

Rousseau, Robespierre, and the French Revolution

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There is little doubt that the French Revolution would not have and could not have taken place without the ideas expressed by the Enlightenment philosophers, which, of course, influenced and motivated some of the Revolution's most notable political leaders. Among those political leaders, Maximilien Robespierre was perhaps the most notable – before Bonaparte – and most certainly exerted the most influence on the fate of the Revolution than any other political leader before the advent of the First French Empire. But while Robespierre exerted so much influence on the Revolution, the Enlightenment's Rousseau exerted an equal influence on Robespierre. There may be, therefore, the temptation to equate Robespierre's political failings with a failing in Rousseau's political philosophy. Of these influences, the idea of the General will and of the necessity of the belief in the immortality of the soul had perhaps the most profound resonance with Robespierre himself and, perhaps – if those in opposition to the thesis maintained throughout this paper are to be believed – a highly destructive influence within the history of the French Revolution, culminating in what has been termed “The Reign of Terror”. The fact that has been overlooked, however, is that political leaders are their own men. While they may be influenced by philosophers, their actions do not equate to the political philosophical prescriptions of political philosophers manifest in historical action. For the political leader, there may be a dozen approaches to incorporating Rousseavian political thought into one's political actions, and some may be more successful than others. While Rousseau's philosophies are sometimes noted as the driving force that led the French Revolution to its demise, I will argue in this paper that Robespierre's political ineptitude – rather than Rousseau's ideas – is what ultimately began the French Revolution on its path to failure.

The question must first be asked, how might Rousseau's philosophies, which advocate pity and compassion, lead to great violence? In order to help answer this question – which, as we shall see, will show that there is no legitimate connection – I believe an assessment of Sade is necessary, for not only were Sade's philosophies comparable to Rousseau's in that they were so radically opposite, but Sade, perhaps more than any other Enlightenment era philosopher, seemed to advocate violence recognizable in Robespierre's actions. While it is commonplace to say that Robespierre's politics were influenced by Rousseau – and while this many have been true – his actions were no doubt more reminiscent of Sade. While Jonathan Israel claims that “it is arguable that the darker side of the French Revolution, the Revolution of 1793-1794, was chiefly inspired by the Rousseauist tendency,” he goes on to say, “Robespierre publicly denounced the philosophes for their alleged servility to court and nobility. But the anti-enlightenment purge hugely intensified once the Terror began.”¹ It should be noted that Sade held a similar perspective on the philosophes and that his ideas were positively anti-enlightenment, in the same way that Robespierre's were during the Terror. The pivot point for the distinction regarding violence in Rousseau and Sade's philosophy ultimately rests in their distinct conceptions of the Self and the Other, and so, a detailed elucidation of this distinction is necessary.

An analogy seems almost eager to be made representing Sadean philosophy's relationship with the larger Enlightenment as a whole as akin to that of the Reign of Terror's relationship with the larger French Revolution. Sade's ideas were an unabashed representation of what ought rightly to be called the Aggressive or Hostile Enlightenment. Sade's so-called philosophy seems more than any other contemporary philosophical system to advocate ‘evil’ in the form of qualitatively and quantitatively great violence. It is best to begin with an elucidation of where Sade's similarities with his contemporary philosophes began and (as we shall see) ended, and from there paint a picture of his conceptualization of the Self and the Other. Sade, like many of his contemporaries, especially among the Radicals, was an advocate for popular sovereignty. But while Rousseau frames the actualization of popular sovereignty in terms of what he calls the general will, Sade imagines a society in which every individual asserts their own power on their own terms. Hayes writes, “The ‘Adresse’ enjoining the king to forget himself and to listen to the voice of the many thus ends with the paradoxical affirmation of the one,” and concludes that, “The split between je and vous is total; je's superiority, quite clear.” But what exactly does the superiority of the je mean with regard to Sade's concept of the Self?

Nothing other than the superiority of the Self above the Other. While at first this hierarchy may seem contradictory to the ideals of the Enlightenment, it will soon become self-evident that Sade's hierarchy actually arose from earlier Enlightenment thought. Pierre Saint-Amand sheds light on Sade's relationship with his ideological predecessor, Montesquieu. The idea of the role of violent reciprocity in social systems binds the two thinkers, but their concepts of the manifestation of that reciprocity differ. Saint-Amand elucidates Montesquieu's perspective: "Men are brought together by a mimesis of fear: 'the marks of this fear being reciprocal, would soon engage them to associate.'"2 For Montesquieu, this association is largely peaceful and ultimately results in justice, though the motivations for that justice may ultimately be violent: "When a man takes stock of himself, how satisfying it is for him to conclude that he has justice in his heart! – it may be an austere pleasure, but it is bound to cause him delight, as he realizes that his state is as far above those without justice as he is above tigers and bears."3 Put differently, justice is at its heart a game of one-upmanship, for Montesquieu. Sade, however, as an atheist, sees the normative idea of justice as ultimately indefensible in the absence of a transcendent being that determines norms. As an atheist, Sade sees justice as being whatever the individual decides that it ought to be, which ultimately reduces justice to violence. In Sade's eyes, "everyone should have access to the privilege of administering justice," that is, violence.4

Sade's Self is perhaps – from a certain modern perspective – ultimately phenomenological. It is difficult to argue that the world's population can be reduced to differentiated Selves and Others with differing rights and privileges, and I do not believe Sade ultimately argues that point (although there does appear to be a strain of misogyny in his writing).5 The uniqueness Sade's Self is, in my view, his refusal to conceptualize the Other as a fellow Self, which of course is where Sade differs from Rousseau. Rousseau's conception of the Self and the Other frames the two as equally valid selves who are subjects rather than objects.6 For Rousseau, the Other is his own Self, and therefore it is not only possible but advisable that the Self exercises pity for the Other. Sade's conception, on the other hand, ultimately and paradoxically accomplishes the opposite effect. Both the Self and the Other in the end become the Other, and both in the end become more or less objectified. This process is fairly straightforward. The Self, in order to maintain a habit of transgression (administering his own justice in the form of violence), must become apathetic as to guard himself from remorseful representations of the act.7 By voluntarily and defensively becoming apathetic, Sade's Self reduces his subjectivity and therefore begins the process of the objectification of him/herself, becoming the Other. Klossowski writes, "monstrosity is the zone of being outside of oneself, outside of consciousness, in which the monster will be able to maintain himself only by the reiteration of the same act."8 In order to keep up the game of one-upmanship – first conceived by Montesquieu – Sade's Self must desensitize himself to his own actions, objectifying even himself.

Without a transcendent being to determine an absolute normative justice, justice becomes ultimately meaningless, and therefore can be reduced to mere violence by autonomous individuals. It is from this point that Sade's characters assert and administer their own so-called justice, which of course is nothing other than violence. But this concept of violence need not be more than descriptive. Saint-Amand points out that, "in Sade's view, evil is synonymous with human relations; violent reciprocity is ineluctable."9 While Montesquieu may have fundamentally agreed with Sade on this point, Rousseau's optimism is incompatible with it. Rousseau subscribed to an idea of "Other as subject (pity)" whereas the Sadean other is "an object (cruelty)."10 Rousseau's Self/Other relationship is based on identification with the other, and reciprocity is thought of as communicating benevolence between the Self and the Other. Rousseau takes a more objective, less phenomenological perspective on society as being full of Selves and Others, each one a Self to him/herself, and each an Other to each other. In this way, the Self/Other relationship is fundamentally homogeneous. In Sade it is (at least initially) heterogeneous. There, according to Saint-Amand, is no "Golden Rule" (or any variation of it) in Sadean ethics: "The well-being of the other never is the aim of the Sadean subject. On the contrary, he is animated by an unmitigated devotion to the propagation of evil – crimes, murders, vengeance."11

Any claim that Robespierre's violent political actions could in any way be associated with Sadism – in terms of how it manifested in Sade himself – is obviously indefensible. But a consideration of Sade does shed a great deal of light in Robespierre in that it highlights the distinction between Robespierre and Rousseau. Just as Rousseau's Other contrasts sharply with Sade's, Robespierre's Other contrasts sharply with Rousseau's. For Rousseau, compassion and pity are highlighted, mitigating violence. For Robespierre, the Other can be justly sacrificed for the "General Will" or good. This sacrifice is not an appeal to any transcendent normative principle, but is rather simply violence carried out by the state. Sade's blurred distinction between justice and violence is recalled. In the same sense that the distinction between justice and violence is blurred in Sade, it is also blurred in Robespierre where with Rousseau it hardly ever was. That said, Robespierre's dedication to the idea of the general will was no doubt sincere. Alphonse Aulard writes, "Robespierre believed them [the people] to be responsible, reasonable, and virtuous; he even stated that all virtue and reason resided in the people. He proclaimed that the people were never wrong: this was the theme of his oratory, at the Jacobins and in the Convention. And he was sincere."12 These sentiments were in fact in line with the idea of the general will and with Rousseau's philosophy. But resorting to violence in order to achieve or maintain that general will

is never prescribed by Rousseau and is Robespierre's own error. In fact, by resorting to violence, Robespierre diverged from Rousseavian principles of pity and compassion.

The political failings of the Jacobins are less a sign of the flawed nature of Rousseau's writings as an indication of their inability to be consistent or follow a train of logic. Robespierre's ideals were hindered by their inability to be fettered by logic. Aulard sums up the Jacobin train of thought, "All politics, according to Robespierre, must tend to establish the reign of virtue and confound vice. He reasoned thus: those who are virtuous are right; error is a corruption of the heart; error cannot be sincere; error is always deliberate. There are only two parties: good and bad citizens. Conclusion: all those who do not think as we do must be eliminated from the city. They are evil-intentioned and unsociable people."¹³ It is difficult to maintain that such an idea arose from Rousseau. The Jacobin rationale arises from a particular alienation of rational thought incapable of arising from a philosopher with the mental capacities of Rousseau – philosophy itself is founded upon the necessity of open-mindedness and a willingness of assess opinions other than one's own. Further, the Jacobin rationale seems to arise from an inability to define the word "vice". If vice can be hindered by the nigh-indiscriminate execution of hundreds of citizens, then it must be that the vice committed by those who are executed was worse than the vice of the executions themselves. How can this be so? The Jacobin campaign of executions seems much more in line with Sadean tendencies toward violence and the idea of a society saturated by fear than with a maintenance of Rousseavian ideas of a General Will. The rebuttal might be made, however, that the theoretical appearance of a philosophy might differ profoundly from its manifestation in the real world. This is a point that will be discussed below.

It is my belief that the incongruences in Rousseau's ideas that are sometimes criticized as inconsistencies are in fact both a sign of intellectual maturity and an image of the process of maturation. Rousseau was not inconsistent, but rather reformatted his ideas in later life to be consistent with – initially – a realistic and pragmatic view of the role of philosophy in the real world. It is an important point to remember that the break between Rousseau's individualism in his early discourses and his collectivism in *The Social Contract* and later writings was not accidental or arbitrary. One might say that Rousseau's individualism undermines itself in that the philosophy is founded upon highly abstract ideas with no foundational basis. Rousseau himself writes, "Let us begin, ... by laying facts aside, as they do not affect the question."¹⁴ His decision in his early discourses to lay facts aside and deal with political questions abstractly rather than concretely (as he would later attempt and fail to do in Corsica and Poland) represents an idealism in Rousseau that leads him to what seems to me a purer expression of his favorite beliefs than what he would express in his later writings.¹⁵ In his early writings, he explicitly defines man as good and society as corrupting, and the individual as morally superior to the collective. It is of utmost importance to remember that, with regard to the world around him, Rousseau was fundamentally and irredeemably a pessimist. His pessimism, however, ought not to be seen as somehow being the seed from whence Robespierre's political violence would emerge, but rather as the force which keeps his normative philosophies constantly idealistic, never to be applied to real political.

In my view, pessimism is the driving undercurrent of Rousseau's philosophy and what unifies his early and later writing. Whereas some see a philosopher who is inconsistent and who undermines his own ideas, I see a pessimist who cannot align his ideals with what he sees in the real world, though he intermittently attempts to do so. In other words, from the pragmatist's perspective, Rousseau's ideas were expressed in vain, and I believe Rousseau understood that. With regard to Poland and Corsica, Klosko writes, "His lack of success was in keeping with circumstances envisioned in the *Social Contract*, which recognizes the unlikelihood of successful reform."¹⁶ Paradoxically, however, the shift between individualism and collectivism in Rousseau comes when he realizes that his individualism is too idealistic and pessimistic to be of any practical value. Rousseau was faced with the fact that the State of Nature is gone, and civil society is here to stay. So what to make of it? Rousseau departed from individualism and wrote *The Social Contract*. What makes Rousseau's work with regard to political theory truly consistent is that Rousseau cannot be practical: his pessimism is the backbone of his idealism both during the early and later periods. Rousseau understood that, and Robespierre did not. It was Robespierre's own error attempting to apply Rousseau's conspicuously purely theoretical philosophy and attempting somehow to apply it to the real world.

I agree with a criticism of Rousseau with regard to his collectivistic writings. I believe that Rousseau threw out individualism because he knew it was incompatible with reality – the most striking reason being that the State of Nature no longer existed and that man was already, by Rousseau's early standards, ruined by civilization. But shortly after he exercises pragmatism in turning toward collectivism, his pessimism about the way things were led him back to idealism. Facts had to be changed, truths ignored, for the "political right" to be realized. In other words, the political right was always an ideal, and nothing more. Thus it should not have surprised him that he was unable to remedy Corsica and Poland's maladies. Rousseau himself admits that his notions of democracy are impossible.¹⁷ His failure in properly working out collectivism only serves to strengthen, in my view, the import of his early and continued

pessimism. Practical is one thing that Rousseau's early and late writings ultimately fail to be, and this is felt in his historical failure to meaningfully affect the conditions of the two states he was called upon to reform.

While Robespierre was a political leader, he emphasized the role of religion in the state, most notably through his "Cult of the Supreme Being". Aulard quotes either Condorcet or Rabaut Saint-Etienne in an effort to display Robespierre's tendency toward religious rather than philosophical approaches to politics: "He has all the characteristics, not of a religious leader, but of the leader of a sect... he is a priest, and will never be anything else."¹⁸ This, perhaps, maybe counted as another of Robespierre's frequent errors. In an "Age of Reason" assuming a political office and then thereafter assuming a religious role ought to be considered a mistake. In this way, Robespierre makes himself into a kind of pope-like figure that no Enlightenment political philosopher called for, let alone Rousseau, despite the fact that Robespierre's actions were supposed to have derived from Rousseau's thought. Aulard writes, "The foundation of Robespierre's character was a belief in the neo-Christianity of Rousseau, the religion of the Vicaire Savoyard, and his supreme but so far secret aim was to make this religion the religion of France."¹⁹ In an Enlightened age, placing the promotion of a specific religion above and before all others as his political goal was a great error on Robespierre's part.

George Lefebvre takes a different perspective, however, one which more closely conforms with a realization of the divergence between Rousseau's philosophy and Robespierre's politics: "Robespierre no doubt owes to Jean-Jacques Rousseau the fact that he became the most famous of the outstanding leaders of French democracy; but he also owes it in part to his own character and social origins."²⁰ He goes on to elucidate those social conditions which, according to Lefebvre, not only gave rise to his affinity with Rousseau's teachings but also gave him his own unique personality, which, of course, would have implications on his political career: "Being chaste and sober, of a taciturn and melancholy disposition, and delighting, above all, in the enjoyment of a family or of a small circle of friends, Robespierre was quite naturally attracted by Rousseau's teachings."²¹ But I do not believe Lefebvre stresses enough the manner in which Robespierre's biography might have affected his own political actions later on – making himself, rather than Rousseau, the responsible party for the Terror. Let us assess the fact that, as recorded by Jonathan Israel, Robespierre condemned, "the arid materialism of the encyclopédistes (Diderot and d'Holbach in particular), philosophes, who waged war not just on the great Rousseau but on sentiment, common opinion, and the simple virtue and beliefs of ordinary people."²² Is not it more likely that Robespierre identified Diderot and d'Holbach as enemies not because – perhaps not simply because – they were seen as being opposed to Rousseau but rather because they were materialists, while Robespierre had lived a humble childhood that must have impressed upon him at least somewhat of predisposition against materialism? Personal history, then, often accounts for Robespierre's character as much as if not more so than supposed influences from Rousseau's philosophy.

It is necessary to note that while Robespierre is seen as having taken a flawed philosophy – that of Rousseau, which no one could deny does have its flaws – and by attempting to apply it to the real world of politics was responsible for disastrous consequences. But ought it to be remembered that Rousseau himself attempted to apply his philosophy to Corsica and Poland and that in neither instance did it produce destructive results. It is clear then that the destruction of the Terror was Robespierre's own. J.M. Thompson records the sequence of events, and thereby elucidates a flaw in Robespierre's handling of events: "It might have been thought that with the execution of the King... the Queen... and Princess Elisabeth... all danger of a royalist reaction was over; that Girondism had finally perished with its leaders and amidst the ruins of "federal" Lyon and Marseille; and that the victory of Wattignies... had ended the "war against Kings." Why should not France now relax and enjoy the blessings of peace under the democratic republic provided for in the Constitution of 1783? Robespierre and his colleagues on the Committee did not think this could be done; and the Jacobin regime went on towards the downfall that every incident of the next six months made more inevitable."²³

While Robespierre and the Jacobins may have begun their campaign of bloodshed with violence against monarchical, despotic rulers, by failing to immediately implement a democratic republic, they themselves merely replaced the rulers they had executed. Even if – as it is often rightly pointed out – the general will can be seen to be nothing by the idea of majority rule – which can have terrible consequences – the Jacobin party in no way emulated the Rousseavian ideal and in fact did nothing other than replace a despotic aristocratic government with another despotic aristocratic government. He did not even attempt – it seems – to defend himself from the criticism that his government in no way represented the majority or general will of the people, for "he had made a speech declaring that the Government was being attacked from two sides – by the extremists and by the reactionaries – and that, until the Republic had achieved liberty and peace, "the Government has to defend itself against all the factions which attack it; the punishment of the people's enemies [he added] is death."²⁴ While he speaks of "the punishment of the people's enemies," one cannot help but notice that he began his statement with a rationalization that "the Government has to defend itself," which places a distinction between the government and the people which, even if Robespierre somehow failed to realize existed, truly did exist in France at the time of the Terror. The flaw in Robespierre's logic, of course, lies in the fact that

the so-called “people’s enemies” are the people themselves, and that that by arresting civil liberties, one cannot possibly hope to realize thereby a day when those liberties are freely granted. One cannot promote freedom by curtailing it.

Returning to Sade, a concluding point might be made about why and how Robespierre differed so radically from the philosophies of the philosopher who supposedly inspired him. The entire thrust of Enlightenment principles was exactly that they were normative, the Revolution itself being an expression of normative political philosophy that envisioned a progression from the Ancien Régime to a form of government that ought to be. Normative sadism, however, appears to be completely indefensible, and it is not my suspicion that Sade attempts to support it, although Robespierre clearly did carry out violence almost as though someone had prescribed it (though, as will be seen, no one did save Robespierre and the Jacobins). A descriptive conception of human society is foundational for Sade’s philosophy in that Sade takes humanity’s violent nature to symbolize the universality of fear, which, if the justice/violence equivocality is maintained, represents the universality of the fear of justice. Understood in this light, Sade’s philosophy would be seen not to advocate any violence at all except violence as retribution, which, owing to the universality of fear, ought to be rarely necessary. And the Self/Other model is maintained in that the Self understands the presence of the Other – the object to be cruel to – in him/herself. Very little elucidation is necessary to show how in nearly every respect Rousseau’s Self/Other is the opposite of Sade’s except in that they both – as the “Dialogue” seems to suggest – make peace the normative principle. If both Sade and Rousseau make peace the normative principle, even in light of the fact that their philosophies differ so radically, then how did the French revolution become reduced to such a violent state? The answer lies in the fact that the violence of the Reign of Terror was prescribed by no one but Robespierre and the Jacobins alone.

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