

From Fraternity to Fratricide

Why the Jacobin Vision of Utopia Degenerated Into the Terror

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The historiography of the French Revolution over the last two-plus centuries has reflected a widely contested view of its legacy. Most scholars are in agreement that the roots of modern liberalism are to be found in the Revolution of 1789, and that the reasons for its disdain among the French up until recently can also be traced back to this time. Liberalism became a painful concept for the French, as well as for the rest of Continental Europe for that matter, because of what it came to be identified with over the span of just a few years during the Revolution. The leading figures of the Revolution, the Jacobins, are notoriously remembered for their radicalism as proponents of liberty and for being responsible for the Reign of Terror of 1793-94. Thus, the two concepts 'liberty' and 'terror' became enmeshed in people's minds, and support for the former became equated with approval of the latter. The original aims of the Jacobins have therefore been completely overshadowed by the horrific means they used to achieve them.

In this essay, I will seek to establish that the Jacobin vision of utopia can be salvaged without having to vindicate their actions in the later years of their involvement in the Revolution. I will provide support for the foregoing statement in the following manner: First, I will give an overview of why the modern account of Jacobinism fails to adequately explain the reasons for the Jacobins' changing policies throughout the course of the Revolution. I will then highlight some key aspects of theories of reform that influenced the Jacobins and explain the Jacobin theory of radical change, to give the reader an understanding of their original goals. Following this, I will spend the remainder of the paper describing and differentiating between the two distinct phases of Jacobinism, drawing attention to the thinkers, circumstances, and events that played a role in the retrogression of Jacobin politics into the Terror.

The modern account of Jacobinism does not adequately convey that a profound shift occurred in the ideology and policies of the Jacobins during the French Revolution. Contemporary analysis tends to focus almost exclusively on post-1793 Jacobinism, as evidenced by the connotations the word Jacobin carries today such as 'extremist' and 'terrorist.' In attempting to confine Jacobin politics to such a narrow description, an understanding of their original aims is obscured. In the years leading up to the Revolution, the Jacobins developed a utopian vision that was not a novel invention but rather a *mélange* of ideas advanced by philosophers and political theorists before them. Unlike most prior theorizers of ideal society, however, the Jacobin revolutionaries were facing the pressing issue of real-time implementation in a state of chaos. Thus, their desiderata, along with their attitudes and political policies, underwent significant changes as the Revolution unfolded. I will therefore submit for the reader's consideration that the objectives of the Jacobins in the early years of the Revolution are antipodal to their later endeavors in the years 1793-94, thus to give their ideology a definitive label is detrimental to a sufficient understanding of their role in the French Revolution. Before expounding on the major differences between the two distinct phases of Jacobinism as they materialized throughout the course of the Revolution, however, it is necessary to explain the Jacobin theory for radical change.

The components of the Jacobin theory can be understood as a guide to apprehending the ideals of the Jacobins, as well as their plan to fulfill them, thus achieving their vision of utopia. In his book, *Jacobins and Utopians*, George Klosko identifies six key features of a Jacobin Theory. These are:

- (J.1) The plan or blueprint of the desired, ideal society;
- (J.2) A low estimation of the potential of the vast majority of the inhabitants of existing society to conform to the dictates of (J.1) on their own;
- (J.3) Belief in the existence of a small group of individuals who understand the blueprint and are strongly committed to its realization;
- (J.4) Support of this group's, this minority's, seizure of political power;
- (J.5) Use of the minority-controlled state to condition and reeducate the inhabitants of society in accordance with the dictates of (J.1);
- (J.6) A distinctive theory of representation ('real representation')¹

These six features draw from the ideas advanced by several reform theorists prior to the revolutionary Jacobins. It is important to discuss the influence of these thinkers, so as to show that Jacobin theory in its original form was not intended to lead to the atrocities of the Terror. Klosko describes these thinkers in detail. For the purposes of this paper, I will introduce them briefly, highlighting the specific ideas that contributed to the development of Jacobinism during the French Revolution.

We can trace the origin of several of the key components of Jacobin theory at least as far back as Ancient Greece, to Plutarch's Sparta and Plato's Athens. Klosko points out that, "Plutarch's Lycurgus viewed his state as radically defective and so beyond the help of partial remedies.... Accordingly, Lycurgus's reform of Sparta was fundamental, a radical reordering of not only the political system but the city's entire way of life."² Thus, in Plutarch's Sparta we can see the need for drastic reform measures and the need for political power to achieve them. Other components of the Jacobin theory can be traced back to Plato. The necessity of total reform was discussed in the *Republic*, including the notion that virtue needed to be inculcated in the citizenry, or what Klosko calls 'educational realism.' Klosko explains, "The existing generation, corrupt as they are, must somehow be induced to accept new institutions, which represent a sharp break with existing society."³ More modern reform theorists influenced Jacobinism as well. Machiavelli's low opinion of human nature is reflected in the second component of the Jacobin theory, and his assertion that force is a necessary requisite to change was clearly heeded by the Jacobins during the Reign of Terror. Two additional thinkers, Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau will be discussed in the next section, as well as throughout the remainder of the paper. Their thoughts on reform seemed to have had the most direct impact on the Jacobins, especially Maximilien de Robespierre, who became the most important figure associated with Jacobinism and the Reign of Terror.

Diderot and Rousseau were two immensely important philosophers during the intellectual enlightenment of the 18th century. These two thinkers shared some aspirations early on but came to represent two entirely different schools of Enlightenment thought. While Diderot advocated radical principles such as equality for all, religious freedom, and the grounding of political institutions in reason, Rousseau came to reject virtually all of these notions, and instead advocated irrational principles and a peculiar notion of the 'general will' of society. Jonathan Israel explains Rousseau's departure from radical principles, stating:

It was his heart, his feelings, he emphasizes, not reasoning, that told him they [the radicals] were wrong. The late Rousseau positively gloried in his rejection of 'pure reason.' Where the radical philosophes vaunted their erudition and knowledge of science and the history of civilizations, he prided himself on his anti-intellectualism and reading practically nothing.⁴

The ideals of Robespierre and the Jacobins, especially their understanding of the 'general will', were first rooted in the egalitarian ideology of Diderot and the other radical *philosophes*. Later in the Revolution, they espoused the Rousseauian 'feelings-based' version. This important shift will become evident shortly, as I discuss some of the key external and internal events that also served as catalysts to the ideological metamorphosis of the Jacobins.

In the early years of the Revolution, when the formation of a constitutional monarchy was still anticipated, and *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (hereafter referred to simply as the

Declaration) was promulgated, the Jacobins gained popularity under the appellation *Society of the Friends of the Constitution*.⁵ The radicalism associated with the Jacobins at this point stemmed from their support for the egalitarian principles that were advocated by the *Declaration*. As champions of doctrines such as “liberty, equality, and fraternity,”⁶ they became popular among the Parisian plebeians, and stood in contrast to the more moderate factions of the Assembly, notably the Girondins. In this respect, the Jacobins were largely influenced by the radical strain of Enlightenment thought that was propounded by thinkers such as Denis Diderot and Baron d’Holbach in the preceding decades. As Israel points out, “This amounted to a thoroughgoing transformation...from the *ancien régime* model to the Diderot-d’Holbachian model rooted in the (Spinozistic) principle—contrary to Hobbes—of natural freedom and equality carrying over into and being reconfigured in society.”⁷ Not everyone at the Assembly, however, was completely unified and supportive of the emerging democratic advancements. A variety of developments were unfolding that would have a profound impact on the dynamic between members of the Assembly, as well as on the course of the Revolution overall. This concatenation of events drove wedges between various groups of representatives, who broke off into additional factions, certain that their way of handling the new occurrences was best. This split between various minority groups and the majority reflects an important aspect of Jacobin theory, namely that the majority cannot be trusted to do what is right for society, and a committed minority group must seize political power to guide the people on the path to virtue.

One of the first such events to create a schism between members of the Assembly was the Storming of the Bastille, which occurred just a few weeks prior to the penning of the *Declaration*. Responses to the destruction of this long-standing symbol of despotism varied greatly. While radicals in the Assembly countenanced the uprising, conservatives were intimidated by the rebellious act and saw it ultimately as being counterproductive. Israel notes:

The psychological impact of the Bastille and its aftermath had, as is well known, a profound influence on the course of the Revolution and cultural life of the nation. Much less well known is its equally profound intellectual and ideological impact, for these events forced a basic and soon irrevocable split between the rival wings of the Enlightenment in their attitude to the Revolution.⁸

The division created by opposing reactions to the demolition of the Bastille led to an uncomfortable reticence among members of the Assembly who used to speak freely with one another about shared democratic pursuits. This internal drama that first appeared in 1789 would continue to progress and eventually become the prime impetus for the Jacobin’s abandonment of rational means to realize their goals in favor of more drastic measures such as those taken during the Terror.

Another factor that exacerbated the discord among the deputies in the Assembly was the newfound freedom of press, provided for in the *Declaration*. From this provision arose one of the most important figures of the French Revolution, Jean-Paul Marat. *L’Ami du peuple*, or *The People’s Friend*, was the name of Marat’s vitriolic and provocative paper, which came to be widely associated with the Jacobins, due to its attack on the moderates of the Assembly. *The People’s Friend* came to be widely read by the Parisian populace and Marat’s rants resonated greatly with them. Through his fervid rhetoric, Marat evoked rage among the masses and called them to action against royalists and other counterrevolutionaries, whom he perceived to be everywhere. Marat effectively widened the gap between the Girondins and the Jacobins, and also altered perspectives toward the Revolution within the Jacobin Club itself. Their original advocacy of the reason-based Diderotian concept of the general will rapidly deteriorated, and the Rousseauian version took its place. Israel states, “Slowly, support grew for Marat’s view that it is not ‘philosophy’ but the people’s will and direct popular sovereignty that constitutes the true criterion of legitimacy.”⁹ This transition permanently altered the course of the Revolution. Israel continues, “Marat’s hectoring, with its unrelenting stress on ‘morality’, ‘virtue’, and the ordinary man’s feelings, created a powerful underlying tension that would one day be exploited by the ‘Robespieristes’ to derail the Revolution of Reason as a whole.”¹⁰

Additional events took place in the early 1790s that propelled the Jacobins toward the Terror. The attempted escape to Austria by King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in June 1791 served to further crystallize the already rampant conviction of the people that a potentially successful counterrevolution was in the offing. In the Assembly, debates ensued between revolutionaries over what to do with the king and whether to go to war with Austria. Robespierre was among the minority members of the Assembly who were opposed to France entering the war, although he was unsuccessful in convincing the others on this matter. In April 1792, the Assembly voted to go to war with Austria, thanks in large part to Georges Danton, a politician and powerful orator in the Assembly. Danton unsuccessfully sought out middle ground between the

irreconcilable Jacobins and Girondins for a while, but would eventually come to be associated with the Committee of Public Safety, the Jacobin organization ultimately responsible for the Reign of Terror.

Despite the Assembly's decision to enter into war with Austria, Robespierre's focus remained on the burgeoning internal crisis in France. "Fear most the enemy within," he warned the Jacobins again; "the most dangerous traitors are not on the front line but mingling in disguise among the patriots in Paris."¹¹ Thus, fear and paranoia began to take primacy in the development of the Jacobin agenda from here on out. After the official fall of the monarchy in September 1792, the National Convention replaced the Assembly and the Jacobins changed their name from *Society of the Friends of the Constitution* to *Society of Jacobins, Friends of Liberty and Equality*. Historian Isser Woloch notes, "[This] change in name would soon become substantive... for the resort to violent, sweeping revolution in 1792 could be justified and sustained only if complemented by... the loyalty of politically conscious citizens from many levels of society."¹² With a new name and an ever-evolving agenda, the Jacobins became increasingly radical in some ways, while consistently narrowing their scope of reason and support for democratic principles. Thus, their 'radicalism' in the beginning as supporters of equality and freedom began to give way to a different kind of radicalism, one that would come to be associated with their totalitarian policies during the Reign of Terror.

Before discussing the next phase in the Revolution, it is important to describe some of the broader implications of the changes taking place in the ideology and policies of the Jacobins. In his exposition on Jacobin theory entitled *Jacobins and Utopians*, Klosko points out this transformation. He states:

The shifting currents in Robespierre's thought throughout his career should most likely be viewed as attempts to pursue his ultimate values under evolving political circumstances, which called for different tactics. Most important was his eventual realization that the people could not be relied on always to pursue their own best interests.¹³

This distrust for the people, as pointed out earlier, is a key component of Jacobin theory. The "minority, who know the truth, must convey it to the majority."¹⁴ The Jacobins justify their extreme procedures due to their belief that they are acting in the true interest of the populace, but the people are resistant because they don't understand their own interests. Klosko continues, "Legitimation of minority rule requires a distinction between the 'empirical' interests of the majority, what they *believe* they want at the present time, and their 'real' interests, what they would want if they had not been corrupted by existing society."¹⁵ Thus, the radical pursuits of Robespierre and the Jacobins in the Convention from 1792 onward is indicative of their lack of trust in the people to achieve what was best for France on their own.

One of the first matters of business for the newly formed Convention was to decide the fate of the king. Louis XVI was put on trial for treason and found guilty. The Girondins called for sparing his life, but the Jacobins outvoted them and the king was executed on January 21st, 1793. The death of the king, coupled with preceding acts of violence such as the September Massacres, caused fury among some citizens, who called for an end to the bloodletting. Many people saw Marat as the ringleader of Jacobin brutality. In an attempt to cease the violence, they (somewhat ironically) decided to kill him. The murder of Marat, in addition to the debilitating war with Austria, Prussia, and Britain, along with the internal insurrections in cities such as Lyon, Nantes, and Marseille, as well as in the Vendée, created an extremely tumultuous political climate that would serve to usher in the Terror.¹⁶ Israel asserts, "Philosophy made the Revolution; the people, in its ignorance, misled by demagogues and rendered ferocious by famine and civil war, made the Terror."¹⁷

The Jacobins convinced the Convention that extreme measures were now necessary to prevent the counterrevolutionaries from gaining control. The Committee of Public Safety was established and became the de facto executive government of France. Klosko states that "[The Committee] came to exercise something approaching dictatorial authority. The Constitution of 1793, drafted for the new Republic, was set aside before it could be implemented. On October 10th, 1793, the Convention declared that the provisional government of France would be 'revolutionary until the peace.'¹⁸ Under the revolutionary government, any trace of Robespierre's previous support for democratic principles such as the people's right to have an active role in politics disappeared. Now, any opposition to the policies of the Committee was seen as treasonous and punishable by death. Klosko notes, "Robespierre assigned the revolutionary government the twin tasks of suppressing the Revolution's foes and raising the people to virtue. These two sides of the Committee's task were linked in Robespierre's mind, because he tended to view the Republic's enemies as responsible for its plight."¹⁹

The Terror was embraced by the Jacobins as a means for securing the virtuous republic they desired for many reasons. First, they were seized by fear that a counterrevolution was looming, and they resolutely believed that they had to go to any lengths to save the Revolution from determined conspirators who wished to sabotage it. They also saw terror as something completely compatible with, and complementary to, virtue. In the words of Robespierre, "If the spring of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the springs of popular government in revolution are at once *virtue and terror*: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless."²⁰ The notion of virtue that Robespierre and the Jacobins were nurturing at this point was no longer the Diderotian understanding of virtue, which stems from reverence for just laws and rational consideration for the common good of self and others, but rather one known solely through feeling. He echoes Rousseau in believing that "Laws... are not written on marble or stone, but on the hearts of all men."²¹ Thus, the radical philosophy that so profoundly influenced the Revolution in the beginning had long since taken a back seat to the Rousseauian disposition. This shift was not popular with the French populace. Klosko notes, "Neither within nor outside the Committee of Public Safety or the Convention was there general support for [Robespierre's] specific Rousseauian-Lycurgeoan goals."²² In this way, we can see how Robespierre's ideological change sealed the fate of the notion of liberty he had originally advocated, now inextricably linking it to the Terror in the minds of the French people.

The Reign of Terror was effective for a period of time against the multi-front war France was fighting in the mid-1790s. However, the people of France felt that its end was long overdue by the time it finally did cease in the summer of 1794. It had run its course in less than a year, and during that time had engulfed the Girondins, Danton, thousands of French nobles, clergy members, and commoners, and eventually Robespierre himself in the coup d'état of Thermidor. The radical *philosophes*, from whom Robespierre once drew his social and political ideals, were relieved. Israel affirms, "Radical Enlightenment writers who survived the Terror subsequently denounced Robespierre, not just as an abominable and bloody dictator but also... as a crassly anti-intellectual demagogue and Rousseauist fanatic."²³

The utopian vision that Robespierre and the Jacobins had in mind toward the end of their chapter in the Revolution was a virtuous republic resembling the ancient cities of Sparta and Rome. However, before this could become a possibility, they believed they had to purge all of the corrupt elements of society in order to begin anew. Robespierre declared in one of his last speeches of 1794, "What constitutes a republic is the total destruction of whatever is opposed to it."²⁴ The paradox of the notion of virtue they were pursuing, however, is that no one would be left to live in the new republic because everyone was corrupt in the eyes of the Jacobins. At this point, they had completely divorced themselves from reason. The continuously changing social and political landscape of the French Revolution had radically shaped and altered the Jacobin theory of Utopia. No similitude can be found between the liberalism the Jacobins advocated in 1789 and the cruel despotism they exhibited in 1793-94. The approach they began with was systematic and rational, but it had developed into something grossly different. As Israel points out: "The Revolution came and went. It proclaimed liberty, equality, and fraternity but failed to establish a viable democratic republic. Robespierre, and the Terror of 1793-1794, wholly or partially discredited the Revolution in the minds of France and abroad."²⁵ The discrediting of the Revolution includes, of course, the denunciation of the principles upon which it was founded. The most important of these was liberty.

To conclude, I have attempted to elucidate the reasons behind the profound ideological shift of the Jacobins by explaining the circumstances in which they operated during the French Revolution. Through an examination of the complex implications of these circumstances and events, the connection between liberalism and the Terror has been broken. The components of a Jacobin theory, and the thinkers who influenced them, make clear that the Terror was not intrinsic to the Jacobin ideals at the beginning of the Revolution. Lastly, I have hopefully shown that when deliberating the Jacobin vision of Utopia, as well as the overall legacy of the Revolution, we must take all of these criteria into account.

References

¹ Klosko, George. *Jacobins And Utopians* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 92

² *Ibid.*, 14-15

³ *Ibid.*, 53

- ⁴ Israel, Jonathan, *A Revolution of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 159
- ⁵ Klosko, 94
- ⁶ Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*, 230
- ⁷ Israel, Jonathan, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 897
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 899
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 914
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 914
- ¹¹ Scurr, Ruth, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 262
- ¹² Woloch, Isser, *Jacobin Legacy: The Democratic Movement Under the Directory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 6
- ¹³ Klosko, 98
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 93
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-5
- ¹⁷ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 931
- ¹⁸ Klosko, 95
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 101
- ²⁰ Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, X, 357; as quoted in Klosko, 104
- ²¹ Klosko, 99
- ²² *Ibid.*, 119
- ²³ Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*, 234
- ²⁴ Robespierre's February 26, 1794 speech; as quoted in Klosko, 111
- ²⁵ Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*, 230