

political personnel. ‘ Patriots’, as he termed them, were more important to Robespierre than men of administrative acumen. He believed that his will was the will of the Jacobins who represented the truedesires of republican France. As Eagan (1978: 12) transcribes, his sole explanation for ever move was that France demanded it. And though his policies may seem extreme and inhumane today, there can belittle questioning of his deepseated revolutionary desire.

At this juncture, Robespierre appears anything but a self serving political ogre in the mould of the greatmultitude of modern dictators but it was his methods of achieving his vision that marked Robespierre out as a calculated political assassin and foreverdamaged his reputation in history. Most historians use the word ‘ purge’ to describehis consolidation of power after July 1793 and there is a very strong case tosupport this argument. For instance, he told members of the CPS that he aimed to purge the bureaux and the civil service of any remnants of nobility orindeed any faction averse to the perpetuation of the revolutionary edicts.

With the establishment of the law of 14 Frimaire in the Republican Calendar (December 1793), power was further centralised within the CPS, which necessitated a diminishing of theinfluence of the Convention. A police state now existed throughout France that acted as the eyes and ears of the closeknit but ultimately isolated followers of Robespierre. It is this move which helped to facilitate the state centricity of the Terror, as revolutionary ideology was emitted beyond the districts of Paris into the French countryside, where some 80% of the population still resided. But Robespierre

and his followers should not be judged solely upon the purging of officialdom between 17934, as Bouloiseau (1983: 2278) argues.

Revolutionary power encompassed all powers because it was revolutionary. For the same reason, it created its own legality, which justified its excesses. It made a single cause out of the defence of the homeland and the defence of the Republic social grievances took second place. As the dictatorship intensified, it called with increasing frequency for equality, justice and virtue. The regime’s intentions were pure, acquired about it lacked the means to put them into practice. Though by no means offering an excuse for state-sponsored terrorism, Bouloiseau makes the important point of the essential dynamics at work during the early years of the French Revolution. It is immensely difficult for any historian writing today to appreciate the sense of novelty that must have pervaded the National Convention, the CPS, butculturallyParis and indeed ‘ la patrie’ as a whole during the early 1790’s. The ideology prevailed that the catalyst to revolutionary success was in its implementation across the country and across the continent. Though we may see the actions of Robespierre as antagonistic and aggressive, his revolutionary contemporaries viewed it as a necessary and formative stage in the liberation of humanity.

It was only when he turned his anger upon enemies within the Convention itself that Robespierre made an inescapable political noose for himself. When the political but culturally popular Danton was sent to the guillotine on 5 April 1794 under fabricated charges of international conspiracy the seeds of revolutionary revenge against Robespierre were effectively sewn, as Munro Price (2003: 346) ascertains. The death of Danton tore the soul out of the

Jacobin dictatorship. Robespierre and his colleagues grew increasingly isolated, from both the popular movement in the streets and the deputies in the Convention.

The zenith of the Terror occurred during the months from March to August 1794. Clearly, Robespierre’s inflammatory revolutionary ideology played a part in the accumulation of terror in France but there were also other factors at work that are imperative in the comprehension of the manufactured myth of Robespierre. There were other influential characters such as Arman Herman, who became head of the home civil service in the spring of 1794, and who drove the desire of the Revolutionary Tribunal to ensure that no stone was left unturned in the purging of the provinces. To indict Robespierre as the sole manufacturer of the Terror is to misunderstand the context of France at this time in addition to mistakenly naming him a despot. Furet was an advocate of the idealistic notion of historiography preferring not to call Robespierre a dictator and rejecting the relationship between foreign War and internal counter-revolution.

The accumulation of acquired a momentum of its own and ought to be seen as a necessary stage in the construction of revolutionary France, as Lewis (1993: 48) underscores. The Terror went on because defeat over the enemies of the Revolution marked but thefirst stage in this process of regeneration and rebirth whose roots lay in the eighteenth century Enlightenment.

Furthermore, France at this time lacked the prerequisites for the establishment of a more stable form of representative parliamentary

democracy. For example, whereas in England money was regulated by a national bank, the economy in the First French Republic was akin to a ship without oars. Foreign policy was similarly rudderless withthe sum of international relations being reduced to a ‘ with us or against us’type scenario, accentuating existing hostilities. National debate was restricted to access to the capital and was dependent upon a consistently changing body of personnel. All of these factors contributed to ensure that Robespierre’s time at the helm of the Revolution would be limited, and it wasindeed curtailed on the infamous 9 th Thermidor (27 July 1794). But, in the end, as William Doyle (1989: 281) explains, the ninth of Thermidor marked not so much the overthrow of one man or group of men as the rejection of a formof government.

Conclusion

Robespierre can be likened in many ways to Oliver Cromwell. Both idealistically set out to destroy the political, religious and cultural machinations of the late medieval state only to slipinto a form of dictatorship as the result of a distorted vision ofrepresentative democracy. Having played a major role in removing the autocratic monarch and national symbol from power Robespierre, like Cromwell, did not trust the people with the will of the nation. Thus a revolution took place within a revolution time and again.

Robespierre was a visionary who was influenced by circumstance though he cannot be considered a *victim* of circumstance. He was caught up in the revolutionary quagmire of doctrine yet he could have chosen a less divisive,

less centralised form of rule, which, ironically, was one of the chief damnations levelled at Louis XVI's reign.

Historical accounts that place Robespierre in the same context as characters such as Stalin are wholly inappropriate and display a lack of insight into the reality of revolution and the interim government. Although he was without doubt an overtly moralistic adherent of draconian revolutionary dogma, Robespierre dedicated his life tothe political ideals in which he believed; celebrated two hundred years afterthe event under the broader historical umbrella of ' Revolution.' As Hardmanconcludes (1999: 215), he had that characteristic quality of the fanatic of never consciously doing wrong.

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