

The Purge of the Girondins: The Use and Abuse of Violence from the September  
Massacres to the Assassination of Marat

by


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ABSTRACT


Looking at the work of Jean Paul Marat and Maximilien Robespierre from the September massacres of 1792 to the assassination of Marat 13 July 1793, this thesis examines the implications of putting violence at the center of analysis of the French Revolution. By focussing on the tension between violence as a force which the masses used to express themselves, while at the same time one which revolutionary leaders manipulated towards their ultimately partisan ends, this thesis demonstrates the extent to which historians have tended to treat violence as a spontaneous response to certain circumstances rather than the product of deliberate political calculation. In particular, this thesis argues that radical leaders manipulated the use of violence as a means of overcoming the barriers between the official political sphere of revolutionary institutions, and the unofficial sphere of popular street politics.

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## INTRODUCTION:

The French Revolution is widely associated with horrific levels of violence. Given the indisputable centrality of violence to revolutionary events, it is surprising the extent to which historians have either taken it for granted or explained it away. There are very few historians who write specifically about violence, and works which would be enriched by considering violence tend either to omit it, structurally exclude it, or give it only passing acknowledgement. As a result of the lack of analysis specifically of violence, historians have overlooked the extent to which its deployment in politics was often deliberate.

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that the popular violence of the French Revolution was neither random nor inevitable. I contend that radical revolutionary leaders consciously used violence to manipulate the tension between the undefined and overlapping spheres of official and unofficial politics and justice during the French Revolution. The official sphere is the realm of established institutions, whereas the unofficial encompasses any sector of society which appeals to the political as rationalization for its cause. The line between these two realms need not be sharply defined for each to exist and have its own distinctive character.

Although historians of the French Revolution frequently discuss popular notions of politics and justice, little work has been done specifically on the interaction between popular forms of political expression and the world of official politics. The historians who come closest to this type of analysis are Donald Sutherland in *France*, and Arno Mayer in *Furies*, as they address the spiral effect of the interplay between contending groups. However, Sutherland and Mayer emphasize the interaction between

revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forms of politics, whereas the focus of this project is the interaction between the revolutionary masses and revolutionary institutions.

Centering my analysis on violence makes it possible to develop the two inter-related tensions which, I argue, contributed to the Revolution's length and violence. First, Enlightenment thought held that politics derived its essence and legitimacy from public opinion and the "natural" political activity carried out by the masses, while also viewing the political more strictly as the work and product of governing institutions. Second, as a result of the fall of absolutist monarchy, the concept of legality was in flux. On the one hand French society saw the legal as grounded in natural laws and popular tradition; on the other, a modern conception of legality, as *specifically* that which is written in law, was beginning to take hold. The commonality between these two tensions was the contentious divide between the official and the unofficial, the natural and the unnatural. Although her focus is not violence, Lynn Hunt addresses this overlap when she argues that "During the Revolution, even the most ordinary objects and customs became political emblems and potential sources of political and social conflict... Because politics did not take place in a defined sphere, it tended to invade everyday life instead."<sup>1</sup> Establishing the modern definition and boundaries of politics and law was the driving dynamic of the Revolution. In this process, violence was often used (as a means of expression) and abused (manipulated) as a political tool or tactic.

With the collapse of the *Ancien Régime*, there was no longer a clear understanding of just what politics were. What was widely believed was that politics had to do with the making and enforcing of law, but opinion diverged on the question of the purpose of the

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 53-6.

law. Radical revolutionaries believed that social harmony would follow naturally from good (true) law; social harmony was thus the moral obligation of politics. However, not everyone agreed that social harmony was what would define the completion of the Revolution. This tension was intensified by the question of the source of political legitimacy. If legitimacy resided in the people, then their social wellbeing was reinforced as being the ultimate purpose of law. Theoretically, the revolutionary interpretation of Enlightenment thought held that official political institutions were only convenient manifestations of the unofficial general will; in reality, however, over the course of the revolution, the new institutions began to take on a legitimacy of their own.

Revolutionaries frequently used violence as a tool to negotiate the space between official and unofficial politics. In addressing acts of violence, revolutionary figures had to face the issue of the source of legality and wherein resided its legitimacy. The written law was yet in too great a state of flux to act as a counterbalance when violence was highly popular. This uncertainty surrounding the body of official law created a large space in which it was possible to conduct unofficial politics. Throughout the Revolution, radical political actors appealed to popular violence as a means of keeping their demands on the official political agenda.

The two-way nature of these tensions is clear when one looks at which acts of violence were appropriated by the Revolution. In some cases, political leaders politicized violent acts and used them to offer legitimacy to mob actions, while in others outbreaks of popular violence were used to justify consolidating state power. Sometimes violence was rejected as apolitical and entirely inappropriate. Some insurrections naturally took on a heroic quality, making them difficult for political actors to reject, but others were

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shunned. For example, as Sutherland points out, “The conquerors of the Bastille were national heroes, recognized as such by distinct medals and uniforms; the peasant insurgents were hanged.”<sup>2</sup> As we will see with the September massacres, whether or not there was approval of violence as a means, the ends of an insurrection were often accepted as a matter of fact when it was politically convenient to do so. The conservative, the moderate, and the radical all engaged in this process of accepting or rejecting acts of violence.

Although acts of popular violence were often explicitly appropriated or rejected by official political actors who shaped and contorted them after the fact, it is important not to allow this manipulation to define events entirely. The masses self-consciously used violence for their own purposes. Not of least significance was that, well before politics had been conceived as something popular, the masses rose up on 14 July 1789 to save the Revolution. Doyle states: “Parisians knew they had saved the Revolution and were proud of it.”<sup>3</sup> Nor was this reality lost on revolutionary leaders who, from then on, had to take mass opinion into consideration.

The nature of violence makes it a force which is very difficult to control, even in cases where great lengths are taken to do so as with an army or a police force. My purpose is not to claim that there was no spontaneous violence during the Revolution, but rather to draw attention to the extent to which, before, during, and after the fact, revolutionary leaders attempted to shape both spontaneous and engineered violence as a means of advancing their political agendas.

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<sup>2</sup> D. M. G. Sutherland, *France 1789-1815: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (London: Fontana, 1985), 86.

<sup>3</sup> William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 177.

I will conduct this project of putting violence at the center of analysis and demonstrating that violence was a consciously employed political tactic by looking at the publications and speeches of Jean-Paul Marat and Maximilien Robespierre from the spring of 1792 to the summer of 1793, focussing on the purge of the Girondins from 31 May to 2 June 1793. During this year of the Revolution, the tension between official and unofficial politics was very strong. Revolutionary institutions were becoming solidified, but the question of just what fell within the realm of official politics remained contentious. Further, the unofficial public space was by this stage of the Revolution quite large and the actors within it were much more experienced. Marat and Robespierre serve as excellent lenses through which to view these tensions. Both men claimed that their legitimacy resided in the fact that they were representatives of the people. They grounded this claim in their unofficial political roles: for Marat his populist paper, *L'Ami du Peuple*, and for Robespierre, his status as a leading Jacobin. However, both men used their populist bases of support to advance their causes in the official political sphere and used violence as a means of constantly renegotiating the space between these two domains.

This thesis is presented in five parts. First, by looking at the literature on violence, Chapter I provides a generalized background against which to consider the interconnectedness of revolutionary violence and politics, from the perspective of both historians of the Revolution and political theorists who address the use of force. Second, Chapter II provides the narrative background of revolutionary events leading up to the period under consideration and lays out the framework of research and analysis in detail. Next, Chapters III and IV focus specifically on how Marat and Robespierre, respectively,

fit into this framework. Finally, Chapter V concludes by considering how looking at violence changes our perception of the Revolution, and how looking at the Revolution influences our perception of violence.

## CHAPTER I: THE LITERATURE ON VIOLENCE

This chapter begins by considering the historiography of the revolutionary crowd as presented by the Marxist, revisionist, and political culture schools. Because of their focus on the masses and popular action, it was in the work of crowd historians that I most expected to find analyses of revolutionary violence, but this did not prove to be the case. All of these schools tend either to divert attention from questions pertaining to violence, or structurally exclude them from analysis. Next, I will summarize the works on the Revolution which do directly address violence. Although historians of the Revolution do not often make violence a specific topic of analysis, its centrality to revolutionary events makes it impossible to overlook it altogether. In the following section I piece together themes which tend to reoccur when the historian is faced with rationalizing or justifying violence: the Rousseauian notion of a unitary will, conspiracy theories, violence as cleansing or sanctifying, the cyclical nature of revenge, and popular conceptions of justice.

After exploring what is and is not said about violence in the literature on the French Revolution, I go on to consider the work of political theorists who address the nature of force. These theorists provide a frame in which it is possible to develop analysis of the intentional use of violence as a political tactic. Finally, in light of the demonstrated significance of the political nature of violence, I conclude by discussing some possible reasons for its insufficient analysis in the literature of the Revolution, and that on revolutionary crowds in particular.

Well before there was a body of historians writing specifically about the crowd, the subject was ever-present in historical accounts. Conservatives such as Edmund Burke

and Hippolyte Taine regarded the crowd as the rabble of the revolution. It did not need to be analyzed because, although members of the crowd may have been despicable and violent, they were of no significance. In contrast, Jules Michelet, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, introduced the people as the heart and essence of the Revolution. Although Michelet cannot be left out of a summary of the work on the crowd, in a sense he does not belong in a category with the others. His is a romance story: “We have, we Barbarians, a natural advantage. If the upper classes have culture, we have much more vital heat.”<sup>4</sup> “How can we live without knowing life? And we can know it only at the price of suffering, working, and being poor.”<sup>5</sup> Despite the romantic element, Michelet’s argument that the crowd was not mere rabble did demand further investigation into the questions of exactly who constituted the crowd and what it actually did. However, facing violence would have left Michelet with the problem of how to maintain his claim that the inherent goodness, virtue, and gentleness of the “people” shaped their conduct.

The closest Michelet comes to analyzing violence is in his representation of the middle class. Here the Marxist school is foreshadowed as revolutionary conflict is represented as the natural outcome of the confrontation of class interests. In Michelet’s view, the people sought both self-improvement and improvement for France, while the bourgeoisie were only interested in securing status and position. While Michelet appeals to the notion that it is those in control who were truly violent, he at the same time, almost unconsciously, slips in a justification for mass violence by suggesting that the bloodshed which resulted from popular violence was in the name of creating something better:

If we could pile up all the blood, the gold, and the efforts of every kind that each nation has spent unselfishly and only for the good of the world, the French would

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<sup>4</sup> Jules Michelet, *The People* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

have a pyramid that would reach to heaven, and you, o nations, the sum of all your sacrifices put together would reach the knee of a child.<sup>6</sup>

Note, however, that Michelet's representation of violence is one which actually skirts the issue: popular actions were, he claims, about peace, goodness, and sacrifice, and thus, in a sense, not actually violent.

Three of the most prominent writers on the crowd, Georges Lefebvre, Albert Soboul, and George Rudé, are Marxist historians. Given that the Marxist interpretation presents the process of revolution as something fueled by the masses, it is not surprising to find a concentration of writers on the revolutionary crowd in this school. However, given this popular aspect of the Marxist interpretation, it is initially surprising that this school, rather than bringing questions of violence to the forefront, tends to gloss over them.

Generally speaking, the Marxist school presents violence as an inevitable, perhaps unfortunate, aspect of the natural transition from the dominance of one class to that of another – in the case of the French Revolution, from that of the aristocracy to that of the bourgeoisie. Class conflict is central to the Marxist account. In typically Marxist fashion, Soboul defines the French Revolution as being a bourgeois revolution:

If the French Revolution was the most outstanding bourgeois revolution ever, overshadowing all preceding revolutions through the dramatic nature of its class struggle, it owes it both to the obstinacy of the aristocracy, which remained firmly attached to its feudal privileges and rejected all concessions, and to the passionate opposition of the popular masses to any form of privilege or class distinction.<sup>7</sup>

The Marxists suggest that such a radical transition cannot be expected to take place without violence, as it is by definition a violent break with the past. Although it is

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>7</sup> Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution 1787-1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 7.

difficult to conceive of a revolution without violence, I argue that this should not result in violence being taken as such a simple and obvious truth that it is not analyzed.

The Marxist concept of material determinism also has direct implications for the ways in which this school addresses revolutionary violence. The formula is straightforward: the relationship of the masses to the mode of production makes them the most vulnerable and the most in need; thus, it is a matter of simple logic that they would act the most desperately, i.e., the most violently. This line of argument contains an implied justification for mass violence: the masses were not responsible for creating conditions wherein violence was the only solution. Further, again in the spirit of moral justification, it is often suggested that given such atrocious conditions, much more violence could have (justifiably) taken place.

Lefebvre's examination of both the *mentalités* of the crowd and that of the individuals it comprised provides an example of how the analytical framework of the Marxist school tends to place violence outside the realm of inquiry. Lefebvre circumvents many of the problems posed by revolutionary violence by claiming that the crowd did not generally come together with the intention of carrying out revolutionary goals, whether with or without violence. Instead, he argues, revolutionary crowds were almost always the product of the politicization of a group of people that had already gathered for some other purpose: normal activities at the market place being the most obvious and common example. By implication, there would never have been a revolutionary crowd, or popular violence, if conditions had not been such that they pushed a group of people into becoming a crowd. Lefebvre states that the people believed that in coming together it was possible to improve the lot of humanity as a

whole, which in turn inspired sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> As we saw in Michelet, once the idea of sacrifice is introduced, violence takes on a different character. It is noble, purposeful, and restrained, rather than sick and excessive. Moreover, the crowd acts spontaneously rather than with premeditated purpose. It thus does not consciously use violence as a political tool, it simply responds to intolerable conditions.

Violent crowd action is also often rationalized by the Marxists by appealing to popular conceptions of justice. For example, Soboul's argument that "The guillotine was popular because the *sans-culottes* regarded it as the avenging arm of the nation,"<sup>9</sup> undercuts conservative and counterrevolutionary accusations of the savagery of the masses and portrays them instead as impassioned moral actors. Such violence, he argues, is perhaps unfortunate, but expressive of little beyond the fact that conditions required it. If things got out of hand, the explanation lies in the desperation of material conditions. If an act of violence did not fit this profile, it must have been about something other than the Revolution, and thus need not be considered by the historian. Also drawing moral vindication from conceptions of popular justice, Rudé turns the notion of popular violence on its head, and attributes its vulgarity to the state: "From this balance sheet of violence and reprisal it would appear, then, that it was authority rather than the crowd that was conspicuous for its violence to life and limb."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, blaming violence on the state was a strategy which was frequently employed by radical political actors during the Revolution.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 50.

<sup>9</sup> Albert Soboul, *The Parisian Sans-Culottes and the French Revolution, 1793-94* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 161.

<sup>10</sup> George Rudé, *The Crowd in History, 1730-1848* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964), 256.

The class-driven analysis of the Marxist school taps into a tension between popular and official politics: claims are made of a very explicit manipulation of the masses on behalf of the middle class (who were in control of the official state). Referring to the Constitution of 1791, Soboul argues:

The new political institutions had one aim and one aim only, that of ensuring the peaceful, uninterrupted rule of the middle classes in their hour of victory, free from the threat of a counter-revolutionary thrust by the aristocracy and the monarchy on the one hand and of any attempt at the emancipation of the people on the other.<sup>11</sup>

The middle class appropriated what it could from the revolutionary *journées*, but once they achieved their ends, viewed popular action as threatening.

Despite pegging much of the story of the Revolution on the idea of the bourgeois ascendance to power, Marxist historians do recognize that during some phases of the Revolution, the masses, and the *sans-culottes* in particular, could be a shaping as well as a shaped force. For example, Soboul states:

From June 1793 to February 1794, the Parisian *sans-culottes* movement played a major role in the political struggle leading to the consolidation of the Revolutionary Government... it imposed economic measures upon a reluctant Assembly intended to improve the living standards of the masses.<sup>12</sup>

Rudé further points to the politicization of the people:

First, there was the experience of shortage and rising living costs, the realization of which was simple enough without any 'philosophical' elucidations! Then there was the matter of directly participating in the work of the revolution... The long succession of revolutionary events, or *journées*... provided in themselves a rich foundation of experience...<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Soboul, *The French Revolution*, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Soboul, *Parisian Sans-Culottes*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> George Rudé, "The French Revolution and 'Participation,'" in Harvey J. Kaye, ed., *The Face of the Crowd: Studies in Revolution, Ideology and Popular Protest, Selected Essays of George Rudé* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), 145.

However, members of the Marxist school tend to make these kinds of observations about popular participation, then put them aside, favouring the theory-framed explanation that the achievements of the masses were bumps in the road to middle-class dominance.

Overall, the Marxist school presents crowd action, and by implication, violence, as a means to an end. Violence is an unfortunate side effect to the greater beauty of the progress brought about by historical materialism. Rudé, in particular, is striking for the extent to which he uses the ends to justify the means: “And yet, in the prevailing conditions of revolutionary crisis, each one of these movements... tended to carry the Revolution forwards, to drive another nail into the coffin of feudalism, and to advance the aims of more consciously radical groups.”<sup>14</sup>

But with all the confusion and irrationality that attended it, the Great Fear had quite positive features and results. It forced the towns and newly created militias to organise themselves in a more efficient manner; it linked the town and villages and thus laid the basis of the Federation of the future; and it stoked up more intense hatred of the nobility, which, in turn, gave an impetus to the progress of the Revolution in the provinces.<sup>15</sup>

The way in which Marxist historians gloss over popular violence and ultimately represent the masses as mere pawns of the middle class ignores the fact that the tension between official and popular politics works both ways. It does the crowd a historical disservice to present it as simply responding to conditions. Although popular violence certainly was not always a controlled and rationalized force, the masses did have interests which they recognized as their own. They also had a sense of politics, and further, had made political gains by extending, often by means of violence, the reach of unofficial politics. Right or wrong, violence was a communicable language readily available to revolutionary actors: if, when, how, and why violence worked are much more meaningful

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<sup>14</sup> George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 226.

questions than whether or not the force used can be retrospectively rationalized or morally justified. If we move away from the language of justification, it is possible to allow for the incorporation of the reality that the use, encouragement, and control of violence was central to the conflicts – between the old regime and the new, between the middle class and the masses, between revolution and counterrevolution.

Contrary to the representation of events provided by the Marxists, for revisionist historians who focus on political rather than social explanations for the cause and course of the revolutionary years, the Revolution and, by implication, its violence, were not inevitable. The members of this school are dedicated archivists, and rely first and foremost on documentary evidence rather than on the internal logic of theory to defend their arguments. Compare the Marxist notion of a violent break with the past to William Doyle's revisionist summary of events:

No longer is it [the Revolution] a cataclysm in which one economic order came to an end and a new one dawned. It is merely the last great crisis of a type to which the old economic order was peculiarly prone, but one which that order survived, to die finally, not with a bang but with a whimper, half a century later.<sup>16</sup>

In denying a violent break with the past, the revisionists do not deny the violence of revolutionary events. Violence is presented as a more random reaction to new policies (conscription, the assignats, clerical oath) which stemmed from the political problems of the state (bankruptcy, war, power vacuum) and challenged traditional ways of life. Further, the revisionists recognize violence as the domain as much of the counterrevolutionary as of the revolutionary.

Given that the revisionist approach is centered on the political rather than the social, this school has done little detailed work on the crowd. Richard Cobb is the

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<sup>15</sup> George Rudé, *The French Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 49.

significant exception. Although Cobb does not write specifically about the crowd, he focuses on institutions such as the police and the revolutionary armies, which, by definition, respond and react to the people. By focussing on institutions that employ force, Cobb makes the presence of violence inevitable in his work.

Cobb is one of the few to recognize the problem violence poses for the historian.

He states:

Any honest historian of popular movements – and especially those of the French Revolution – must at times be seized with doubts. Is he not attempting to steer away from a violence that, on close inspection, becomes unbearable? Is he not trying to find excuses for brutality and murder? Is he not taking refuge in the convenient jargon of collective behaviourism to explain and to rationalize massacre?<sup>17</sup>

Taking up this challenge, Cobb addresses the question of how violence both propelled and impeded the course of the Revolution. On the one hand he argues that the revolutionary armies represented little more than ‘bloodshed and pillage’ to the ‘*honnêtes gens*,’<sup>18</sup> while on the other he claims that revolutionary *journées* were required to move things forward.<sup>19</sup> In this approach, morality has fallen out of the analysis. Rather than being the last resort of an oppressed people and forcing the morally necessary advancement of revolution, violence was a force which, justifiable or not, in some cases helped the Revolution, in others hindered it, and sometimes had no political effect.

Violence comes through much more clearly as a method with Cobb. In his work, violence is not simply the natural domain of the downtrodden masses, or of a powerful state, but a strategy used by both official and unofficial political actors, and by both the

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<sup>16</sup> Doyle, *Origins*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest 1789-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 89-90.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Cobb, *The People's Armies: The armées révolutionnaires: instrument of the Terror in the departments April 1793 to Floréal Year II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

revolutionary and the counterrevolutionary. Cobb does not lose track of the fact that the violence of the Revolution was expressive, while also controlled and contorted. His representation of the nature of revolutionary journalism is one of the best examples of this. Cobb argues, “a number of skillful journalists and ambitious demagogues raised themselves up on the shoulders of violence and made their careers out of it; some of them – many thought rather suitably – were later destroyed by it.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, mass violence was on one level an expression of popular sentiment, but, being such a powerful force, revolutionary leaders at the same time attempted to use it to their own ends. As in the case of Cobb’s journalists, those who sought to control and shape violence tended to ignore the extent to which it was also a force of its own, resulting in many being swept under by the very violence they tried to wield.

Cobb does not ignore material conditions. Obviously poverty had an impact, but rather than take for granted that poverty caused violence, Cobb looks for specific aspects of poverty which were likely to result in violent action. Not surprisingly, he points to alcohol: “Wine was the great consoler of the poor; and in periods of anxiety or dearth, they would drink more and eat less. Dearth should never be considered as a phenomenon apart; its partner was always excessive drinking.”<sup>21</sup> As much as there may have been a connection between poverty and violent action, the relationship was not simply one of cause and effect as suggested by the scientific model of the Marxists. Instead, Cobb argues: “Everything about the *problème des subsistances* and the attitudes it provoked

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<sup>20</sup> Cobb, *Police*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-3.

among various sections of the common people was divisive, impermanent, sporadic, and unplanned.”<sup>22</sup>

That Cobb says much about violence during the Revolution is more the product of the institutions which he focuses on, than of his revisionist school approach. Indeed, given the attention he pays to violence, his work stands out as an anomaly in the historiography of this school. Revolutionary violence is considered more readily by members of the political culture school who focus on the nature and use of language, signs, and symbols, and how, over the course of the Revolution, they contributed to the formation of a new political culture.

Mona Ozouf’s focus on festivals and public opinion links her to the group of historians who write about the revolutionary crowd. However, being of the political culture school, she addresses different questions. What was the culture of the people who took part in the Revolution? How did they interpret their experiences? How did they make themselves understood? Focussing on festivals as a significant aspect of revolutionary political culture, Ozouf does not so much analyze violence as demonstrate that it was ever-present. A breaking with the norm, itself a kind of violence, is the essence of the carnivalesque, which in turn is implicit in the festival.

Ozouf addresses the tension between official and popular politics by demonstrating that revolutionary leaders tapped into the popular tradition of festival celebration and shaped it into a means of extending revolutionary culture to the masses. Ozouf argues, “[t]he festival was an indispensable complement to the legislative system, for although the legislator makes the laws for the people, festivals make the people for

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

the laws.”<sup>23</sup> The process of spreading and consolidating the Revolution, however, was not one of smooth transition. Ozouf argues that the source of the problem was the nature of violence when employed as a political tool: “the Revolution never managed to break with the initial violence that made it possible but that also made its completion impossible.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the revolutionary government’s source of legitimacy resided in the very violence that it needed to control and suppress to appear legitimate. Festivals may have been a tool of demagoguery and normalization which could be used towards the end of solidifying political authority, but their close relationship to the carnivalesque, and hence the unofficial and the violent, made them at the same time a space in which the masses were able to express themselves.<sup>25</sup>

In response to the extent to which festivals proved integral to popular revolutionary culture, Ozouf argues that violence was the inevitable product of the concept of the general will:

Unanimity appeared to be such a clear precondition for the festival that interest soon shifted to ways of creating it... When this proved impossible, the festival itself took on the sorting process: anyone who failed to find pleasure in this exemplary gathering of the people would be declared, ipso facto, a public enemy.<sup>26</sup>

In using the crowd’s concern for unanimity as the explanation for the violent course of the Revolution, Ozouf limits the ways in which she is able to consider violence. What other factors were at work? Did escalation of violence in fact correspond to an increased adherence to the myth of a united will?

<sup>23</sup> Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> This is a popular theme, see also: Singer, “Ingestion,” 287; Foucault, *Discipline*, 59-61; and Bercé, *Revolt*, 116-7.

<sup>26</sup> Ozouf, *Festivals*, 12.

Of the political culturists, it is Colin Lucas who is the true crowd historian.<sup>27</sup> He is also one of the few exceptions in the historiography of the French Revolution for the fact that he specifically addresses questions of violence. By directly addressing the issue of popular violence, Lucas is able to gain a new understanding of how the revolutionaries defined themselves. In fact, Lucas argues that violence was a central force in the determination of revolutionary identity:

The willingness to sanction some violence, even if only in the most limited and retrospective sense, probably marked the basic divide between supporters and opponents of the Revolution... One of the clearest demarcations between revolutionaries quickly became how long that passage was seen to be and, thus, how much popular violence was admissible.<sup>28</sup>

Here, Lucas presents violence as a reality that, good or bad, rational or irrational, can tell us something about the nature of the Revolution.

In considering violence, Lucas reveals some of the problems caused by the tension between official and street politics: "At the heart of the problem of violence in revolution resides the problem of the duality of violence, its double character as both purifying and consolidating and yet also contaminating and dissolving."<sup>29</sup> Subsequently he remarks: "Indeed, it is remarkable how consistently the revolutionary assemblies sought to obliterate rhetorically the violence of insurrection the moment it occurred, even when accepting its results."<sup>30</sup> In large part, violence was what kept the barrier between popular and official politics permeable, undefined, and contentious. On the one hand, the masses were able to use the threat of force to insure that official politicians did not ignore

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<sup>27</sup> Although much of Lucas' work would be classified as Revisionist, most of his work specifically on the crowd uses a political culture or public opinion approach.

<sup>28</sup> Colin Lucas, "Talking about urban popular violence in 1789," in Alan Forrest and Peter Jones, eds., *Reshaping France: Town, country and region during the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 126-7.

<sup>29</sup> Colin Lucas, "Revolutionary Violence, the People and the Terror," in Baker ed., *The Terror*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

their concerns, and on the other, popular violence, when it was in line with official plans, was an effective means of imposing change on a rigid system.

Simon Schama's chronicle of the French Revolution, *Citizens*, is also unusual in its explicit discussion of revolutionary violence. Schama says the Revolution was defined by its violence. According to the author, "[violence] was the Revolution's source of collective energy. It was what made the Revolution revolutionary."<sup>31</sup> He states:

I have returned it [violence] to the center of the story since it seems to me that it was not merely an unfortunate byproduct of politics, or disagreeable instrument by which other more virtuous ends were accomplished or vicious ones thwarted. In some depressingly unavoidable sense, violence *was* the Revolution itself.<sup>32</sup>

As much as Schama acknowledges violence, and argues that it was intrinsic to the Revolution, his analysis tends to run parallel to the events he discusses. Rather than integrating his conception of violence into his presentation of events, Schama more often reminds us at the end of a chapter that violence was present and important.

Brian Singer is another historian who offers some analysis of revolutionary violence by looking specifically at how the model of popular violence shifted throughout the Revolution. For Singer, the masses began contending for their interests in a new way with the September massacres of 1792. Singer demonstrates that up to this point, popular violence had been public and full of spectacle: bodies were mutilated, carried through the streets, then hung from lampposts. This kind of violence was never carried out on a large scale; rather, it was directed toward a few representatives of the enemy. Conversely, the violence of the September massacres took place behind prison walls, with little spectacle, on a very large scale, and instead of flouting justice, the conductors of the massacres set

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<sup>31</sup> Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 447.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

up informal tribunals. Singer summarizes his argument by stating that the September massacres marked a transition from “popular violence” to “popular justice.”<sup>33</sup>

Looking at French history more broadly, Charles Tilly also picks up the theme of violence. Tilly uses a collective action model; he argues, “We shall know that a new era has begun not when a new elite holds power or a new constitution appears, but when ordinary people begin contending for their interests in new ways.”<sup>34</sup> Using this perspective, Tilly concludes that much of the popular agitation which has taken place in France since the seventeenth century has been a response to the development and expansion of both capitalism and the nation state. This argument does not so much analyze violence as use it as an alternative means of demonstrating a change in the structure of society.

Aside from Cobb, Lucas, Schama, Singer, and Tilly, historians of the French Revolution generally do not provide analysis of revolutionary violence. Nevertheless, in filtering through the historiography of the Revolution, it is possible to pick out several reoccurring themes which, though generally not the purpose of analysis, can be taken as attempts to rationalize revolutionary violence. Most common among these are historians’ reference to Rousseau and the general will. This emphasis on Rousseau is interesting given that Rousseauian arguments were invoked during the Revolution to justify political structures, but were not generally employed to explain violence. It was only after the fact that the question of the violent implications of the discourse of the general will was given serious consideration by those attempting to account for the difficulty of consolidating the Revolution.

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<sup>33</sup> Brian C. J. Singer, “Violence in the French Revolution: Forms of Ingestion/Forms of Expulsion,” *Social Research* 56, 1 (Spring 1989).

Typical of the political culture school, Keith Baker and Lynn Hunt emphasize the significance of language. Hunt argues that “Revolutionaries placed such emphasis on the ritual use of words because they were seeking a replacement for the charisma of kingship.”<sup>35</sup> Drawing on Hunt, Baker further argues that “successive actors in the revolutionary competition to fix public meanings were swept away by the power of a language that each proved unable to control.”<sup>36</sup> What was difficult for revolutionary leaders to control was the language of Rousseau’s general will, the implications of which, Baker argues, inevitably led to violence:

In the most general terms, it was opting for the language of political will, rather than of social reason; of unity, rather than of difference; of civic virtue, rather than of commerce; of absolute sovereignty, rather than of government limited by the rights of man – which is to say that, in the long run, it was opting for the Terror.<sup>37</sup>

One may attribute violence to a revolutionary ideology that demanded that you publicly declare yourself either with (by one solitary, unified definition) or against the revolution, but other factors must have been at work. How else is it possible to account for more peaceful times?

Although Rousseauian discourse, on its own, cannot be taken to offer an adequate account of revolutionary violence, it undoubtedly did contribute to the violent atmosphere. Followers of Rousseau regarded the general will as the ultimate source of legitimacy and morality, viewed events in black and white terms, and made political diversity and neutrality unacceptable. Hampson argues that “Since, for Rousseauists, morals and politics were two aspects of the same thing, opposition was not merely

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Massachusetts: Harvard Belknap Press, 1986), 9.

<sup>35</sup> Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 7.

illegitimate but wicked.”<sup>38</sup> Further, in the face of a revolution which proved extremely difficult to consolidate, revolutionaries were left with the need to account for their failure. The Rousseauian theme of unity suggested that nature is such that all problems have a solution which just needs to be discovered. Invoking this argument, the revolutionaries declared the Revolution flawless, and concluded that the problem could only be that evil-doers were sabotaging it.

Though Rousseau may have provided a script for much of the violence of the Revolution, neither the man nor his writings can be held responsible for the degree and nature of revolutionary violence. Grounding Rousseau in his historical context, Carol Blum suggests:

The question of virtue was a sore festering under the skin of the Bourbon monarchy, and as much as any issue of taxes, hereditary privileges or budgetary imbalances it was the source of a despair and resentment which would eventually undermine the whole social order... Before that could happen, however, the resentment had to be legitimized by a new morality in the name of which aristocratic claims to moral authority could be negated... The man who forged the vocabulary of this new virtue was Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>39</sup>

Here, Rousseau is not being blamed for the violent events of the Revolution, which often were carried out in his name; instead, Blum recognizes that Rousseau provided a language and a system of legitimization that was especially suited to the political culture of the Revolution. Joan McDonald also locates Rousseau in the specific context of revolutionary events. She points out that he was central to the intellectual training of French society at large, not just of the revolutionaries. McDonald concludes that the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>38</sup> Norman Hampson, *Prelude to Terror: The Constituent Assembly and the Failure of Consensus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 107.

<sup>39</sup> Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 26.

invocation of Rousseau's work to rationalize events was political, rather than the natural result of his teachings.<sup>40</sup>

Related to the revolutionaries' notion of the general will was their obsessive fear of conspiracy: the fear of hidden evil actors who sought to subvert the general will and destroy the Revolution. Revolutionaries certainly did make widespread use of conspiracy theories to explain and rationalize popular violence. First, it was feared that the army, still controlled by the former nobility, was intentionally leading good patriots to butchery. A second common conspiracy theory was that monopolizers were hoarding grain to purposely starve the people. In both cases, revolutionaries claimed that counterrevolutionaries were trying to provoke public disorder so that the people would demand at best a strong government and at worst a return to monarchy.

The fear of conspiracy during the Revolution may seem quite natural, but this obsession grew up in a particular historical context. Leon Bernard's research demonstrates that, "while the history of popular rebellions in France can be traced well back into the Middle Ages, the notion of conspiracy, of hidden direction from above, is introduced only in modern times."<sup>41</sup> Hunt makes a similar claim: "Conspiracy only became a systematic obsession when the revolutionaries confronted the novelties of mass politics."<sup>42</sup> Thus, in regards to conspiracy, the question which must be considered is what it was about the discourse of conspiracy that made it so appealing to revolutionary actors. How can we account for its obvious political currency? Tackett argues that conspiracy offered an explanation for that which "the Enlightened analytical apparatus at

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<sup>40</sup> Joan McDonald, *Rousseau and the French Revolution 1762-1791* (London: The Athlone Press, University of London, 1965), 4-6, 104.

<sup>41</sup> Leon Bernard, "Popular Uprisings in the Late Seventeenth Century," in Isser Wolock, ed., *The Peasantry in the Old Regime: Conditions and Protests* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 65.

the revolutionaries' disposal" could not: why anarchy was spreading, and why, if nature is orderly, events were so unpredictable.<sup>43</sup> The existence of conspiracy offered an explanation for violence which was otherwise difficult to account for.

The theoretical implications which historians have extracted from the fear of conspiracy are similar in tone to elements found in Rousseau's work. Donald Sutherland argues, "If treason and assassins were everywhere, moderation was counterrevolutionary and unremitting suspicion and vigilance were patriotic duties."<sup>44</sup> On a practical level, the concept of conspiracy is a notion that is very easy for those seeking to propel mass action to use: if the Revolution is perfect, but things are not perfect, this must be due to traitors. Further, while it was easy to claim the presence of conspiracy, it was very difficult to disprove. Francois Furet discusses the advantage of this strategy: "there was no need to name the perpetrators of the crime and to present precise facts about their plans, since it was impossible to determine the agents of the plot."<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey Larrabee makes the additional practical observation that conspiracies made good press and were an effective means of fuelling revolutionary energy in the absence of the drama of revolutionary *journées*.<sup>46</sup> Marat in particular found that discussing conspiracies effectively won both him and his newspaper much greater political clout.

The revolutionary rhetoric of conspiracy implied the need to purge the state of impure elements, and how could this be done except by violent means? The theme of violence as purifying or sanctifying is further developed by Richard Burton, who closes

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<sup>42</sup> Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Timothy Tackett, "Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792," *American Historical Review*, 105, 3 (June 2000), 712.

<sup>44</sup> Sutherland, *France*, 191.

<sup>45</sup> Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 53.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Larrabee, "The lantern and the scaffold: The debate on violence in revolutionary France, April-October 1789" (Dissertation: State University of New York, 1991), 316.

the gap between political and religious culture and argues that the way in which the crowd viewed its revolutionary acts can be interpreted in terms of religious sanctification:

The “spontaneous” foundational killings of July 1789 were to be corroborated and authenticated by a fully legal, rational, and deliberate sacrificial act, a sacrifice that would both inaugurate a new cosmos in and through violence and abolish the need for violence in the future; in short, a sacrifice to end all sacrifices, the republican equivalent of the full and final sacrifice of Christ.<sup>47</sup>

Although this parallel works on a metaphorical level, Burton does not prove that the linkage of sanctification and violence offers an account of revolutionary violence. Marat and Robespierre did argue that the state needed to be purged, but their tone was utilitarian, not religious.

When discussing the nature of revolutionary justice, Larrabee also addresses the view that violence could be perceived as cleansing. He states:

The demand for violence was contained, not by stifling it in the conservative manner, but by channeling it into ritual and political allegories in which the wicked were punished and the innocent were vindicated. Directed into the proper institutions, violence would, in theory, become a positive force creating unanimity rather than division.<sup>48</sup>

The view of violence as justifiable for its cleansing or sanctifying power can only be maintained by overlooking the question of revenge. Indeed, Burton and Larrabee are not using these themes to justify violence, but to explain its extent.

Arno Mayer, in *Furies*, is one of the few historians of the Revolution to consider seriously the question of vengeance. He argues that “The attendant spiral of violence was amplified by the simultaneous breakdown of the judiciary and law enforcement generally, opening a breach for the return of repressed vengeance.”<sup>49</sup> Mayer recognizes the spiral

<sup>47</sup> Richard D. E. Burton, *Blood in the City: Violence and Revelation in Paris, 1789-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 43.

<sup>48</sup> Larrabee, “The Lantern,” 154.

<sup>49</sup> Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.

effect of fear and reaction. Most significantly, he notes that this was played out in the dynamic between revolution and counterrevolution: "It is important to remember that the counterrevolution was not innocent. That without it there would have been no Furies; and that at key junctures the forces of resistance came close to winning the day."<sup>50</sup>

Popular justice is the final theme frequently invoked to account for revolutionary violence. As a result of the permeable line between the actual or official law, and the unofficial space where it was tolerable for the masses to make certain demands,<sup>51</sup> both revolutionary actors and historians of the Revolution have often used contending notions of justification and legality to explain the nature of revolutionary violence. For revolutionaries, the undefined border between popular and official justice was at the heart of the conflict. As stated by Larrabee, "The intention in radical justice was to make official and popular justice one and the same."<sup>52</sup> "The justice of the lantern was an attempt to restore order, not just by punishing the wicked, but also by imposing the people's version of justice upon the authorities."<sup>53</sup> A move away from the official law should not be equated with anarchy: unofficial violent protests often had their own set of rules and regulations. Indeed, revolutionaries and historians alike have often pointed out that, even during the frenzied prison massacres of September 1792, the people organized impromptu tribunals.

During the Revolution, radical actions were often justified on the grounds that they were avenging the violence of the *Ancien Régime*, or doing what morality had long demanded. Internalizing this rationalization as a natural truth, radicals drew heavily on

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Foucault develops this theme in *Discipline and Punish*, 82.

<sup>52</sup> Larrabee, "The Lantern," 16.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

this line of reasoning to legitimize their calls to violence: they were not violent, but only sought to do what was necessary as quickly and efficiently as possible so that it would be possible to move beyond the need for violence. The implication of claiming that violence is the means of ending violence, like revenge, risks a bitter spiral: those who are against radical violence are by implication in favour of long-term violence, and should be considered enemies.

As much as notions of popular legitimacy were frequently invoked by those employing political violence, the script of justification could just as easily be provided after the fact as before.<sup>54</sup> If justification is supplied after the fact, to what extent does this make justice a construct? Whose interests are served by a particular definition of legitimacy? William Sewell, with his focus on the discourse of subsistence, taps into the notion of popular justice being a construct that revolutionary leaders intentionally put to good use. Although Sewell does not question that subsistence was important to the *sans-culottes*, he makes the empirical observation that, “Few of the *sans-culottes* militants whose words we are able to retrieve were poor enough to be threatened by hunger.”<sup>55</sup> Sewell argues that the notion of subsistence became a rhetorical device which served the pragmatic purpose of uniting the masses, and the theoretical purpose of painting their enemies as villains who were intentionally starving them.<sup>56</sup> Larrabee also discusses the way in which the issue of bread was constructed by revolutionary leaders to provide legitimacy for popular violence:

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<sup>54</sup> For a discussion on scripts for rebellious activity from a general European perspective, see Bercé, *Revolt*, 7-8.

<sup>55</sup> William Sewell, “The Sans-Culotte Rhetoric of Subsistence,” in Keith Baker ed., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture, Vol. 4: The Terror* (Toronto: Pergamon Press, 1994), 252.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 253-60.

Bread was the one issue that was guaranteed to bring together the Parisian masses in protest and revolt. The success of revolutionary radicals in using popular riots for political ends was due in no small measure to their growing skill in associating political struggles with the issue of bread.<sup>57</sup>

Just as conspiracy theories contributed to the atmosphere of fear and violence regardless of whether they were grounded in fact, that justice is arguably a construct should not detract from the fact of its centrality in how both the individuals involved in revolutionary events and their historians have interpreted and understood the Revolution.

Thus far, we have surveyed the primary explanations for revolutionary violence: Rousseauian notions of a unitary will, conspiracy theories, the view that violence can be cleansing, the cyclical nature of revenge, and popular conceptions of justice. Few of the works mentioned above, however, addressed violence as their central concern. The most significant result of analyzing revolutionary violence is that we can move away from conceptions of revolutionary violence as something essentially spontaneous, and address the implications of the fact that revolutionary actors frequently and consciously sought to shape the ways in which it was both used and interpreted.

By considering the work of political theorists who address the political use of force, it is possible to suggest a frame of analysis which historians can use to develop the implications of the argument that violence is often intentionally manipulated. As theorists, I have chosen Machiavelli, Karl Marx, Michael Bakunin, Max Weber, Vladimir Lenin, Franz Fanon, and Hannah Arendt, both for their importance in addressing issues of force and violence, and for the fact that their works have taken on a universal, timeless quality. A further advantage of comparing the work of political theorists to that of historians of the Revolution is that this accentuates the fact that while violence is solidly

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<sup>57</sup> Larrabee, "The Lantern," 108.

entrenched in the history of events surrounding its occurrence, it is also universal and ahistorical.

Although violence is addressed by political theorists, discussion of the political use of force still does not match the volume or the significance of its occurrence. Arendt looks to our use of language as demonstrative of the extent to which the study of violence has been deprioritized. She states: "It is, I think, a rather sad reflection on the present state of political science that our terminology does not distinguish among such key words as 'power,' 'strength,' 'force,' 'authority,' and, finally, 'violence.'"<sup>58</sup> Porta, a historian of social movements, further points out that the study of political violence has tended to be divided into terrorism studies and social movement studies. Whereas terrorism is defined by its violence, social movement studies set themselves up in opposition and tend to de-emphasize violence.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the fact that the volume of discussion of violence does not match its occurrence, the notion that violence is central to politics has a long history. Max Weber claims that the state is defined precisely by its control or monopoly of physical force:

A state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory... The state is considered the sole source of the 'right' to use violence. ...if no social institutions existed which knew the use of violence, then the concept of 'state' would be eliminated.<sup>60</sup>

Violence is also discussed in terms of function in Lenin's work. As with Weber, we see political struggle defined by Lenin as the need to control the use of violence: "The proletariat needs state power, the centralized organization of force, the organization of

<sup>58</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 43.

<sup>59</sup> Donatella Della Porta, *Social movements, political violence, and the state: A comparative analysis of Italy and Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4-5.

<sup>60</sup> Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in H. H. Gerth and Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 78.

violence, both to crush the resistance of the exploiters and to lead the enormous mass of the population...”<sup>61</sup> While Weber suggests that a total elimination of violence could eliminate the state, Lenin argues the reverse: if the state were eliminated, so too would be violence.<sup>62</sup>

Machiavelli also presents violence as central to the operations of politics. In particular, he discusses the problem violence poses to the consolidation of authority. The populace may use force to usher in political change, but after this popular show of force (even at its most successful), the governing body must re-establish control of violence; in other words, use force against its new subjects.<sup>63</sup> Machiavelli further argues that these injuries will likely be resented, in turn leading to another problem of consolidation: the cycle of revenge. He argues, “It should be observed here that men should either be caressed or crushed; because they can avenge slight injuries, but not those that are very severe. Hence, any injury done to a man must be such that there is no need to fear his revenge.”<sup>64</sup> Machiavelli’s solution is that rulers, no matter how kind-hearted, must embrace the reality of force, then use it as efficiently as possible. He states, “Anyone who does not act in this way, either because he is timid or because he lacks judgment, will always be forced to stand with sword in hand.”<sup>65</sup> This observation of the dangerously cyclical nature of revenge is echoed in Rousseau: “If there remains among you the slightest germ of bitterness or distrust, hasten to destroy it as a ruinous leaven that sooner or later results in your misfortunes and the ruin of the state.”<sup>66</sup> In response to

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<sup>61</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1958), 43-4.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-1.

<sup>63</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>66</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 29.

charges that he had an insatiable blood-thirst, it was precisely this line of argument which Marat invoked in his defense.

Foucault also presents a theory of vengeance. In historicizing the process of justice, he demonstrates the centrality of revenge to both official and unofficial justice. At the official level, Foucault argues, "In the execution of the most ordinary penalty, in the most punctilious respect of legal forms, reign the active forces of revenge... It restores the sovereign by manifesting it at its most spectacular."<sup>67</sup> Under monarchy, where sovereignty resided was clear, but with the collapse of the *Ancien Régime*, its rightful location became a contentious issue. Pertaining to conduction of justice, Foucault argues that "The right to punish [was] shifted from the vengeance of the sovereign to the defense of society."<sup>68</sup> From here, it is not a large step for unofficial actors to claim, as revolutionaries often did, the right to establish justice, when it was possible to assert that the official forces who should be doing so were not.

Fanon presents the use of violence as central to political change by holding that it is a necessary cleansing force. He argues, "At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect."<sup>69</sup> Fanon's tone is dark and reflects a sense of helplessness that there can be no other way: "The native who decides to put the program into practice, and to become its moving force, is ready for violence at all times. From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called into question by absolute violence."<sup>70</sup> For Fanon, however, political

<sup>67</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 48.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>69</sup> Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 94.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

violence is not an inevitable fact of resistance; instead, it is a sad fact that history has made it necessary.

For Bakunin, politics are inherently violent. He argues that violence is the inevitable product of class conflict and the inherently dishonest nature of politics under such a system. Bakunin does not so much discuss the function of violence as he uses strong, harsh language to describe the reality of the existence of the masses as a violent struggle for survival: "I discover I have no riches in myself, no wealth but that stolen from the common life of the common people."<sup>71</sup> "How can one possibly believe after this that the men who make a business out of politics, and whose goal is injustice, violence, lies, treason, single, and wholesale murder, honestly believe that the wisdom and art of ruling the State make for the common weal?"<sup>72</sup> Indeed, this distrust of politics was central to French revolutionary culture. From this perspective, how would it be possible to bring about change peacefully?

Interestingly, works which claim that force is necessary to bring about change often make a point of distinguishing between violence employed against people, and that employed against objects. For example, Bakunin argues:

In order to launch a radical revolution, it is therefore necessary to attack positions and things and to destroy property and the state, but there will be no need to destroy men and to condemn ourselves to the inevitable reaction which is unfailingly produced in every society by the slaughter of men.<sup>73</sup>

In part, this is a tactical consideration which advocates the use of force in a way that enables the perpetrators of violence to be able morally to defend their actions more readily. This delineation between wielding force against people and objects is both

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<sup>71</sup> Michael Bakunin, in Guy A. Alfred, *Bakunin's Writings* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1972), 20.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

arbitrary and political: damaging objects can and often does harm people. To what extent can we distinguish between direct and indirect acts of violence? Closely related is the question of whether or not violent language constitutes violence.

Marx argues that violent words are intertwined with physical violence. He argues, “material force must be overthrown by material force. But, theory, too, will become material force as soon as it seizes the masses.”<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, despite this power of words, Marx presents physical force as a necessary means of expression for the oppressed: “Ideas can never lead beyond an old-world system but only beyond the ideas of the old-world system. Ideas cannot carry anything at all. In order to carry out ideas men are needed who dispose of a certain practical force.”<sup>75</sup>

The connection between words and action was debated throughout the course of the French Revolution. Both Marat and Robespierre frequently invoked the defense that words are just words, and that, therefore, they could not be implicated in revolutionary violence. Their accusers, on the other hand, argued that the likes of Marat and Robespierre were even more guilty than the masses who took to the streets as their words were consciously and intentionally the moving force behind popular violence. The question of how Marat and Robespierre responded to charges of inciting violence will be considered in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

Contrary to accounts which put violence front and center to the operation of politics, it has also been argued that violence is not a valid political alternative as it is a means which, by its very nature, cannot achieve its ends. Arendt, for example,

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<sup>73</sup> Bakunin in, Arthur Lehning, ed., *Michael Bakunin, Selected Writings* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1973), 168-9.

<sup>74</sup> Karl Marx, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” in David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx, Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 69.

recognizes the potential appeal of violence, but argues that, in the end, it is solely a destructive force. On the one hand, Arendt recognizes that, to the socially disadvantaged, violence may seem the only solution. From this perspective, she argues that “Their need was violent, and, as it were, prepolitical; it seemed that only violence could be strong and swift enough to help them.”<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, she states: “Violence by no means gave birth to something new and stable but, on the contrary, drowned in a ‘revolutionary torrent’ the beginning as well as the beginners.”<sup>77</sup>

To summarize, what comes out of an examination of the work of political theorists that is generally missing in histories of the French Revolution is a recognition of the extent to which violence can be a consciously employed political tool. Whether violence is actually efficacious remains a matter of debate. In light of both the universal significance of political violence and its centrality in accounting for the course and nature of revolutionary events, how is it possible to explain historians’ relative silence on this issue?

In the case of the Marxists, the structure of their analysis makes it difficult for them to discuss meaningfully the nature of violence. As a result, this school skims over violence, confronting it mostly in an indirect attempt to morally vindicate the people. There is perhaps an element of recruitment in this simplified and glorified presentation of revolutionary violence. Given that the Marxist school is connected to a contemporary political agenda which promotes revolution, it is difficult to separate analysis of the role of popular violence in revolutions of the present and of the future when its members address that of the French Revolution. Since revisionist historians focus on official

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<sup>75</sup> Marx, “The French Revolution,” in *ibid.*, 147.

<sup>76</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 91.

political explanations for the cause and course of the Revolution, popular action, and therefore much of the violence, tends to fall outside the realm of their inquiry. Finally, historians of political culture have little choice but to address, at least by implication, the issue of violence, but even here, the relative silence on the intentional use of violence is not broken. Arguably, as much as it may have been part of revolutionary culture, the moral difficulties of discussing violence remain.

Does the act of explaining violence, thus arguably making it understandable or rational, necessarily, as Cobb suggests, imply that the historian is justifying it? It does seem reasonable that the risk of appearing to rationalize that which you would rather consider indefensible could prevent one from taking up an issue; especially if that issue seems obvious and in little need of analysis. That violence is horrifying and unfortunate may seem obvious. Reflecting on the contemporary lack of analysis of violence, Arendt makes a similar observation: “violence and its arbitrariness were taken for granted and therefore neglected; no one questions or examines what is obvious to all.”<sup>78</sup>

Singer also raises the moral problems of discussing violence. He argues, “To speak of violence, it is feared, is to justify violence – unless such speech is explicitly directed at its condemnation.”<sup>79</sup> In response to this apparent dilemma, Singer argues that it is ridiculous to claim that “...popular actors must, in order to be rendered historically acceptable, be made into rational actors.”<sup>80</sup> Why is it that much of the literature on violence seems to hold up as its standard the need to convince us that if we had been there, we might have done the same thing? In holding up this standard, the assumption is

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>78</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 8.

<sup>79</sup> Singer, “Violence in the French Revolution,” 263.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 272.

that violence must be either rational or evil, suggesting that that which is not interpretable as rational must be wrong.

Schama also offers some thoughts on why violence has been glossed over:

“Anxious lest they give way to sensationalism... historians have erred on the side of squeamishness in dealing with this issue.”<sup>81</sup> The question here is why and how it has been possible to rescind the violent to the merely sensational. Schama further presents the case that, given the extent of physical violence, it has been somewhat inevitable that those who do consider violence pass over the places where it was less dramatic, “merely” verbal, or between the lines.<sup>82</sup> In a world where heads and entrails were paraded through the streets on pikes, harsh words understandably seem less threatening. However, placed in the context of the tension between the violence that the people used to express themselves, and the violence which revolutionary leaders consciously manipulated towards political ends, non-physical, suggestive forms of violence are much more readily identifiable as violent.

If violence is what we do when words fail, when rational discourse has ended, is it possible for history, a rational discourse, to talk about it? Given that not all acts and all sequences of acts are rational, if history is to be able to tell and interpret the story of what happened, it must as readily face the irrational and the rational. Now that we have a context in which to consider the nature of revolutionary violence, it is possible to move on to look at the broader framework of this project. The brief consideration of the works of leading theorists of force reveals that they recognize that violence is a consciously employed tool; but historians of the Revolution tend to skirt this issue. In addressing the

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<sup>81</sup> Schama, *Citizens*, xv.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 859-60.

conscious use of violence in the context of the French Revolution, I will consider how violence is at the center of how Marat and Robespierre address the questions of fear and conspiracy, the use of language, and notions of justice. In the following chapter, it will be demonstrated that analysis of violence is not just a lacuna in the literature of the Revolution, but that giving violence a more central place when interpreting events sheds new light on the interaction and overlapping of the official and unofficial political spheres.

## CHAPTER II: THE FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out the framework of my analysis. Why do I focus on the period and people I do? I begin by considering the definition of violence, with emphasis on what is entailed in the term “popular revolutionary violence.” Next, I provide a summary of the major revolutionary events building up to the timeframe under consideration, drawing attention to the significance of violence in how they played out. Once the historical background is provided, I discuss the significance of the purge of the Girondins, as bookended by the September Massacres and the assassination of Marat. Thereafter, the following section will introduce Marat and Robespierre and demonstrate why these figures are well-suited to this project. Finally, in light of the significance of the revolutionary press, and both Marat and Robespierre’s involvement in it, I will summarize some of the main themes in the historiography of the press.

The emphasis of this paper is on popular revolutionary or political violence. There are many forms of political violence; Peter Sederberg lists them as violent crime, social banditry, gangsterism, peasant risings, urban riots, guerilla raids, revolutionary warfare, urban revolution, assassination, vigilante violence, coup d’etat, and regime terror.<sup>83</sup> Arguably, most of these are subcategories of revolt, rebellion, and revolution. Whereas revolt is generally taken as the early stage or the small scale of rebellion or revolution, the literature on violence presents rebellion and revolution as different in kind: rebellion looks backward, and revolution looks forward.<sup>84</sup> Timothy Tackett

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<sup>83</sup> Peter Sederberg, *Fires Within: political violence and revolutionary change* (New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1994), 50-3.

<sup>84</sup> For further discussion of the difference between rebellion and revolution, see: Mayer, 30; Sederberg, 152.

discusses the transition from rebellion to revolution that took place during the revolutionary years:

In part it [October Days] had the character of a traditional grain riot, with large numbers of women – defenders of the family economy and usually immune from prosecution – leading the way and calling for bread, and with a certain number of men following close behind them. But both women and men were also aware of the new political realities and were following after their fashion the debates and the factional disputes within the Assembly. The calls for bread were joined with threats against “aristocrat” deputies on the right – now seemingly in control of the Assembly.<sup>85</sup>

My focus is on violence which invokes revolutionary purposes as its justification.

This focus narrows down what type of violence will be considered, but it does not offer an account of what violence is. On the surface, this may seem straightforward.

Etymologically, in both English and French, “violence” stems from the Latin *violentia*, which means force. Contemporary dictionaries, however, vary in their definitions and leave many questions unanswered. Encarta defines violence as “Physical force exerted so as to cause damage, abuse, or injury... Vehemence, fervor.”<sup>86</sup> Can violence be non-physical? Are vehemence and fervor always violent? The Oxford Dictionary also focuses on force, but further introduces the notion that violence is generally connected to the unlawful: “Involving great force or strength or intensity; involving the unlawful use of force.”<sup>87</sup> What about the lawful use of force? Webster’s builds on the previous two definitions by attaching intensity to violence: “Acting with, or characterized by, physical force or strength; forcible, especially unlawfully so; moved by strong feeling; passionate; intense; vehemence; unjust force; outrage; profanation.”<sup>88</sup> Again, what about non-

<sup>85</sup> Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 195.

<sup>86</sup> Encarta 97 (Microsoft Corporation, 1993-96).

<sup>87</sup> *The Oxford Paperback Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>88</sup> *Webster's New Dictionary and Thesaurus* (New York: Russell, Geddes & Grosset, 1990).

physical and lawful force? How do we decide if force is unjust? Finally, the World Book Dictionary definition combines all of the above elements: “Rough or harmful action or treatment; the illegal or unjust use of physical force to injure or damage persons or property; fury; passion.”<sup>89</sup> Is it fury, or its manifestation that is violent? Why equate passion and violence?

What complicates the concept of violence above all else is the merging of the violent with the unlawful. Indeed, revolutionaries across the spectrum did their best to collapse the definition of violence into that which opposed their agendas. There is definitely a difference between legal and illegal forceful actions. If I were robbing a bank and a police officer forced me into handcuffs, this would be an act different in kind from one in which I had been innocently walking down the street and a civilian did the same thing. The first problem with attaching violence to the illegal is that this presupposes a fully established conception of legality. In the above example, the police are widely accepted as defenders of the law, and robbing a bank is widely accepted as an unlawful act. Things are not, however, always this clear. Even this example could take on a different quality set in a different context. The bank could have stolen large amounts of money, then installed a police regime to defend it. This points to a further problem: legal actions can, of course, be violent. Political violence can just as well be used by the state to obtain certain objectives as by the people to make political statements. How can we meaningfully distinguish between the terrorist and the freedom fighter if one uses violence, and the other force, simply as a matter of definition? In an attempt to lessen this ambiguity, we can name the violence of the people popular violence, and that of the state, state violence.

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<sup>89</sup> *The World Book Dictionary* (Toronto: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1969).

Arguably, there is no final definition of violence: it is too constructed a concept. No definition can get beyond the fact that the lines between these different categories of violence are arbitrary. On what authority could one claim to have the *final* word on whether an action constituted force (suggesting a degree of legitimacy) or violence, popular action or terrorism? These designations themselves are political. After taking these issues into consideration, Shyli Karin-Frank's definition is the strongest: "One need not be committed to a particular ideology in order to argue that harming the other through the exertion of power (physical or mental) intentionally directed at him, when the other has a right to avoid that assault, is the essence of all forms of violence."<sup>90</sup> Although this definition begs the question of how it can be determined when one has the right to avoid an assault, its strength resides in the fact that Karin-Frank claims to explain the essence of violence, rather than define it definitively.

Arendt distinguishes among power, strength, force, authority, and violence – which she puts together in a single category because they are all "means by which man rules over man."<sup>91</sup> For her, "Violence... is distinguished by its instrumental character."<sup>92</sup> She argues: "Power is indeed of the essence of all government, but violence is not. Violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues."<sup>93</sup> This definition, despite its seemingly neutral and scientific quality, reflects Arendt's political agenda of deflating the political power of violence.

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<sup>90</sup> Shyli Karin-Frank, "Freedom, Equality, and Violence: Revolutions and the Moral Point," in Yeager Hudson and Creighton Peden, eds., *Revolution, Violence, and Equality* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 49.

<sup>91</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 43.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

Arendt invokes the difference between the social and the political, and argues that politics should not be the domain of social change. She claims that politics have only artificially, and thus falsely, been made the domain of social change, and she argues, “The social question began to play a revolutionary role only when, in the modern age and not before, men began to doubt that poverty is inherent in the human condition.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, this problem lies at the heart of the Revolution. Marat, in particular, was unwilling to consider the Revolution complete without a resolution of the social question. He argued that ignoring social questions was a violence against the people who were forced to continue living in desperate conditions.

Although I do agree that the introduction of the “social question” into the realm of the political created something new, I do not agree that it follows that these are naturally separate domains. It is a political act to claim that something is not political. Part of what causes my notion of political action to diverge from Arendt’s is that I would not strictly equate “politics” with “political.” I would define “politics” as the domain of that which is *officially* recognized as political; the realm of political institutions. On the other hand, “political” is a much more permeable and arbitrary category, defined by what people perceive as important to the public good. If political arguments are used to rationalize an act of violence, that act is political. What remains to be determined is whether or not political acts or ideas are able to achieve the status of being recognized by the domain of official politics.

To summarize, the violence under consideration in this paper is specifically popular revolutionary violence which invokes politics as its justification. This does not cut out notions of state violence, as the two are intimately related, one often justifying the

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<sup>94</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 22.

other. Nor, in focusing on the revolutionary, is the counterrevolutionary left out: the two fed off each other. By focusing on those violent actions which were politicized, the arbitrary and shifting nature of the lines between official and unofficial, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary will be accentuated.

Temporally, this project focuses on the year surrounding the purge of the Girondins, 31 May to 2 June 1793. Before moving on to the analytical questions of how violence was used as a political strategy, it is necessary to provide a brief narrative background of the revolutionary events leading up to this phase of the Revolution. Looking at the sequence of events which led up to the purge of the Convention demonstrates that, from the outset, violence played a central role in propelling the Revolution, beginning with the fall of the Bastille on 14 July 1789.

The first violent *journée* of the Revolution was the culmination of tensions surrounding the debate over governmental responsibilities. In response to conflict over proposed fiscal reform with the *parlements*, on 25 September 1788, Louis XVI announced that he would convene the Estates General for the first time since 1614. This announcement, combined with the project of surveying the people's grievances with the *Cahiers de doléances*, created an atmosphere of great hope in France. People expected change.

Hopes for peaceful reform were soon dashed as conflict broke out over the structure of the Estates General. Traditionally, voting had taken place by order, giving a built-in advantage to the clergy and the nobility who, respectively, formed the first two estates. Organized as such, the vast numerical majority of the Third Estate was rendered politically meaningless in the Estates General. This arrangement, however, no longer

reflected the political culture of France as it existed in the late eighteenth century. By 1788, much of the financial power of the nation rested with the bourgeoisie, creating an escalating degree of tension over the traditional privileges of the first two orders. The convening of the Estates General provided a political space in which to conduct this fight, and the battle was won by the Third Estate when it obtained the right to vote by head. Moreover, on 17 June 1789, the Third Estate declared itself a National Assembly, and then, on 9 July, appointed itself the task of creating a Constitution. The reason why the fall of the Bastille, and not this parliamentary fight, is taken to mark the beginning of the Revolution is that the King still had every intention of suppressing this movement. It was only when the people – from poor workers, to skilled artisans, to lower middle-class elements – rose up and the troops refused to take strong action against them, that Louis XVI was forced to recognize the reality of this change, and France became a constitutional monarchy. Thus, popular violence played a key part in the birth of the Revolution.

Popular violence was also crucial to the Revolution progressing from essentially political to essentially social reform. Amidst new hope that politics could help improve their lot, and rumours that brigand bands employed by aristocrats were on their way to attack the countryside, the rural masses rose up. Having heard about the events in Paris, the insurgents believed that they had the consent of the King. In response to widespread revolt, on the night of 4 August, the National Assembly abolished feudalism in the hope of appeasing the peasantry.

By October, politics had taken another violent turn. On 1 October, at a banquet for the Officers of the King's Bodyguard, a toast was drunk to the King, but not to the

nation. Making matters worse, rumours spread that a revolutionary tri-color cockade had been trampled and that many officers had worn the royal black and white cockades. Set against the backdrop of bread shortages in the city, this insult popularized the sentiment that the King was not paying due respect to the Revolution, and raised concern as to whether he did in fact truly accept it. On 5 October, a crowd set out for Versailles to bring “the baker, the baker’s wife, and the baker’s boy” to Paris. After a minor showdown between the crowd and the Bodyguard, Louis XVI agreed to move to the Tuileries palace in Paris. Under the pressure of this popular uprising, the King also accepted the constitutional decrees and became a virtual prisoner of the Parisian revolutionaries.

It was after this popular *journée* that the Jacobin Club began to consolidate itself as a powerful revolutionary force. The original nucleus of the Jacobins was a café society made up primarily of radical Breton deputies. After the October Days, they established themselves in Paris in a former Jacobin convent. Robespierre was involved at this early stage of the club; however, his status was secondary to that of other leading figures such as Barnave, Duport, and the Lameth brothers. Other such societies began to spring up throughout the countryside. The Parisian Jacobins demonstrated great political foresight as they networked these various societies together. Although the Jacobins were primarily middle class, they did establish relations with popular societies composed mostly of artisans and tradesmen.

With the King in Paris, financial questions now dominated the discussions of the Constituent Assembly. Although there were many small-scale popular demonstrations during 1790 and the first half of 1791, the next major revolutionary event did not take

place until 21 June 1791, when Louis XVI and his family attempted to flee to Varennes. This act marked the true beginning of the end of the French monarchy. Nevertheless, despite the very widespread disenchantment with the monarchy, only a small minority were prepared to call for the creation of a republic. The King was, however, suspended and the Assembly took greater control over the executive. Again the Revolution was radicalized, but only for a short time.

This radicalization was due in part to the coming to the forefront of two more revolutionary organizations: the *Cordeliers* and the *Cercle Social* (which would evolve into the Girondins). The *Cordeliers* was a street movement associated with the district of this name, founded in April of 1790. This was the locus of Danton's political power, and Marat also had a popular base of support here. The Social Circle was a more casual association of friends, commonly associated with Brissot and Roland, who met to discuss politics. After the flight to Varennes, these two organizations came together over the fate of the King. They formed a joint commission to create a petition to the nation stating that the King should be reinstated only if a majority of active citizens wished it. They encouraged the Jacobins to join them in this endeavor, but the latter backed away. The fate of the King had seriously split the Jacobin club because many of the members remained constitutional monarchists. About half of the Jacobins, including Lafayette, the Lameths, and the vast majority of deputies, left the club to form the *Feuillants*. Although the *Feuillants* would never achieve much influence either with the King or in the Assembly, and many would return to the Jacobins over the next several months, this could not be foreseen at the time. In an attempt to heal this schism, Robespierre argued that the Jacobins should withdraw support for the petition. It was too late however; the

split was established, and the petition was to go forward with or without Jacobin support. Radicals planned to gather the Parisian populace at the *Champ de Mars*, where celebrations had just taken place to commemorate the second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, and peacefully collect signatures for the petition. What resulted was another violent *journée*.

It was not the petition itself which triggered violence, but rather an unfortunate series of events. A couple of bystanders were hiding under the patriotic altar where signatures were being collected. Thinking they looked suspicious, in its agitated state, the crowd attacked them. This resulted in Bailly, the mayor of Paris, declaring martial law. Lafayette and the National Guard stormed the field where they were greeted with stones and the National Guard responded by firing on the unarmed crowd. In the weeks following this event, many activists and revolutionary leaders were arrested. Radicalism ebbed temporarily as Marat was forced underground, Danton left for England, and the *Cordeliers* club was closed.

Revolutionary energy was rekindled with the debate over the war. Those who would become the Girondins felt that a war would consolidate the Revolution. Most significantly, they argued, foreign war would force the King to demonstrate where he stood on the Revolution. The power of the argument that war would unite France and force the King to reveal his true loyalties was grounded in the fear of conspiracy and counterrevolution. Many revolutionaries feared that the *émigrés*, with the support of the foreign monarchs, were consolidating forces outside the borders of France. Indeed the *émigrés* had established three armies in 1790-1, Calonne had formed a network of counterrevolutionary coalitions within France, the Comte de Oilliamson was negotiating

for foreign support from his base in Normandy, and the Marquis de La Rouerie had established cells throughout Brittany.<sup>95</sup>

At the time, revolutionaries had no way of knowing that these groups by no means constituted a powerful force. Fear of counterrevolutionary conspiracy was further fueled not only by the flight to Varennes itself, but also by the emigration of thousands of military officers which followed, reinforcing the notion that officers remained aristocrats at heart, and by the Declaration of Pilnitz on 27 August 1791. Upon the urging of the Comte d'Artois, brother of Louis XVI, Leopold II of Austria and Frederick-William of Prussia issued this declaration in which they swore to use force to uphold 'the basis of a monarchical government.'

In this climate of fear of counterrevolutionary conspiracies, desire to crush anything which threatened the Revolution became stronger. Although they would both be vetoed by the King, the decree of 9 November 1791 against the *émigrés* was one symptom of this intensified desire to suppress opposition, and that of November 29 against refractory priests was another. In July of 1790, the National Assembly had passed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and required the clergy to swear an oath to it. Until the flight to Varennes, the refractory priests who had not sworn the revolutionary oath were, for the most part, able to carry on as usual. After the flight, however, many revolutionaries came to believe in a widespread counterrevolutionary plot, and non-constitutional priests increasingly came under suspicion. Extensive persecution began, and this polarized the countryside, where many people remained loyal to their refractory priests. As potential sites of counterrevolution, the dangers of *émigrés* and refractory priests were merged in the popular revolutionary imagination.

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<sup>95</sup> Sutherland, *France*, 134-5.

Sutherland argues that many revolutionaries perceived war as a seemingly easy solution to the problems of refractory priests, *émigrés* armies, and internal conspiracies.<sup>96</sup> Opinion was not, however, united among the Jacobins. Both Marat and Robespierre were against the war. For Marat it was a court conspiracy, and Robespierre believed that it was ridiculous not to fight internal enemies first. As vocal as they were, they were in the minority: there were only ten votes against war when the Assembly voted. On 20 April 1792, France declared war on Austria and the King of Bohemia and Hungary. Although Prussia lent support from the start, it only formally declared war on France on 13 June.

The first significant military setbacks led to another revolutionary *journée*. The Girondins encouraged the view that the lack of a quick military success was the product of an aristocratic conspiracy with Austria. In this atmosphere of suspicion and patriotism, the populist *sans-culottes* movement, made up of militants from the popular societies, came to prominence. On 18 June, the *sans culottes* were further inflamed by a letter from Lafayette which strongly denounced the Jacobin clubs. On 19 June, Louis XVI provided the final straw with his veto of the law of 27 May to deport refractory priests. On 20 June, thousands of demonstrators, organized by the *Cordeliers*, poured into the Tuileries. This *journée* was mostly characterized by insults hurled at the King. After the fact, however, Lafayette attempted to use this insurrection to discredit the Jacobins. His judgement was bad: the National Guard refused to act against them. Lafayette had momentarily unified the revolutionary forces.

Unity was short lived, as military and political troubles merged again. On 3 August the Brunswick Manifesto was published. Written by *émigrés* and issued by the Duke of Brunswick, the commander of the allied armies, this manifesto threatened harsh

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

action against the revolutionaries should they harm the royal family. On 5 August, the sections<sup>97</sup> of Paris demanded the end of the dynasty and called for a National Convention. An argument was made by those associated with the Girondins that a national emergency was no time to change the executive, but this marked the beginning of the downfall of this group. After propagandizing an Austrian conspiracy, their failing to act suggested treasonous inclinations. On 8 August, a motion to put Lafayette on trial was voted down in the Assembly by a majority of 406 to 224. Radical opinion was outraged, as this vote was taken by the populace as proof of the Assembly's corruption. The result was the insurrection of 10 August 1792, which, after much bloodshed, led to suspension of the monarchy and the election of a new parliament known as the National Convention.

Far from solving the nation's problems, the insurrection of 10 August marked the beginning of a much more hostile and contentious phase of the Revolution. First, Lafayette tried to march his army against Paris, but failed and surrendered himself to the Austrians. On 19 August, the Prussians and an army of *émigrés* crossed the frontier. Then, on 2 September, Parisians learned that Verdun was under siege, and this news triggered the September Massacres. In response to a widespread belief and fear that the prisons were full of former aristocrats and counterrevolutionaries who were conspiring with the enemy, the masses rushed the prisons to purge the nation of this evil. For three

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<sup>97</sup> Paris was divided into 48 sections. Sections were a political unit whose function was to "group communes into primary assemblies for electoral purposes and to mark the jurisdictions of the justice of the peace." (Sutherland, *France*, 90-1) The commune was responsible for electing the mayor. While these organizations were created as voting units, the members within did not in fact limit themselves solely to this function. Both the sections and the commune were frequently used as a basis from which to organize petitions to parliament and street demonstrations, and as such they formed significant political pressure groups.

days, sometimes tried by informal tribunals and sometimes not, between 1,100 and 1,400 inmates were massacred by the angry Parisian crowd.<sup>98</sup>

Reactions to this massively violent *journée* were mixed and slow to take shape. By late fall, the Girondins were using the massacres as a pretext to advance their cause against the leftist radicals (Montagnards) in the Convention. The Montagnard deputies were closely associated with the Jacobin Club, where they often worked out their policy ideas. Given the Girondin position, the radicals were left with little choice but to defend the massacres. As with many outbursts of revolutionary violence, though the means may have been condemned, the result was embraced by Girondin and Montagnard alike: France was officially declared a republic on 21 September 1792.

After the Prison massacres, the fight between Girondins and Montagnards was largely confined to political institutions and the press rather than the streets. This constant propaganda battle was the product of neither group having a solid majority, and was fought out primarily around the issue of the King's fate. There was no debate over his guilt; it was the punishment that was the problem. Leading radicals argued that the only choice was execution. The Girondins were concerned about the results of such rash action. Within France, the debate over the King was a power struggle: the Girondins' base of support was in the country, and they did not believe that Parisian radical opinion did or should represent the nation on this issue. Externally, the Girondins feared that executing the King would further unite their enemies, who would bring their vengeance down on France. They proposed putting the question to the nation in a referendum. Given the political climate, this proposition turned out to be a grave political

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<sup>98</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 192.

misjudgment. The Montagnards successfully portrayed the Girondin effort as a royalist plot to divide the nation and bring on civil war, and the King was guillotined 21 January 1793.

Once the republic was declared and the King was dead, the Revolution could not turn back. The Convention's military decisions from the fall of 1792 to the spring of 1793 reflected an awareness of this political reality. In November 1792, Dumouriez defeated the Austrians at Jemappes, allowing for the French occupation of Belgium. The French were far from humble in this victory: they declared that they would offer 'fraternity and assistance' to the oppressed peoples of Europe, Savoy was annexed, and the Revolution was spread to conquered territories. Clearly, the Convention understood that extending the Revolution would further antagonize their European enemies. In February 1793, it declared war on Britain and Holland, and on Spain in March.

Throughout the winter of 1792-3, there were no major insurrections, although there were many smaller-scale uprisings, often over bread and the grain trade. Revolutionary leaders did not pay much heed to these movements, although they often attributed them to plotting on the part of their opponents. Aside from the *enragés*, who were the most radical political group, it was yet to be a few months before subsistence issues would be popular with revolutionary leaders. The *enragés* were led by the ultraradical priest Jacques Roux and the journalist Hébert. What set the *enragés* apart from the rest of the radicals was their passionate advocating of social equality; in particular, they focussed on subsistence. The *enragés* leaders were a central force in propagating the view that food shortages were the product of hoarding, and as such were a social problem. As a result, they insisted on price fixing, ignoring the fact that this was

a band-aid solution which only benefited the city. Other radicals condemned this movement on the grounds that it held the Revolution back by resorting too readily to violence and popular protest.

The grocery riots which took place in Paris 25 February 1793 made up the next popular movement which received significant attention from official revolutionary actors. In an attempt to strike down the Montagnards, the Girondins accused Marat of causing these riots. Girondin deputies successfully kept this issue in the public eye for over a month and on 12 April, Marat was impeached on charges of propagating violence and disrespecting the Convention. This strategy overlooked Marat's unofficial street popularity, which he used successfully to refute the charges. He was acquitted on the 24<sup>th</sup>, having portrayed the Girondins as filthy persecutors of the Revolution's greatest martyr. What is more, subsistence issues and the rights of the poor achieved a new status on the official political agenda. Perceiving the benefits of an alliance with the *sans culottes*, by 4 May the Montagnards had pushed through a partial law of the maximum which regulated the grain trade.

Morris Slavin argues that it was this willingness of the Montagnards to compromise with the popular movement, and the complete unwillingness of the Girondins to do so, which made the gap between the two "unbridgeable."<sup>99</sup> Indeed, the growing popular perception that the Girondins solely represented the propertied middle class of the countryside (locus of counterrevolution!), whereas the Montagnards represented the Parisian masses (true revolutionaries and patriots), did make continued coexistence difficult. The Montagnards managed to maintain this perception in the

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<sup>99</sup> Morris Slavin, *The Making of an Insurrection: Parisian Sections and the Gironde* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), vii.

popular imagination despite the reality that the class background of their members was quite similar to that of the Girondins, and the fact that both groups held similar views on the market economy.

These political problems took place against a backdrop of military crises which further intensified the Girondin-Montagnard conflict. On 18 March 1793, Dumouriez, after being defeated at Neerwinden, betrayed the Revolution and attempted to turn his troops on Paris. Like Lafayette, he could not convince his troops and had to flee to the Austrian lines. Naturally, his betrayal fed the fear of conspiracy from within. On 6 April, the Convention established the Committee of Public Safety to better organize the war effort and to purge alleged “traitors.” As the Austrians and Prussians, as well as the Sardinians and Spanish, continued to make significant advances, the Montagnards successfully managed to connect in the popular imagination the claim of Girondin false patriotism with the deteriorating military situation and with counterrevolution in the Vendée.

Once the masses perceived the Girondins as the source of the Revolution’s troubles, they could be purged. By 30 May, the Parisian sections were declaring a state of insurrection, and on the following day, the *sans culottes* took to the streets demanding a purge of the Convention. Their goal was achieved on 2 June. The Montagnards now had control of the National Convention, thanks to little aside from fear, violence, and the *sans culottes*.

What makes the insurrection which culminated in the purge of the Convention of particular interest is that it was perhaps the least violent *journée*, but had one of the most dramatic results. However, the relative absence of physical violence does not mean that

it was not present as a force. In fact, many theorists (e.g., Machiavelli, Weber, and Arendt) argue that the absence of force may instead indicate its mastery. Arguably, the low level of violence was calculated and demonstrates a political understanding on behalf of the crowd of when and when not to use force. Both Marat and Robespierre regularly advised the masses as to how to play their cards, and warned against falling prey to partial movements encouraged by false patriots for the purpose of bringing about disorder. Further, the low level of violence certainly made it easier for the radicals in the Convention to claim the event.

The purge of the Girondins took place far enough into the Revolution that it is meaningful to talk about new and competing notions of legality, both official and unofficial. The tension which resulted from an undefined sphere of law is especially apparent with Robespierre who, in view of his devotion to the law, had to rationalize his position of support for this insurrection. Another appeal of centering analysis on the purge of the Girondins is that the difficulties of consolidating the Revolution were clear by this phase of its evolution. As stated by Sutherland, "The end of fiscal privilege did not bring the relief that people had hoped for."<sup>100</sup> Questions of wealth and privilege, especially those connected to property, remained politically charged. Although it was not discussed in these terms, the lingering problem was the need to solidify the boundary between official and unofficial politics. For the Revolution to be successful, official political actors needed to be able to claim, with at least perceived legitimacy, that they had done what they could for the masses.

Naturally, when talking about the purge of the Girondins, I am also talking about that which came before and after. The purge is bookended by two violent events: the

September massacres of 1792, and the assassination of Marat on 13 July 1793. Although the heated debates over the war and the fate of the King epitomized the schism between the Girondins and the Jacobins, it was the September massacres that were picked up by the Girondins and used as a moral metaphor to prove the rightness of their position. Further, although much of the intensification of the struggle between the Girondins and the Montagnards can be attributed to an unwillingness on the part of the Girondins to work with the *sans culottes*, this was not always the case. It was only after the September massacres that compromise became truly unacceptable.<sup>101</sup>

The September massacres, more than any other revolutionary event, summarized the problem of violence both for revolutionaries and for the historians of the Revolution to follow. For the revolutionaries, Sydenham argues:

Whatever the truth, the massacres of September had the effect of terrorizing moderation into silence during the critical period of the elections to the Convention... The deliberate slaughter of scores of defenseless people was in all probability a severe shock to their philosophical faith in progress and in the natural goodness of the people, to their dreams of the sober and virtuous republicanism of ancient Rome.<sup>102</sup>

For historians, how the September massacres are represented remains now, just as much as it was then, difficult to detach from the ideological preferences and moral inclinations of those representing it. The Marxists, for all their work on the crowd, give little attention to the September massacres. Although class-based arguments that it was necessary to purge the aristocrats can be invoked, this addresses neither the moral question of the nature of the slaughter, nor the empirical question of who was actually massacred. Even

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<sup>100</sup> Sutherland, *France*, 103.

<sup>101</sup> Gary Kates, *The Cercle Social: The Girondins and the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 223.

<sup>102</sup> M. J. Sydenham, *The Girondins* (London: The Athlone Press, 1961), 117-8.

in more neutral accounts of the Revolution, representation of the September massacres remains politically charged. For example, consider Sydenham's tempered portrayal:

Although the matter remains controversial, it seems rather that they [prison massacres] were carried out by a comparatively small number of *sans-culottes* and *fédérés*, who were convinced that their work was just and that they were serving the city by ridding it of priests and prostitutes, aristocrats and forgers, all alike in being enemies within the gates.<sup>103</sup>

Contrast this with Schama's account which puts the Prison massacres at the heart of revolutionary culture: "But a good case, however, might be made for seeing the September massacres as the event which more than almost any other exposed a central truth of the French Revolution: its dependence on organized killing to accomplish political ends."<sup>104</sup>

Though the September massacres were obviously horrific, representation of this event did not prove straightforward. Slavin's research demonstrates that the relationship between the horror of the massacres and their condemnation by opponents of the radicals was not one of simple cause and effect. He points to the use and abuse which occurred in representation of this event:

They [the Girondins] clamored against the September massacres only later, when they saw the political gains that could be made from their opposition... [They] had even applauded the September massacres until they realized that indignation over them could be utilized as a weapon against their enemies.<sup>105</sup>

It cannot be ignored that emphasizing and condemning the violence of the prison massacres did work as a highly effective weapon.

I conclude with the assassination of Marat which was the mirror reflection of the September massacres in terms of how the Montagnards and the Girondins portrayed

<sup>103</sup> M. J. Sydenham, *The French Revolution* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1965), 122.

<sup>104</sup> Schama, *Citizens*, 637.

<sup>105</sup> Slavin, *Making*, 6-7.

themselves and each other. Just as the Girondins used the September massacres as something tangible and emotionally evocative to legitimize the moral high ground which they took against the radicals, the Montagnards used the assassination of Marat as evidence that the (former) Girondin deputies were in fact moral degenerates and conspirators. By attaching responsibility for the assassination of Marat to the Girondins, the Montagnards confirmed the legitimacy of expelling them from the Convention.

Thus far, this project has been narrowed down to focussing on popular revolutionary violence, from the September massacres to the assassination of Marat, with the purpose of examining how violence was used to work out the relationship between official and unofficial politics. I will go about doing this by analyzing the publications of Marat and Robespierre from the spring of 1792 to the summer of 1793.

Unlike many of the prominent revolutionaries whose background was in law, Marat's pre-revolutionary career was in science and medicine. His 1774 pamphlet, "The Chains of Slavery," demonstrates, however, that he was politically active before the revolutionary years. Indeed, his involvement in the Revolution was rapid; he began publishing his paper, the "*Publiciste Parisien*" (soon to become "*L'Ami du Peuple*") on 12 September 1789. This newspaper was the heart of Marat's political power. As a result of its passionate and uncompromising language of devotion to the common people, *L'Ami du Peuple* had a massive *sans-culottes* following which, when Marat did become involved in official forms of politics, he was able to rally to his cause.

Marat is widely associated with the *Cordeliers*. However, he was never a leader of this group in the way that Danton was. For most of the Revolution, Marat operated underground and quite independently. His popularity in the *Cordeliers* district, as with

the *sans culottes* more broadly, was more a reflection of the fact that his paper addressed their particular concerns. When Marat called for action, it comes across as a matter of general principle, not a call to a specific element of the populace.

It was only after the summer of 1792 that Marat became a public political figure. With the official suspension of the monarchy after the *journée* of 10 August, Marat was able to operate in the open. In September, he was elected to the National Convention and this marked the beginning of his short-lived official political career. Despite his having moved into the world of official politics, Marat's power-base remained the populace.

Uncomfortable with the extent of his association with violence, the other radical deputies at the Convention tended to disassociate themselves from Marat. What made it possible for him to avoid (official) political oblivion was his ability to rally the common people observing from the galleries. The line between official and unofficial politics did not just overlap in theory, but physically as well. Aware that radical policies were worked out in the Jacobins, Marat attended the Club. Despite being elected president in April 1793, he never did become one of its foremost members. He was given this position, not as a reflection of his status within the Club, but because of his influence over the *sans culottes*. As the conflict intensified between the Montagnards and the Girondins, his fellow radicals needed to draw on his popularity with the masses. Indeed, Marat was a central figure in forging the alliance between the *sans culottes* and the Montagnards.

When Robespierre is called to mind, one likely thinks of his activities during the Terror, which marked the pinnacle of his career. However, the focus here is the year leading up to the Terror. Though already devoted to Rousseauian ideals, he had not yet

developed them into the violently practiced cult of united virtue. Instead, at this time, Robespierre was more known for his adamant faith in the law and the constitution. In terms of Robespierre's relationship with violence, Norman Hampson argues, "He [Robespierre] never shrank from bloodshed when he thought that a revolutionary situation could only be resolved by force but his goal was always a return to humane constitutional government."<sup>106</sup>

Robespierre's career is of particular interest to a study of the interaction between official and unofficial politics as he spent a great deal of time operating in the overlapping space between the two. Robespierre entered politics via official means by getting himself elected to the Estates General. He then became a deputy in the National Assembly which followed. In May 1791, Robespierre obtained an ordinance blocking deputies from being re-elected and this ended his official political role until the fall of the following year. His political position, however, by no means declined as a result. Robespierre had never, in fact, achieved much influence within the Assembly; as stated by Hampson, it was the Jacobin club that was his "main political fortress."<sup>107</sup> Although not originally a dominant figure, Robespierre was involved with the Jacobin Club from its beginning. He soon worked his way to the forefront and became president in March of 1790. Robespierre worked the club's network in the countryside well, and established himself as a national revolutionary figure.

The Jacobin club was technically an unofficial political forum, but what makes it interesting is the extent to which it was also a political institution. This political gray space was the source of Robespierre's political power. At the Club, deputies debated and

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<sup>106</sup> Norman Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London: Duckworth, 1974), 233.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

worked through policy proposals, before taking them to the Assembly. Further, speeches made at the Jacobins did not disappear into thin air; they were often circulated to other clubs, or published. For Robespierre personally, not only did the Jacobins provide him with a forum in which to express his views, it also provided him the opportunity to hone his oratorical skills, which would be an essential tool in the later years of his career.

Between his time in the Assembly and the Convention, Robespierre dabbled in some lower profile official political positions. He was elected president of a new law court in Versailles in the fall of 1790, but resigned when chosen to be public prosecutor in the Paris criminal court. Despite his legal background, and despite his belief that the law was the road to a better world, Robespierre showed little interest in this type of position. On 10 April 1791, he resigned as public prosecutor – before he had even tried a case. In the summer of 1792, he turned down both a position offered to him by Danton in the ministry of justice and his election to preside over the new revolutionary court. He did accept his election as one of the leaders of the Commune after the *journée* of 10 August: politically, this position was center-stage. With his September election to the National Convention, a position for which he campaigned quite hard, Robespierre was fully reinstated in the world of official politics.

What Marat and Robespierre have in common is that they are both well-known radicals who are widely associated with the violence of the French Revolution. They both presented morality as at the heart of politics; much of the violence with which they are associated stems from this view. However, in terms of their approaches to violence, they present a nice contrast. The names of their respective newspapers say it all: Marat was “*l’ami du peuple*,” and Robespierre the “*défenseur de la constitution*.” While neither

Marat nor Robespierre demonstrated any desire to shy away from revolutionary violence, Robespierre was much more legalistic in his approach. Both of these men claimed their legitimacy resided in the fact that they were representatives of the people. Robespierre had a significantly longer history of being so both officially and unofficially, while Marat was primarily so unofficially. Whether acting officially or unofficially, both Marat and Robespierre played on the tension and overlap between these two worlds.

Finally, while both of these men were famous and well recognized (then as now) as representatives of the people, they were at the same time unquestionably shapers of opinion. In this, the importance of their role as newspaper men cannot be underestimated. It is precisely the fact that they were journalists as well as radical political actors beyond the world of the press which drove me to them in particular. The tensions between politics as a shaping while also a shaped force, something both official and unofficial, between public opinion as something natural and contrived, are arguably played out best in the press.

The printed word has a long history of influencing and shaping events, and this was true even before the press was able to operate on a large scale. Jeffrey Sawyer demonstrates that “Before the eighteenth century... Propaganda aimed to help the government control the impressions (perceptions) of its subjects in order to secure better compliance with its policies.”<sup>108</sup> As part of this effort, “Pamphlets focused public attention on particular issues, actually defining or creating them in many instances.”<sup>109</sup> As the *Ancien Régime* collapsed, the power of print did not lie so readily at the hands of the monarchy and its supporters. There was a vacuum, but not for long. Under a new,

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<sup>108</sup> Jeffrey K. Sawyer, *Printed Poison: Pamphlet Propaganda, Faction Politics, and the Public Sphere in Early Seventeenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 2.

unstable, and hopeful form of government, the ability of the press to shape reality was at the heart of the conflict over establishing acceptable boundaries between official and unofficial politics.

Given that they were operating in the context of a revolution that considered “politician” a dirty word, many newspaper men would have denied that in many ways the press was politics and journalists were politicians. Not surprisingly, portraying themselves as virtuous and above partisan struggles became a central aspect of career journalism. The way in which journalists were responsible for informing the masses and expressing public opinion could be virtuous, while political, in a way that politics and politicians never could be. Marat, in particular, regularly reminded his readers of his poverty and self-sacrifice. Robespierre also discussed his personal sacrifices made for the Revolution at length.

Jeremy Popkin emphasizes the ability of the press to shape events. He argues that, “Whatever historians may think, the journalists of the time did write as if the newspapers could set out scripts and guidelines to prepare the actors on the revolutionary stage for their parts.”<sup>110</sup> This is apparent in the works of both Marat and Robespierre. Both men repeatedly expressed frustration when their calls went unheeded. Whether heeded or not, their proposed scripts were an integral part of revolutionary political culture. Even though their readers did not generally do what the radical papers demanded, when they demanded it, these papers did help establish both an atmosphere and a theory of popular violence.

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>110</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France 1789-1799* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 136.

The process of communicating political ideas through the press works both ways.

Popkin summarizes this process as follows:

The newspaper press was an indispensable link between government and public: it was at the heart of the new political culture of publicity and openness that was meant to ensure that the rulers truly reflected the will of the people... Under these conditions, the political press was an indispensable symbol of the public opinion of a people that lacked the means to speak for itself... By publicizing and, indeed, amplifying the confrontations that destroyed the Revolution's claim to express a general will that, by its very definition, had to be unified, the press was as powerful a force in undermining the legitimacy of each successive set of revolutionary leaders' claims to speak for the people as it was making the assertion of those claims possible.<sup>111</sup>

Although one must recognize that the press was a force which worked both ways, one must also be careful not to underestimate the shaping power of the press. Indeed, the Revolution could not have had the same meaning without it. Popkin argues, "Without its work of shaping and defining, the events of the revolutionary decade would not have been packaged as historically effective symbols."<sup>112</sup> Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche make a similar argument: "Without the press, they can conquer the Bastille, but they cannot overthrow the Old Regime."<sup>113</sup>

Perhaps above all, the press was what made it possible to expand the space in which politics were able to operate. Popkin and Darnton both point to the politicization which resulted from mass access to the press.<sup>114</sup> Largely through the press, the realm of unofficial politics was able to grow and achieve a new legitimacy. Further, the realm of official politics was made more public, and was watched much more closely.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 2-5.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>113</sup> Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche, "Introduction," in Danton and Roche, eds., *Revolution in Print: The Press in France 1775-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), xiii.

<sup>114</sup> See Danton and Roche, eds., *Revolution in Print* and Popkin, *Revolutionary News*.

To summarize, I use revolutionary political violence as a tool of analysis because it is a means of examining the tension between official and unofficial politics and law. Temporally, I focus on the purge of the Girondins as, unlike the Terror, the violence of this *journée* was not so obvious: it was one of the least violent uprisings, with one of the most dramatic results. By this phase of the Revolution, revolutionary institutions had solidified, but their legitimacy remained contentious. Finally, I chose to focus on Marat and Robespierre both for their importance in radical and violent politics, and for the fact that they were leading figures in the official and unofficial political spheres. With this framework established, we can now go on to look specifically at what was said and done by Marat and Robespierre.

### CHAPTER III: MARAT

This chapter begins with a general analysis of the presence of violence in Marat's work, particularly in two main regards. First, more than he called for it openly, violence was often implicit in Marat's arguments. This tendency is evident in his frequent discussion of conspiracy, wherein he portrayed alleged treason against the Revolution as so violent in nature that it became difficult to imagine any solution other than resort to violence. Of the counterrevolutionary conspiracies, Marat focused primarily on that of the war, but other conspiracies included plotting on behalf of false patriots to induce public disorder, triggering subsistence crises to discredit the masses, and attempting to silence left-wing radicals by vilifying them for their association with violence. The second type of violent writing found in Marat is more explicit, and here he made straightforward demands for greater use of force. He attacked moderation and laxity of action, he presented human nature as essentially unchanging, making it necessary to purge undesirable elements, and, finally, he made direct calls for insurrection. Whether tirading against the war or making an explicit call for insurrection, Marat used violence as a means of demanding that his voice be heard.

After having discussed the main themes of violence in Marat's writing, I consider his presentation of official and unofficial political space, and how he operated in and between the two. In the final section of this chapter, I compare Marat's approach to the violence of the September massacres to that of the purge of the Girondins.

Before turning to Marat's work, it should be noted that his writings during the period under consideration were not as radical as some of his earlier publications.

Arguably, this was because he had a much more official political role. After 10 August

1791, he no longer had to operate underground, and in September he joined the National Convention. Marat was no longer part of the political opposition; he was part of the official institutional structure of government. Perhaps he attempted to distance himself from violence in an effort to obtain more influence among his fellow deputies.<sup>115</sup>

Theoretical discourse not being his purpose, Marat never presented a comprehensive theory of violence. Nonetheless, much of what he would have said can be deduced. In line with the general contemporary distinction between force (justifiable) and violence (abusive), Marat often suggested a difference between violence as a physical force or tool, and violent intentions. If it is used to bring about better ends, violence as a physical force is justifiable; in fact, more than being justifiable, this form of violence is not really violent. On the other hand, violent intentions, although they may be indirect or disguised as moderate, are truly violent.

Marat would have defined violent intentions primarily in terms of seeking to destroy the Revolution – because the Revolution was for the overall good of the people, an act against it was violent. Violent intentions are highly dangerous, as the peril is often not immediately evident to the less enlightened. This interpretation of violence manifested itself in Marat's defense against charges that he was a bloodthirsty monster. Grounded in assertions of his moral virtue, and the fact that he did not aspire to personal power, Marat claimed vindication, and redirected charges of violence at his enemies. In other words, while Marat may have appealed to violence when necessary, his intentions were honourable, and the violence he advocated was meant to end violence. The following passage is a typically dramatic self-defense:

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<sup>115</sup> This is a theme that has been developed in works on Marat during the last decade. See: Coquard 367-8, and Connor 215.

Enfin il doit porter l'abnégation de lui-même jusqu'à l'héroïsme, pour immoler son être tout entier au bonheur public; passer ses jours dans les privations, les humiliations, les chagrins, les alarmes; vivre au milieu des pièges & des ambuches; avoir sans cesse sous les yeux l'image de la mort, se resourde à verser son sang goûte à goûte; s'exposer même à périr ignominieusement sur l'échaffaud pour le salut d'un peuple ignorant ou égaré, qui trop souvent le dédaigne, qui l'outrage quelquefois, & dont il est presque toujours méconnu.<sup>116</sup>

It is immoral hypocrites who use revolutionary discourse only to obtain personal power who should properly be considered violent. Beneath the claim that violence should be defined as that which goes against the Revolution lies the suggestion of a simple logic: if you get rid of all the bad men, then there will be no more violence.

Marat's famous assertion that, if the Revolution took 500 criminal heads, it would save 500,000 innocent ones, is the most significant example of the argument that force employed for the purpose of ending violence is not actually violent. Reminiscent of Machiavelli's recognition of the economy of violence, Marat argued that, if only revolutionary actors had not so easily named all violence "violent" and done so much to avoid killing even those who were "bad," many "good" lives would have been saved. For this pointless loss of so many good citizens, he further declared that we have only false and weak patriots with too much official power to blame, and they are much more dangerous to the Revolution than its sworn enemies. The explicit bloodiness of this argument alienated even many radicals, and they often invoked it when defending setting themselves apart from Marat. Such political pressure did not, however, cause Marat to back down; rather, the following passage is an example of how he portrayed the chopping of 500 heads as ultimately peaceful:

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<sup>116</sup> Jean Paul Marat, *Marat dit L'Ami du Peuple*, vol. 15, pp. 5918-9. For other examples see: Vol. 15, pp. 5590, 5860-1; Vol. 17, p. 6729; Vol. 18, pp. 6807-8. Note: passages from Marat's newspaper leave the text in its original form.

Si j'ai conseillé d'abattre cinq cent têtes criminelles, c'étoit pour en épargner cinq cent milles innocentes. Que n'a-t-elle été prise à tems, cent mille patriotes n'auroient pas été égorgés; cent mille patriotes ne seroient pas menacés de l'être, nos campagnes ne seroient pas remplies de veuves et d'orphelins réduits au désespoir, la disette et la misère n'auroient pas désolé l'état quatre années consécutives, il ne seroit ni bouleversé par les factions, ni déchiré par des hordes barbares d'ennemis, après l'avoir été si long-tems par ses enfans dénaturés.<sup>117</sup>

Marat expressed this view confidently and frequently.<sup>118</sup>

Regardless of whether you accept the logic that taking 500 heads would save exponentially more, this remains a violent act. Arguably, however, a greater source of violence lies in passages wherein Marat implicitly demands forceful action. His portrayal of the status quo is so harsh that it is made difficult to imagine any solution other than violence. His implicit suggestion that conditions demand violence is apparent in several of the issues which tend to reoccur in *L'Ami du Peuple*: the war plot, the food plot, and the conspiracy to silence “energetic” patriots.

Marat is famous for his impassioned denunciations and paranoid fear of conspiracy, and resort to violence is a central aspect of both. The extent to which his fears were legitimate has been widely debated, but it is not my purpose to address this issue. What is of concern here is the extent to which Marat used or recognized the use of violence as a political strategy when presenting conspiracy theories to the public.

Marat certainly understood the politically charged nature of violence. While he pushed for violence to be used as part of a strategy to obtain certain revolutionary ends, he also manipulated its definition to attribute its dark side to his enemies. Presenting his enemies as conspirators enabled Marat to turn conceptions of violence on their head: it

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., Vol. 15, p. 5560.

<sup>118</sup> For examples see: Vol. 14, p. 5407; Vol. 15, pp. 5589-90, 5872; Vol. 16, p. 6340; Vol. 17, p. 6658; Vol. 18, p. 6807.

was not he who advocated violence, he was fighting it; the masses were not a mob, it was power-hungry statesmen who only pretended to be patriotic who caused civil disorder.

More than anywhere else, the tension between advocating and condemning violence can be seen in Marat's portrayal of the war effort. On the one hand, he portrayed the war as a conspiracy to butcher patriots; on the other, he implied that using force to purge the state of traitors was the only means of rectifying the situation. Although arguing that the war was an intentional effort to send good patriots to the slaughter obviously made for good press, it must be noted that Marat made this argument continuously from the beginning of the war. Given that, at the outset, the war effort had mass support, one must conclude that Marat was not merely pandering to the fears of an easily led people.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, examining what Marat said about the war, and all the supposed plots and conspiracies which surrounded it, demonstrates the extent to which he also used this discourse as a political strategy.

The essence of Marat's rhetoric was simple logic: if the bulk of the army is made up of good patriots, and patriots can never be defeated by armies of men enslaved by despotism, that France is experiencing setbacks can only be explained by the fact that the army is being led by traitors. From this, it can (must!) be concluded that hypocritical statesmen and former aristocrat officers are conspiring against the state.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, there were enough cases of treason, most significantly those of Lafayette and Dumouriez, for this argument to ring true. Moreover, using this logic served as a very effective strategy, as Marat was able to argue his case in a way which, while not well supported by evidence, was very difficult to disprove. When reproached with recklessly charging

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<sup>119</sup> For more on this argument, see Clifford Conner, *Jean Paul Marat: Scientist and Revolutionary* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997), 218.

people with conspiracy, Marat defended himself by arguing that plots do not leave evidence.<sup>121</sup> Better to err on the side of caution and make a few false accusations – that is, if you are a true patriot. In this way, Marat was able to suggest that it was the indirect violence of false patriots and their failure to act properly which were the true sources of revolutionary violence and chaos.

Having established that it is the foremost of patriotic duties to uncover conspiracy, Marat went on to assert that leading as many patriots as possible to fight the exterior war suited the interests of conspiring statesmen: it left the interior poorly defended, making it possible to stamp out revolution and re-establish despotism. Marat even tried to claim military victory as part of the overall conspiracy. In a war where French soldiers were led by traitors, claims of victory could only be taken as part of a plan to lull the population into a false sense of security. More cynically, he suggested that false news of victory was spread for the sake of causing the elated masses to drink themselves into passivity.<sup>122</sup>

Marat also employed the strategy of representing the war effort as an anti-revolutionary conspiracy to save himself from the trap of appearing unpatriotic in his lack of support. He avoided implying that the French did not need to fight to defend their nation by arguing that, given the inevitability of war, false patriots were obviously conspiring against the Revolution when they delayed declaring war, intentionally allowing their enemies more time to prepare.<sup>123</sup> Again, he did not need to prove this claim, and, once more, the logic was simple: if we had declared war sooner, our enemies

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<sup>120</sup> Marat, Vol. 14, pp. 5286, 5347, 5361, 5380, 5447; Vol. 16, p. 6404.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 15, p. 5862.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 16, p. 5974.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 14, p. 5251.

never could have been prepared to fight the tremendous force of a free and patriotic army. This line of argument also made it possible to turn the argument around: if you disagree, you are suggesting that France is not the greatest nation of earth, and must be a traitor.

Marat gave heart-rending accounts of the material conditions of the soldiers to further fuel the emotional issue of the war. Although even many of the radicals did not give subsistence issues serious consideration until the approach of the Terror, on a more general level there was a good deal of consensus that the burden of shortage should be shared more equally, and not left to weigh so heavily on one segment of the population. Marat tapped into this sentiment when he discussed the condition of the soldiers. It is certainly no coincidence that he compared their destitution to the comfortable living conditions of officers and counterrevolutionary prisoners. Moreover, Marat tied the material conditions of the army to the broader debate over subsistence by arguing that grain was being sold to France's enemies on the free market.<sup>124</sup> Subsistence may not have been a high priority on the official political agenda, but it was of foremost importance to the masses to whom *L'Ami du Peuple* was directed, and it is highly improbable that Marat was not aware that he was playing with fire when making these claims.

There is a certain irony in the way in which Marat presented the war issue. While he portrayed himself as the ultimate crusader against the slaughter of patriots, there was constantly an unquestionably violent quality to Marat's words. Consider the following passage: "ILS ME FONT UN CRIME D'AVOIR PREDIT QUE LES GENERAUX ET LES CHEFS DE L'ARMEE, CONDUIROIENT LEURS TROUPES A LA BOUCHERIE, ET LIVREROIENT A L'ENNEMI LES BARRIERES DU

ROYAUME.”<sup>125</sup> Although Marat reserved capital letters for when he *really* wanted to be taken seriously, the language of this passage is typical of the inflammatory style which he used to portray events. How, other than with violence, could the masses be expected to respond to the state intentionally butchering the best of them?

In the same spirit that Marat claimed that the war was a conspiracy to weaken the revolutionary masses and create chaos, he also argued that much of the popular agitation was not a true expression of revolutionary energy, but rather the product of conspirators tricking the people. At best, the intention behind these plots was to create disorder so that the authorities could justify stronger rule; at worst, such disorders could set off civil war, forcing the people to demand the return of monarchy to re-establish order. This line of reasoning not only removed the moral responsibility for popular violence from the masses, it also reinforced the notion that the seemingly moderate were the truly violent. Marat was not subtle in these allegations. He stated them clearly and frequently; for example:

Qu'en conclure? Si ce n'est que les fonctionnaires publics, les magistrats préposés à la police, les juges, l'état-major parisien, sont conjurés avec la cour, pour favoriser tous les désordres, entretenir l'anarchie, allumer la guerre civile, et forcer le peuple à chercher la sûreté et le repos dans les bras du despotisme.<sup>126</sup>

Passages such as this leave no doubt as to what is being suggested. Implicit in this argument that those who abuse authority are violently damaging the Revolution is the suggestion that they must meet their end. Marat does not necessarily say that this end must be achieved by violent means – but, given the extent of their duplicity, how else?

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 5379.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 5264.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5200. For other examples see: Vol. 14, pp. 5191-2, 5202, 5244, 5289, 5308, 5332, 5489-90; Vol. 17, p. 6588; Vol. 18, p. 7058.

The issue of subsistence was central to Marat's claim that the Revolution's enemies were intentionally creating chaos. He argued that the despotically inclined were manipulating the poverty and political innocence of the masses and abusing subsistence as a means of inflaming conflict, a maneuver which made it possible to justify a harsher hand in dealing with unofficial political expression. Marat denounced this alleged plot in highly inflammatory language: "S'il est un complot criminel, affreux, atroce, fait pour remplir d'indignation & de fureur tous les coeurs honnêtes, c'est celui d'affamer le peuple, pour avoir un prétexte de l'égorger, comme séditieux et rebèle lorsqu'il vient à se soulever contre les accapareurs, les agens de famine."<sup>127</sup> Marat's taking this stance on subsistence uprisings was a dual-edged sword which epitomizes the tension between official and unofficial politics. The conductors of the plot come across as moral villains who would use even the starvation of the masses to advance their cause. In fact, however, many of the radicals who were supposed to be the true representatives of the people were no better. They propagated the view that food-based agitation was the product of conspiracy, and used this as an excuse to claim that subsistence issues should be left to revolutionary institutions to resolve.

Although Marat argued that the masses must be careful about taking to the streets too readily over subsistence, he also argued that very bad conditions would make insurrection inevitable. Marat blamed food shortages on social rather than natural factors. He argued, "Nous mourons de faim au milieu de l'abondance; qui doute que la disette factice que nous éprouvons depuis long-tems, ne soit, l'ouvrage des accapareurs?"<sup>128</sup> This is a very volatile proposition. Focussing solely on social factors

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., Vol. 14, p. 5195.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., Vol. 18, p. 7018.

simplifies the issue to a fight of good versus evil, shutting out political, economic, and scientific solutions which may have helped to ease the situation. The ferocity of Marat's language suggested that violence was the only solution. Other than by forcibly removing them, how else would it be possible to solve the problem of hoarders and monopolizers who would never share their wealth with the people?

The final device which Marat commonly invoked to legitimize his world view was the argument that, when state officials spoke out against him and other radicals, the revolutionary press, or patriotic societies, their criticisms constituted an effort to prevent patriots from revealing the truth. He argued, "Ceux qui m'accusent de vues ambitieuses, connoissent mieux que personne toute l'absurdité de leurs imputations: ils ne veulent me proscrire que pour m'ôter les moyens de les démasquer, et d'arrêter leurs projets criminels."<sup>129</sup> Here, the implication of violence is more subtle. It resides in Marat's attempt to convince his readers that they should never trust what they hear, unless it comes from good, true, and proven patriots. Marat's argument that a conspiracy existed to prevent the revelation of false patriots was an argument that evil was trying to destroy good, before good was able to destroy evil. Such polarization demands violence: evil cannot just be left alone. Left unmasked, it will expand and destroy everything.

So far, Marat comes across more as an individual who used violence as a political tactic than as someone who was fanatically bloodthirsty. The tone of what he wrote is violent because he represented the state of affairs as so appalling that violence appeared to be the only possible solution. Although both his implicit and his explicit suggestions of a need for force contributed to the violently charged atmosphere, the above arguments

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 6808. For other examples see: Vol. 14, pp. 5190, 5259-60, 5288.

are different in kind from those which explicitly demanded greater “revolutionary energy.”

For the extent to which Marat railed against moderation and laxity of action, it is definitely possible to charge him with intentionally creating a violently charged atmosphere. Consider the tone of the following passage: “La source de tous nos maux, de tous nos malheurs, de tous nos désastres, c’est moins la perfidie des ennemis de la liberté, qui inondent l’état, que le défaut d’énergie et de vertu des patriotes qui siègent dans le sénat, et auxquels la nation a remis le soin de ses destinées.”<sup>130</sup> In this case, Marat was not suggesting that violence is the likely result of horrid conditions, but explicitly demanding that revolutionaries be more forceful.

Marat further contributed to the radicalization of the Revolution by demanding action and expressing impatience with talk and theorizing: “O peuple babillard, si tu savois agir!”<sup>131</sup> Prioritizing action over talk also served Marat well by permitting him to draw a line between harsh words (of which he may have been guilty) and violent actions (of which he could not be accused), and he frequently asserted that he could not be blamed or held responsible for what others did. For example, shortly after being accused of setting off the grocery riots of 25 February 1793, he argued: “comme si une réflexion politique, une simple opinion pouvoit être délit.”<sup>132</sup> Words are not to blame; the problem is that conditions are so bad that harsh words become necessary. Marat used violence itself to detach himself from the violence with which he was so famously associated, and turned the blame towards his enemies.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., Vol. 14, pp. 5322-3. For other examples see: Vol. 14, pp. 5197, 5205, 5467; Vol. 15, pp. 5663, 5874; Vol. 16, pp. 5961, 6163, 6279; Vol. 17, p. 6471; Vol. 19, pp. 7291-2.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., Vol. 14, p. 5552.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., Vol. 17, p. 6648.

Marat was often frustrated that the masses did not act with more force on his advice, and this largely accounts for his impatience with moderation. As a result, Marat could be very hard on his readers. The following passage is an example of how he chastised them:

Vous voyez très-bien les événemens quand ils sont arrivés, je l'avoue: mais je les vois presque toujours une année avant vous. Est-ce ma faute, si vous avez la vue si courte? Ce qui me désole, c'est que la nation entière est partagée en deux classes, dont l'une est composée de maitres frippons, & l'autre de fières dupes: il y a longtems que je n'aurois plus rien à vous dire, si celle-ci avoit le sens commun.<sup>133</sup>

Violence is not directly mentioned in this passage, but Marat's suggestion that the masses must not hesitate in accepting the necessity of force is clear.

Closely connected to Marat's impatience with moderation was a certain rigidity in his view of human nature. There is no middle ground; your heart is either for or against the Revolution. Intensifying this rigidity was his belief that if you are born one way, chances are slim that you will change. Therefore, to be on the safe side, the Revolution necessitated a purging of nearly everything established during the *Ancien Régime* and the removal of anyone who had been in a position of authority prior to 1789. The person most clearly implicated by this line of reasoning was the King, but it extended to all those who benefited under the old system. Marat did not demonstrate any concern that such a rigid position might be alienating; instead, he discussed it in his standard impassioned language:

Farce grossière! Comment avez-vous pu en être la dupe un instant? <<Nous voilà tous frères,>> disiez-vous en dansant au champ de la fédération. Mais quoi, est-ce avec de vaines maximes de morale, qu'on pouvoit parvenir à changer leurs goûts, leurs habitudes, leurs moeurs? Est-ce avec vains discours, qu'on pouvoit réussir à détourner le cours de leurs passions? Est-ce avec un vain serment, qu'on

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., Vol. 16, pp. 6033-4. For other examples see: Vol. 14, pp. 5210, 5215, 5251-2, 5284, 5363, 5431, 5482; Vol. 15, p. 5558; Vol. 17, pp. 6616, 6661; Vol. 18, p. 7055; Vol. 19, pp. 7231, 7254.

pouvoit régénérer leur coeur, leur donner une ame nouvelle?... Folle entreprise! Ils aimeroient mieux cesser d'être que de renoncer à leurs prétentions. ... Encore quelque-tems, et ils feront couler votre sang à grands flots, pour vous punir d'avoir éparané le leur.<sup>134</sup>

This is a very explicit call for violence. Those who benefited under the old system will fight to the death to keep what they have. Don't be fools! Do away with them before they do away with you.

Marat, of course, also made many explicit calls specifically for violent action.<sup>135</sup>

When Marat did call for insurrection, his language was bloodthirsty. The following is a typical example: "Debout, Français, qui voulez vivre librés; debout, debout, et que le sang des traîtres recommence à couler. C'est le seul moyen de sauver la patrie."<sup>136</sup>

Despite the harshness of his calls to action, Marat did, however, preserve the sense that violence was about bringing an end to violence. Further, Marat demonstrated a preference that this violence to end violence be carried out by official institutions rather than by the masses. This was the reasoning behind his extensive lobbying for a revolutionary tribunal. Nevertheless, when there are no institutions, or the existing institutions are not doing their job of *properly* carrying out justice, the masses must rise up. Given Marat's views of widespread conspiracy, the ineffectiveness of moderation, and the rigidity of human nature, such an insurrection would virtually inevitably be violent.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., Vol. 14, pp. 5428-9. For other examples see: Vol. 14, p. 5482; Vol. 15, p. 5594; Vol. 16, p. 6176; Vol. 17, pp. 6424, 6732-3; Vol. 19, pp. 7244-5, 7308.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., Vol. 14, p. 5258. For other examples see: Vol. 14, pp. 5317, 5377-8, 5407; Vol. 16, pp. 6202, 6351-2; Vol. 17, p. 6360; Vol. 19, pp. 7224, 7228, 7293-4.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., Vol. 14, p. 5504.

Now that we have looked at the places where violence is present in Marat's writings, we can go on to consider how his approach to violence influenced the way that he conducted politics, both official and unofficial.

With the exception of the case of the purge of the Girondins, which I will discuss separately, Marat's calls for revolt were not immediately followed by insurrection. Although Marat was blamed for triggering the grocery riots of 25 February 1793, his call for insurrection was published after the riots were already under way. When the masses did rise up, however, the script used to justify popular violence did often mirror arguments frequently found in the pages of *L'Ami du Peuple*: they had to prevent conspiracy; as "the people," they had the right to insure that justice was carried out. These arguments, however, were standard in radical speeches and publications, and were not solely the territory of *L'Ami du Peuple*.

Although he was not as legalistic as Robespierre, Marat did agree with the latter that laws must, by definition, be good. Thus, Marat did not view the masses as having the right simply to rise up whenever they were upset about something. The problem was that bad laws could appear to be good laws, when they were really the tools of despotism. It was such thinking that led Marat to make so many calls for insurrection. The justice system must be made good first and then there can be social order, as the domain of official politics will be both fully legitimate and fully demarcated. Marat's approach to the law demonstrates again the extent to which he was not a theorist. He took it for granted that (good) people accepted the Enlightenment notion of justice as something embedded in nature, needing only to be uncovered by patriots. In assuming the vague proposition that good patriots will make good laws, he did not address the complications

which arose from deciding exactly who had the right to determine if a law was good: answering “good patriots” is circular, as it begs the question of who qualifies as a good patriot.

Holding that it was necessary to good government, revolutionaries insisted that the physical openness of government institutions was required if official politics were to be fully legitimate. In another simple formula, transparency was seen as central to republicanism: despotic governments use secrecy; democratic ones are open to public scrutiny. The official political product of this ideal was to allow the crowd to attend parliamentary debates. From the galleries, the crowd was not a passive viewer, but rather merged the official and the unofficial with its cheers and jeers. The heckling from the galleries influenced the deputies by reinforcing the popularity or unpopularity of both individuals and ideas, and also by acting as a strong reminder that public opinion must be considered. Since the Revolution was yet an experiment, it was still possible to hold up ideals such as political transparency and to claim that, once they were achieved, society’s troubles would disappear. Unfortunately, in order to avoid perpetual deadlock, sometimes political institutions have to push things along, regardless of their mass appeal. Converting or winning public opinion can be a drain on political resources, and risks becoming little more than propaganda battles. Such was the case with the Girondin-Montagnard showdown; to this day, the Convention is characterized by the contest between these two ‘factions’ rather than by any of its policies. Both sides largely lost track of the need to lead the Revolution, and instead spent their time lobbying for support. For example, when the Montagnards passed the Law of the Maximum, this was

not done primarily out of a belief that fixing prices was for the good of the nation, but as a means of gaining *sans-culottes* support.

With Marat there is a definite sense that, although necessary, official politics, which remain somewhat secret, are inevitably corrupting. Marat seemed to take it for granted that street politics, given their open character, were naturally virtuous - that is, assuming they were revolutionary. Given this perception that official politics are both tainted and tainting, Marat sought to justify himself each time he acted in the realm of official institutions. His tone was very defensive:

Depuis le 15 août, où j'ai quitté mon souterrain, je n'ai paru dans aucune société publique; si ce n'est cinq à six fois au corps électoral pour y donner ma voix aux députés à la Convention; deux fois à la société des Jacobins pour y dénoncer les persécutions atroces dirigées par Chazot & Dumourier contre les bataillons de Mauconseil & le Républicain; une fois à la section de Marseille pour m'opposer aux mesures violentes que quelques citoyens allarmés proposoient au sujet du projet de décret sur la force armée, dont les factieux conventionnels l'ont environnée avant même qu'il ait été discuté.<sup>137</sup>

As much as Marat may have seen unofficial politics as more natural and honest, he did show a desire to be accepted by the official political sphere. Marat was not purely an idealist; he knew that it was in official political institutions that things got done, and he was bitter when his advances to the official sphere were rejected. He often blamed his inability to obtain the podium at the Convention on a conspiracy of the "faction maudite" to silence him.<sup>138</sup>

Perhaps in response to his ambiguous position in the world of official politics, Marat emphasized the role of the press. The press was not entirely of one political sphere or the other; it was the bridge between the two. Marat argued that it was "clairvoyant

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., Vol. 15, p. 5861.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., Vol. 16, pp. 6230, 6301; Vol. 17, p. 6744; Vol. 18, p. 7019; Vol. 19, pp. 7189, 7415.

writers” who would save the Revolution.<sup>139</sup> It was Marat’s street popularity, gained by his newspaper, that gave him political power, both unofficially and officially. The world of official politics was not, however, welcoming to Marat. Even the radical elements of the revolutionary government generally chose to set themselves apart from him. However, the fear of violence from the boisterous masses observing from the galleries forced the deputies at least to give the appearance of considering what Marat had to say. Marat was able to play on his unofficial position as friend and representative of the people to demand credibility, but, just as he used his unofficial position to further his official status, the Montagnards used Marat to increase their standing with the masses. At both the Convention and the Jacobins, Marat received the most recognition when the Montagnard deputies realized his value in forging an alliance with the *sans culottes* against the Girondins.

During both the September massacres and the purge of the Girondins, Marat demonstrated an ability to use violence as a political tool, and he showed that he was aware of what was at stake when official and unofficial political actors collided. Examining Marat’s representation of events demonstrates that, although he was an official political actor, his power base remained popular and unofficial. New to the official scene in September 1792, he was still able to focus his critique on the state, but, as revolutionary institutions were gradually radicalized, this became increasingly difficult. If the state’s ultimate purpose was to represent the people, there should be no tension between official and unofficial politics; but such tension obviously existed. The solution to this contradiction was the one picked up by Marat and the radicals in general: it was not the institutions that were the problem, but perverted elements within.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., Vol. 14, p. 5329.

Not surprisingly, Marat's position on the September massacres was a bit ambiguous, as he was faced, for the first time, with the need to act both as a representative of the people and of the official state. This ambiguity did not stem so much from contradictions in his representation of events as from the length of time that it took him to develop a position. The intentions behind the massacres may have been in line with what Marat demanded of the Revolution; however, he sought a more calculated response. A frenzied people could not serve Marat's long-term interests: it was essential that what violence was used could be legitimized.

Marat said very little about the prison massacres in the weeks immediately following the event,<sup>140</sup> but on 15 September he did make the very significant passing comment: "Voici la plus glorieuse époque de la révolution."<sup>141</sup> This was, however, an isolated statement, and for the rest of September, Marat demonstrated a greater preoccupation with the problems posed by the prison massacres. He understood that the fact that all those slain were obviously not conspirators could undermine the whole event. As a result, the massacres, despite their appeal to the logic of stamping out conspiracy for the greater good, could not be defended on their own merits. Marat deployed a strategy of emphasizing violent acts performed by the state and, in particular, he used the events of 10 August as the source of justification for those of 2-4 September. It is Robespierre, however, who most fully developed this line of argument: for him, the events of 10 August and 2-4 September were continuous.

Marat also had some success presenting the people as having had no other choice. As stated by Ian Germani, "violence could always be rationalized by explaining that the

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<sup>140</sup> Connor argues that Marat was more interested in the elections for the Convention, 216.

<sup>141</sup> Marat, Vol. 14, p. 5525.

alternatives were much worse.”<sup>142</sup> Like claiming conspiracy, the argument that things would have been much worse had the masses not risen up is very difficult to disprove. Marat also invoked the well-worn argument that the agitation leading up to the massacres was actually a conspiracy on the part of unpatriotic authorities and counterrevolutionaries to discredit the Revolution. He collapsed the violence of the other great revolutionary *journées* and the subsequent failure of official political actors to establish institutional preventative measures into a single argument, and railed that none of this would have happened had officials taken his advice and established a revolutionary tribunal to deal swiftly and decisively with traitors so that the people would not have to do so.

In the end, Marat developed the script that the September massacres were terrible, but that they were made necessary by the fact that officials refused to perform justice properly. This abuse of the legal system resulted in a situation wherein the masses were left with no choice but to take the execution of justice into their own hands. The unfortunate frenzy which resulted was the product of a desperation which never should have been allowed to become so intense. Finally, Marat argued that as harsh as the prison massacres may have been, representatives of the *Ancien Régime* would have done much worse if the tables had been turned. On 6 October, Marat at last brought together his position on the massacres in the following passage:

Ce qui déchire le coeur, c'est qu'un grand nombre de papiers démontrent que plusieurs victimes massacrées dans les prisons, le 2 septembre, étoient d'excellens patriotes, entr'autres un brave général qu'il ne nom pas. On conçoit la fermentation qu'a dû exciter une pareille déclaration...

L'évènement désastreux des 2 & 3 septembre, que de perfides & des stipendiés attribuent à la municipalité, ont été uniquement provoqués par le dénit de justice du tribunal criminel qui a blanchi le conspirateur Montmorin, par la protection qu'il annonçoit ainsi à tous les autres conspirateurs, par l'indignation

<sup>142</sup> Ian Germani, *Jean-Paul Marat: Hero and Anti-Hero of the French Revolution* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 24.

du peuple qui a craint de se voir esclave de tous les traîtres qui ont si long-temps causé ses désastres & ses malheurs. On prétend que ce sont des brigands qui ont massacré les traîtres & les scélérats détenus dans les prisons...

C'est donc parce que les conspirateurs étoient soustraits au glaive de la justice, qu'ils sont tombés sous la hache du peuple.

Le comité donna l'ordre sur le champ à différens géoliers de les séparer des grands malfaiteurs & des traîtres contre-révolutionnaires: afin que le peuple ne fût pas exposé à immoler quelque innocents. La séparation étoit faire, lorsque les prisons furent forcées: mais la précaution se trouva inutile, par l'attention qu'eut le juge du peuple, qui faisoit les fonctions de Tribun dans cette expédition, de vérifier les écroux, et de relacher tous ceux qu'avoit fait séparer le comité de surveillance. Attention que n'auroit pas eû le despote s'il eût triomphé le dix août.<sup>143</sup>

Marat was not the only one who demonstrated caution in his representation of the massacres; even moderate revolutionaries took a few weeks to come down solidly on the side of condemning them. Although it may seem like an obvious defense, it was even longer before Marat directed blame towards official politicians. Was it not the responsibility of officials to bring order when such breaches occurred? Does their failure to act not implicate them in the matter? Does this not make their condemnation of the masses the ultimate hypocritical act? These defensive allegations demonstrate the extent to which the portrayal of violence was a political act.

Charges were made that Marat provoked the prison massacres, and this too was a political act. Despite the fact that he ultimately defended the event, Marat adamantly denied responsibility. Indeed, Marat may have encouraged the view that the war was being lost due to an aristocratic conspiracy, but his words in the days and weeks leading up to the beginning of September were no different in kind from those of the previous several months. Obviously other factors were at work which gave a new legitimacy to his claims. In light of Dumouriez's treason, significant military setbacks, and

<sup>143</sup> Marat, Vol. 15, pp. 5649-50. For other examples see: Vol. 15, pp. 5656, 5684, 5902-3; Vol. 16, pp. 6020, 6161; Vol. 17, pp. 6395-6, 6528.

counterrevolution in the Vendée, paranoia was widespread, regardless of what Marat wrote.

In the case of the purge of the Girondins, Marat made a much more explicit call for action, and was much quicker to appropriate the event. Marat's list of grievances with the Girondins was long: they conspired to silence him; they wanted to keep the despot alive in the hope of someday returning him to the throne; they sought to provoke civil war which would force a demand for the return of monarchy to end the chaos; they put aristocrats at the head of the army to ensure the crushing of the Revolution; they monopolized food supplies to create disorder and feed the enemy, and they considered only their private interests, rather than the general will. On top of all this, they did these things wearing the "mask of patriotism," using the language of the Revolution only to advance their tyrannical cause. In these charges against the Girondins, Marat was careful to emphasize that his problem was "merely" with the troublesome (and purgeable) faction, and not with the Convention as a whole.

Although Marat had been condemning "la faction," "le Jésuite Brissot," "la clique Roland," "les fripons," "les hommes d'états," since the spring of the previous year, there was a notable change in the intensity of his charges with the approach of the end of May 1793. The following is a typical example, in subject and language, of the kind of charge Marat leveled against the Girondins in the spring of 1792:

Il seroit difficile de croire que la députation de la Gironde et quelques membres de la députation de Paris, ... eussent poussé la scélératesse jusqu'à vouloir rétablir le despotisme du prince; mais il n'est pas douteux qu'ils veulent établir celui du corps législatif, pour se procurer à eux-mêmes, et assurer à leurs successeurs le privilège glorieux de trafiquer impunément avec la cour des droits et des intérêts du peuple.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., Vol. 14, p. 5287.

Compare this to the language and tone of a condemnation from the latter part of May of the following year:

On ne doit bientôt plus demander ce que fait la Convention pour le bonheur public: mais de quelles intrigues elle est occupée: mais quelles scènes scandaleuses ont rempli ses séances scandaleuses: mais quels projets funestes ont été proposés dans son sein: mais quels décrets liberticides en sont émanés: tant les meneurs de la faction des hommes d'état s'agitent jour et nuit pour faire échouer tous nos préparatifs de défense contre les rebelles de la Vendée, favoriser les projets des malveillans de l'intérieur, et des ennemis de l'extérieur: tant ils s'agitent pour écraser le patriotisme, faire triompher l'aristocratie, et par elle ramener la royauté.<sup>145</sup>

In addition to his use of more passionate and violently charged language, Marat stepped up the amount of press dedicated to these allegations, and similar statements were made in *L'Ami du Peuple* on 20, 21, 24, and 26 May. On 25 May, he made an explicit call for an uprising: "Braves Sans-culottes, réunissez-vous, résistez à ces intrigans et sauvez la République."<sup>146</sup>

In contrast to his reaction to the September massacres, Marat discussed the purge immediately after the event. In the case of this very dramatic *journée* which took place with little violence, it was easy for him to face the charge of having incited a chaotic and savage crowd, and throw it back at those leveling it. Marat reveled in this:

Ainsi s'est passé sans effusion de sang, sans outrages, sans insulte, sans désordre, une journée d'alarmes, au milieu de cent mille citoyens armés, provoqués par six mois de machinations et d'attentats, et calomniés d'une manière atroce par leurs lâches oppresseurs.<sup>147</sup>

Radical representation of this *journée* was further simplified by the fact that, for the first time, insurrection was directed towards protecting official politics. Marat wasted no time

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., Vol. 18, pp. 7153-4.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., Vol. 19, p. 7177.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 7233. For other examples see: Vol. 19, pp. 7212, 7220.

in claiming that the insurrection of 31 May to 2 June saved both the Revolution and freedom.

Despite Marat's being much quicker to claim the events of May/June than those of September, in the end he appealed to the same rationalization and justification in both cases: the authorities were failing in their role of properly carrying out justice. In the case of the September massacres, official justice should have dealt with traitors long before the situation escalated. In the case of the purge, force was made necessary by the fact that the Girondins' factional interests prevented the Convention from operating as it should.

Although the low level of violence, and the ease with which the event could be rationalized politically, made it unproblematic for Marat to claim the purge for the radical movement, he at the same time showed concern that the tame insurrection did not go far enough. The matter of trying the Girondins remained to be settled. Hoping to ensure severity in this regard, Marat resigned from the Convention, vowing to return only when justice had been performed. Unfortunately for Marat, removing himself from the realm of official politics, combined with his declining health, only served to decrease his influence. He returned to the Convention on 17 June, but was not able to influence events. Marat still published his paper and wrote impassioned letters to the Convention, but the lack of response made him well aware that his unofficial political actions were not going to change the course of events. The Revolution was ready to move into a new phase, one in which violence could no longer be used in the same ways. The tension between the official and unofficial right to use force, especially in relation to the right to

exercise justice, was resolved as the *sans culottes* merged with the Montagnards, and violence was re-established as primarily the prerogative of the state.

Focussing on the presentation and use of violence in Marat's writings makes it possible to bring to the forefront several aspects of his revolutionary politics. Violence was often a force which Marat used consciously as a political tool. The fear of violence was at the heart of Marat's representation of conspiracy. Whether discussing the war, disorder induced by false patriots, or the conspiracy to silence the left-wing radicals, Marat suggested to the people that the state could be a very powerful, violent, and deceptive entity against which they had better defend themselves. Marat further implied that such defensive use of force was not actually violent, but rather a means of ending violence. Marat also manipulated the concept of violence by drawing a strict line between words and action, thus morally vindicating himself. Marat altered definitions to suit his purpose. By defining the just as the revolutionary, Marat made "enemy of the Revolution" a very large category. In the particular cases of the September massacres and the purge of the Girondins, Marat used violence as part of his strategy to balance himself between the official and unofficial political realms. While with the massacres he was only just entering the world of official politics, he still railed against the state as the source of corruption; in the case of the purge the following spring, he switched to aiming his calls for force against perverted elements within good institutions. In both cases, however, Marat had to defend popular action, and in both cases he did so by attributing the problem to the official failure to regulate violence by properly performing justice. The way in which Marat allocated the responsibility for street violence to officials made

it possible for him to present himself as the honourable spokesman of a desperate people, and not a bloodthirsty monster.

Part of what makes the study of Marat so interesting is that he was such an extraordinary individual. He rarely conformed or bowed to political pressure; he just kept trying his best to use his paper to hammer his vision into the minds of his followers. However, given the extent to which he was exceptional, if he is studied alone, it is difficult to sort out what can be attributed to his particular personality and what was a general cultural trend of the Revolution. In comparing him to Robespierre, the following chapter will determine which themes were common to both.

#### CHAPTER IV: ROBESPIERRE

When discussing Marat and Robespierre, a certain degree of comparative analysis is inevitable. In whose work was violence more obvious? Does one go further than the other in defining when violence is legitimate or illegitimate? This chapter begins by looking at Robespierre's representation of Marat. Although Robespierre portrays himself as a fundamentally different politician, there are significant similarities in the work of these two men. Most noticeably, railing against conspiracy is a central political strategy of both. This chapter examines how, given his greater official status, Robespierre differed in his representation of the plotting of his enemies. Next, I look at how Robespierre worked the tension between official and unofficial politics. How did his respect for the law influence his political behaviour? How and when did he rationalize insurrection? Another important aspect of Robespierre's negotiation between official and unofficial political space was his Rousseauian conception that the republic must be the product of a single, united, and transparent will, and this chapter considers the violent implications of this world view. Thereafter, I go on to look at specific suggestions of violence in Robespierre's work; as with Marat, sometimes these were implicit, and at other times they were explicit. I conclude by considering Robespierre's approach to violence during the September massacres and the purge of the Girondins.

Although today Marat and Robespierre are both widely associated with the radicalism and violence of the French Revolution, at the time under consideration it was Marat who had the greater reputation for calling for blood. Seeking to preserve his political stature and reputation, Robespierre explicitly set himself apart from Marat. He suggested that Marat's use of violence demonstrated that he did not properly understand

politics, as he alienated even those whose support he should desire. Robespierre stated, “L’un des reproches les plus terribles que l’on m’ait fait, je ne le dissimule point, c’est le nom de Marat.”<sup>148</sup> In defense, he pointed out that, after they met only for the first time in January of 1792, Marat judged him as having “*ni les vues, ni l’audace d’un homme d’état.*”<sup>149</sup>

Balancing himself between the realms of official and unofficial politics, Robespierre recognized that association with violence could be at least as much of a liability as an asset. There is no question that Robespierre’s position on Marat was in large part a matter of political expedience, but there were also marked ideological differences between the two men. Most significantly, Robespierre had a much greater respect for the law, and he comes across as ill at ease with the chaotic and unrefined way in which Marat expressed his politics. In a word, Robespierre paid more heed to the world of official politics.

Despite his discomfort with the man, Robespierre did address Marat quite frequently. Arguably, this was because the political significance of violence in negotiating the space between official and unofficial politics made it impossible for him, a “fellow” radical, not to take a position on Marat. Robespierre’s position had to be one that allowed him to maintain official respectability, without alienating unofficial support. The strategy which Robespierre adopted was to reject Marat’s methods, but not his politics:

Ce n’est pas que je veuille refuser à Marat la justice qui lui est due. Dans ses feuilles, qui ne sont point toujours des modèles de style ni de sagesse, il a dit pourtant des vérités utiles, et fait une guerre ouverte à tous les conspirateurs puissans, quoiqu’il ait pu se tromper sur quelques individus. Je sais qu’il ne vous

<sup>148</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. IX, p. 80-1.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

a pas épargnés vous-mêmes: mais ce mérite-là, n'a point effacé à mes yeux, ces phrases extravagantes qu'il a mêlées quelques fois aux idées les plus saines, comme pour donner à vous et à vos pareils, le prétexte de calomnier la liberté.<sup>150</sup>

Robespierre evaded discussion of whether it was possible to separate method from ideology, and, in focussing on more explicit calls for violence, he also failed to address the question of the extent to which almost all of Marat's politics implied violence.

With the intensification of the Montagnard struggle with the Girondins, Robespierre was left with little choice but to stand more solidly with Marat due to the latter's influence in the unofficial realm of politics. Hence, in the spring of 1793, we see Robespierre's strategy of separating method from political values evolve into one of distinguishing words from actions. This distinction made it possible for him to come across as embracing Marat more firmly, while still not necessarily condoning violence:

Comme la phrase de Marat qui dit que la liberté ne sera établie que quand les traîtres et les conspirateurs seront exterminés, quelque illégale qu'elle puisse paraître, n'a jamais tué un seul traître et un seul conspirateur, et que les hypocrites ennemis du peuple ont déjà fait égorger 300,000 patriotes et conspirent pour égorger le reste.<sup>151</sup>

Marat's words may be harsh, but they reflect a certain truth and he never actually *did* anything illegal.

Because of his close connection to violence in popular myth, representations of Marat could be as politically charged as violence itself. Robespierre tapped into this power of representation and discredited his enemies by arguing that their portraying Marat as a monster was an abuse and manipulation of the facts, grounded not in their actual hostility to Marat, but in a desire to vilify radicals generally. This was a very effective strategy, as it allowed Robespierre to take the moral high ground, while he

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., Vol. V, p. 202.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 432.

remained ambiguous on “Marat.” That Robespierre was also manipulating the myth of Marat as a means of presenting himself in a certain light did not seem to detract from his ability to condemn others.

The extent to which Robespierre sought to set himself apart from Marat is a key consideration of the question of who was the more violent. Robespierre was indisputably more concerned with law and order; but this did not make violence any less central to his political strategies. Whether attacking or approving it, both Marat and Robespierre used violence as a primary means of conducting politics.

Although Robespierre’s newspaper and speeches were not jammed with denunciations, he did allude frequently to counterrevolutionary conspiracies. As in the writings of Marat, much of this discussion revolved around the war debate: exterior war left the interior unprotected and an army led by traitorous generals was bound to fail.<sup>152</sup>

Moreover, Robespierre argued that the government was fighting the wrong war:

“Comment pourrait-on concevoir que, tandis que le peuple verse son sang pour repousser les ennemis de dehors, il s’abstînt de faire la guerre aux ennemis de l’intérieur.”<sup>153</sup> He further suggested that focussing on the external war, when it was the internal one which really needed to be fought, was an intentional maneuver to bring down the Revolution.

Both Marat and Robespierre warned that war would end in military dictatorship, but Robespierre’s preoccupation with this potential outcome was much more pronounced and was tied to his personal vendetta with Lafayette. Robespierre condemned Lafayette with a passion worthy of Marat:

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 84. For other examples see: Vol. IV, p. 189 & 287, Vol. V, p. 243-4.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 343.

Lafayette devint l'idole des accapareurs, des financiers, des agioteurs, de tous les bourgeois orgueilleux et égoïstes. En captivant l'armée parisienne, il vouloit régner dans Paris. Investi de ce pouvoir, il le tourna bientôt contre les citoyens dont les lumières et l'énergie lui faisoient ombrage.<sup>154</sup>

Given that Lafayette was a prime candidate for military dictatorship, Marat would have been concerned with him as well, but Robespierre's more vociferous condemnations were the product of a more specific fight for official status and recognition. For Marat, Lafayette was simply one of many parts of a greater system which had to be brought down, whereas for Robespierre he was a rival in the official sphere of politics.

In order not to appear unpatriotic in his campaign against the war, Robespierre deployed arguments similar to those of Marat: France is great; if France is not rapidly victorious, this must be due to treachery. Although the essence of this argument was the same with both men, Robespierre made his case more dramatically. Unlike Marat, who comes across as simply telling things as he saw them, assuming the internal logic of his arguments, Robespierre was more of a theorist. As a result, his arguments were more verbose and detailed:

Il est deux espèces de guerre; celle de la liberté, celle de l'intrigue et de l'ambition; celle du peuple; celle du despotisme. Il est facile de les distinguer à des caractères certains. Lorsqu'une nation puissante fait la guerre de la liberté, elle se lève toute entière; elle marche sous des chefs qu'elle a choisis entre les plus zélés défenseurs de l'égalité et de la cause populaire... Son objet est sublime; sa force est invincible; ses mesures sont sages et grandes; ses attaques promptes et irrésistibles... Le mot de trahison est inconnu, parce que personne n'oseroit trahir... Une telle guerre est terminée presque aussitôt que commencée; elle ne coûte aucunes alarmes qu'aux despotes; elle ne fait point acheter de pénibles succès, par des torrens de sang.<sup>155</sup>

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 175.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 225-6.

Robespierre's proposed solution to poor military performance was no less violent than that of Marat: "Il faut purger l'armée de tous les officiers suspects qu'elle renferme encore, et les remplacer par des amis éprouvés de l'égalité et de la république."<sup>156</sup>

Robespierre also made the argument that much of the disorder of the Revolution could be attributed to plots, and that conspiracy was the true source of danger to society. Conspiracy posed a number of dangers. First, it could take the form of using the discourse of the Revolution to appear patriotic, lulling the people into a false sense of security:

Le despotisme... sentit la nécessité de composer avec l'opinion publique, et vit qu'il ne pouvoit désormais asservir la nation qu'en la trompant... Il divisa tout, pour dominer tout; il créa des divers partis qui agitent aujourd'hui la France... elle abuse de la confiance du peuple pour le tenir endormi, jusqu'à ce qu'on ait eu le temps de lui forger de nouvelles chaînes.<sup>157</sup>

Second, conspirators intentionally created disorder so that the authorities could justify taking a stronger hand in governing.<sup>158</sup> In both cases, violence was at the heart of Robespierre's argument. Oppressive authorities were abusing their power to keep the masses down and promote their private interests. Does this not constitute violence against the masses and, even worse, the Revolution? In passages such as the above, it is unlikely that the masses would have interpreted the message as suggesting a solution other than violence. Under such hostile conditions, would it be possible to save the Revolution by any means other than force?

Robespierre was often more specific than Marat in his allegations that hypocritical authorities were plotting to bring about social chaos only to justify

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., Vol. V, p. 246.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 79. For other examples see: Vol. VI, p. 370, Vol. IX, p. 59.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, pp. 2, 88, 125, 141, 167, 186, & 298-300; Vol. V, pp. 104, 289-90, 326; Vol. VI, pp. 382-3; Vol. IX, p. 325.

authoritarian rule. While Marat often spoke in broad, general terms, Robespierre told detailed stories about particular, recognizable events. For example, Robespierre claimed the following when addressing the grocery riots of 25 February 1793:

Il faut vous informer qu'à la tête des femmes attroupées, parmi lesquelles se trouvoient fort peu d'hommes, encore moins de patriotes trompés, étoient les domestiques des aristocrates connus, des émigrés même, cachés sous le costume respectable des sans-culottes, et dont plusieurs sont maintenant arrêtés et livrés aux tribunaux; nous devons vous informer que des émigrés ont été aperçus dans les galeries des jacobins, cherchant à soulever le public contre nous.<sup>159</sup>

In another example, he directly implicated Lafayette:

Hier soir un ancien mouchard de Lafayette, un des hommes qui ont fait le plus de mal, se transporta au fauxbourg Saint-Antoine avec des alguasils. Il voulut exécuter ce complot que nous dénonçons depuis long-tems, il voulut exciter les citoyens à se porter au Temple. Le peuple l'a reconnu, l'a saisi, et s'est contenté de le traîner chez le commissaire de la section. Là, cet homme a dit: si vous voulez me laissez tranquille, je vous nommerai ceux qui m'ont payé.<sup>160</sup>

That Robespierre's charges were usually more detailed and specific than those of Marat can be attributed to Robespierre's greater concern with his official status. Marat was ridiculed for his constant and vague charges of conspiracy, whereas Robespierre used allegations of conspiracy in a more calculated fashion and was careful not to overuse them. Although his charges were more specific, he did not actually provide any more evidence than did Marat. It was merely Robespierre's method of presentation which gave him a more authoritative appearance.

Robespierre recognized the ways in which language was manipulated to serve certain interests, especially concerning the subject of violence. In the following passages, Robespierre revealed that characterizing something as "violent" is itself a political act:

L'indiscipline! ce mot insidieusement répété par l'aristocratie et par le machiavélisme, n'est autre chose qu'une éternelle accusation contre le civisme

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., Vol. V, p. 326.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 207.

des soldats citoyens, qui ont commencé la révolution... Ce mot ne fut jamais appliqué aux officiers de la caste éternellement privilégiée, qui n'a cessé de persécuter le patriotisme et d'insulter à la liberté!<sup>161</sup>

Quel est ce pouvoir magique de changer la vertu en vice, et le vice en vertu! de donner à la sottise, à la corruption et à la lâcheté, le droit d'accuser hautement le courage, l'intégrité et la raison!<sup>162</sup>

Moreover, Robespierre demonstrated an awareness of the tension between the official and the unofficial: the official took on an authority of its own, while the unofficial had to defend its legitimacy; here again, Robespierre is leveling a charge of which he too was guilty. While he attacked authorities for naming acts as violent, not on their own merit but simply based on the challenge they posed to constituted authority, Robespierre himself named as violent that which challenged the Revolution.

Robespierre also showed an understanding of the kind of violent events which were good to claim: "Renverser la bastille, détruire la royauté, dompter les tyrans et punir les traîtres. Voilà les soins des patriotes; voilà les exploits du peuple de Paris: tout le reste appartient à ses ennemis."<sup>163</sup> How convenient to define violence in such a way that you are able to name as revolutionary that which you claim served the Revolution, and to attribute the rest to anti-revolutionary forces.

As with Marat, the movements which Robespierre was most hesitant to claim were those connected to the question of subsistence. This reluctance was largely because he saw subsistence as the easiest means of manipulating the masses. Robespierre complained that subsistence uprisings tended to be partial or incomplete, and as such damaged the overall revolutionary movement, and he argued that "Les sections de Paris doivent être très réservées à faire des pétitions; ces pétitions n'ont presque jamais aucun

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 22.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 47. For other examples see: Vol. IV, pp. 111, 204, 211, 237, 366.

but sérieux; très rarement elles embrassent les grands intérêts de la république; elles ne mettent pas un grain de plus dans la balance des délibérations de la Convention.”<sup>164</sup>

What Robespierre was really saying here was that, although they may have legitimate cause for anger and concern, the masses did not understand the nuances of politics, and should therefore leave such important issues to the judgement of official revolutionary actors.

The grocery riots of 25 February 1793 provided the most significant example of how Robespierre disowned food-based uprisings. Although he did express sympathy for the rioters due to their living conditions, Robespierre criticized the uprising, chastising the people for being tricked into holding back the greater movement out of “petty” desires for sugar and coffee:

Il y a deux causes: la première, une disposition naturelle dans le peuple à chercher les moyens de soulager sa misère...

Il y a une autre cause: cette cause, ce sont les desseins perfides des ennemis de la liberté, des ennemis du peuple, bien convaincus que le seul moyen de nous livrer aux puissances étrangères est d’alarmer le peuple sur ses subsistances et de le rendre victime des excès qui en résultent...

Je ne vous dis pas que le peuple soit coupable, je ne vous dis pas que ses mouvements soient un attentat; mais, quand le peuple se lève, ne doit-il pas avoir un but digne de lui?...

Le peuple doit se lever, non pour recueillir du sucre, mais pour terrasser les brigands.<sup>165</sup>

Just as Robespierre accused his enemies of manipulating the people’s hunger to serve their ends, he at the same time used this condemnation to serve his ends. It is no coincidence that he blamed “les aristocrates, les émigrés, les ex-nobles, les brissotins, les rolandistes, girondistes”<sup>166</sup> in particular for triggering the riots.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., Vol. V, p. 344. For other examples see: Vol. IV, p. 207; Vol. VI, pp. 382-3; Vol. IX, p. 287.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 320.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., pp. 275. For other examples see: Vol. V, pp. 287, 344.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 288.

Despite his suspicion of food-based movements, Robespierre did accept that subsistence was a political issue. It would have been impossible to remove subsistence from the agenda while maintaining that politics were about making good laws, and that good laws make for social harmony. As a result, Robespierre was forced to hammer out at least a fuzzy theory of subsistence: “Tout homme n’a pas le droit d’entasser du bled, quand son semblable meurt de faim, tout ce qui est nécessaire à l’existence de la vie des hommes, appartient à la société, son superflu seul est un objet de commerce.”<sup>167</sup> “Il faut assurer la subsistance du pauvre par des lois sages et humaines. Il faut l’arracher aux barbares spéculations d’une administration dévorante, et à la cupidité homicide du monopole.”<sup>168</sup> None of this, however, called for popular action, but rather for good laws.

Legality was central to Robespierre’s ideal of the Revolution. On the surface, this may seem to indicate a more moderate position than that of Marat, but, in fact, both he and Marat ended up in the same place: personal virtue is what qualifies you for public life; the non-virtuous must be purged. In a manner similar to Marat, Robespierre repeatedly emphasized that he was not after personal wealth or power: “Je n’ai pas besoin de dire que l’amour seul de la justice et de la vérité dirigera ma plume.”<sup>169</sup>

Robespierre made very good use of the tension between official and unofficial notions of legality, and he manipulated it to keep both official and unofficial actors in line. Unofficially, as we have seen, he advanced the argument that only certain kinds of displays of “revolutionary energy” were legitimate. If the people moved more than an accepted distance from the official law, they became worthy of their reputation as rabble. Officially, Robespierre was able to defend his actions by removing the title of legality.

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. V, p. 245.

For example, in December 1792, when he sought to defend harsh action against the King despite his constitutional protection, Robespierre argued: “Nous n’avons point encore de lois,”<sup>170</sup> or, more strikingly, stated: “Peuples, jusqu’ici des frippons vous ont parlé de lois, pour vous asservir et pour vous égorger; et vous n’aviez point les lois. Vous n’aviez que les criminels caprices de quelques tyrans, accrédités par l’intrigue et appuyés par la force.”<sup>171</sup> The way in which Robespierre rejected the existing body of law when it clashed with his political ideals was also a very effective political strategy: he was able to swipe nastily at authority without bringing his respect for the system into serious question.

Although Robespierre sometimes denounced the law when it served his purposes to do so, such attacks were not the norm for him. He demonstrated a much greater respect for official forms of authority than Marat. For Robespierre, law was what defined society; he argued, “Les lois sont les conditions et le lien de la société; tout membre de la société qui leur refuse l’obéissance, cesse de l’être par cela même.”<sup>172</sup> Good laws were more important than the form of government. In the first edition of *Le Défenseur de la Constitution*, published in May 1792, Robespierre stated, “j’aime mieux voir une assemblée représentative populaire et des citoyens libres et respectés avec un roi, qu’un peuple esclave et avili sous la verge d’un sénat aristocratique et d’un dictateur.”<sup>173</sup> Further, Robespierre was a strict defender of the constitution, whether or not he agreed with all its points: “J’obéis à toutes les lois; mais je n’aime que les bonnes.”<sup>174</sup> On a pragmatic level he argued that despite its flaws, the institution of a constitution was

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 3. For other examples see: Vol. VI, pp. 307-15; Vol. IX, pp. 16-23.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 155.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 359.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 144.

needed to protect the new and fragile nation from falling prey to despotism.<sup>175</sup> On a more abstract level, Robespierre's recognition of the importance of the constitution was grounded in his Rousseauian assumption that, once the law was a true reflection of the general will, society's troubles would disappear:

La sagesse a sur les hommes un empire naturel; et tous obéissent avec joie, quand c'est l'intérêt général qui commande. Les bonnes lois amènent les bonnes moeurs qui, à leur tour, cimentent leur puissance. Est-il quelques individus pervers ou égarés par l'intérêt personnel? La volonté générale les contient, et la force publique les subjugué facilement.<sup>176</sup>

Despite his respect for the constitution, Robespierre did not hold that it should not be challenged: in fact, as a human creation, it would be flawed. When it needed to be challenged, however, this should be done by legal means. Along these lines, Robespierre argued, "Vous avez dans les lois tout ce qu'il faut pour exterminer légalement nos ennemis."<sup>177</sup>

What is it then that makes insurrection legitimate? Robespierre's answer was confusing. On the one hand, in order to be genuine, a law must reflect the general will. Robespierre invoked the Romantic sense that, in its closeness to nature, insurrection which *truly* reflected the needs of the people was connected to the truth. This was not so much a case of the masses being above the law, but rather that they were able to make a call back to the true law.<sup>178</sup> Thus, insurrection may be legitimate as an expression of the general will or as a means of demanding a return to it. On the other hand, he argued that the institution of the law, regardless of its quality, must be shown the highest degree of

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., Vol. VI, pp. 374-5.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 145.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 491.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 24. For other examples see: Vol. IV, pp. 78, 115, 325; Vol. V, pp. 200, 207; Vol. VI, p. 414; Vol. IX, pp. 348, 582.

respect: “Qu’elle soit sage ou absurde, juste ou injuste, il n’importe; son devoir est de lui rester fidèle. Telle est la nature du respect qu’il lui doit: l’obéissance.”<sup>179</sup>

Perhaps this apparent contradiction can be resolved by taking into account the point that where Robespierre saw things going wrong lay not so much in the laws themselves, as in the application of them. He pointed out that, as in the *Ancien Régime*, justice was not carried out equally:

Quand je vois d’un côté les chefs des grandes conspirations impunis, les gens coupables de grands attentats contre la liberté du peuple, récompensés, portés aux places dans les administrations, le commandement des armées; et que de l’autre j’apperçois des citoyens inquiets sur leur subsistance, s’égarer un moment sur les moyens de se l’assurer, se livrer à des mouvemens sans doute illégaux mais dont ils s’offrent à réparer l’illégalité aussitôt qu’ils la reconnaissent; quand je vois, dis-je, ces citoyens accablés sur le champ de tout le poids de la loi, obligés pour se soustraire à son glaive, de fuir patrie, enfans, travaux, ménage, je ne puis m’empêcher de reconnaître qu’on cherche à perpétuer, à étendre partout ces scènes sanglantes qui n’ont pour but sous le spécieux prétexte de l’exécution de la loi, que de perpétuer les vices de l’ancien régime, que d’établir deux poids et deux mesures dans la balance de la justice, l’un pour les hommes puissans, l’autre pour le peuple.<sup>180</sup>

However, even in cases where justice was being abused, Robespierre revealed a discomfort with acting against the law: “Sachez nous pardonner, si l’excès de nos angoisses nous porte quelquefois à des mouvemens convulsifs que notre coeur, revenu à lui-même, désavoue et condamne.”<sup>181</sup>

Despite his institutional view of politics, the sense that official state actors were not entirely to be trusted lingered in Robespierre’s work. This suspicion was attached to his notion of virtue. Robespierre’s vision of the Revolution demanded a great deal of sacrifice from its participants. Politics were a means of determining and establishing the general will, and never of advancing personal agendas. As a result, he was very

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, pp. 144-5.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., Vol. VI, pp. 256-7.

suspicious of anyone who might profit from the system. Thus, political institutions must protect themselves from individual members as the power they possess is a great temptation for all but the most virtuous of men. Nonetheless, the solution did lie with, and ultimately only with, official political institutions. Robespierre argued, “Le salut de la nation est attaché à l’assemblée nationale: sans cette dernière elle ne peut être sauvée.”<sup>182</sup>

As with Marat, Robespierre’s solution to political corruption was openness: “Sous les yeux d’un si grand nombre de témoins, ni la corruption, ni l’intrigue, ni la perfidie n’oseroient se montrer; la volonté générale seroit seule consultée, la voix de la raison et de l’intérêt public seroit seule entendue.”<sup>183</sup> Talk of political openness is immediately connected to virtue, which may seem far from violence, but such emphasis on virtue is dangerous, as it creates a very rigid atmosphere of good versus evil. Belief that the republic must be one and indivisible intensified this tension: dissent of any sort, rather than healthily provoking debate, became evil. Politics defined in terms of a manichean world view left no room for compromise. Further, private morality was merged with public virtue. This was especially dangerous in an atmosphere wherein diversity had been abolished, leaving only one arbitrarily decided definition of “morality.”

In their passion for openness, Marat and Robespierre both attributed a central role to the press in establishing an ideal society. The press was the means of both enlightening the masses and of keeping official political actors in the public eye. The press expressed public opinion and the general will. Robespierre seemed to hold up the freedom of expression as vital to the operation of a free state: “La loi n’est que

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 132.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 383.

l'expression de la volonté générale: la volonté générale n'est que le résultat des lumières générales; et les lumières générales ne peuvent être formées et accrues, que par la libre communication des pensées entre les citoyens."<sup>184</sup> However, such statements should not be taken as an acceptance of political diversity. To the contrary, given the power of the press to work for the good of society, it was twice the sin to use it for any other purpose: "l'écrivain qui prostituant sa plume à la haine, au despotisme ou à la corruption, trahit la cause du patriotisme et de l'humanité, est plus vil que le magistrat prévaricateur, plus criminel que le représentant même qui vend les droits du peuple."<sup>185</sup>

When telling of the glorious potential of the revolutionary press, Robespierre took it for granted that his words represented public opinion. Instead of addressing what it was about what he said that spoke for the people, he went on at length about how others in positions of authority, whether in the press, in the government, or in some other organization, failed to represent public opinion and often intentionally misled it. In making these allegations, Robespierre set himself up as the people's representative and defender; he did not demonstrate any sense that he felt the need to prove this claim.

Robespierre often altered his position on the power of words to suit his purposes. While to speak against or misrepresent the Revolution was a crime in league with physically assaulting it, as we also saw in the case of Marat, Robespierre at the same time invoked the distinction between words and action to defend the radicals. Robespierre's distinction between words and action is, however, questionable; his speeches and newspaper were filled with language that both explicitly and implicitly called for violence.

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 503.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 146.

Robespierre frequently spoke of zeal and patriotic energy. In doing so he did not necessarily seek to provoke violent response; but, in the context of a revolution, if not violence, what do calls for zealous energy imply? The violent implications of Robespierre's appeal to patriotic zeal are further demonstrated by the fact that he chastised his readers and listeners in an attempt to push them to more definitive action:

O hommes stupides et pervers, que votre justice est barbare! que votre sagesse est absurde! que votre probité est perfide et lâche! Pour être innocent à vos yeux, il suffit donc de monter au dernier degré de la scélératesse; et ce que vous méprisez dans le crime, c'est moins sa turpitude naturelle, que la misère de celui qui le commet; qu'il se montre à vous environné de la force et de la puissance, vous vous prosternez devant lui, et vous l'adorez comme la vertu.<sup>186</sup>

Demands for forceful action were buttressed by claims of the horror which would result if action was not taken far enough: a return to despotism, violent crushing of the revolutionaries, life in chains, etc.

Like Marat, Robespierre advocated a very rigid and uncompromising view of human nature. Sometimes, this rigidity was directed at specific individuals: "Soyez-en certains, Lafayette sera toujours le même."<sup>187</sup> At other times, it was more general: "Tous les aristocrates font cause commune; ils sont tous ligués contre les patriotes."<sup>188</sup> The violence here is implicit in the fact that if you argue that your enemies are incapable of change, they can only be dealt with forcibly. There was also violence in Robespierre's all-or-nothing approach to events: "Nous voulons triompher ou mourir pour la liberté."<sup>189</sup> From this perspective, there is only for or against; friend or enemy; good or evil: "Il n'existe plus que deux partis dans la république, celui des biens et des mauvais

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p. 113 . For other examples see: Vol. IV, pp. 1-2; Vol. VI, p. 372; Vol. IX, pp. 577-8.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 399.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 278.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 291.

citoyens; c'est-à-dire, celui du peuple français et celui des hommes ambitieux et cupides.”<sup>190</sup>

An all-or-nothing world view is highly morally charged and suggests the need to purge all but the “alls.” Indeed, Robespierre made many very explicit calls for purges.

The following is a typical example:

Pour moi, je ne connois que deux moyens de prévenir tous les désordres, le premier c'est de punir les véritables agitateurs, les véritables auteurs de nos maux; qu'on purge Paris des émigrés dont on a partout favorisé le retour, de ces hordes contre-révolutionnaires qui se sont rassemblés pour sauver le tyran et pour ressusciter la tyrannie, de tous les étrangers et de tous les brigands, de tous les suppôts de l'ancienne police qu'on emploie contre nous.<sup>191</sup>

Sometimes he sounded exactly like Marat: “Faites mouvoir horizontalement le glaive des loix pour frapper toutes les têtes des grands conspirateurs.”<sup>192</sup> In this regard, Robespierre would likely have invoked a defense similar to that of Marat: his language may be harsh, but it is not actually violent as the purpose is to end violence. Neither figure, however, addressed the point that the violence they sought to end was only the violence they defined arbitrarily as anti-revolutionary, and not violence itself.

Another place where violence was present in Robespierre's words lies in the way he often described the Revolution as a war: “Français, sachez raisonner et combattre. Vous êtes en guerre désormais avec tous vos oppresseurs; vous n'aurez la paix que quand vous les aurez châtiés.”<sup>193</sup> If the fight is a war, then violence must be the means, as that is the nature of warfare. Similar to the extent to which he employed the metaphor of war, Robespierre often made references to blood. His revolution was a gory one:

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., Vol. V, p. 344. For other examples see: Vol. V, pp. 352-3; Vol. IX, pp. 342, 444, 485, 571.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 317.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 360.

Vous serez libres; gardez-vous d'en douter: je jure par l'incendie de Courtrai; par les enfans des brabançons, égorgés dans le ventre de leurs mères, et portés tout sanglans au bout des baïonnettes autrichiennes: je le jure par les mânes des avignonnois qui ont péri sous les coups des nos communs ennemis: je le jure par nos femmes et nos enfans, lâchement égorgés au champ-de-mars; par les défenseurs de la patrie, assassinés tant de fois en détail, et par les patriotes, entassés encore aujourd'hui dans nos cachots: je le jure par les armées étrangères, qui s'assemblent, et par les traîtres qui les appellent: je le jure par la déclaration des droits de l'homme, solennellement promulguée et insolemment violée; par les calamités de vingt siècles, que nous avons à expier; par nos aïeux que nous devons venger, par notre postérité que nous devons affranchir, et par nous-mêmes que nous devons sauver.<sup>194</sup>

While he may have attributed the violence in this account to unpatriotic authorities, Robespierre's language created a charged atmosphere and called for a response. Once Robespierre had informed his readers that innocent children had been stabbed while still in their mother's womb, could the response be anything but violent?

In his frequent invocation of revenge, Robespierre's rhetoric was arguably more violent than that of Marat. Drawing on the power of the threat of violence, Robespierre frequently warned his opponents that, no matter what they achieved, one day the people would have their vengeance, and that this revenge would be proportionate to what had been taken from them.<sup>195</sup> What prevented Robespierre from seeing revenge as something self-perpetuating and cyclical was the same argument that allowed him to maintain that it was possible to bring violence to an end. If you define violence exclusively as an isolated force which hurts the Revolution or goes against the general will, it is possible to conceive of its termination. However, if you allow for a more open definition, then revenge becomes more problematic as an instrument. Whether or not one sees them as just, acts of violence will be resented, and often repaid. Acts take on their own dynamic and become cyclical if they are based simply on revenge for previous acts.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 232 . For other examples see: Vol. IV, p. 134; Vol. VI, pp. 315, 394 ; Vol. IX, p. 439.

As we saw with Marat, much of the violence which can be attributed to Robespierre was implicit in his arguments, rather than explicit in the form of calls for the use of force. There were, however, also many explicit calls for popular uprising or violence in his work. These calls were generally presented as a response to the extent to which justice was not being carried out, or the Revolution was being exploited. For example:

C'est quand toutes les loix sont violés, c'est quand le despotisme est à son comble, c'est quand on foule aux pieds la bonne foi et la pudeur, que le peuple doit s'insurger. Ce moment est arrivé: nos ennemis oppriment ouvertement les patriotes; ils veulent, au nom de la loi, replonger le peuple dans la misère et l'esclavage.<sup>196</sup>

Interestingly, Robespierre at times called for official and unofficial proponents of the Revolution to rise up together:

Il faut que le peuple se lève dans toutes les parties de la France pour écraser les ennemis intérieurs; sans cela tout est perdu...  
Je dis que la Convention doit se lever aussi, qu'elle doit donner au peuple le signal de se lever contre les ennemis intérieurs.<sup>197</sup>

If official and unofficial elements rose up together, popular violence became much easier for the radicals to justify. As true as this may be, it is curious that Robespierre assumed that legality was not an issue if official institutions were involved.

Now that we understand something of how Robespierre used appeals to violence, and that they were central to his politics, it is possible to move on to look specifically at how he developed his position on the September massacres and the purge of the Girondins. Although Robespierre's response to the September massacres differed from Marat's, the two responded in a very similar manner to the purge. In all probability, this

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, pp. 23-4, 231, 341; Vol. V, p. 19; Vol. VI, p. 436; Vol. IX, 481, 617.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 526. For other examples see: Vol. IV, pp. 62-3, 351-2, 366; Vol. VI, pp. 311, 381; Vol. IX, pp. 329, 512.

convergence was the product of the Montagnards' forging an alliance with the *sans culottes*. Robespierre had to let go of some of his legalistic language in order not to alienate the popular support which he was now courting. Further, as we saw in Chapter 3, Marat was established as an official politician by this phase of the Revolution. Thus, their representations of the purge demonstrate that circumstances caused Marat and Robespierre to move towards each other.

Robespierre, more than Marat, developed the argument that the September massacres were the logical and virtually inevitable follow-up to the events of 10 August 1792 – a day when justice was denied. In his desire to carry the gains of 10 August one step further, we see Robespierre attempt to theorize the illegal but legitimate insurrection; but his theory of violence was weak. He often described as legitimate simply those movements of which he approved, and his approval was based in large part on whether or not the insurrection was partial or complete. Robespierre's standard of approval is not surprising given his argument that partial uprisings only hindered the movement, but his position boils down to his accepting – after the fact – insurrections which were successful, and rejecting those that were not. This is not much of a theory. If he did accept an uprising, he legitimized it with talk of the bravery, energy, and virtue of the people, and the justice that they had been denied. In the buildup to the September massacres, it was in these terms that Robespierre presented the events of 10 August: “Ne voyez-vous pas que cette conduite politique et courageuse étoit absolument nécessaire, pour réunir et diriger la force populaire, contre l'armée anti-révolutionnaire, que les tyrans avoient rassemblée dans Paris.”<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 348. For other examples see: Vol. IX, pp. 367, 527.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., Vol. V, p. 101.

The day before the massacres, Robespierre's position on 10 August culminated in an explicit call for action.

Qu'étions-nous avant la journée du 10 août 1792? les esclaves et les jouets de tous les mandataires du peuple, des victimes vouées aux vengeances de la cour...

L'excès du mal produisit encore une fois le remède; et le peuple se leva, il fut forcé d'acheter la victoire par le sang des meilleurs citoyens.<sup>199</sup>

This explicit call to action was in contrast to Marat who did rant about conspiracy and traitors throughout August, undoubtedly contributing to the buildup of tension, but whose last explicit call for action was on 19 August, two weeks before the massacres. With Robespierre as well, the call for force was not new, but his language was much stronger. Moreover, his impassioned language must be considered in the context of extreme agitation over France's military setbacks at Longwy and Verdun, and the defection of Lafayette. Robespierre would have known that he was talking to an anxious people.

Despite his dramatic portrayal of revolutionary events and his explicit call to action, it is highly unlikely that Robespierre ever would have anticipated an uprising as brutal as the prison massacres, and he certainly would not have encouraged such a thing. Rather than actually encouraging an insurrection, Robespierre probably was using the threat of street violence to push officials towards the left. As was often the case with those uneasy over violence as a means, Robespierre was, however, happy to accept the ends, i.e., the formation of a republic.

Robespierre took two months to develop his position on the massacres. His first line of defense was that he did not know what was happening, and thereafter he argued that it was the responsibility of city authorities to monitor agitation and to keep things under control. Robespierre then referred back to his argument that the events of 10

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 449.

August made further insurrection inevitable, and asserted that the people could not be blamed for the fact that they were pushed to the brink by the treachery of military officers. The following passage presents a summary of Robespierre's position on the massacres:

Si vous avez pensé que le mouvement imprimé aux esprits par l'insurrection du mois d'août étoit entièrement expiré au commencement de septembre, vous vous êtes trompés; et ceux qui ont cherché à vous persuader qu'il n'y avoit aucune analogie entre l'une et l'autre de ces deux époques, ont feint de ne connoître ni les faits, ni le coeur humain... l'indignation étoit dans tous les coeurs.

Cependant une cause nouvelle, et beaucoup plus importante acheva de porter la fermentation à son comble. Un grand nombre de citoyens avoient pensé que la journée du 10 rompoit les fils des conspirations royales, et regardoient la guerre comme terminée, quand tout-à-coup la nouvelle se répand dans Paris que Longwi a été livré, que Verdun a été livré, et qu'à la tête d'une armée de cent mille hommes, Brunswick s'avance vers Paris.<sup>200</sup>

In other words, the crowd cannot be held responsible for the prison massacres as they already revealed the need for more swift treatment of traitors on 10 August; it is not their fault that this warning was not heeded and that further military disaster ensued.

Despite the fact that Robespierre took two months to develop his position, and that he obviously did so more out of pressure from his opponents than from a desire to defend the masses, once he had developed it, he saw this line of defense as powerful – more powerful than erasing the legacy of the massacres. In the buildup to the purge of the Convention, Robespierre attributed the massacres not to the perpetrators, but to the horrid necessity created by the treachery of the Girondins. What enabled Robespierre to create this script was his linking of the Girondins to the declining military situation.

Like Marat, Robespierre implicated “the faction” early on. Much of Robespierre's antagonism towards the Girondins derived from his perception of politics.

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., Vol. IX, pp. 91.

Although an advocate of official institutions, he was highly suspicious of individual power wielded within those institutions. Politicians should act for the good of the nation, and never out of private interest. Robespierre charged Roland with this sin of all political sins:

Le pouvoir exécutif est influencé par un homme [Roland] tellement puissant qu'un seul mot de sa bouche est une loi pour la Convention... Il est un seul homme dans la Convention qui dirige le ministère, et cet homme est tellement sacré qu'il est impossible à un membre de la Convention de l'attaquer, parce que cet homme a la majorité de la Convention pour lui... Nous avons reconnu que la liberté ne pouvait exister dans la réunion des pouvoirs, et tous les pouvoirs sont réunis dans les mains des mêmes fripons par la *faction brissotine*.<sup>201</sup>

Robespierre's list of what the Girondins did wrong was long: they abused their official status to violate the rights of the nation; they sought to destroy liberty; they intentionally provoked chaos for the purposes of reinstating despotism; they wanted to destroy the patriotic societies, and, they represented factional interests.<sup>202</sup> These charges against the Girondins were formulaic and no different from those which Robespierre leveled against other enemies of the radicals over the course of the Revolution. It can be concluded, therefore, that it was not these charges themselves which sealed the fate of the Girondins, but the fact that the Montagnards were successful in linking the Girondins to military failure and counterrevolution.

Robespierre's language became more dramatic and bloody as the purge approached, and his charges against the Girondins were increasingly specific and verbose:

Je les vois insinuer qu'elle est l'ouvrage d'une faction ambitieuse qui cherchoit à élever la puissance de quelques citoyens sur les ruines de la royauté. Je les vois entretenir éternellement l'univers de la mort de quelques complices du tyran, immolés par le peuple; peindre Paris, comme le séjour du carnage et du crime,

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-6.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 83; Vol. VI, p. 445; Vol. IX, pp. 154-5, 170-1.

comme le domaine d'une troupe de brigands et d'assassins, qui domine au sein même de la Convention nationale. Quels moyens de rendre la république naissante respectable aux yeux des peuples, que de flétrir son berceau, par les idées de sang, d'assassinats, de troubles et de factions! Qui a cherché encore à déshonorer cette autre époque immortelle de notre révolution, où la condamnation solennelle du tyran la consolida? Qui a voulu nous faire un crime et un titre d'opprobre de ce grand acte de justice et de vertu républicaine? Qui a peint la Convention nationale, comme une horde de cannibales? Qui a réveillé, de tout son pouvoir, les préjugés les plus serviles? Qui a prodigué, à la face de l'Europe, les injures les plus atroces aux représentans du peuple, qui provoquoient cet exemple redoutable à la tyrannie? Qui a prononcé à la tribune de la Convention nationale, pour éloigner la punition de Louis des discours qui ressembloient à des manifestes anticipés des cours étrangères? Les mêmes hommes qui avoient tenté de déshonorer par les mêmes moyens la révolution qui avoit conduit le même tyran au Temple.<sup>203</sup>

Robespierre harped back to the debate over the war and argued that treason, that of Dumouriez in particular, could be connected to this faction, and that life would have been much better had there been no Girondin treachery. The implication was that patriots had better be rid of the 'faction' sooner rather than later, before even more atrocities occurred.

Two days before the start of the insurrection, Robespierre's rhetoric culminated in an explicit call for action:

La faction qui domine au sein de la Convention, intimement liée aux généraux conspirateurs. Cette faction continuera de dominer. Le plan d'égorger les patriotes ne sera pas abandonné.

Tous les moyens de corruption et toute l'influence que donnent les richesses de la République sont entre les mains de la faction...

Je dis que, si le peuple ne se lève pas tout entier, la liberté est perdue... Je n'ai que deux mots à vous dire: le peuple est sur le bord de sa tombe; le despotisme va renaître et siéger sur des monceaux de cadavres; nos ennemis triomphent de toutes parts; car le foyer de la contre-révolution est dans le sein de l'assemblée...

Marseille, autrefois le boulevard de la liberté, est aujourd'hui son tombeau. Le même sort nous attend, si nous ne montrons de l'énergie, et si Paris ne se lève tout entier pour écraser les hydres qui sifflent à nos oreilles.<sup>204</sup>

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., Vol. V, pp. 268-9.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., IX, pp. 536-9.

Not surprisingly, Robespierre made much more than did Marat of the argument that this was an uprising *for* the Convention. In its unofficial political capacity, the crowd was acting for the sake of the official:

La Convention a reconnu elle-même la nécessité de cette insurrection; tous les bons citoyens l'ont vivement ressentie. Il ne restait à la République d'autre ressource que les efforts d'un peuple ami éclairé de la liberté qui a su, en se levant, étouffer tous les complots de l'aristocratie.<sup>205</sup>

For Robespierre, claiming that the popular movement was supported by the official political sphere of the Convention made the movement unproblematic to encourage, and easy to appropriate. After the fact, the justification was simple: there was no choice; things could have happened no other way. As for Marat, the low level of violence also made this insurrection easy and unproblematic for Robespierre to claim: "Pourra-t-on espérer de plus grandes preuves de patriotisme et d'énergie que l'insurrection du 31 mai, qui a terrassé le colosse de l'intrigue?"<sup>206</sup> Of course, the radicals never questioned whether their attempt to force the Convention to represent a single will could constitute violence.

Subsequently, Robespierre revealed the same uneasiness with the limited dimensions of the purge apparent in Marat. The non-explosive nature of this *journée*, combined with the fact that, although the Convention was purged, many Girondins were able to live comfortably in exile outside of Paris, did not make for much of a legacy. Thus the radicals were forced, after the fact, to heighten the significance of the purge. They did so by refusing to let the question of officially assigning guilt to the Girondins fall from the popular imagination. As we have noted, Marat had little success in this regard, and Robespierre too might have failed if it had not been for Charlotte Corday's

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 545.

assassination of Marat on 13 July. The Montagnards had tremendous success presenting Corday's action as the product of a widespread Girondin conspiracy, and Marat was made a martyr, further enhancing the status of his populist political agenda. Robespierre, contrary to his earlier position, decided that the Committee of Public Safety could be an effective revolutionary institution, and he became a member on 17 July. By the end of October, the Girondins had been found guilty by the Revolutionary Tribunal, and the counterrevolution in the Vendée was being violently repressed. The Terror was well under way.

Overall, theory played a more central role in Robespierre's use of revolutionary violence. Whereas Marat derived his legitimacy in claiming no more than to defend those most in need, Robespierre grounded his legitimacy in Rousseauian claims that he was a vehicle of the general will, and that law could lay the foundation of a perfect society. Given the status he attributed to the institution of law, Robespierre went to much greater lengths to present a theory of violence and popular action which could be characterized as 'legal,' whereas theoretical discourse was virtually absent in Marat's work. This is not to say, however, that Robespierre's theory was more sophisticated. Rather, he often contradicted himself when expressing when violence was and was not appropriate. Further, his rationalizations were often based on little more than whether or not the movement successfully achieved revolutionary ends. If we open the examination of revolutionary violence beyond looking at cases where it occurred or was explicitly advocated, the question of who was more violent is made more complicated. *L'Ami du Peuple* was definitely more radical than anything Robespierre produced during this period, and the perpetually agitated tone of Marat's paper did give it an overall violent

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 559.

quality, but when you focus specifically on what these two men said about violence, and the extent to which they used it as a political strategy, they appear very similar.

The instability of the state, and the uncertainty as to the legitimacy of insurrection allowed Marat and Robespierre to use violence, or the threat of it, for their own ultimately partisan purposes. They both embraced the political power of violence, then put it to use. When Marat or Robespierre wanted to push official political institutions to the left, they threatened that poor conditions would inevitably lead to insurrection, and when they wanted to encourage the masses to take action, they invoked notions of the state as a violent and oppressive institution against which they had no choice but to defend themselves forcibly. Neither man can be named strictly an official or an unofficial political figure as neither was truly of one realm or the other; instead, they both moved from one sphere to the other, operating in the gray space between the two, and used violence as a means of insuring their influence.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

As much as violence is a universal political phenomenon, the way in which violence was used throughout the French Revolution was specific to the culture and conditions of its time and place. Which acts of violence revolutionary leaders accepted as legitimately political, treated as counterrevolutionary, or set apart from the Revolution altogether was politically and culturally determined. The great revolutionary *journées* were not the only time when significant violence took place, but instead the particular circumstances surrounding the *journées* made it possible for them to take on political meaning and to be lodged in the popular imagination. Further, in the legal vacuum created by the fall of the monarchy, shifting and contending notions of legitimacy created a gray space in which both official and unofficial political actors could claim the authority to define events. The flexibility around the portrayal of violence proved to be at the heart of how politics were conducted as revolutionary leaders strategically chose when to encourage or discourage resort to force, and when to accept or reject it.

There were many aspects of the French Revolution which encouraged violence; primary among them was the intense and widespread fear of conspiracy. Fear of conspiracy encouraged the use of violence in both the official (purge of the Girondins) and the unofficial (September massacres) political spheres. As the Revolution dragged on with no end in sight and the military situation continued to deteriorate, conspiracy theories offered an explanation as to why the Revolution proved so difficult to consolidate. Fueling the fear of counterrevolutionary plots was, additionally, an effective means of keeping the masses actively and energetically revolutionary. In the official realm, leveling charges of false patriotism, and hinting at the associated threat of popular

violence worked as a highly effective political strategy which Marat and Robespierre used extensively.

Several aspects of the radical world view also encouraged violence. Although at the time of the Revolution followers of Rousseau perceived the notion of the general will as providing a means of achieving peaceful social existence, in retrospect one can see the extent to which insisting on a unitary will promoted violence. Radicals such as Marat and Robespierre took it for granted that their sympathy for the common people made them vehicles of the general will, and used this self-proclaimed role to justify their right to act as both politicians and political journalists. The way in which Marat and Robespierre represented their function in the process of conducting politics according to the general will was one-sided. Both of these figures only addressed the extent to which the press was able to influence opinion in reference to counter-revolutionary conspiracy, and never the press' power to shape revolutionary opinion. Indeed, recognizing their power to shape opinion would have made it much more difficult for Marat and Robespierre to deny responsibility for revolutionary violence.

Marat and Robespierre characterized those who opposed them as evil. This polarization is evident in the work of both men. Seeking to uncover and politically institutionalize the general or unitary will, Marat and Robespierre both argued that moderation, instead of healthily promoting political diversity and debate, was in league with the counterrevolution in its failure to act more forcibly in favor of the Revolution. In addition to defining moderation as a social evil, Marat and Robespierre presented a rigid view of human nature wherein people were unlikely to change, and implied that all those who benefited under the former political system must be purged. The danger of

this manichean world view was intensified by the republican demand that political institutions be transparent, further reducing the capacity to compromise. Instead, personal morality and public virtue were presented as inseparable, creating an even broader category of those who needed to be purged for social harmony to ensue.

Although violence was implicit in their world view, the general reluctance of radicals to associate themselves with Marat demonstrates that encouragement of violence was a contentious issue for them. Nevertheless, radicals did seek to legitimize the use of violence in their revolutionary discourse. We have seen both Marat and Robespierre advance the argument that the masses would use violence when the official political realm failed or refused to perform justice properly. In this regard, there was consensus among the radicals that the poor living conditions of the common people was legitimate cause for forceful protest. The radicals often claimed that they were using violence as a means of ending violence, as was the case with Marat's argument that chopping off 500 guilty heads would save 500,000 patriots. In assuming the moral rightness of violence as a tool to end violence, the radicals failed to consider the cyclical nature of revenge. Finally, the radicals frequently appealed to a distinction between words and action to justify their association with violence: if the conditions they presented were so terrible that they demanded a violent response, radical words, no matter how inflammatory, could not be blamed for the necessity of violent action. In arguing that violent words and actions are different in kind, neither Marat nor Robespierre addressed the question of the responsibility they bore for how they chose to represent events. Both men also failed to question whether or not it was in fact possible to consider action in isolation from the theory which claimed to provide the action with legitimacy.

Historians of the French Revolution have not systematically analyzed the intentional promotion or rejection of violence for political purposes. The theoretical framework of the Marxist school diverts attention from the need to analyze violence by making it essentially an inevitable aspect of class conflict. Although Cobb's work on the revolutionary armies and the police made the discussion of violence inevitable, the revisionist school as a whole tends to gloss over popular agitation in its focus on official political reasons for the cause and course of the Revolution. Finally, historians from the political culture school, in considering the formation of revolutionary culture cannot overlook violence. Nonetheless, few of them consider violence an independent topic of analysis.

The notion of violence as a consciously employed political tool does, however, come up in the work of political theorists who address the issues of politics and force. Further investigating the nature of revolutionary violence and addressing the places where the suggestion of force is implicit as well as those where it is explicit demonstrates that revolutionary violence was not random or simply an unfortunate yet inevitable aspect of significant social and political change. To the contrary, presenting violence as essentially spontaneous serves the political purpose of making its use a mere response to horrid conditions, and does more to vindicate its perpetrators morally than to give an account of the nature of violent action. This thesis, however, demonstrates that, although at times violence certainly was representative of little more than popular frustration over conditions, it was also a means by which leading revolutionaries sought to manipulate the tension between the undefined and overlapping official and unofficial political spheres.

In the gray space between the official and unofficial spheres, radicals used violence to bend both popular agitation and official institutions to suit their own purposes. We have seen that when Marat and Robespierre wanted to radicalize revolutionary institutions, they appealed to the threat of popular violence; when they needed to reinforce the political status of their agendas, they pushed the masses to rise up by telling them horror-filled stories of conspiracy and atrocities committed, not just by their enemies, but also by power-hungry false patriots parading as their friends to advance their partisan, counterrevolutionary, and authoritarian cause.

As an unofficial political actor, the crowd also used violence as a means of keeping its concerns, especially subsistence issues, on the official political agenda. Popular agitation over subsistence is of particular interest as it often resulted in a clash between street actors and even some of the most left-wing radicals. Marat and Robespierre both argued that food-based movements tended to be only partial, and not properly political. Robespierre in particular defined violent movements as complete or legitimate not on their own merits, but in terms of their successful outcome. Out of concern that subsistence was a site where false patriots could easily trick the people into agitating, Marat and Robespierre suggested that the masses should leave such difficult problems in the hands of revolutionary institutions. Despite the many warnings of Marat and Robespierre of the damage that the crowd could do to the broader revolutionary movement if it agitated too readily over food-based issues, the Parisian crowd in particular preserved this as their rightful domain of action, and did eventually use the threat of the potential violence they could wield to secure price-fixing laws.

How, then, does looking at violence change our perception of the Revolution? It has been demonstrated that the line between official and unofficial political spheres was highly contentious during the Revolution, and that using violence to work the overlapping gray space in between was a profitable means of conducting radical politics. Violence was used consciously as a means of ensuring that certain issues stayed on the official political agenda. The history of the establishment of revolutionary institutions can be seen as a history of a sequence of *journées*, all propelled by the use, threat, or fear of violence.

Another way in which our perception of the Revolution is altered by looking at violence lies in the difference between the ideals and the practices of Enlightenment philosophy. Despite the order which Enlightenment thought promised, and the integral intellectual value of many of its philosophies, looking at the violence of the actual events of the French Revolution cannot but influence how Rousseau's theories in particular are viewed. Combined with the nature of revolutionary events, the ideal of social harmony, achieved by using reason to uncover the secrets of nature, resulted in a manichean world view which made political diversity impossible, and made it seem necessary for the Revolution to crush any opposition if it were to survive.

Focussing on the French Revolution also alters our perception of violence. As we have seen, violence is a force which is often calculated rather than primarily spontaneous. Further, "violent" is not a naturally determined category objectively defined, but rather a concept which can be politically allocated as a means of representing events in the desired light. The same act which might be considered violent under one set of

conditions could be named heroic under another, and it is a political contest to see who can secure the authority to label things one way or the other.

Of course, the concept of violence is not entirely arbitrary – intentionally causing harm is quite universally accepted as violent. Nonetheless, looking at how violence was represented both during and after the Revolution reveals that, morally speaking, there has been a pronounced tendency to believe that it is possible to take the violence out of the violent. Both Marat and Robespierre argued that, virtually regardless of the level of force involved, anything that opposed the Revolution was violent and that which protected it was not. Following this logic, both figures suggested that force employed to establish justice was not violent, but failing to conduct justice was. This definition is plainly arbitrary; counterrevolutionary actors certainly believed that they were the victims of violence before they were its perpetrators. Being arbitrary, however, did not detract from the political power encompassed in the rhetoric of claiming that something was against the Revolution, and therefore violent.

The particular conditions of revolutionary culture determined what was viewed as violent. As we saw with the formulaic charges that Robespierre leveled against the Girondins, it was not the case that violence was “naturally” or necessarily implied by charges that the Girondins represented factional interests, or that they were conspiring to reinstate the monarch. Instead, the popular image of the Girondins as monsters was more the product of impending military disaster and counterrevolution, and how the radicals represented these conditions. More generally, in the specific set of circumstances which formed the political arena of the French Revolution, the most significant aspect of violence was that it was not a random or inevitable force, but rather served as a valuable

means for radicals to secure political influence by manipulating the gray space between the official and unofficial realms of politics.

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