

A large, stylized graphic of a flame or fire, rendered in a light blue-grey color, occupies the left side of the slide. It has multiple pointed, upward-curving shapes that resemble tongues of fire.

The French Revolution

Culture and Politics in contemporary France

Preliminary thoughts on the French Revolution

- 1789-1799
- Discussion about the rupture/continuity with the preceding history of France
- Ancient Regime / Modern and individualistic State-nation
- Ancient Regime (corporations, interpersonal and local relations)
- Modern regime (discussion on the notion of political representation, legitimacy of power)
- The Third Estate (Siéyès). "What is The **Third Estate**?"
- Revolution: new power share + affirmation of the **bourgeoisie** as a new political elite
- **Institutionalization of a representative government** (September 1792 : The First Republic)

A few theses on the French Revolution

- For the Prussian philosopher Hegel, the French Revolution illustrates the contrast between the will for absolute freedom and the concrete Terror (he perceived the dialectics with the negative reality). The idea of liberty was too abstract and was not able to find a concrete form.
- Tocqueville had another view on the French Revolution. He saw the Revolution as an attempt to resacralize the collective unity. The Revolution was not against the religion, it was paradoxically a way of re-injecting a spiritual force.
- Book *The Ancient Regime and the Revolution*
- The impact of all the celebrations (*fraternité*)
- *Fête de l'être suprême* (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84122902/f1.item>)



2023-11-25

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/>

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

The reality of the Revolution

- The Reign of Terror. Executions/massacres after the proclamation of the First Republic
- Name that is associated with the Reign of Terror
- "The figure of Maximilian Robespierre has always gone between two extremes. Some present him as the **tyrant** who adulterated democracy and perverted the Republic turning it into Terror. They are right. Others see in the **Jacobin** a revolutionary leader who put an end to the Ancien Régime, a system that burdened the French people, and inspired several generations to change history" (CE Noticias Financieras, 16 August 2023)

Maximilien de Robespierre (1758-1794)



Robespierre

- “Maximilian was a disciplined and serious boy from a provincial town, Arras, where he was born in 1758. He studied law and became a criminal judge. He earned a reputation as a defender of the humble and made a name of himself as a writer and orator. His ambition encouraged him to run for election to the meeting of the States General. He was elected. Before the other representatives he defended the ‘Rousseauian’ democracy, very different from how we understand it today, since it was based on the general will, not pluralism, and the legislative construction of the new man” (CE Noticias Financieras, 16 August 2023)
- « Robespierre is the name of the contradiction that continues to characterize the attitude of the French to their Revolution. A hero to some, reviled by others, Robespierre embodies at once the Revolution’s promise, still alive today, and the bloody impasse to which it led » (Gauchet, 2022: 1). Dictatorship of the *Comité de Salut Public* (Committee of Public Safety)+ radical turn of the Republic (Gauchet, 2022: 6).

The crisis of leadership in France

- Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien* (1949)
- Two groups who have difficulties with the history of France: "those who cannot permit themselves to be stirred by the memory of the crowning of French kings at Reims, and those who feel no emotion on reading accounts of the Festival of Federation" (Gauchet, 2022: 3)
- The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (26 August 1789). Construction of the new man (Rousseauist perspective). The power is "legitimately created and exercised by human beings" (Gauchet, 2022: 7).

Robespierre and the Jacobin club

- Some universalist characteristics in Robespierre's thinking (vision for principles) (Gauchet, 2022: 34)
- Law Le Chapelier (14 June 1791): the assemblies of people (trade-unions...) were banned as they propagate risks for conspiracy. Robespierre was against this law
- Civil constitution of the clergy (12 July 1790). The church depends on the State (a big turn in the reorganization of the State).
- Discussions on the representation of the people (the « nation »). Many references to the « people » in his speeches (Gauchet, 2022: 46).

The difficulties of discussing the adequate political representation

- “In postulating the existence of a social actor that happens to be the “most numerous class,” in which the theoretical aggregation of individual potentials is realized, he sidestepped the most difficult question of all—the political question of what **sort of regime** is required by a society based on rights and what sort of constitutional mechanisms are proper to it” (Gauchet, 2022: 47)
- Formulation of one of the characteristics of the French thinking, the cult of generalities (Rosanvallon, 2004). Universalist approach with a tendency to define the general rules
- Cult for the Supreme Being (Gauchet, 2022: 49)
- Rousseauist perspective. Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, imagined a way to create enthusiasm for public bodies (general will). Idea of a civil religion

Address to the National Convention – 5 February 1794

- “What is the end of our revolution? The tranquil enjoyment of liberty and equality; the reign of that **eternal justice**, the laws of which are graven, not on marble stone, but in the hearts of men, even in the heart of the slave who has forgotten them, and in that of the tyrant who disowns them” (Blaisdell, 2011: 2)
- “We wish to substitute in our country morality for egotism, integrity for ‘honor’, principles for customs, deeds for decorum, the empire of reason over the tyranny of fashion, a contempt of vice for a contempt of misfortune, pride for insolence, magnanimity for vanity, merit for intrigue, genius for wit, truth for flash, the attractions of happiness for the ennui of sensuality, the grandeur of man for the littleness of the great, a people magnanimous, powerful, happy, for a people amiable, frivolous and miserable; that is to say, all the virtues and miracles of a Republic instead of all the vices and absurdities of a monarchy” (Blaisdell, 2011: 3)

The differences between the *Girondins* and the *Jacobins*

- 1791-1793 Influence of the Girondists in the Legislative Assembly. With the **Montagnards**, they were at the origins of the creation of the **Jacobins**.
- Brissot was their leader (from the *département* of Gironde)
- **Girondins** were like an union of different political tendencies. They were against the monarchy and wanted to extend internationally the principles of the Revolution. Moderate Republicans.
- Insurrection of 31 May-2 June 1793 beginning of the Reign of Terror
- Jacobins (radical views on the Revolution + trust in a central State)
- Today, the expressions "Jacobins" and "Girondins" are always in use in France. The word "*Jacobin*": somebody who is in favour of a strong central power.

The Jacobins

- Some current uses of the word "Jacobinism"
- "I believe that Uruguayan society owes itself a profound examination of the role that the State has played in this matter for more than a century. Many times we hear proud statements by advocates of **Jacobinism** that Uruguay is the most secular (or atheist) country in Latin America, which is true" ("Vernacular jacobinism", CE Noticias Financieras, 9 May 2023)
- "Moreno's Jacobinism is closed to the ethical and moral rigidity of an extreme Catholicism, than to Robespierre's atheism" (About Cornelio Saavedra, CE Noticias Financieras, English, 6 June 2023)

Jacobinism

- “In response to this rampant **Jacobinism**, the renowned actor Gerald Depardieu renounced his French passport, accepting a Russian passport (in return for calling Russia a democracy, which probably forced him to summon all his acting ability) while taking up residence in Belgium” Cross, P. (2013, Jan 08). Adventures in socialism; france's return to past sinks sclerotic economy. *National Post* Retrieved from <https://ezp.sub.su.se/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/adventures-socialism-frances-return-past-sinks/docview/1267206172/se-2>
- Radicalizing the State (Jacobinist tendencies). It certainly contributed to the cult of the State in France

The turn to terror

- " 'The aim of constitutional government is to preserve the Republic; that of revolutionary government is to found it' " (Gauchet, 2022: 103-104)
- Conspiracy, the factions. Climate of suspicion which explains the negative attitude towards political parties.
- Association between virtue and terror: " 'if the mainspring of popular government in a time of peace is virtue, in a time of revolution it is at once *virtue and terror*: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless' " (Gauchet, 2022: 113).
- Comments on Saint-Just who was close to Robespierre and shared his radical views on the revolutionary government and the terror.

Conclusions

- Robespierre – the idea of building a new human nature
- Radical views on equality and on the Republican government
- Robespierre applied some of the conceptions of Rousseau
- Virtue and terror
- Nevertheless, the terror is not only due to Robespierre but to a specific orientation of the Revolution (Gauchet, 2022: 185)
- Jacobinism remains in the political language to qualify a passion for equality and radicality
- Roots for modern populism (Hazareesingh, 2015: 128)

References

- Blaisdell, R. (Red.). (2011). *Infamous speeches: from Robespierre to Osama bin Laden*. Dover Publications.
- Gauchet, M., & DeBevoise, M. B. (2022). *Robespierre: the man who divides us the most*. Princeton University Press.
- Hazareesingh, S. (2015). *How the French think: an affectionate portrait of an intellectual people*. Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2004). *Le modèle politique français*. Paris: Seuil.