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Our Great Awokening and France's Great Terror

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Anyone who sits on the vast spectrum from the liberal-minded left through to conservative traditionalists should have no illusions about the woke.

As efforts intensify to purge anyone and anything from Western culture that offends the illiberal left's sensitivities, the fanaticism which drives the Great Awokening has become abundantly evident. To question the 1619 project's factual veracity, for example, is seen as evidence of implicit racism. Any confidence that the American Founding has something to teach the world is considered an instance of what Marxists call "false consciousness." References to reason, evidence, rule of law, or the West's Jewish and Christian heritages are viewed as the language of someone hopelessly in thrall to "Eurocentric" outlooks.

What impresses me, however, is less the historically-illiterate justifications offered for the decapitation of statutes of Christopher Columbus, than the righteous fury visible in the eyes of those shouting slogans like "Rhodes Must Fall!" Prudence, circumspection, and subtly are out. Raw emotion and ideological purity are in. You are either with us or against us. And if you don't endorse everything that we—the woke—think, say and do, be prepared to face the consequences.

The problem is that once that particular tiger gets out of its cage, putting it back in is extremely difficult. There are always plenty on the left willing to be more radical than thou, and who will interpret any reticence to affirm wholeheartedly their positions as prima facie evidence of backsliding or outright treachery. That's a dynamic which we're seen before with people like Che Guevara and Lenin. But the standard-setter for such behavior was the French Revolution's most violent stage, commonly known as *la Terreur*.

From Hope and Anticipation, to Fear and Trembling

Few events have been more thoroughly parsed, praised, and castigated as the French Revolution. That owes something to the sense that the Revolution was one of those rare occasions that represented a decisive break with the past. Contemporary witnesses describe the millenarian-like hopes that permeated French society in the immediate aftermath of 1789. But fascination with the French Revolution also has much to do with another factor: the penchant for frenzied violence which raised its head right from the beginning.

Every Revolution has its casualties. Loyalists were among those of the American Revolution. Many of them were subject to anti-Tory laws which ranged from being disenfranchised to large fines. Compared, however, to other revolutions, the Loyalists got off lightly. The Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 was followed by the targeting of anyone officially designated by the new regime as "former people." Arbitrary imprisonment, confiscation of property, and terror were used ruthlessly against groups like the nobility, but gradually extended to categories who had hardly been friends of the Czarist regime: classical liberals, constitutionalists, businessmen, etc.

It was, however, the French Revolution which established the modern benchmark for systematic violence against anyone insufficiently in sync with the political views of whoever is in charge at any given moment. Many of the Revolution's early leaders—people like the American Revolutionary hero, the Marquis de Lafayette—quickly became persona non grata as the revolutionary tumult escalated through successive thresholds of rage. Those revolutionaries who managed to transition through each stage were few in number. Many eventually found themselves strapped to a guillotine. Others eked out miserable existences in exile alongside the royalists who preceded them.

Over the past two centuries, many explanations have been offered for the frantic character of the Revolution's violence. They include pent-up resentment against the old regime, fears of fifth columnists who might help invading foreign armies, concerns about counter-revolutionary plots, and the outbreak of full-scale popular uprisings in 1793 against the Paris government in provinces ranging from the Vendée to Brittany and cities like Marseille and Lyon. Virtually all historians of the Revolution underscore the widespread paranoia that occupied the minds of Revolutionary leaders but also many ordinary citizens, particularly those living in cities and for whom politics had become the be-all and end-all of life.

There was, however, something else at work which became apparent after Louis XVI's execution on January 21, 1793, and the subsequent acceleration of tensions between the two groups which then dominated Revolutionary politics: the Girondins and the Jacobins. While the former were considered more moderate than the latter, both groups were firmly on the left of the revolutionary scale. That, however, didn't save the Girondins from being destroyed by the logic that came to direct French political life and which resulted in thousands being executed before the Terror ended with the guillotining of the man most associated with it on July 28, 1794.

One Single Will

Given his public reputation as the Terror's chief architect, many are surprised to learn that Maximilian Robespierre wasn't the most extreme Jacobin. As a group, those associated with the Jacobin Club were divided into factions constantly at odds with each other. Some like Jacques Hébert, leader of the Hébertistes and editor of the radical newspaper *Le Père Duchesne*, were far to Robespierre's left. Neither the Hébertistes' inclination to militant atheism nor their desire for direct state control of much of the economy were to Robespierre's taste. Others, such as Georges Danton, eventually gravitated to Robespierre's right. Danton had played a major role in the Monarchy's overthrow in August 1792 and did nothing to stop the September Massacres which followed. By late-1793, however, Danton had become convinced of the folly of persecuting the Church and was calling for an end to extreme revolutionary violence.

In a way, however, the details of these policy differences were unimportant to Robespierre and close allies like Louis Antoine de Saint-Just. What really mattered to Robespierre was that there could be no differences. According to Robespierre, France needed what he famously called *une volonté une* (one single will). In this ideal, he believed, was to be found the Revolution's ultimate security and salvation from its enemies, foreign and domestic.

As a scholarship boy at one of France's most prestigious schools, the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, Robespierre had been influenced by two sets of writings which featured significantly during the late-French Enlightenment. The first were classical texts which extolled the virtues of the Roman Republic and its leaders. The second were the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, especially his 1762 book *Du contrat social* (*The Social Contract*), and his popularization of what was called *la volonté générale*.

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For Rousseau, the "general will" didn't necessarily mean what an actual majority of people in a given political society wanted. Rather, it was the basis for the legitimacy of any government that acted for the well-being of all the people rather than sectional interests. Robespierre took this concept of the general will, but conflated the government and the people at the expense of the latter. "The Government," he once proclaimed, "has to defend itself against all the factions which attack it; the punishment of the people's enemies is death." To criticize the government was thus to be against the people. Ergo, the government could claim that any strike which it launched against its opponents was a strike against "the people's enemies."

As Robespierre saw it, Revolutionary France was riddled with factions (including those which split the Jacobins) and threatened by those who wished to overthrow the government. Consequently, it was the responsibility of the virtuous to strike ruthlessly, in a manner akin to Marcus Junius Brutus' slaying of Gaius Julius Caesar, against those who stood in the way of the "one single will." For Robespierre, such enemies of the Republic included those Girondins who had compromised their revolutionary credentials by working with Louis XVI before August 1792, promotors of faction like Danton and Hébert, and those simply incapable of attaining republican virtue (nobles, old regime officials, clergy loyal to Rome, etc.). Expelling these disparate groups from the body politic was how you ensured the general will prevailed and finally realized a united, indivisible and virtuous Republic—that is, one single will.

Naturally, there was a raw power-play dimension to all this. Robespierre saw people like Hébert and Danton as threating his dominance of the government. But it is impossible to underestimate the effects of the depth of Robespierre's commitment to his ideology: one which led to the inexorable conclusion that being a virtuous citizen of the Republic (like Brutus) meant being willing to use extreme violence (like Brutus) against its foes. Robespierre spelt this out in a speech in February 1794 when the Terror was at its height:

If virtue be the spring of a popular government in times of peace, the spring of that government during a revolution is virtue combined with terror: virtue, without which terror is destructive; terror, without which virtue is impotent. Terror is only justice prompt, severe and inflexible; it is then an emanation of virtue; it is less a distinct principle than a natural consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing wants of the country.

Such thinking is what resulted in about 17,000 people being officially "kissed by Madame Guillotine," as the saying went, in the name of virtue.

Beware the Coming of the Reign of Wokedom

Two things eventually brought Robespierre undone. The first was the economic crisis which engulfed France in the form of food-shortages and rampant inflation throughout 1794. Given his preeminence in the revolutionary regime, Robespierre become increasingly unpopular among Paris's hyper-politicized population.

More importantly, enough Revolutionary leaders recognized that the logical conclusion of Robespierre's outlook was the destruction of anyone who did not fully adopt his positions, and therefore a series of continuous purges with no apparent endpoint. On July 26, 1794, Robespierre effectively confirmed such trepidations when he gave a speech to the National Convention and then to the Jacobin Club arguing that the time had come to "Punish the traitors, purge the bureau of the Committee of General Security, purge the Committee itself, and subordinate it to the Committee of Public Safety, purge the Committee of Public Safety itself and create a unified government under the supreme authority of the Convention!"

This call for the elimination of anyone not 100 percent behind Robespierre led enough Convention members to summon up the courage to purge the master-purger himself. After a short and violent political struggle, Robespierre and 21 of his supporters were guillotined on July 28 at the Place de la Révolution. The Terror was over. But it seared France's political culture for decades afterward.

The parallels between the France of 1793-1794 and our present Great Awokening are not exact. The historical circumstances are very different. We are not living in the shadow of an old regime. The woke have not seized the levers of political power in the way that Robespierre and his followers did.

The primary similarity between revolutionaries like Robespierre and twenty-first century wokedom is a yearning for ever-increasing ideological purity, something which lends itself to identifying more and more categories of people and ideas as unacceptable. That generates chronic instability as people can never quite know if they and their ideas remain among the elect. Indeed, cancel culture cannot help but actively seek out opponents whose existence is seen as obstructing the creation of a new world purified of error. For without new enemies, it loses its *raison d'être*.

In this light, those contemporary Girondins who dominate larger municipal governments throughout America and who rule the universities throughout Western countries, would be foolish to imagine that the illiberal left can somehow be placated by letting them riot, loot small businesses, and destroy public monuments. Words like "compromise," "tolerance," and "moderation" do not form part of the lexicon of wokery. After all, once "one single will" has been established, such habits become superfluous.

Perhaps at some point, the woke will turn on themselves as they try to outdo each other in showing whose consciousness has been raised the most. Unless or until that happens, however, anyone who sits on the vast spectrum from the liberal-minded left through to conservative traditionalists should have no illusions that the woke—like Robespierre—will be satisfied with anything less than complete submission. And that would represent the end of liberty in any meaningful sense as well as the civilization which gave rise to it.

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