

**THE MEANING**

**OF**

**VIOLENCE**



by  
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# Understanding Counterrevolution and Violence in the French Terror

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n defense of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, Robespierre declared that "[t]error is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue."<sup>1</sup> This, at first, may seem an impossible pairing; virtue and terror appear fundamentally counterposed. Rather than go on the defensive, Robespierre linked virtue with terror, by claiming that terror is inflexible justice, and thus virtuous. But why? This seems to go against our instincts that terror is bad, and therefore not virtuous.

The key to understanding why Robespierre made this connection can be found in how he, and other revolutionaries, past and present, understood the role between revolution and counterrevolution. Robespierre understood the goal of the French Revolution as overthrowing the Old Regime and instituting a republic based on equality and overthrowing tyranny. To him, any attempt to counter these efforts was despotism and a return to tyranny. That is why terror, that inflexible justice, in response to attempts to overthrow the new republic, is so interconnected with virtue.

However, the historian must exercise extreme care in understanding such a violent and messy affair, and no doubt historiography has shifted a few times in

trying to interpret the French Revolution. The reason for this is simple: events of the 20th Century have caused historians to backtrack and view the French Revolution primarily in connection with that next great revolution of human history. The success of the Bolshevik Revolution has increased what is at stake in understanding the French Revolution and its accompanying reign of terror. As Francois Furet notes in introducing his view, "[t]he historian of the French Revolution ... must show his colours. He must state from the outset where he comes from, what he thinks and what he is looking for; what he writes about the French Revolution is assigned a meaning and label even before he starts working ... As soon as the historian states that opinion, the matter is settled; he is

labelled a royalist, a liberal, or a Jacobin.”<sup>2</sup> One reason for this is that subsequent events have shaped the way historians have looked back on the past. It is in the context of the Cold War that many of these historians have attempted to understand the role of terror and violence within the French Revolution. In attempts to wrestle with the deeply complex Russian Revolution, historians have often drawn connections between the French and Russian Revolutions. The conservative historians see the Gulags and purges of the Russian Revolution as further proof that terror, repression and violence are inseparable from the ideas of revolution itself.

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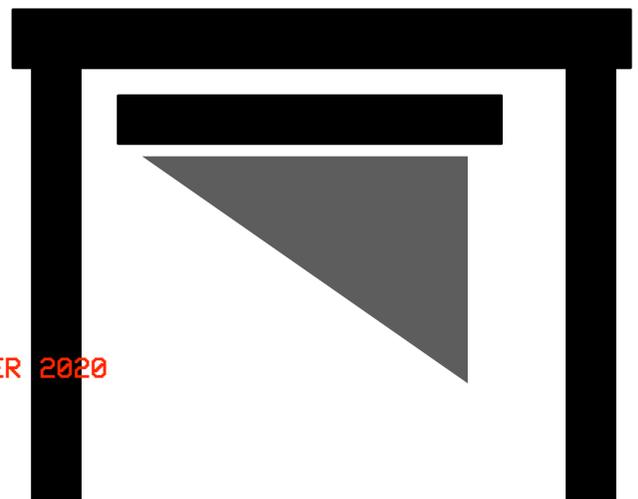
**The French Revolution is also important because of the reactions it engendered. The emergence of conservatism and reactionary politics can be traced directly back to the French Revolution.**<sup>3</sup>

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And as the Furet quote above illustrates, a scholar’s political thought determines what they make of the French Revolution and the terror. These historians focus on the violence and terror of revolutions, but what

is often missing or downplayed is the role of violence within the standard functioning of societies. The spectacle of the guillotine and the passionate speeches of the revolutionaries rightfully capture our attention. In understanding revolutionary violence and terror, it must be put into the context of the violence and terror that existed in the society the revolutionaries opposed. While this may at first glance seem like an obvious task, arguments about the Reign of Terror consistently neglect this point. The violence of revolutions is merely a different, more visible type of violence.

Rather than introducing new primary sources for analysis, this paper engages intensively with historiographical scholarship on the French Reign of Terror, as well as political philosophy in relation to violence and terror. To show my colors, as Furet would say, the argument presented here is a variation on the circumstance thesis. However, the critical intervention this paper makes is a focus on the meaning of violence, and its relationship to revolution and counterrevolution. A narrow view of what constitutes “violence” has led scholars to moralize about the terror. In turn, arguments about the terror have tended to avoid critical theorizing about what it means to wage revolution, and the role violence plays in revolutions and human society.



To put it rather bluntly, even if one is to concede to the conservative view that the terror was an essential and necessary part of the revolution, a judgement must still be made whether the relatively small number of executions was worth the cost when compared with the hundreds of years of structural violence in the Old Regime.



## THE TERROR IN HISTORY

In the historiography of the French Revolution, there are essentially two interpretations with their own variations. The conservative view sees revolution as inherently violent, with terror built into it. Gough sums up this view by drawing on the work of numerous historians. The book *Citizens* by Simon Schama “condemned the revolution as an act of mass violence with terror at its core ... The revolution, for Schama, was flawed from the outset by physical violence which developed into mass terror and set a model for 20th-century dictatorships.”<sup>4</sup> This view has its roots in Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Though a later section will further explore Burke in relation to conservative political philosophy, here it is enough to point out that this view opposes revolution not out of the tactics that revolutionaries employ, but rather out of a desire to preserve existing structures.<sup>5</sup>

The opposing view sees the actions of the revolutionaries and the Terror as responses to those who aimed to overthrow and stop the revolution. This argument is often called the “circumstance” thesis. “[Leftist historians] see the terror not as an integral part of the revolution but as a tactical defense of the republic against its enemies when it was threatened with total defeat ... Terror had been forced on to the politicians by counter-revolution and war and once that pressure was relieved, it vanished.”<sup>6</sup> Although Gough seemingly mistakes political liberals as on the left, he identifies these historians as well as republican democrats who founded the Third Republic and Marxists as defenders of the circumstance thesis.<sup>7</sup>

Italian Marxist philosopher Domenico Losurdo offers something like the circumstance thesis, and sees efforts to condemn the French Revolution as part of a larger effort on the part of historical revisionists “[t]o explain the ravages of the revolutionary disease in the twentieth century” by linking the Bolshevik Revolution with that of the French.<sup>8</sup> He claims that “[t]he main theme of this comprehensive reinterpretation of the contemporary world [by historical revisionists] thus becomes even clearer: it involves the liquidation of the revolutionary tradition from 1789 to the present.”<sup>9</sup>

However, he goes even further than the circumstance thesis by arguing that those who condemn the French Revolution as specifically violent or repressive, completely ignore the violence and repression of other “good” revolutions, specifically pointing to the elimination of colonialism in these historians’ works. In his analysis,

To demonstrate that Terror and dictatorship are an exclusively French creation, and the immanent result of a determinate ideology, historical revisionism – here in full agreement with the neo-liberal vulgate – proceeds to a double or triple arbitrary abstraction. The first erases circumstances; the second isolates a single stage (the most relatively painless) of the British and American revolutionary cycles, triumphantly contrasting it with the French Revolutionary cycle as a whole. At the same time, isolation of this single stage (the Glorious Revolution and the War of Independence) involves abstracting the experience of the truly civilized community from the experience of the barbarians and savages (Irish and Scottish in the one case, blacks and Native Americans in the other).<sup>10</sup>

In essence, Losurdo uses the circumstance thesis while also showing how historians have obscured the actual history of revolutions by employing a selective and narrow focus only on those things that support their ideological views.

One interesting interpretation of the terror comes from French historian Sophie Wahnich. Her book is somewhat misleadingly titled *In Defence of the Terror*, since the only strong defense comes from Slavoj Žižek's forward. However, she does seem to suggest that the terror arose as a response to chaotic mob violence. In her words, "[e]stablishing the Terror had the aim of preventing emotion from giving rise to dissolution or massacre, symbolizing what had not been done in September 1792 and thus reintroducing a regulatory function for the Assembly."<sup>11</sup> This view goes a little bit further than the previous left historians in defending the institutional

terror, but suffice to say, it still fits in with the circumstance thesis.

All this is to point out that historians have hardly come to agreement over how to understand the terror. "Clearly historians have disagreed over why the terror happened. Conservatives see it as an integral part of the revolution, revisionists as a flaw in an otherwise positive development, circumstance historians as a response to counter-revolution, and post-circumstance historians as a development within revolutionary politics closely linked to conspiracy theory."<sup>12</sup>



## CONSERVATISM AND COUNTER- REVOLUTION

Almost as soon as the revolution broke out, Edmund Burke wrote his critique of the revolution, *Reflections on the French Revolution in 1790*, even before the terror. Countless scholars have pointed to Burke as the very beginning of what has become conservative politics.<sup>13</sup> "Any discussion of conservatism in relation to counter revolution in the two great revolutions of modern times must, of course, begin with Edmund Burke. An Anglo-Irishman, not a Frenchman, he formulated the first major statement of conservative principles of the epoch of the French Revolution."<sup>14</sup> In his work on the history of conservative thought, Corey Robin puts the matter bluntly: "It is hardly provocative to say that conservatism arose in reaction to the French Revolution."<sup>15</sup>

From the point of view of conservatives, the Reign of Terror was built into the ideas and practices of the revolutionaries. However, the conservative view of the terror has fallen out of favor in more recent historiography. One reason for this is that it largely leaves out the actions of those who opposed revolutions. The circumstance thesis has been the counter to this view. As Karl Marx famously remarked “[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under *circumstances* chosen by themselves” (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup> The question that all revolutionaries must face is how to defend the revolution from those who oppose it.

In his book *The Furies*, Arno Mayer attempts to explain and defend the violence and terror of both the French and Russian Revolutions. “The Furies of revolution are fueled above all by the resistance and the forces and ideas opposed to it. This confrontation turns singularly fierce once it becomes clear that revolution entails and promises – or threatens – a thoroughly new beginning or foundation of polity and society ... Revolution provokes enormous resistance in part because it entails far-reaching changes not only in politics but also in society and culture.”<sup>17</sup> Mayer fits his argument well within the standard circumstance thesis, namely that it is not possible to separate revolution from the counterrevolution that it stokes. Drawing on numerous other scholars, he sums up this point well:

**For certain, ‘it takes two to make a revolution,’ and counterrevolution is revolution’s other half. Revolution and counterrevolution are bound to each other ‘as reaction is bound to action,’ making for a ‘historical motion, which... is at once dialectical and driven by**

**necessity.’ It is another central postulate of this study that revolution and counterrevolution ask to be conceived and examined in terms of each other. The inveterate governing and ruling classes of France and Russia could hardly have been expected to freely abandon their vested interests and prerogatives, especially since these were tied into a religious, cultural, and mental universe which was being sharply challenged.**<sup>18</sup>

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**Intuitively, this seems relatively straightforward. Those who stand to benefit from the existing order are most likely to want to defend it. The French revolutionaries’ demand for equality, then, meant a drastic change in the feudal order.**

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“What the conservative sees and dislikes in equality, in other words, is not a threat to freedom but its extension. For in that

extension, he sees a loss of his own freedom.”<sup>19</sup>

What is also important in this context is the extent to which the revolutionaries feared counterrevolution, and the very words and goals of the counterrevolutionaries. Tackett makes it clear that on the eve of war with other European powers, tensions and fears became heightened. “For well over a year [the deputies] had spoken endlessly, had been haunted by the menace of a ‘grand conspiracy.’ It now seemed patently clear that the external and internal assaults were all of a piece, all working together to destroy the Revolution.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the real fears that the revolutionaries had of counterrevolution, much like Tackett documents, counterrevolution is typically glossed over throughout the history of revolutions in general.

This rebalancing is one of the main tasks that Mayer hopes to accomplish with his 700-page book. He points out the disparity of entries in research libraries between the terms “revolution” and “conservatism.” His investigation of the online catalogue of the Firestone Library at Princeton University in 1990 revealed thousands of entries for “revolution” but only a tiny fraction of that number under the heading of “conservatism” and “reaction.”<sup>21</sup> One reason for this may reside in how subsequent revolutions shaped political discourse. A lot of historiography about the French Revolution was written during the Cold War, and as such is not immune to near unanimous condemnation of the Soviet Union from the West. Particularly, common perceptions label Stalin as a paranoid power-hungry dictator who turned on all the so-called Old-Bolsheviks, and constantly invented new enemies to send to the Gulags. While this is probably exaggerated, the basic sentiment is that

revolutionaries tend to imagine more enemies and make these enemies out to be more powerful than they actually were. Thus,

**Although counterrevolution is the other half of revolution, it tends not to be recognized and theorized as such ...**

**This disregard recently was reinforced by the argument that counterrevolution was a myth or phantasm with little, if any, basis in reality. In this reading, the revolutionaries of 1789 and 1917 eventually reified counterrevolution in an invented polymorphous ‘aristocratic’ (1789) or ‘capitalist’ (1917) conspiracy. The idea of this plot presumably was implanted or emerged as the organizing principle of the Manichaeian ideology and rhetoric with which Jacobins and Bolsheviks justified the use of rampant violence and terror against their real and imagined enemies.**<sup>22</sup>

It might be instructive to understand this idea of imagining or exaggerating the counterrevolutionary enemies as a version of the conservative view of the terror. In this way, terror was built into the revolution, and the violence of the revolution was justified, either after the fact or during, by fabricating excuses and enemies.

All of this is simply to point out that counterrevolution had a major impact on the course of the revolution. Whether real, imagined, or exaggerated, counterrevolution forced the revolutionaries to act, and constrained their options. Especially in the French Revolution, but also to an extent in the Bolshevik Revolution, there was no precedent from which they could draw on from history to help guide their responses.

This point is important to keep in mind when judging what could be considered “excesses” in their responses to counterrevolutionary threats.

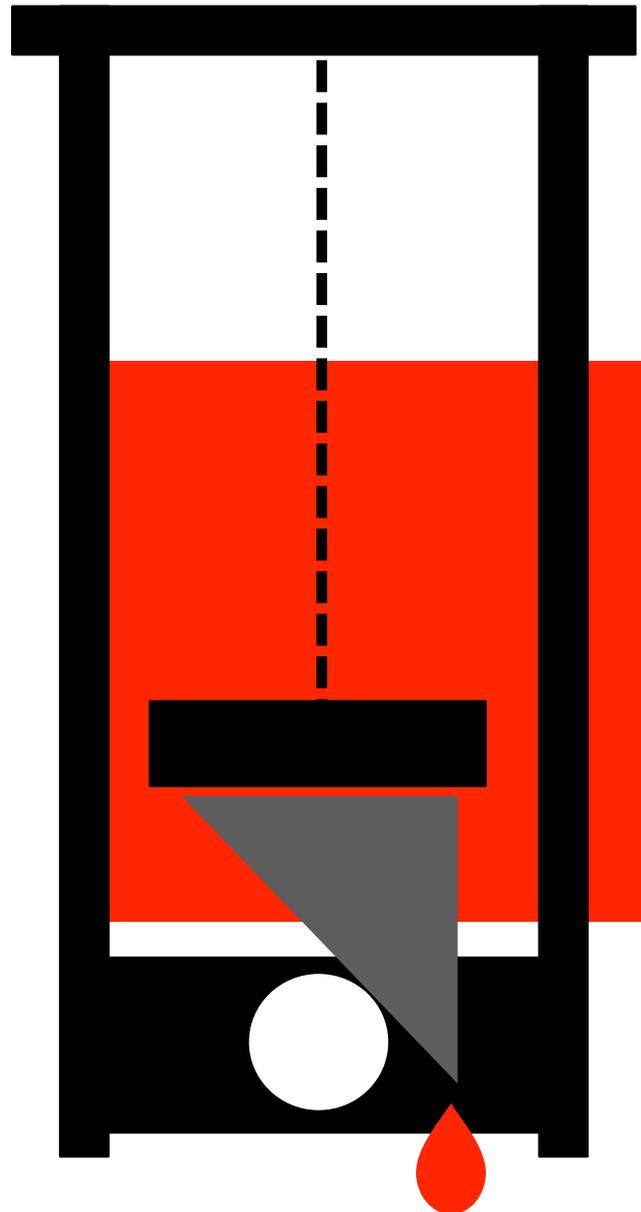


## MORALIZING VIOLENCE

Even if scholars attempt to understand how and why revolutionaries resort to violence and terror, this does not necessarily entail a justification or even endorsement. One of the shortcomings in the existing literature, from philosophy to history, is a lack of critical analysis of violence in general. The beheadings and gunfights that erupted over the revolution provide easily documentable and spectacular focal points to examine. Only a few have tried to put the violence and terror of the revolution into a broader context. The conservatives are right to see revolutions as violent, but they ignore the violence already existent within the societies that revolutionaries aim to abolish. Consider this lengthy quote from Mark Twain:

**There were two “Reigns of Terror,” if we would but remember it and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon ten thousand persons, the other upon a hundred millions; but our**

**shudders are all for the “horrors” of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak; whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe, compared with lifelong death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heart-break? What is swift death by lightning compared with death by slow fire at the stake? A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror which we have all been so diligently taught to shiver at and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by that older and real**



**Terror—that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us has been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves.**<sup>23</sup>

What is so crucial about this insight from Twain is that he questions why it is that history is so concerned with a brief and relatively small outburst of violence while the violence of feudal society that spawned the revolution is largely ignored or downplayed.

Why is it that scholars have so studiously avoided situating the violence of the revolution with what Twain called “that older and real Terror?” The revolution abolished slavery, and aimed to end this “older and real Terror.” Yet, scholars focus on the 1,376 executions from the two month period of the Year II between 22 Prairial and 9 Thermidor.<sup>24</sup> One of the major strengths of Mayer’s work is that he takes this question seriously. “Since violence has played such an enormous role in human affairs throughout the ages, and exceptionally so in the twentieth century, it is surprising that contemporary political theorists have rarely ‘singled it out for special consideration.’ This avoidance can be attributed, in part, to the ethical and epistemic difficulty of conceptualizing and theorizing violence without justifying, absolving, or condemning it.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, it seems that scholars may avoid such critical theorizing out of fear of either becoming an apologist for the executions of the guillotine, or the misery that slaves and members of the Third Estate lived under throughout the Old Regime.

For Žižek, a major barrier for people in understanding the complexities of violence is precisely this distinction between the visibility of the guillotine and the invisibility of the “older and real Terror.”

The guillotine, for him, is a type of “subjective” violence that captures our attention much more easily because the actors involved are more easily identified. However, stepping back from these preconceived ideas,

**enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance: the ‘objective’ violence inscribed into the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems. The catch is that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero-level of ‘civility’ ... However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent in this ‘normal’ state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as being subjective violence.**<sup>26</sup>

The objective violence is the real terror that Twain identifies, and the reason it is overlooked is because we tend to view it from the wrong perspective.

Adding to this critique of the dominant view that distorts the meaning of violence, Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides a similar explanation. Although he wrote his book *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem* in the context of a defense of the Soviet Union, it has a lot of value to political theory in general, and in conceptualizing violence and terror. His work has provided a theoretical framework that countless scholars have used and applied to the French Terror. “To respect one who does not respect others is ultimately to despise them; to abstain from violence toward the violent is to become

their accomplice. We do not have a choice between purity and violence but between different kinds of violence.”<sup>27</sup> Much like Zizek, he understands that violence is more than beheadings or street fights.

Although they both aim to demystify violence, Merleau-Ponty perhaps puts it more strongly when he writes that, “[h]e who condemns all violence puts himself outside the domain to which justice and injustice belong. He puts a curse upon the world and humanity – a hypocritical curse, since he who utters it has already accepted the rules of the game from the moment that he has begun to live.”<sup>28</sup> The “rules of the game” for Merleau-Ponty can be directly connected to the “zero-level standard” Zizek describes. If one accepts these rules of the game, then the zero-level standard is set. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, accepting these rules of the game means choosing to recognize one type of violence (objective) over the other (subjective).



## CONCLUSION

Making sense of the Reign of Terror is not only difficult but necessary, precisely because of the immense implications it has for subsequent historical events and the possibilities of the future. This paper has chosen to analyze two distinct but interlocked elements of the Terror: counterrevolution and violence. If the normal functioning of the state, in this case

feudal Old Regime France, is premised on a continual cycle of violence, does tolerating this violence make one an accomplice to violence, perhaps like Merleau-Ponty might argue?

Consider the recent report that implicates the Torey government’s austerity measure in the premature deaths of 120,000 people.<sup>29</sup> This is just another example of the objective violence that Zizek wants us to understand. It’s largely invisible, slow, and unspectacular, in contrast to the public executions that left the streets of France stained and reeking of the nauseating stench of blood.<sup>30</sup> This is the world order the counterrevolutionary wishes to use violence in order to defend, a world filled with objective violence that so many fail to perceive because it is viewed against the standard imposed by the ruling class. Scholars in their effort to understand the Reign of Terror, have largely, and presumably, unconsciously agreed to what Merleau-Ponty labeled as the rules of the game. In so doing, they’ve missed or glossed over what Twain called “that older and real Terror.”

This narrow focus on the subjective violence of the Reign of Terror serves a useful purpose to the ruling class that wishes to prevent revolution. In this view, the everyday oppression, slavery and suffering in Old Regime France or the 120,000 deaths from austerity measures in the U.K., does not count as violence. It is only when these victims rise up to overthrow the perpetrators of the objective violence that it becomes real violence. Certainly revolutions are violent, but so is the “normal” functioning of society, and counterrevolution. Thus, one must choose, as Merleau-Ponty argues, not “between purity and violence but between different kinds of violence.”<sup>31</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Maximilien Robespierre, "On the Principles of Political Morality that Should Guide the National Convention in the Domestic Administration of the Republic" in *Virtue and Terror* (New York: Verso, 2017), p. 115.
2. Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 1.
3. Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 4 and p. 42-43, though this theme runs throughout the entire book. It should also be noted that this point is hardly controversial.
4. Hugh Gough, *The Terror in the French Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 5-6.
5. Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*. Robin argues in this book that a main goal of conservatism is this preservation of the old. A later section will further investigate this claim and the relation of tactics, means, and ends.
6. Gough, *The Terror*, p. 6-7.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Domenico Losurdo, *War and Revolution: Rethinking the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 2015), p. 4.
9. Losurdo, *War and Revolution*, p. 5.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
11. Sophie Wahnich, *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution* (Verso, 2012), p. 64.
12. Gough, *The Terror*, p. 11.
13. Robin's *The Reactionary Mind* argues this point specifically, but it has hardly become a controversial statement.
14. Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 53.
15. Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, p. 43.
16. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1991 [1852]) p. 15.

17. Mayer, *The Furies*, p. 23.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 6. Here, Mayer quotes from Chalmers Johnson, *Revolution and the Social System*, and Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*
19. Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, p. 8.
20. Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 276-277.
21. Mayer, *The Furies*, p. 45.
22. Mayer, *The Furies*, p. 45. Here, Mayer cites two sources by Furet in French.
23. Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (Project Gutenberg, 2006 [1889]), Chapter XIII. This is an ebook with no page numbers.
24. Wahnich, *In Defence*, p. 98. Wahnich calls this the "classic response" to the price of the Terror.
25. Mayer, *The Furies*, p. 73. In this quote, he also references Arendt's *On Violence*.
26. Slavoj Zizek in Wahnich, *In Defence*, p. XV.
27. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969 [1947]), p. 109.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
29. Alex Matthews-King Health Correspondent, "A Landmark Study Has Linked Tory Austerity to 120,000 Deaths," *The Independent*, Nov. 16, 2017.
30. Gough, *The Terror*, p. 65. Gough details the gruesome sights of the public executions here.
31. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 109.

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