

Mark Mikityuk

Political Science 112C

Revolutionary Government

Robespierre's "On the Principles of Revolutionary Government" (1793) argued for the establishment of a constitution in France that recognized the natural rights of the French people and concluded that revolutionary terror is appropriate as a means of establishing the constitution. A question arises: *how does Robespierre define and distinguish the people from its enemies?* And, given the colorful critiques of the Terror which took place during this time, *is the distinction between enemies overly broad?* I will argue that though Robespierre makes a reasonable distinction between the foreigner and the criminal, he makes an overly broad definition for the criminal which results in identifying contrary positions to the sovereign as complete rejection of the Republic.

Robespierre's characterization of enemies is established by two categories: foreigners, whose voices are not recognized as legitimate in concerns of the French nation as they do not compose its body politic, and criminals, whose voices are not recognized as punishment for their inability to recognize the Frenchman's rights. We see that "Austria, England, Russia, Prussia, and Italy" (p. 6) constitute the major foreign actors blamed for continued interference with the general will of the Frenchmen by means of "announcing senseless doctrines," (p. 6) which "misleads the zeal of good [French] citizens" (p. 3), and manipulating the availability of necessary goods like bread, which inflates the foreigners' reputation as "arbiters of [French] tranquility" (p. 6) thus encouraging the inappropriate conception, per Robespierre, of a "single universal Republic [that unites all nations]" (p.3). Therefore, *an* enemy, here, is the *foreigner* who betrays the integrity of the French body politic by having non-French influences and considerations in the courts, the army, and clubs intended to represent the French interests alone (p. 6).

The second category of enemies are the criminals, the "tyrants" and their "accomplices" (p. 7-8), who actively work to revert the changes done in establishing the Republic and to revolt against the natural rights inalienable to man. The Committee, in solidifying this conception, uses language relevant to criminal matters, e.g. "culprit," "tried," and "punish[ed]" (p. 7). However, ambiguity emerges on whether it is fair to make no distinction between those *actively* "raising up the aristocracy... and the plots of federalism" (p. 7) and those "moderates and cowards of good faith" (p. 4) who *passively*

encourage the opponents of the revolution through hesitancy and skepticism. Robespierre colorfully declares the latter as “more atrocious” than the former (p. 7). Robespierre’s defense, then, of bad actions from good-willed citizens is unidirectional as he justifies the purge of the hesitant and skeptical, or the “cowards and the moderates,” regardless of their intentions, yet maintains the necessity for not purging the bad actions from the overzealous patriots by virtue of their good intentions since it is only *criminal* to align with *tyrants*.

On the concern of criminals being too broadly defined, Robespierre defends his position in two manners: rhetorically and theoretically. Declaring the well-intentioned, potentially misled, critics worse than the active perpetrators introduces moralizing language, a rhetorical strategy, to complement his assumed theoretical necessity of the revolution; moralizations provide the moral legitimacy to eradicate fellow citizens by association of their (alleged) aligned interest with the tyrants, even if they are not themselves members of the aristocracy and the criticisms may be positively embraced by the public. This is where the false conflation of the general will is made with the total will. The Revolutionary Government’s insistence on “public liberty” derived from “public interest” (p.3) is understood as adherence to the general will, but it incorrectly attributes any factional interests that do not necessarily hinder the functioning of the public liberty with that of opposition to it. A prime example is found in the clergy; surely we would consider it inappropriate to force the Church to swear allegiance to France as was done in 1790 (referencing contemporary rights to religious practice). Only about half of the priests took the oath. This resulted in these non-juring priests to be viewed as enemies of the state because a paranoid interpretation of this factional interest which aimed to reject allegiance to this intermediary government, given religious followers generally swear allegiance exclusively to God Almighty, was viewed as an opposition to recognizing natural rights and the Republic. Ultimately, Robespierre, who raises the exclusive sovereignty of the French in the body politic (at the exclusion of foreigners’ interests) makes the mistake of overly defining the criminal accomplice of the tyrant by interpreting factional interests, e.g. religious belief/clergy, as an opposition to the Republic/natural rights when it merely differed from the general will by hesitating and attempting to moderate the merciless and blood-hungry mob.

In conclusion, Robespierre is throwing the baby out with the bathwater by removing all legitimate interests in the French body politic that differ marginally from the general will (yet make up the total will) by trying to remove foreign and tyrannical influences in the establishment of the Republic.