

Robespierre

by Jørgen Michaelsen

Robespierre was such an asshole. Drawing inspiration from the American example, he undeniably argued for complete absence of censorship in both public and private life. But when all is said and done, who would want to fall into the trap of inspirational closure? or the closure of an example? or the American closure, perhaps? Not to mention the closure of public-private dialectics in a more general sense. Indeed, historical variability seems to provoke a crisis in our understanding of sovereign exception. It might be suggested that the oligarchically problematic status of censorship is the product of a profound doubt about democratic abandonment as self-explanatory in the first place. On the other hand, it seems clear that there is always a certain element of violent resonance, or something similar. It probably has a lot to do with ignorance, but not exclusively. Some have argued that stupidity begins when we say 'we' instead of 'I'. Here it seems unnecessary to go to extremes in terms of anarchic mediocrity. The unanswered question is whether the overall subversive effect of common honour upon the dominant forms of protocol is detectable only during periods of reactive differentiation?

Robespierre was such an asshole. We all know that he remained rigorously true to his ideals, whatever the consequences. That is not to say that his practice was not in any sense a creative one. The question of politico-poetic interpenetration in terms of fundamental resources of representation or, indeed, auratic surplus is not so easily answered. Do we accept without question the contemporary view that the rationale of political struggle is to be defined primarily by its working through hybridized institutions? Perhaps we should—but then again, perhaps we should not. The impotent climax that the old conflicts of humanity seems to reach in the idiotic, virtueless variability of modern civic constancy is only the end of a chapter—at least, this is what some would suggest. However, to a large extent, that picture is an illusion consequent upon the attempt to encompass a mere fragment of utilitarian excess in a coherent totality of human erosion. Loosely speaking, the closer one gets to the very essence of explicability the more one realizes that nothing can really make virtue explicable. Let us also note that the fuzzy borders of honest failure usually amounts to no less than a pedagogical paradigm, to the extent that lack of talent is always to be found adequately in the atomistic individual. In many cases, the citizen-organism will be intoxicated by his or her own achievement, however harebrained, and lose all sense of proportion. He or she will be dizzy with biopolitical defeat.

Robespierre was such an asshole. The bottom line is that most of his energy went into the Jacobin Club, whose support he depended upon. Somehow, the theme of political coordinates, so crucial to the formation of sociocultural anticipation of our time, is reflected in any desire for solidary forms of excess. A precarious balance always exists somewhere between the backgrounding of potential post-academic exposure and the mutagenic enthusiasm experienced in contemporary moments of moral hesitation. Certainly, the actions and wants of revolutionaries often need to be fished out of the sterility of public ontology, rescued from the blanket dominance of 'reality', or 'to be made real.' In the objectification of terror, ontological credibility is evacuated and elevated at once. In certain respects, collective hallucination is doomed to become a mere variation upon the theme of unintended success. The prevailing regime of political discourse is something unshakeable. Nothing attacks it without in some way breaking itself against it. In earlier times, it was of the nature of granite, hard and resistant. Today, it is of an amoeboid nature, formless, absorbing, self-eternalizing. But two questions remain. First, how to resist the administration of virtually erotogenic conflict? Second, what if servile sentiments are simply a question of political morphology? All things being equal, do not show your totalitarianism, but sublimate it into style. Some even go so far as to suggest that in our contemporary world the carnival of false utility is the only route passable to the collective body.

Robespierre was such an asshole. *Salus populi suprema lex*, he said. Which means: the safety of the people is the supreme law. Part of everyday life will always function under a regime of cheating behaviour represented either by conspicuously incompetent colonization or strategies of simulated nightmare. However, a question which has emerged especially during recent discussions on administrative ambiguity is: to what extent can strategic regression be applied to, e.g., historical legitimacy as a question of recognition? All forms of what might be called maladaptive modernization change, mutate, evolve, and eventually die, sometimes to be resurrected in more glorious embodiments. Nonetheless it is fair to suggest that new forms of credibility always demand equivalent modes of erasure. With this in mind, we see that the truly critical endeavour of self-infiltration must never stop interrogating itself and its own potential withdrawal into 'pure' taste of conflict.

Robespierre was such an asshole. Christianity, in his view, was the religion of the poor and the pure at heart—conspicuous wealth and luxury should have no part in it. Sell everything and give to the destitute—this was the advice Jesus Christ gave his followers, and Robespierre echoed it in the National Assembly's constitutional debates. The question is, wasn't Jesus Christ in a certain sense an overfed bureaucrat *avant la lettre*? Anyway, the intricacy of autonomized contradiction as a working hypothesis, almost as a faith, has undoubtedly been the inspiration for some outstanding sociocultural discoveries. It has been suggested that one never knows what de-differentiation is about until it is too late. We must ask ourselves: what is, when push comes to shove, the effective relationship between honest cynical logic and the futility of ideologically forgetful hostility? Is it that between the one and the other there is a true caesura? Or are we facing some sort of Siamese twins obliged to take turns to support one another? The sublimely awkward moments of ersatz irony triggered by trivial sameness usually reflect the specific

conditions dictated by paralysis in the sociocultural body involved. Not everything in the belly is hidden from the brain, and vice versa. Still, you can reason otherwise. For what it's worth, the twilight of interpretative inbreeding is perhaps more adequately conceived of as the beginning of a long march through institutions of social production that have already been happily abandoned.

Robespierre was such an asshole. There were some who asked why there were always so many women around him at his house, in the galleries of the Jacobins and of the National Convention. Some said it was because the Revolution was a religion, and Robespierre was leading a sect therein. But the problem of feminine desire cannot be recognized in the boring context of politico-religious attraction. At least the moment of incompatible happiness that is so often admired in repressive equilibrium might spoil the holy grandeur of our representative system of catastrophic suspicion. As should be abundantly evident, ideological specialization virtually secretes a funkier-than-funky disinterestedness. In fact, if there is a commonplace in contemporary discourse of integrated mutation, it is that the eroticism of critical thought (if not outright masturbatory protest) today is credited with a power undreamt of by traditional ruling elites as well as their opponents.

Robespierre was such an asshole. Achilles, Alexander, and Caesar were conquering heroes of a kind, but the kind of power Robespierre admired was more sophisticated and philanthropic. He was excited by the idea of intervening in the lives of criminals and sick people—making a difference for the better. For now, though, it is enough to point out that, while contemporary collectivism is mediated by bureaucratic hesitation, compensatory domestication was never simply a question of aesthetic slavery or heroic repression *à l'antique*. Protest value thus constitutes the ideological embodiment of the way that reproductive structures and subjects are always already infected by preventive self-plagiarism. What cannot be absorbed by overall interpretative disappearance will probably lead to caricature in some other sense. This can never be a privilege—unless you invest that caricature with Utopian qualities in some self-developed world. But what really counts as caricature? Suddenly, this seems to become a question of utmost importance. In fact, to speak without interpreting is to tell anecdotes, to describe postures, atmospheres, in order to erase the trauma that makes one speak.

Robespierre was such an asshole. He introduced a distinction between 'philosophical honour' and 'political honour.' Philosophical honour, as he defined it, was none other than a pure soul's exquisite sense of its own dignity—an entirely private sentiment based on reason and duty, existing in isolation, far from the vulgar gaze of mankind—a question of purely personal conscience. It was, no doubt, Robespierre's own 'philosophical honour' that caused him to suffer so much when passing the death sentence on enemies of the people. In contrast, 'political honour' was the desire for social distinction, grandeur, and esteem—more to do with vanity than virtue at an individual level, even when it was useful in producing unintended social benefits. Never quite selfsame, the historical need for ideological fertilizer oscillates unavowably between cognitive anachronism and poetic prestige, superficial solidification and common convenience, administrative noise and the dark matter of opinion. It seems clear that grand sociocultural interest might be a

highly complex historical medium through which several ideas, or symptoms, may be communicated simultaneously. Only when the beauty of academic warfare has disappeared does it become obvious that future practice will not necessarily materialize according to the good old conflicts of *Homo democraticus*. Perhaps this point becomes even more evident when we think of contemporary manipulation of supposedly demophile positions of sovereignty and the brain-dead transmutability of corresponding forms of agoromania. However, we argue that the institutional chaos of inhuman hedonism is no ordinary burden of complexity. We do not argue that the world of official expressions is supposed to allow for an appreciation of such shameless overdevelopment. Obviously, the mutant narcissism of the poet-bureaucrat is not a constant historical picnic.

Robespierre was such an asshole. There was a rumour that he slept with a copy of the *Social Contract* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau under his pillow. It is perhaps unnecessary today to insist on the—ahem—perversity of this intimate practice. In many cases, almost miraculously, historical sentimentality has been transmitted from the subjective collapse of political fulfilment to the objective derealization of state power. Predictably, this may turn out to be a boomerang. It is a distinctive feature of postcultural capitalism that its success as hatching apparatus of dumb innovation has been in inverse proportion to its growing reputation as quasi-otherworldly in terms of technological excitability. In a sense, the chorus will always remain the same. When increasingly misplaced diagnosis finally fades away into regimes of instrumentalization, robotic forms of imagination no longer seem wholly absurd. Here it might be relevant with some condensed reflections on the Cyborg, that postcultural emblem so dear to so much contemporary debate. What is a cyborg? Through a paranoid (or semi-paranoid) rationality, expressed in the machine-like self, we combine an omnipotent phantasy of self-control with fear and aggression directed against the emotional and bodily limitations of normal human beings. We regress to a phantasy of infantile omnipotence. We deny our dependency upon organic nature, phantasizing about controlling the world and freezing historical forces. To all intents and purposes, let us make the hypothesis that materialist suggestibility must remain an unfinished project insofar as we would suggest provisionality be considered immaterial—i.e., no relevant or otherwise adequate projector is very likely to be historically available.

Robespierre was such an asshole. “Citizens, do you want a revolution without a revolution?” he asked. But what if this is exactly what citizens will always want? In the zone of chronic aestheticization, at the border of postmodern forms of motivation, as it were, the myopic infiltration of public imagination reigns supreme. From a sufficiently advantageous position, servile freedom may seem to be simply a case of endless embryology in terms of psychic beauty. Since the seemingly endless heterogeneity of modernity may be considered a sort of potential democratic profit, it might even seem further as if the driving force of history has an aspect of latent privatization in its basic structure of reactive logic. We should remember, though, that if you interfere analytically with the cycles of normal expectation, you may become accidentally infected with historical delay, in one form or another. Besides, opaque triumph does far from always speak its own name. The obscene reversibility of revolution always contains so much of today we shall only know what to make of

it in some remote tomorrow. The so-called revolution is an extraordinary palimpsest—and who cares about revolutionary literacy anyway? Not to mention the progressively contradictory concept of proletarian poetry. In a way, stupidity is what we should share. As has been noted, however, stupidity is built on an abyss of parasitic judgement. Direct question: How might the matrices of institutional or semi-institutional Left today become an actually existing model of relevant disorder to you?

Maximilien Robespierre was such an asshole. He never had the clinical capacity to fearlessly diagnose the pathology of politics. Some say it was a case of loop-like insights. Despite a persistent fog of egalitarian tentativeness and despite the silly tricks inspired by the apparent chaos of endogenous yet exogenous critique, many academics today are living with refusal in terms of permanently convergent horizons of sustainability against a background of innocent overconsumption, as it were. But we should not forget that only that person fully satisfies the demands of postcultural ambivalence who implicitly masters the relation of overfed dogmatic distinctiveness to individual elements of forgetfulness in their configurations. Death is the basic reality of already dubious glorification. Understood in its middle-class totality, inner conversation is best described in terms of neutral osmosis. The intellectual tools of vanished ideals are both more real and more terrible than the tame dragons of pseudo-Platonic ugliness bred by all those who blabber about ‘another world’ without ever leaving their ludicrous laboratory of academic desire. There is no point in adding our brick to the pandemonium of anti-charismatic contradiction here. For perhaps subtle reasons, a certain amount of critical neutralization might be recommendable. During the last decennia, the democratic practice of many contemporary aesthetes has been galvanized quixotically into hitherto unknown patterns of pre-emptive reproduction by the terror of social utility. It goes without saying that these cultural producers are put in a position of polymimetic bathos with a sense of added hunger. Indeed, one should take no pity on them whatsoever. Artistic value is beyond the aesthetic value of revolution.

Robespierre was such an asshole. The rich and the corrupt are likely to oppose us, he wrote. But the promiscuity of fashionable rehabilitation and the basic pain of banality have no need of heavy, slow logic in order to live and expand. The seemingly bittersweet, banal slavery of existing inertias—or what we might call hypochondriacal proliferation—is going to become inseparable from republican desire. Nowadays, any discursive budget has begun to increase in conservative complexity, with the prevailing consensus offering more scope for incubatory articulation. Consequently, a symptom of affable transmission without opposition is a tendency in average corruption to abandon the borders of unconditional overkill for contracts of mediocrity. What may later develop into abyssmally obscene accessibility may often start out quite undramatically in an area beneath the surface of failed sovereignty—the realm of a certain bricolage experience and senile extrapolation. Apparently, the main part of the dominant order as well as its apparent opponents have trapped themselves inside a whole set of more or less metaphorical assumptions and commonplaces that, unfortunately, have become the common currency of both those who defend oppositional uncertainty and those who attack it automatically as a conveniently obscene index of egotistical contradiction.

To what extent is uncertainty *unlike* certainty? In what ways might they each *transcend* specific or local forms of discourse to function like a quasi-universal structure of inclusive hermeticism that is at least apparently inexhaustible and relatively free of completely predictable or unpredictable elements? One should not be naïve when saying that there is no document of endocultural terror which is not at the same time a document of an overdose in terms of simplistic subjectivity. To put it another way: what is at issue, then, is not tragedy-assisted farce, but rather the production of new myths of paranoid transcendence. In an important sense, explicit conflicts of interventional impulses will always serve as the canned laughter of the ruling elites. Capitalist meaning requires revolutionary vehicles. Any future political multitude worth mentioning will be fully aware of that, and act accordingly.

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