

WALKING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION DAYS OF «TERROR» IN THE SHOES OF THE «ROBESPIERRISTES»

by Vlassis G. Rassias *

** Mr. Vlassis G. Rassias is a noted Greek author who has written 17 books, most of them dealing with the ancient Greek notion of Cosmos, philosophy, religion and history.*

There are three different ways to study History. The first involves a cold study of facts without any in-depth analysis, the second way includes some attempts to analyze causes and evaluate results and the third way, which is undoubtedly the hardest one, attempts a very deep understanding of the historical figures. The difficulties that arise in the third way of studying History -opposite to the other two which are limited to a "from above" consideration and, of course, from a safe distance observance of the "dramas of life" of some people who lived in the far past and do not directly affect the reader- is that this particular way requires the reader to take the place of the historical personalities he is reading about. Furthermore, the reader is required to cross-examine himself while wearing the shoes of the historical figures and agree or disagree with the actions taken by them, or with the actions that the pen of the various historians has chosen to depict.

The preciousness of the third way of studying History lies in the fact that each time it leads both the simple reader and the historian to a serious expansion of their perception of the diachronic human nature, eventually leading them as well to some kind of self-knowledge, mainly when the personality that needs to be deeply understood is negatively portrayed by the modern moral dualism.

Having chosen in my latest book ¹ to use the third way of studying History so as to deeply analyze the personalities of the hardest and most serious phase of the French Revolution, in other words, the era of "Terror" (October 1793-July 1794), I was soon faced with the same dilemmas that Maximilien Francois Marie Isidore de Robespierre, Louis Antoine Leon de Saint Just and Georges Auguste Couthon were confronted with, and felt that the rudimental integrity was leading me to defend the indispensability of the much discussed era of "Terror" («La Terreur»), which, surely very far from the modern sense of the term, Robespierre himself, also known as «The Incorruptible», had defined: «Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue» ².

The reason I'm using the verb "defend" is that because up to this day those specific personalities have been continuously subjected to slanderous remarks by many "from above" and "from a safe distance" historians, although there is no doubt that the French Revolution was led to its peak by those very men and then came to its end when they were overthrown and beheaded in the 9th and the 10th of month Thermidor. This continuous and dense slandering constitutes a phenomenon of pure absurdity and a flagrant attempt to "moralize" History itself by condemning the tragic creators of the so called "Western" democratic world, surprisingly by the very same people who would never think of giving up the benefits and especially the foundational values of this world, like the political liberties, the equality against the law and the institutionalized humanitarianism. The whole thing seems as absurd as if someone would demand to have bloodless births, or as if someone else believed that the houses have always had electricity and running water.

The truth is that those personalities and especially Robespierre, despite the countless verbal abuses they have also received some supportive remarks from a handful of daring historians such as Ernest Hamel, Claude Mazauric, Albert Mathiez, and others. For the most of these historians, the common point of their admiration is the persistence of the «robepierristes» to materialize the notion of Virtue. In the first paragraph of an older article in the «TO BHMA» newspaper, Mr. Gerasimos Vokos, professor of Philosophy at the Department of Political Sciences of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, justifies straight from the shoulder, the Hegelian ascertainment that “we could say” that Robespierre “took Virtue (Arete) seriously”³. However, this ascertainment brings about the crucial question whether we can take Virtue on any other way than seriously.

Virtue and especially its public dimension, which in the process of time was defined as “Political Virtue” (so as to describe the triptych Justice-Decency-Responsibility that the ancient Greeks considered as a gift of God Zeus to mankind), is something extremely serious, something that cannot be discounted. In his treatise “De Republica”, Cicero, using Scipio as an example, introduces the idea of the existence of a very special place in the heavens where the dead politically virtuous men reside⁴.

Undoubtedly, Virtue should be considered as a non-negotiable entity for every society that is interested in maintaining some basic but supreme in nature, values. Nevertheless, most of us live in societies that solely focus on evaluating everything according to its economic value, so some self-evident notions, especially moral ones, are unfortunately considered as being “utopic” or “extreme”. Either defined by its ancient meaning and content or solely by its political content that the «robepierristes» gave to it, Virtue normally demands from men a gentle “inflexibility”: “Virtue as ethos, bravery and stable behavior serving freedom, is the antidote against deceit. Defined as such, Virtue does not bear any personal, moralistic or psychological characteristic. In the eyes of Robespierre, Virtue has a deep political and democratic character.”⁵

Surely inflexibility can be viewed today by many “westerners” as a foretaste of fanaticism and one could also argue that certain liegeman forming-circles certainly prefer it to be viewed as such. However, in other levels of culture and human behavior that simply have been defeated by their modern and predominant equivalents, the inflexibility of virtue is not only right but also necessary. Unfortunately, these superior cultural levels have been defeated by their modern and predominant equivalents. The element of inflexibility was an indispensable ingredient of Virtue for everyone who was obliged to materialize in his daily life the “Arete” (“Virtue”) or “Virtus” of the pre-Christian Hellenic and Roman world or other serious codes of ethics like the “Bushido” of the Japanese Samurais. This specific truth had not escaped from the minds of the revolutionaries we mention in this article, especially Saint Just, as we see them quite often making continuous and almost fetishistic references to the institutions and the value system of the Lycurgian Sparta as well as of Rome of the republican era⁶.

The admirable inflexibility of the “robepierristes” which has made them and continues to make them so much hated by their enemies, works in reverse and brings out their wonderful, pure and exemplary traits of their personalities in the eyes of people capable of studying History without the imposed specifications of today that more or less demand flexibility and relativism. Upon reviewing the book of the historian Ruth Scurr “Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution”, Hilary Mantel asked and simultaneously answered in the “London Review of Books” concerning the Incorruptible (Robespierre): “Why was his purity fatal? Because it seemed to be absolute. You couldn’t buy him. You couldn’t impress him. You couldn’t frighten him. You couldn’t lay claim to him”⁷.

There have been quite a few other personalities who were hated by their enemies because they also viewed inflexibility as an indispensable component of virtue. The republican stoic – in - arms of the 1st century BCE Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis or Cato Minor (94 – 46) who ended

up opening his abdomen with his sword so as to avoid being arrested by the Caesar⁸, is one example. Another great example is the contemporary of Nero and noted Stoic philosopher Publius Clodius Thrasea Paetus who in the years 66 CE spilled the blood of his veins as a libation to "Iuppiter Liberator". It is not accidental that in the Jacobin Calendar of Revolution which was adopted by the Convention, "Stoicism"⁹ stood among the values celebrated in the "tenth days" (décadis), according to the article VII of the decree that established "the worship of the Supreme Being"; a "Stoicism" surely seen not as a school of Philosophy of the Antiquity but as a strong orientation towards virtue in all the continuous dilemmas of daily life.

Opposite to this specific strong orientation, there stood numerous examples of the two kinds of men that provoked the disgust of the "robepierristes" who characterized them as "the enemies of Virtue": the opportunist traitor and the adroit crook.

The first kind of these "enemies of Virtue", well incarnated by the shrewd Joseph Fouché and Jean Lambert Tallien, initially a Jacobin extremist who was later on transformed into a warm supporter of the monarchic street gang «Jeunesse Dorée»¹⁰, has been described by the author in his book when he refers to the "Diachronic Blackguard of History", in other words "the miserable kind of man who knows well how to quickly strike his flag and replace it with another one, the flag of the eternal political party of the each time majority, following not the stability of an idea or a vision but the proven fluidity of times which the faster they change, the more often cause the striking and the hoisting of the flags of the depraved, the cowards, the arrivistes, the opportunists and the traitors"¹¹.

The second kind of "the enemies of Virtue", perfectly incarnated by Philippe François Nazaire Fabre d'Églantine, Marie – Jean Hérault de Séchelles and some others, was defined and described by Robespierre himself who had adopted from Voltaire the term "fripon", which applies to all of those who steal and cheat artfully, dexterously and above all unscrupulously. For Robespierre, the "fripon" constitutes "the absolute anti-political, apolitical or anti-political creature"¹², a rodent that unstoppably eats as much as its belly can endure.

The only thing that Robespierre, whom rightly E. Hamel called "one of the greatest men that struggled for the common good upon the Earth"¹³, can be accused of, was the double "naivety" of himself and all of his close collaborators that misled them to consider the moralization of the whole people feasible by just replacing the countless personality weaknesses with a few political and social virtues and to accept a role - trap that an irresponsible and unprepared for the real Democracy public had imposed on them, the role of the ones that were called to incarnate the Revolution itself so as to die with it. They continuously forced themselves to experience the cold pain of validating necessary executions, hoping that the long term bloodshed would soon end. Nevertheless, they only things they received from the people they struggled for, were defamation, conspiracy, treachery and death. It is extraordinarily tragic the fact that Robespierre himself dreamed of establishing public benefit institutions and abolishing the death penalty as he had confessed to the neoclassical "painter of the Revolution" Jacques – Louis David, a few days before the 9th of Thermidor¹⁴.

I ought to admit that from all of Robespierre's collaborators, I was mostly impressed and puzzled by the personality of Philippe François Joseph Lebas (1765 – 1794). In the 9th of Thermidor he volunteered to be arrested with his other comrades, setting as the only precondition to say goodbye to his newly born son and his wife (who, until the time of her death, refused to condemn the "robepierristes" whose portraits decorated the walls of her home) and he finally shot himself just before he was re-arrested in the Town Hall of Paris.

Regarding the "era of Terror", my own conclusion is that it constituted one of the very rare periods of History where the ancient Greek cosmic notion of Anagke (Necessity) appears to haunt the human world and, in that specific case, to demand full inflexibility when it comes to

the practice of moral duties. An approach of such a period of History can be proven legitimate only if it does take into account this very notion of Anagke, and of course it is rather unfair, if not indecorous, to “wash our hands” by solely observing the facts “from above” and from a safe distance as if we were some kind of deity that resides out of the dimensions where the mortals live and act.

Within the framework of the above stated conclusion, everyone who insists on using the third way of studying the History of the “Terror Era” and additionally has the common dosage of sincerity, is led via a narrow one-way path to admit to himself that if he had been born in the 6th of May 1758 in Arras or in the 25th of August 1767 in Decize of Nivernais¹⁵ and had truly “taken virtue seriously”, he would have ended up in the scaffold of Place de la Révolution and from there to the huge lime pit in the Errancis graveyard. A huge lime pit that simply amplified the illusion of the traitors and the “fripons” that the bodily demise of their victims would let absolutely nothing stir up the deep darkness of their guilty conscience.

NOTES

1. Rassias G. Vlassis, *«Laimetomos Arete. Robespierre – Saint Just – Couthon»*, Athens, 2007
2. *«La Terreur n' est autre chose que la justice prompte, severe, inflexible; elle est donc une emanation de la vertu »*, in the speech of the 5th of February of 1794 in the National Convention, titled *«Sur les principes de morale politique»* (Robespierre Maximilien F. M. I., *«Oeuvres complètes»*, Volume 10, Paris, 1967, σελ. 357).
3. Vokos Gerasimos, *«O Robespierros kai e Politike Arete»*, newspaper *«TO BHMA»*, 12th of November 2000, p. B18
4. Clarke M. L., *«To Romaiko Pneuma»* (*«The Roman Mind»*), Athens, 2004, p. 101
5. Vokos Gerasimos, *«O Robespierros kai e Politike Arete»*, newspaper *«TO BHMA»*, 12th of November 2000, p. B18
6. An interesting sample of the “Institutions” drawn by Saint Just that concerned the structure of society after the Revolution, with a lot of emphasis placed on the civics and the proper upbringing of the youth, using ancient Sparta as a prototype, is presented by J. H. Robinson in *«Readings in European History»* volume 2, p. 451 – 454, Boston, 1906.
7. Mantel Hilary, *«If you'd seen his green eyes»*, in the *«London Review of Books»*, volume 28, no 8, 20th of April 2006.
8. Plutarch, *«Cato»*, 68 – 71
9. Scurr Ruth, *«Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution»*, London, 2006, p. 292
10. Andress David, *«The Terror. Civil War in the French Revolution»*, London, 2006, p. 353
11. Rassias G. Vlassis, *«Laimetomos Arete. Robespierre – Saint Just – Couthon»*, Athens, 2007, p. 362
12. Vokos Gerasimos, *«O Robespierros kai e Politike Arete»*, newspaper *«TO BHMA»*, 12th of November 2000, p. B18
13. Hamel Ernest, *«Histoire de Robespierre»*, volume 3, p. 807, Paris, 1867
14. Mignet F.A., *«Historia tes Gallikes Epanastases»*, volume 2, Athens, 1955, p. 341
15. Dates and places of birth for Robespierre and Saint Just respectively.

The French Revolution has long inspired progressive radicals ready for change at any cost. It also gave us terror in its political sense, and with it the words terrorism and terrorist. It pioneered violent progressive utopianism and effectively birthed modern conservatism, via Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. It even influenced fashions, pioneering short haircuts on women in tribute to guillotine victims "who had their hair shorn before execution" in the Terror's aftermath. (When the Robespierristes rode the tumbrils to their doom the next day, hecklers in the crowds shouted, "Foutu maximum!" "Fucking maximum!") Troops loyal to the Convention quickly retook the Hôtel de Ville. I'm David Andress, Professor of Modern History at the University of Portsmouth, and author of several books on the French Revolution. I'll be here 1700-2000 GMT on 14 January. Ask Me Anything! After the Terror, this coercion is abandoned, producing a hyperinflation of the assignat, and a short-lived replacement currency, and forcing the Republic back to using hard cash. Fortunately, by this time they have become a military conqueror of some of the richest regions of Europe, and so loot basically sustains the state until, under Napoleon's dictatorial control, economic stability returns.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION IN THE HISTORY OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD Albert Soboul. NOBLES, BOURGEOIS, AND THE ORIGINS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION Colin Lucas. THE FRENCH REVOLUTION REVISITED Francois Furet. THE IDEA OF A DECLARATION OF RIGHTS Keith Michael Baker. Mathiez's influence was especially great because of the Société des Etudes Robespierristes (Society of Robespierrist Studies), the organization he founded that published documentary collections, books, and most importantly, the scholarly journal *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*. By Mathiez's early death in 1932, the *Annales* had established itself as the premier journal of record for French Revolutionary historiography.

He is above all the man of the Terror, presented in the simplistic form of mass violence by the State. These books also share the idea that there is nothing new to be learned about Robespierre. His life, and his political thought, if we assume that he had any, have already been examined from every possible angle (he was a disciple of Rousseau). Let us be quite clear, the fact that non-specialists are writing about the French Revolution and Robespierre is obviously not a problem in itself. The Revolution is a research topic, but also a civic object that it is not a question of reserving for the traditional university monopoly.