

Present historic: Carlyle, Robespierre and the French Revolution

By Ann Talbot
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Ruth Scurr (ed.) *Carlyle's The French Revolution* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010) and Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London: Vintage, 2006)

The boy kneels in the street. His borrowed clothes are wet with the rain that has been falling all day. A coach rattles across the cobbles and halts beside him. The occupants do not get down because of the rain. Instead, a window is lowered and the boy, still kneeling, delivers an oration. The coach drives on, leaving the boy and several hundred other boys and masters kneeling in the street. They get to their feet and file back through the gates of Louis-le Grand College, walking neither too fast nor too slow as the school rules prescribe.

The boy was Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) and the coach contained Louis XVI and his family returning from his coronation at Reims in 1775. Louis had considered breaking with a tradition that dated back to the fifth century and holding the coronation in Paris, but his advisers warned him that the times were too troubled to risk such innovations. The visit to the college was something of a compromise. It was a nod towards the new France in which these boys would take their place as administrators and lawyers. They were being educated for their future role, according to a strict classical regime.

Their reading was carefully monitored to exclude the influence of unsuitable and subversive literature. That did not stop them reading it. Robespierre became a passionate devotee of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Even the classics they read formed their minds according to a pattern of republican virtue that jarred with the aristocratic mores of *ancien regime* France. Tacitus might be an exercise in style, history and grammar in any other circumstances, but in late eighteenth century France it read like an exhortation to revolution. The authorities of Louis-le-Grand would find that they had produced a generation of revolutionaries. The talents of the college's young orator would be applied to a very different purpose when he next encountered the king.

Ruth Scurr has done an enormous service by producing a collection of extracts from Thomas Carlyle's powerful narrative *The French Revolution* to add to her earlier biography of Robespierre, in which she uncovers something of the character and motivations of a man who is more usually hidden in the "blood red mist" of the Terror. The portrait she offers is a generally sympathetic one that aims to present an objective picture of Robespierre and restore him to his rightful place in history as a man who helped to shape modern political institutions—albeit by a means of a revolutionary process that is entirely unpalatable to the present-day liberals that benefit from it. As Scurr writes, "To understand him is to begin to understand the French Revolution."

Not only the French Revolution. A serious study of Robespierre inevitably throws light on other revolutions, as Scurr's critics have been quick to point out. Reviewing Scurr's biography in the *Nation*, Professor Lynn Hunt, who teaches French and European history at the University of California, Los Angeles, draws a direct connection between Robespierre and Leon Trotsky, and between both of them and all forms of terror.

"History transformed Robespierre from a highly personalized ogre into the embodiment of revolution itself. The right has been certain of the pedigree, at least since 1917. In their view, the theorist of terror set the mold for all the great revolutionary butchers: Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot and, more recently, both Saddam Hussein and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The left has felt less sure of what to do with his legacy. For Marx he was a "terrorist with his head in the clouds," driven by ancient Roman ideals and therefore inherently incapable of sniffing out the ascension of modern bourgeois social relations. But the later French socialists and Russian Bolsheviks, especially Trotsky, lionized him. Trotsky remained obsessed with "the Incorruptible" throughout his life, seeing Lenin and then himself as the true Robespierre of the Russian Revolution." [Lynn Hunt, "For Reasons of State," *The Nation*, May 29, 2006.]

Marx does not describe Robespierre as a "terrorist with his head in the clouds," as Hunt suggests. What he and Engels wrote was that Napoleon was "no terrorist with his head in the clouds" [Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family* (1845) MECW, vol. 4]. The omission of that two-letter word and the false attribution to Robespierre is of a piece with the unhistorical amalgam that Hunt attempts to create between Trotsky and Robespierre, and the distinction she attempts to draw between Trotsky and Marx. Marx was certainly critical of Robespierre, but then so was Trotsky. Trotsky defined the relationship between Marxism and Jacobinism in the following way in *Results and Prospects* (Trotsky, 1906).

"The whole of the present international proletarian movement was formed and grew strong in the struggle against the traditions of Jacobinism. We subjected its theories to criticism, we exposed its historical limitations, its social contradictoriness, its utopianism, we exposed its phraseology, and broke with its traditions, which for decades had been regarded as the sacred heritage of the revolution.

"But we defend Jacobinism against the attacks, the calumny, and the stupid vituperations of anaemic, phlegmatic liberalism. The bourgeoisie has shamefully betrayed all the traditions of its historical youth, and its present hirelings dishonour the graves of its ancestors and scoff at the ashes of their ideals. The proletariat has taken the honour of the revolutionary past of the bourgeoisie under its protection. The proletariat, however radically it may have, in practice, broken with the revolutionary traditions of the bourgeoisie, nevertheless preserves them, as a sacred heritage of great passions, heroism and initiative, and its heart beats in sympathy with the speeches and acts of the Jacobin Convention."

There is, in this sense, a continuity between the French Revolution in what Trotsky describes as its “heroic phase” and the proletarian revolution. But the social basis of the French Revolution of 1789 was entirely different from that of the Russian Revolution of 1917. To attempt to fuse them together, as Hunt does, is to remove them from their proper historical context and to deny the distinctive social content of each. It is hopelessly abstract to speak of revolution without specifying the social and historical content of the particular example under discussion. To throw assorted dictators and Islamic fundamentalists into the mix is simply to sow confusion.

If we are historically specific about the Jacobins, we can see there was an inescapable contradiction within their programme. They attempted to create a society founded on reason, liberty, equality and fraternity on the basis of private property and of social relations that presupposed the exploitation of one class by another. It was an inevitably utopian project that ultimately could be sustained only on the basis of the Terror, and then only on a temporary and tenuous basis.

The imperatives of private property and profit were not about to stand still, and the Jacobins had no alternative form of social organisation to offer. Robespierre did not need to imagine conspiracies. They arose in plenty. Just across the Channel, the emerging capitalist power of Britain could afford to finance the armies of the surviving *ancien regimes* and uprisings such as that in the province of La Vendée. Domestic opposition was produced by the war profiteers and grain merchants, who exploited the continuing shortages of grain.

Historians tend to focus on the Terror and attempt to catalogue its victims in Paris and the provinces, but they seldom set beside it the death toll from the war that resulted from the invasion of France, or the potential death toll if the Terror had not enabled the Jacobins to mobilise resistance to that invasion. France defeated, devastated, despoiled and partitioned would have seen a far higher death toll than that produced by the guillotine. The terror of the guillotine is remembered, but the terror of the invading Prussians is forgotten. Nor had the French monarchy and aristocracy been slow to resort to their own terror in the past.

The fascination with the Terror to the exclusion of the circumstances in which it took place has tended to lead to the conclusion that revolution is necessarily associated with Terror. Not every revolution is the French Revolution. It is therefore unhistorical to suppose that all revolutions must lead to a terror comparable to that of the French Revolution.

Scurr’s biography of Robespierre attempts to put him in his correct historical context, rather than submerge him in a long and assorted list of dictators and Islamic fundamentalists who are all supposed to be rendered equal in their sanguinary aims. The picture she offers of Robespierre is historically founded and nuanced. He is a complex character rather than a crude stereotype culled from the current, modish fears of the liberal intelligentsia.

It would be impossible to write about the execution of the king or the Terror without mentioning Robespierre, and it would be impossible to write about Robespierre with mentioning the Terror and his role in the decision to execute Louis. But Scurr is meticulous in showing how both the execution of the king and the Terror emerged from the logic of political events. She traces the evolution of Robespierre’s political thought through his speeches, and shows how the young lawyer who opposed the death penalty became the strongest advocate of the king’s execution and the Terror under the pressure of war and internal conspiracies.

If there is a weakness in the book, it is that Scurr does not have a firm grasp of the class issues involved in the revolution and which underlay the terror. In part, this is imposed by the medium of biography. Scurr’s focus must be on the person of Robespierre and cannot shift to the wider social context that would be required if she were to examine why capitalist social relations made the Jacobin programme utopian.

But even in a longer, more wide-ranging book it is possible that the same problem would be evident, since Scurr largely sees France through Robespierre’s eyes. Even in biography, that has its limits. It is possible now to have a far clearer conception of eighteenth century social relations and their material basis than Robespierre could have had at the time.

The influence of Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul is evident in Scurr’s willingness to see history from below, which sets her somewhat apart from the revisionist tradition, and she has managed to raise some hackles from this quarter as a result. It may be that her future work will encourage her to explore the class questions more closely.

The attempt to understand Robespierre and the French Revolution brings Scurr almost inevitably to Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). His now profoundly unfashionable account of the revolution was first published in 1837 and has Robespierre at its centre. Scurr has provided readers with an accessible edition of some of the highlights of Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, complete with a useful introduction. Carlyle’s work has gone out of favour in part because of a literary style that was extraordinary even by the standards of the time, but, more fundamentally, because he recognised in the French Revolution an inevitable and necessary process that was still influencing the course of political life in his own day.

Carlyle’s French Revolution was not, like Simon Schama’s, an accidental event that could have been avoided. Nor was it, like Robert Darnton’s, dissociated from the ideas of the Enlightenment. The influence of Rousseau on Robespierre, who was rumoured to sleep with a copy of the *Social Contract* under his pillow, cannot be doubted. He often referred to the philosopher in his speeches and Robespierre was the central figure in the most revolutionary phase of the struggle. With these two books, Scurr has begun to reassemble the pieces of a history that has been heavily deconstructed in recent years.

Scurr’s extracts from Carlyle provide the modern reader with a good entry point into his dense multi-volume work. He has suffered something of the same fate as Sir Walter Scott, whom he resembles in both his Tory radicalism and his elaborate, but intensely visual, literary style. There is a cinematic character in the way they both present history. They both owed a debt to Goethe and the German Pantheist tradition. Like Goethe, there is an element of the prophet about Carlyle. For Carlyle, history was a truly human “revelation” that owed nothing to God and reflected only the work of man.

History, for Carlyle, is not just about something that happened in the past. The French Revolution defined the modern period.

“It is the baptism-day of Democracy; sick Time has given it birth, the numbered months being run. The extreme-unction day of Feudalism!”

His use of the present tense is characteristic. He aims to make the reader experience what it was like to be there. The present tense conveys a sense of the rush of events and the uncertainties of the time. There was a definite purpose to this style. For Carlyle, the French Revolution remained part of a living struggle that would continue to influence the centuries to come.

“What a work, O Earth and Heavens, what a work! Battles and bloodshed, September Massacres, Bridges of Lodi, retreats of Moscow, Waterloos, Peterloos, Tenpound Franchises, Tarbarrels and Guillotines;—and from this present date, if one might prophesy, some two centuries of it still to fight! Two centuries; hardly less; before Democracy go through its due, most baleful, stages of Quackocracy;

and a pestilential World be burnt up and have begun to grow green and young again.”

Reading his *French Revolution* is a dizzying experience. Words and images tumble one over another in rapid and headlong succession. He describes the procession of orders that preceded the opening of the Estates General scanning the crowds gathered in windows and other vantage points, cutting rapidly to the procession itself, and just as rapidly focusing in on the individuals who will be significant for his story until he come to Robespierre, then an unknown advocate from Arras.

“[W]ho of these Six Hundred may be the meanest? Shall we say, that anxious, slight, ineffectual-looking man, under thirty, in spectacles, his eyes (were the glasses off) troubled, careful; with upturned face, snuffing dimly the uncertain future-time; complexion of a multiplex atrabiliar colour, the final shade of which may be the pale sea-green”.

Robespierre had a pale complexion and wore green-tinted glasses to protect his weak eyes from the glare of the sun. Carlyle’s portrait of him as the “sea-green incorruptible” is an unflattering one. He has no natural sympathy for Robespierre, yet he holds the centre of the stage from this first appearance to his execution in July 1794 at the age of 35. He was an essential anti-hero for an historian who thought that history was driven by the actions of great men who embodied the spirit of their age. And Carlyle was objective enough to recognise that Robespierre expressed the spirit of his age.

Carlyle was not unaware of class, but he did not have a fully developed concept of the class struggle or its role in history. Despite these limitations, G.V. Plekhanov wrote approvingly of Carlyle’s *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841).

“Carlyle calls great men *Beginners*. This is a very apt description. A great man is precisely a Beginner because he sees *farther* than others do and his desires are *stronger* than in others. He solves scientific problems raised by the previous course of society’s intellectual development; he indicates the new social needs created by the previous development of social relations; he assumes the initiative in meeting those needs. He is a hero, not in the sense that he can halt or change the natural course of things, but in the sense that his activities are the conscious and free expression of that necessary and unconscious course. Therein lie all his significance, all his power. But it is a vast significance, and an awesome power.” [‘On the Individual’s Role in History’, G.V. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. II, p. 314]

Plekhanov was not alone in his admiration for Carlyle. Engels reviewed his *Past and Present* (1843) for the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* and described it as the only book published in England that year that was worth reading. Marx found him “frequently brilliant and always original”. He made careful notes on Carlyle’s *Chartism* in the 1840s and his reference to the nexus of “cash payment” in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* is probably drawn from Carlyle.

Isaac Deutscher drew a comparison between Carlyle’s work and Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*. Like Trotsky, Carlyle is a master of the art of drawing crowd scenes and the movement of masses of people in the course of a revolutionary struggle. His description of the

insurrection of 10 August 1792, *sans* when the *Parisistes* Tuileries, marking the beginning of the end for the monarchy, is sensitive to the subtle and sudden shifts in consciousness that characterise such a mass movement.

“Reader, fancy not, in thy languid way, that Insurrection is easy. Insurrection is difficult: each individual uncertain even of his next neighbour; totally uncertain of his distant neighbours, what strength is with him, what strength is against him; certain only that, in case of failure, his individual portion is the gallows.”

He imagines a flight across Paris “waving open all roofs and privacies”, noting the different responses.

“Fighters of this section draw out; hear that the next Section does not; and thereupon draw in. Sainte-Antoine, on this side the River, is uncertain of Saint-Marceau on that”.

He charts the uncertainties of the night until the morning when the royal family and courtiers, after beginning to believe that they are safe and the ringing of the tocsin has not summoned the revolutionaries, look out of the palace windows to see armed crowds advancing towards them.

“Unhappy Friends, the tocsin does yield, has yielded! Lo ye, how with the first sun-rays its Ocean-tide, of pikes and fusils, flows glittering from the far East,—immeasurable; born of the Night!”

He is acutely aware of the dynamics of the revolution and understands the external threat of invasion and the internal threat of counter-revolution that produced the September Massacres.

“Thirty thousand Aristocrats within our own walls; and but the merest quarter-tithe of them yet put in Prison. Nay there goes a word that even these will revolt.”

While for many of his contemporaries, as for many historians writing today, the September Massacres are an event that has a supra-historical character and serve to condemn the revolution, Carlyle was careful to set them within the historical context of previous massacres and atrocities carried out under the *ancien regime*.

“Kings themselves, not in desperation, but only in difficulty, have sat hatching, for year and day ... their Bartholomew Business”.

He weighs the questions that faced the revolutionaries in relation to the king.

“Keep him prisoner, he is a secret centre for the Disaffected, for endless plots, attempts and hopes of theirs. Banish him, he is an open centre for them; his royal war-standard, with what of divinity it has, unrolls itself, summoning the world. Put him to death? A cruel,

questionable extremity that too: and yet the likeliest in these extreme circumstances, of insurrectionary men, whose own life and death lies staked: accordingly it is said, from the last step of the throne to the first of the scaffold there is a short distance.”

To those that would condemn the revolutionaries for lack of mercy he points out:

“Reader, thou hast never lived, for months, under the rustle of Prussian gallows-ropes”.

He recognises the political dynamics of the Terror and the relationship which developed between the *sans culottes* and the most determined of the Jacobins in the National Assembly—the Mountain—who established a system of repression against the enemies of the revolution. This was the Terror.

“[T]ill treason be punished at home; they do not fly to the frontiers; but only fly hither and thither, demanding and denouncing. The Mountain must speak new fiat, and new fiats”.

The Terror does not emerge as the work of a few conspirators in Carlyle’s account of the French Revolution, but as the expression of a class that is fighting for its very existence.

“Twenty-five million, risen at length into Pythian mood, had stood up simultaneously to say, with a sound that goes through far lands and times, that this untruth of an Existence had become insupportable. Oh ye Hypocrisies and Speciosities, Royal mantles, Cardinal plushcloaks, ye Credos, Formulas, Respectabilities, fair-painted Sepulchres full of dead-men’s bones, behold, ye appear to us to be altogether a Lie. Yet our Life is not a Lie, yet our Hunger and Misery is not a Lie! Behold we lift up, one and all, our Twenty-five million right hands; and take the Heavens, and the Earth and also the Pit of Tophet to witness, that either ye shall be abolished, or else we shall be abolished.”

It was Carlyle’s genius as a historian; that, without sympathising with Robespierre, he could understand the social forces that lay behind this slight, apparently insignificant, provincial lawyer and made him a great revolutionary. He demonstrated the same ability to understand the revolutionary role that Oliver Cromwell played in the English Revolution. He produced an edition of Cromwell’s letters (1845) that Marx admired.

“To Thomas Carlyle belongs the credit of having taken the literary field against the bourgeoisie at a time when its views, tastes and ideas held the whole of official English literature totally in thrall, and in a manner which is at times even revolutionary. For example, in his history of the French Revolution, in his apology for Cromwell, in the pamphlet on Chartism and in *Past and Present*.” [Karl Marx, “Review: Latter-Day Pamphlets”, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Politisch-ökonomische Revue* No. 4, April, 1850, *MECW*, vol. 10, pp. 301-10]

But 1848 was for Carlyle, as for other radical members of the bourgeoisie, a turning point beyond which they had no stomach for revolution. Carlyle lost his faith in democracy as revolution swept Europe and the working class emerged for the first time as a distinct and independent political force. Workers were to Carlyle “Vagrant Lackalls”. Under these conditions, Carlyle feared that universal suffrage would mean rule by the ignorant rather than the noble and the wise. The youth of the “Students, young men of letters, advocates, newspaper writers, hot inexperienced enthusiasts” who led the 1848 revolutions he now found disconcerting in a way that it had not been when he wrote of the youth of the Jacobins.

A tendency to idealise the medieval, which had always been evident in Carlyle, as it was in other English radicals and even some Chartists, came increasingly to dominate his thought after 1848. The genius of his early works was lost in Carlyle’s later works, among which can be numbered his life of Frederick the Great, the book which Hitler was reading during his last days in the bunker. In these later works only the cult of the great man remained. Despite Carlyle’s later evolution his early works are still well worth reading for the insight they offer into the development of radical thought in his own time, for their importance in the development of historiography and because they offer an effective antidote to the prevailing air of cynicism, derived from postmodernism, that has infected the study of the French Revolution.

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