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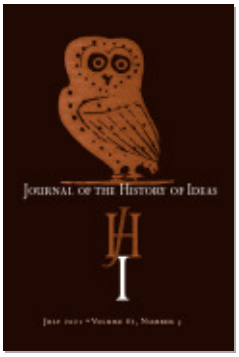

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The First Conceptualization of Terrorism: Tallien, Roederer, and the "System of Terror" (August 1794)

Ami-Jacques Rapin

Since the French Revolution, the notion of *terror* and its morphological derivatives (*terrorism*, *terrorist*) have emerged as central and often debated concepts in political philosophy. In examining the meaning and political instrumentalization of terror, the historiography of the French Revoluation has not adequately distinguished between rhetoric and substance.[1] Annie Jourdan argues that the discourse on terror was not related to "totalitarian ideology" but rather was a part of "combat rhetoric" among the revolutionaries of 1792–93. They developed a "rhetorical strategy" by using their opponents' words in a "discursive overbidding" that led, in particular, to the famous and controversial formula: making terror "the order of the day."[2]

[1] Following Dan Edelstein's distinction: *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 166.

[2] Annie Jourdan, "Les discours de la terreur à l'époque révolutionnaire (1776–1798)," *French Historical Studies* 36 (2013): 51–81. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the French are my own. The wording of the slogan varies during the period. One example is "Plaçons la terreur à l'ordre du jour," which appears in quotation marks in the context of a speech by Bertrand Barère to the Convention on 5 September 1793 (Barère quoting a watchword of the Commune of Paris). See *Gazette nationale*, 8 September 1793.

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Significantly, Jourdan highlights the widespread use of the notion of terror during the revolutionary period and shows that political terror was not conceptualized as part of any coherent ideological construction before 9 Thermidor II (July 27, 1794). However, this analysis is limited in that it focuses on the uses of the term without accounting for lexical context. As Dan Edelstein points out, revolutionaries were far from agreement on the meaning of *terror.*[3] Precisely because the term had a floating meaning, it was sometimes associated with and othertimes dissociated from the notion of justice. Indeed, during the period of the "Reign of Terror" (as a historical concept), the word *terror* was seldom used by the revolutionary authorities, who claimed to be pursuing "justice." This well-known paradox indicates two aspects that are equally important for understanding the semantic ambiguities that characterize revolutionary discourse. First, both words—*justice* and *terror*—had the same referent and could be used interchangeably. Second, the conceptualization of political terror was indeed subsequent to the Reign of Terror period.

It is widely accepted that the concept of political terror was just as rhetorical and instrumental—if not more so—than the use of the word *terror* before 9 Thermidor II. Nevertheless, it is important not to place all Thermidorian discourses on the same level. Careful reading of the famous speech delivered by Jean-Lambert Tallien on 11 Fructidor II (August 28, 1794) reveals an ambivalence—that is, the coexistence of a rhetorical strategy and a more genuine conceptual reflection from which a definition of terrorism was to emerge and become permanently embedded in political thinking. The ambivalence of Tallien's discourse can be explained simply: he had drawn from and marginally revised analysis by Pierre-Louis Roederer. Many authors have noted the value of Tallien's speech, but few identify Roederer as its true author. While Laura Mason indicates that Roederer was the speech's ghost writer, she does not sufficiently account for that fact.[4] Ronen Steinberg will admit only the possibility that Roederer was

[3] Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right*, 130.

[4] Bronislaw Baczko, *Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre,* trans. Michel Petheram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 52. Patrice Gueniffey, *La politique de la terreur* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 23. Jean-Clément Martin, *La terreur: Vérité et legendes* (Paris: Perrin, 2017), 12. Ronald Schechter, *A Genealogy of Terror in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018), 204. Sophie Wannich, *La Révolution française: Un événement de la raison sensible, 1787–1799* (Paris: Hachette, 2013), 139. Laura Mason, "Thermidor and the Myth of Rupture," in *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution*, ed. D. Andress (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 528.

the author.[5] But there is good reason to be more firm in asserting Roederer's involvement. In addition to the testimonies of Bertrand Barère and Roederer himself, the text's construction suggests an outside influence. It is true, however, that in the absence of Roederer's original text, the attribution of authorship is more a matter of what Carl von Clausewitz called a "high probability" (*hohe Wahrscheinlichkeit*) than of absolute certainty (*völlige Gewißheit*).[6]

I argue several points herein: first, that attributing the speech to Tallien encouraged analysis and interpretation of the subject in instrumental and rhetorical terms. Second, I argue that Roederer was influenced by Hobbes's writings and examined the relationship between the application of the law and its psychological effects. Third, I claim that it was precisely the philosophical grounding of this analysis that established terror as a concept, thereby making the word newly effective as a political instrument. Finally, I assert, Roederer did not "speak in the same vein" as Robespierre when he considered the relationship between terror and justice.[7] In fact, he had inverted Robespierre's reasoning to deny the virtue of the government's actions during the Reign of Terror. While Robespierre conceptualized the notion of justice by making rhetorical use of the notion of terror, Roederer conceptualized the notion of terror in order to demonstrate that the intensification of repression was a deadly threat to justice and revolution. More precisely, Roederer's conceptualization of terror allowed him to understand that revolutionary institutions no longer generated only awe (i.e., the Hobbesian reverential fear of law), but also another type of fear, as ever-widening sectors of society began to be categorized as "hors-la-loi" (outlaw)—or "enemies of mankind" or "enemies of the republic."

We might understand this situation as generalizing a *state of exception* following the usage of Giorgio Agamben. Agamben regards a *state of exception* as "a zone of absolute indeterminacy between anomie and law." Michel Biard and Marisa Linton have contested his interpretation, yet their reasoning is based on only a partial understanding of the notion of "zone of indeterminacy."[8] In this case, the generalization of a *state of exception* caused terror and justice to become indistinguishable from one another, an

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[5] Ronen Steinberg, *The Afterlives of Terror: Facing the Legacies of Mass Violence in Post-revolutionary France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 165.
[6] Carl von Clausewitz, *Hinterlassene Werke* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1835), 7:314.
[7] Jourdan, "Les discours de la terreur," 70.
[8] "Una zona di assoluta indeterminazione fra anomia e diritto," Giorgio Agamben, *Stato di eccezione* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), 74. Michel Biard and Marisa Linton, *Terreur!: La Révolution française face à ses démons* (Paris: Colin, 2020), 266.

effect reflected not only in revolutionary discourse but also in social relations. The state was constituted by these "extraordinary circumstances," in which more and more people were being treated as enemies of the republic (and subject to exception following Louis XVI).[9] This was what Roederer called a "system of terror" or *terrorisme*.

NEW INSIGHTS INTO TERROR

The recent historiography of the French Revolution has considerably changed our understanding of the Reign of Terror (1793–94). The "emotional turn," as Ronald Schechter named it, played a significant role in this regard, not only because it made emotions an analytical category but also because it brought fear itself back to the center of historical study.[10] Sophie Wahnich suggests that in a "dynamic of emotional economy" it was not only the fear instilled by the revolutionaries that played a decisive role but also their own dread.[11] While acknowledging that various forms of terror existed during that period, Linton points out that of all the "conflicting emotions" that influenced the Jacobins during the Terror, the most important was fear.[12] Writing with Biard, she highlights that although the phrase making terror "the order of the day" became a slogan used repeatedly in the Convention, it was never formally decreed, nor did it manifest a system of government. During this period, the word *terror* still had appeal and retained its "pre-revolutionary emotional connotations" without being used methodically in a purely pejorative sense.[13] It was incorporated into political language that was already saturated with emotions.

The broad use of the term *terror* is inseparable from this emphatic language that aimed to produce dramatic rhetorical effects. As Timothy Tackett pointed out, "each attempted to outdo his rival in the inflation of rhetoric, the violence of proposals, and the denunciation of conspirators."[14] The term's meaning, however, was largely indefinite; while it had power as

[9] Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right,* 141–42.
[10] Schechter, *A Genealogy of Terror*, 199.
[11] Sophie Wahnich, *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 19.
[12] Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 286.
[13] Schechter, *A Genealogy of Terror*, 14, 171.
[14] Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 294.

a watchword, it was not a central concept with a clear definition from which a policy of planned violence was organized. It was understood according to its purpose (to fight the enemies of the revolution) and according to its function (to frighten and paralyze them).

It is clear, from the variety of contexts in which the term was used, that *terror* did not refer to a reverential fear inspired by public power, but rather to a massive psychological concussion that was the intended result of the actions of the revolutionary movement, the government, or its armies. But, while the revolutionaries wanted to provoke anxiety among their enemies, it was difficult to define a "system of terror" with a coherent political process and coercive mechanism. The term *terror* had a floating meaning that varied from one speaker to another, particularly at the National Convention's tribune.

There the revolutionaries contructed their discourse around polarities: virtue/corruption, transparency/secrecy, authenticity/duplicity.[15] Initially no such polarity existed in the relationship between terror and justice, as indicated by Robespierre's famous words: "Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is, therefore, an emanation of virtue."[16] But this changed in the wake of 9 Thermidor, when the authenticity of Robespierre's virtue and that of his "accomplices" was denied. At that point, terror ceased to be seen as legitimate violence. As Colin Lucas pointed out, the dual nature of violence is at the root of a fundamental tension: "The mask that violence as justice required was liable to be a mask for violence as criminality."[17] Terror was largely undefined before Thermidor. That fact helped the Thermidorians to delegitimze revolutionary violence; they presented it as criminal violence from then on. They also benefited from a new dichotomy that established and reinforced an opposition between revolutionary violence and criminal violence, and a distinction between two kinds of fear generated by violence.

In short, although making terror "the order of the day" was certainly seen as a kind of revolutionary action (*se conduire révolutionnairement*)—as Jacques Léonard Laplanche put it[18]—no one could translate this slogan into a well-defined policy. One need not go so far as Jean-Clément Martin's claim that the "system of terror" was invented by Robespierre's opponents

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[15] Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 285.
[16] February 5, 1794 speech, Robespierre, *Œuvres*, 550.
[17] Colin Lucas, "Revolutionary Violence, the People and the Terror," in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, ed. Keith Michael Baker (New York: Elsevier Science Ltd., 1994), 4:74.
[18] *Gazette nationale* [hereafter *GN*], 21 October 1793.

after 9 Thermidor and Biard and Linton's assertion that it was created from scratch: there is no denying that the conceptualization of "the politics of terror" occurred only after that date, and not prior to it.[19] On this point, Françoise Brunel's approach—according to which it was the post-Thermidorian sources that invented the *imaginary* of the Terror—seems more appropriate.[20] From the very beginning, this concept included the notion of *terrorisme*. Thus this neologism became inseparable from any reflection on political terror.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE WORD *TERRORISM*

The first occurrence of the word *terrorisme* is associated with Tallien. While he did use this neologism in his speech to the National Convention on 11 Fructidor, year II, he cannot be credited with originating the term. Tallien conveyed ideas he had mostly drawn from a previously unpublished text written by Roederer. It was Roederer who first set out to formulate, in his own words, a "theory of the system of terror."[21] Former *procureur général syndic* of Paris (a position created during the French Revolution), Roederer had gone into hiding during the Reign of Terror but decided to return to public life in the days following 9 Thermidor. Roederer was determined to weigh in on the National Conventions debates which, according to him, oscillated between the "system of terror" and that of "justice." His fear of a return to the Reign of Terror led him to conceptualize political action based on binary oppositions. Thus, Roederer was the first to analyze the notion of terror from a truly political and philosophical perspective, and he was instrumental in developing new terminology that conceptualized terrorism as illegitimate political violence. Publicized through Tallien's speech and popularized by the political press of the period, Roederer's thoughts permeated the Thermidorian representations of the Terror, which in turn became embedded in political reflection.

In a note to his children, Roederer explained the circumstances that led Tallien to use his ideas in the National Convention. Roederer had ini-

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[19] Martin, *La terreur: Vérité et légendes*. "Créé de toute pièce," Biard and Linton, *Terreur!*, 11.

[20] Françoise Brunel, "Bridging the Gulf of the Terror," in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, ed. Keith Michael Baker (New York: Elsevier Science Ltd., 1994), 4:330.

[21] Pierre-Louis Roederer, "Notice de ma vie pour mes enfants," in *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, ed. A. M. Roederer (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1854), 3:288.

tially intended to intervene in the public debate by publishing, anonymously, an article in *Le Républicain français*. The editor of the newspaper, Charles His, brought the article to the attention of Tallien, who found it excellent. Roederer allowed Tallien to add a "preamble" and use the manuscript as material for his speech at the National Convention on 11 Fructidor II (August 28, 1794).[22] In his memoirs, Barère presents a version of events close to Roederer's. However, Barère specifies that Roederer's *opuscule de réaction* (reactionary pamphlet)—which he also referred to as a "satirical discourse on the Reign of Terror"—was read at Madame Tallien's salon by His to a group of Thermidorian reactionaries. Barère explains that Tallien then took the manuscript and later used it as his own at the National Convention.[23]

Roederer's version of the facts was taken up by his biographers who, for the most part, also mentioned Tallien's contribution to the text he presented at the National Convention. In the *Biographie Universelle*'s entry on Roederer, the author points out that the deputy of the department of Seine-et-Oise drew "the substance" of his speech from Roederer's article, which was initially intended for *Le Républicain français*.[24] Kenneth Margerison, on the other hand, indicates that Tallien made only "minor revisions" to Roederer's text.[25] Tallien's contribution, though marginal, was not limited to the preamble Roederer mentioned in his note. To assess his contribution we must distinguish the various versions of the text in which he set out his "theory of the system of terror."

The original version of the text—the manuscript given to His—was not preserved. The second version is Tallien's speech to the National Convention, as published in the *Gazette Nationale* on 13 Fructidor II (August 30, 1794). The third version of the speech was printed by order of the National Convention and contains some minor variations on the version published in the *Gazette Nationale*.[26] The fourth version is a copy of the printed speech, annotated by Roederer and published in his collected

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[22] Roederer, "Notice de ma vie pour mes enfants," 288.
[23] Barère, *Mémoires de B. Barère* (Paris: J. Labitte, 1843), 3:405.
[24] "Roederer," in *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne* (Paris: Michaud, 1846), 79:303.
[25] Kenneth Margerison, *P.-L. Roederer: Political Thought and Practice during the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 114.
[26] *Convention nationale. Discours prononcé à la Convention nationale, dans la séance du 11 fructidor, l'an II de la république, sur les principes du gouvernement révolutionnaire, par Tallien* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, s.d.), National Library of France, Tolbiac—Rez-de-Jardin, LE38-918.

works.[27] Finally, the fifth version is a substantial revision of the original draft article. It was printed by Roederer in 1815 when "the royalist party proposed a system of proscription and terror."[28] The fourth text provides a fairly precise sense of the original manuscript, insofar as Roederer's annotations identify Tallien's additions. They tend to suggest that Tallien had not always grasped the nuances and subtleties of Roederer's arguments, but they do not distort the meaning of the original text.

When he appropriated Roederer's ideas, Tallien did more than just conceal the identity of their true author. He also created confusion by stating to the National Convention that his speech was but a "commentary on what Barère said to this tribune regarding the system of terror."[29] According to Cesare Vetter, it is this part of Tallien's speech that may have misled the historians into believing that Barère was the first to introduce the phrase "system of terror" which in actuality, he did not use even once in the days following 9 Thermidor.[30] Prior to that date, Barère, like Robespierre and others, had used the phrase "system of terror," not to characterize the revolutionary system of government, but to cast anathema on their opponents.

However, Barère did use the word *terror* in his speech of 14 Thermidor II (August 1, 1794), in which he famously argued that "la terreur fut toujours l'arme du despotisme; la justice est l'arme de la liberté [terror was always the weapon of despotism; justice is the weapon of freedom]."[31] Barère was merely exploiting the rhetorical opposition that Jullien de la Drôme had already expressed at the session of 11 Thermidor (July 29, 1794): "You have put an end to tyranny, which reigned by terror; it is no longer terror that reigns, it is justice."[32] As we shall see, the opposition between terror and justice was to become the main construction around which Roederer conceptualized terror. This opposition was embedded in the discursive atmosphere of the Thermidorian moment in which justice

[27] *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1858), 7:4–10.
[28] Roederer, "Notice de ma vie pour mes enfants," 59.
[29] Brunel, "Bridging the Gulf of the Terror," 333–34.
[30] Cesare Vetter, "'Système de terreur' et 'système de la terreur' dans le lexique de la Révolution française," 23 October 2014, https://revolution-francaise.net/2014/10/23/594-systeme-de-terreur.
[31] *GN*, 2 August 1794.
[32] "Vous avez mis fin à la tyrannie qui régnait par la terreur; ce n'est plus la terreur qui règne, c'est la justice," *GN*, 31 July 1794.

was made "the order of the day"—a sort of "axiom" that ostentatiously marked a break from the period of Terror.[33]

FEAR AND TERROR

For a notion to move from rhetorical to conceptual use, it must be sufficiently thematized so that its meaning emerges from a dense network of intertwined notions. In Tallien's speech of 11 Fructidor II, the large number of occurrences of "terror" reveals a thematization of the word. Although it was little used at the tribune of the National Convention in the days following 9 Thermidor, the word permeates Tallien's speech. Indeed, the speech contains thirty-six occurrences of *terror* out of a total of 4494 words (a number that has been corrected, for Cesare Vetter mentioned only thirty-two occurrences), including eight occurrences of the phrase "system of terror," three occurrences of the phrase "agency of terror," and one occurrence of the phrase "government of terror." These occurrences are organized around a series of oppositions; terror/justice, unrelenting torment/possible fear, tyranny/freedom, crime/virtue, absolute power/legitimate authority, minority/majority, counterrevolution/revolution. These oppositions constitute the notional network from which the concept's new meaning emerges.

The first among these oppositions was the most striking, for it reversed the original formulation of Robespierre: "Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is, therefore, an emanation of virtue,"[34] To present terror in opposition to justice effectively denied terror any revolutionary legitimacy; it refuted the idea that terror was a form of violence legitimized by the sovereignty and will of the people. "Justice," "virtue," "probity," and "terror" had all been made "the order of the day"; terror was now categorically separated from the other three. The theme of justice thus structures the stigmatization of terror; indeed, if one examines Roederer's text in isolation from the additions to the text made by Tallien, it is clear that justice is the structuring theme, for Roederer's analysis asserts that the government must make a political choice, one that will determine

[33] Loris Chavanette, Hervé Leuwers, Denis Salas, and Ronen Steinberg, "'Justice transitionnelle' et république de l'an II," *Annales historiques de la revolution française* 398 (2019): 134.

[34] "La terreur n'est autre chose que la justice prompte sévère, inflexible; elle est donc une émanation de la vertu," Robespierre, *Œuvres*, 550.

whether the country is governed by a "system of terror" or a "system of justice."[35]

Roederer refers to the same theme at the end of the text when he skillfully concludes that justice can be considered only in its indivisibility—a transparent allusion to Couthon's speech of 22 Prairial II (June 10, 1794) in which he opposed "subordinating public salvation to the prejudices of the Court."[36] Roederer wrote, "It was a great license to distinguish two kinds of justice at the tribune of the Convention; there is only one kind of justice: Citizens, it is justice that does not know men, but that weighs actions; it is only that which judges; any other commits assassinations."[37] Roederer sought to demonstrate that during the Reign of Terror, justice had been invoked in a purely rhetorical manner in order to better mask its absence. In reality, as in the ancient allegory used by Carl Schmitt to symbolize the implementation of the state of emergency, a veil covered the eyes of justice.[38]

Although the opposition between terror and justice was foundational to Roederer's argument, it was not part of his conceptualization of political terror. Rather, another opposition structured his reflection and enabled him to organize the series of antinomies he used as support for his demonstration: the opposition between two "species" of fear. Roederer was probably inspired in this respect by Hobbes, whose *De Cive* he had just translated. And it was precisely during the Reign of Terror, when he had been forced to live in hiding, that he devoted his time to translating Hobbes's work.[39] The first pages of Hobbes's work contain an important note which, given the circumstances, was bound to draw Roederer's attention: "It is objected: It is so improbable that men should grow into civil societies out of fear, that if they had been afraid, they would not have endured each other's looks: They presume, I believe, that to fear is nothing else than to be affrighted [*perterreri*]: I comprehend in this word fear, a certain foresight of future evil; neither do I conceive flight the sole property of fear, but to distrust, suspect, take heed, provide so that they may not fear, is also incident

[35] "Les causes évidentes sont la différence des opinions établies sur le système que doit suivre désormais le gouvernement, savoir: s'il continuera d'entretenir la terreur dans les esprits, ou s'il reposera sur la justice," *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, 7:4.
[36] "Subordonner le salut public aux préjugés du palais," *GN*, 12 June 1794.
[37] "Ç'a été une grande licence que de distinguer à la tribune de la Convention deux sortes de justice; il n'y a qu'une sorte de justice: citoyens, c'est celle qui ne connaît pas les hommes, mais qui pèse les actions; il n'y a que celle-là qui juge; toute autre assassine," *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, 7:9.
[38] Carl Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde* (Berlin: Duncker & Humbolt, 1974), 67.
[39] Margerison, *P.-L. Roederer,* 114.

to the fearful."[40] Hobbes's influence on Roederer's political thought is readily apparent.[41] But Roederer did not include in his translation all the critical observations he had originally planned, and accordingly it is difficult to retrace the intellectual itinerary he followed after reading this note in the *De Cive*. What is known is that his views about the role of fear in politics changed following its publication, as evidenced by the lectures he gave in 1793 in which he expressed very different ideas on the subject. We can assume that his reading of *De Cive* contributed to the development of a new polarity that confined the rhetoric of terror: on the one hand, a reverential fear emanating from the power of law and justice and inherent in man's life in society; on the other hand, a pathological fear that causes one to flee—or, in other words, that breaks the social bond and destroys the possibility of life in society. Hobbes characterized that latter fear as the experience of being terror-stricken (*perterreri*). Based on this premise, in order to negate the legitimacy of revolutionary violence and to place it in the category of criminal violence, all Roederer had to do was demonstrate that fear spread beyond the enemies of the republic. Hobbes only underlined the confusion between two forms of fear, confusion that blurred the understanding of the conditions in which the social contract, as he saw it, was embedded. Through this dichotomy, Roederer shifted the debate from the virtues of terror to the psychological effects of violence.

In the statement of Barère and Jullien de la Drôme, the opposition between terror and justice was only a rhetorical formula. By combining this opposition and his analysis of Hobbes's reflection on fear, Roederer gave conceptual scope to this opposition and found a way to invalidate the views defended by Robespierre on 17 Pluviose II. Before 9 Thermidor, *terror* had positive or negative connotations depending on its lexical context, but it acquired exclusively pejorative connotations as soon as Roederer weighed it against "mutual fear," which Hobbes saw as the foundation of civil society.[42] Once it was seen as contributing to the dissolution of the social bond—no longer a bulwark for public freedom—it was no longer possible to see terror as virtuous. The call to make terror "the order of the day" backfired as soon as the question of the legitimacy of government

[40] Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen (De Homine and De Cive)*, trans. Charles T. Wood, T. S. K. Scott-Craig, and Bernard Gert (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 113.
[41] Ruth Scurr, "Pierre-Louis Roederer and the Debate on Forms of Government in Revolutionary France," *Political Studies* 52 (2004): 251–68. Lucien Jaume, "Roederer, homme politique et lecteur de Hobbes," *Revue d'histoire des facultés de droit et de la science juridique* 8 (1989): 289–93.
[42] Hobbes, *Man and Citizen*, 171.

action was presented by Roederer as an alternative between "two ways of being feared," one subjecting citizens to a reverential fear of the state, the other plunging them into the terror of an authority imposed by violence alone. As Roederer put it: "Which of the two fears can best support, achieve, guarantee the revolution? That is what it boils down to, that is what I am going to look at."[43] In Roederer's view, once established as a "system," terror spread beyond just the "suspect classes" and targeted more than just guilty actions. It radiated throughout society and distorted the principles of the revolution. As a systematic refutation of the justifications for extreme repressive measures, Roederer's argument was tight; but fundamentally, his condemnation of such a system was based on a central idea: terror "defraternizes, desocializes, demoralizes."[44]

The effect of the politics of terror on social cohesion was a key argument against invoking "freedom" to justify the use of extreme violence. Not only did Roederer place terror and freedom in conceptual or philosophical opposition; he also presented them as fundamentally incompatible in terms of individual experience. The psychological impact of government terror on citizens—all citizens, according to Roederer—broke the very principle of citizenship: "Terror, when it has become the usual state of the soul, concentrates man in himself and in the least part of himself, I mean his physical existence; it breaks all bonds, extinguishes all affections; it defraternizes, desocializes, demoralizes; it reduces the soul to the purest selfishness." Under these conditions, government action was deeply altered, since the "revolutionary agency" became a "agency of terror," which, far from defending the people, enslaved them.[45]

The notion of agency sheds light on Roederer's notion of *system*. He believed that government was no more than an agent of the people; it was not the government's prerogative to reproduce the revolutionary act performed by the people (a violent act he likened to an act of war). Rather, it should merely carry out the will of the people: to bring the revolution to completion. Government action became arbitrary when it systematized the use of terror; in that instance, the government abused the power delegated

[43] "Laquelle des deux craintes peut le mieux seconder, consommer, garantir la révolution? Voilà à quoi se réduit la question, voilà ce que je vais examiner," *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, 7:6.

[44] *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, 7:9.

[45] "La terreur, quand elle est devenue l'état habituel de l'âme concentre l'homme dans lui-même et dans la moindre partie de lui-même, je veux dire son existence physique; elle rompt tous les liens, éteint toutes les affections; elle défraternise, désocialise, démoralise; elle réduit l'âme au plus pur égoïsme," *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer,* 7:9.

to it by the people and claimed to act in their name while using violence against them. From this perspective, the governmental system had become counter-revolutionary the moment the "revolutionary agency" became an "agency of terror" that held on to a semblance of legitimacy by speaking in words that no longer had a meaning.[46] Another way to reverse Robespierre's argument was to emphasize the false legitimacy provided by a discourse disconnected from reality: Terror was not a circumstantial weapon brandished to defend the revolution; it characterized the true nature of a regime that had become oppressive and devoid of popular legitimacy. In other words, it was tyranny.

For Roederer, *terror* was not just a word detached from reality. The term perfectly characterized the kind of fear that government action had produced not long before:—an extreme fear that had affected not only the enemies of the revolution but society as a whole. To refute the argument that the terror was aimed only at the enemies of the revolution, Roederer relied on the distinction between the two kinds of fear that government action could generate.[47] In his conceptualization of political terror, Roederer placed a central focus on the notion of power, which, in the case of this anxiety-inducing violence, has three characteristics. The power is arbitrary, as well as absolute and infinite: "The system of terror supposes not only, as I said earlier, arbitrary and absolute power, but also endless power; if the soul sees a term, and a near term, for the causes that strike it with terror, it crosses the intervals, it leaps over the perils in happier times; it rests there, consolidates itself there, and fear no longer exists."[48]

Unlike politicians who used the word rhetorically in emphatic speeches, Roederer sought to define the notion of terror with precision. Taking seriously the psychological connotation of the word, he considered both the methods used by the government and their impact on people's minds. This led him to formulate a principle that continues to be relevant: "Let us judge [terror] by the means it involves and by the effects it produces."[49] The "system of terror" thus was not identified with any form of legitimate political

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[46] *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, 7:8.

[47] *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, 7:6–7.

[48] "Le système de la terreur suppose non seulement, comme je le disais tout à l'heure, le pouvoir arbitraire et absolu, mais encore un pouvoir sans fin; si l'âme voit un terme, et un terme prochain, aux causes qui la frappent de terreur, elle franchit les intervalles, elle s'élance par-dessus les périls dans des temps plus heureux; elle s'y repose, s'y affermit, et la crainte n'existe plus," *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, 7:7.

[49] "Jugeons-la par les moyens dont elle suppose l'emploi et par les effets qu'elle produit," *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, 7:6.

violence. It could only emanate from an "absolute" power that was able to create the permanent climate of extreme fear. The creation of this climate is what Roederer named "terrorism."

THE EMERGENCE OF *TERRORISM* IN THE POLITICAL LEXICON

In an important lexicographic study on the morphological family of the word *terreur*, Annie Geffroy argues that, in the Thermidorian discourse, the neologism *terrorisme* did not primarily refer to a "political system"; rather, it is mainly, if not exclusively, a rhetorical instrument. One can find in the Thermidorian press some examples of rhetorical or metaphorical usage of words such as *terrorism*, *struggle*, *agitate*, or *roar*, but that evidence is insufficient for supporting the conclusion that the neologism *terrorisme* is *une fausse abstraction en* "*isme*" (a false abstraction ending with -ism).[50] In fact, the word was both a rhetorical weapon and a new concept that enriched the political lexicon. One only needs to examine usage of the word *terrorisme* following Tallien's speech at the National Convention to ascertain that the term was not merely used rhetorically and that it acquired, from that moment onward, a more conceptual meaning. Indeed, Paul Cadroy referred to a "roaring terrorism" in his remarks of November 14, 1794 ("le terrorisme rugit encore autour de vous"),[51] but the term had been associated with "anarchy" during a prior session, on 12 Vendémiaire II (October 3, 1794), and with "[its] outrageous supporters" during the session of 22 Vendémiaire II (October 13, 1794). The last two examples show that the new term served to stigmatize a political system that was equated with the dissolution of civil society.

In Roederer's text, the neologism *terrorisme* appears only once, but this single occurrence left open the possibility of different uses of the word: "Quand le terrorisme a cessé un instant de faire trembler, il ne peut que trembler lui-même" (When terrorism ceases to terrify people for a moment, it can only be terrified itself). This neologism made it possible to personify the system it stigmatized (terrorism itself is "terrified") while characterizing the "causing of terror" as a political doctrine based on the principle of fear. *Terrorisme* was a synonym for "system of terror," a phrase that was soon

[50] Annie Geffroy, "'Terreur' et sa famille morphologique de 1793 à 1796," in *Néologie et lexicologie,* ed R. Adda (Paris: Larousse, 1979), 131.
[51] *GN*, 15 November 1794.

used to define the neologism in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. In fact, the word condensed the meaning of *system of terror*; it denoted a current of political thought that had transformed popular sovereignty into a pathological form of revolutionary will. The creation of this neologism was part of a larger trend in using words ending with the suffix "-ism" to denote different political currents active during the revolutionary period, such as *modérantisme*, *feuillantisme*, *girondinisme*, or *royalisme*. Although Roederer defined the system of terror as Robespierre's system, and one of the versions of the text specified that "this infernal system was given the name Robespierre,"[52] he chose not to join others in using the newly coined term *robespierrisme,* which was added to the list of existing neologisms *hebertisme*, *rolandisme*, *buzotisme*, or even *brissotisme*.

Robespierrisme had emerged in political discourse as early as the first part of August 1794,[53] but Roederer chose not to use this depreciative label—a logical choice in that the terror was associated not with Robespierre or any one person but with a system of government that could be reproduced regardless of whoever was at the helm. The impact of this choice on the political lexicon is still relevant today. The neologism *terrorisme* was quickly distinguished from other lexical creations ending in "-ism." For example, an editor of *L'Esprit des journaux* noted in the summer of 1795: "When partisan hatreds create a word to designate opponents, that word always ends in *-ism*. . . . Words in *-ism* were only used as *noir à noircir* [to paint the gloomiest possible picture] for 18 months. Today we have terrorism; but this word, which has now entered common use, is applied only to that which is too dark to be darkened; it is used only with justice and with measure, either to things or to persons."[54]

Terrorisme was a formidable abstraction that not only stigmatized the men who had made terror the order of the day—those who immediately became "terrorists"—but also served as what Wahnich called a "normative disqualification."[55] By choosing to call the system of terror *terrorisme*

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[52] "Elle [l'Europe] donne maintenant à cet infernal système le nom de Robespierre," *GN*, 30 August 1794. This part of the text, which does not appear in the version published in *Œuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, was probably added by Tallien.
[53] *GN*, 17 August 1794.
[54] "Quand les haines de parti créent un mot pour désigner des adversaires, ce mot se termine toujours en *isme*. . . . On n'a employé pendant 18 mois les mots en *isme*, que comme noir à noircir. Aujourd'hui nous avons le *terrorisme*; mais ce mot, à l'usage de la raison publique, n'est appliqué par elle qu'à ce qui est trop *noir* pour pouvoir être noirci; il n'est employé qu'avec justice et avec mesure, soit aux choses, soit aux personnes," *L'Esprit des journaux français et étranger* 3 (May and June 1795): 347.
[55] Wahnich, *In Defence of the Terror*, 102.

rather than tying the action to a person by calling it "robespierrisme," Roederer managed to keep it outside the realm of legitimate political action. But at the same time, this choice to use a term ending with "-ism" was consistent with the trend of neologisms that associated a person with a system. Roederer certainly understood better than Tallien the full strength and scope of the anxiety-inducing term *terrorisme*.

TALLIEN'S OWN CONTRIBUTION

That Tallien did not grasp the full implication of the statement he was making is confirmed by two aspects of his intervention on Roederer's text. The first was mentioned earlier. The addition of a preamble and conclusion to the original statement veiled, at least in part, the central core around which the latter was structured. The second relates to the conclusion of his speech, which took the form of a solemn declaration of the National Convention to the French people. In the third point of his statement, Tallien stated an insconsistency that shows both that he had not fully understood Roederer's demonstration and that he could not completely break away from the line of reasoning he had been pursuing in the preceding months. Indeed, rather than making a distinction between two species of fear, one of which (terror) was the product of illegitimate government action, Tallien distinguished two kinds of terror—one legitimate, the other not.[56] This statement would seem to validate the notions that had prevailed before 9 Thermidor, implying that terror and justice could be reconciled. Roederer vehemently refuted this suggestion by showing that terror and justice were irreconcilable.

Although Tallien was clearly unable to fully capture the Hobbesian inspiration underlying Roederer's theses, he nevertheless helped to flesh out Roederer's analysis on the psychological attributes of terror. Between the section of the original text relating to the two ways of being feared and Roederer's core argument, in which he isolates two types of fear in order to distinguish between terror and justice, Tallien added a paragraph devoted to the characteristics of terror:

> The characteristics of terror deserve to be noted; terror is a habitual, general shiver, an external shiver that affects the most hidden

[56] *Convention nationale. Discours prononcé à la Convention nationale, dans la séance du 11 fructidor*.

> fibres, that degrades man and makes him resemble a beast; It is the shock of all physical forces, the commotion of all moral faculties, the disorder of all ideas, the overthrow of all affections; it is a real disruption of the soul, which, by only giving it the capacity to suffer, deprives it both of the gentleness of hope and the resources of despair. Terror being an extreme affection, it is not susceptible to either more or less. The fear of the laws, on the contrary, can be increased according to the need.[57]

From this perspective, terror is not just any type of fear; it is an extreme form of anxiety with specific psychological and behavioral manifestations. This other form of anxiety is not the reverential fear as envisaged by Hobbes ("awe" in the *Leviathan*), but a fear that dissolves the social bond and allows oppressive regimes to create a permanent climate of dread.[58] Carlo Ginzburg hypothesizes that the correct translation of "awe" into Italian could be *terrore* (terror), based on a famous passage from the *Leviathan*: "For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the Commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him that, by terror thereof, he is enabled to form the wills of them all, to peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad."[59] While it is true that the marginal use of the notion of "terror" in the *Leviathan*, in a place where the reader expects "awe" to appear, would merit further analysis, it is also true that Hobbes uses the notion of "awe" much more frequently, which is consistent with his argument.

Those who had put terror on the agenda considered violence a legitimate means of defending the achievements of the revolution against internal and external threats. Roederer and Tallien seized upon the notion of terror and gave it a new meaning that stigmatized the excesses of a political system.

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[57] "Les caractères de la terreur méritent d'être remarqués; la terreur est un tremblement habituel, général, un tremblement extérieur qui affecte les fibres les plus cachées, qui dégrade l'homme et l'assimile à la brute; c'est l'ébranlement de toutes les forces physiques, la commotion de toutes les facultés morales, le dérangement de toutes les idées, le renversement de toutes les affections; c'est une véritable désorganisation de l'âme, qui, ne lui laissant que la faculté de souffrir, lui enlève dans ses maux et les douceurs de l'espérance et les ressources du désespoir. La terreur étant une affection extrême n'est susceptible ni de plus ni de moins. La crainte des lois, au contraire, peut être augmentée suivant le besoin," *Convention nationale. Discours prononcé à la Convention nationale, dans la séance du 11 fructidor.*

[58] Carlo Ginzburg, *Paura, reverenza, terrore, Religgere Hobbes oggi* (Parma: MUP Editore, 2008), 39.

[59] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Routledge, 1894), 84.

By advocating making terror "the order of the day," in the summer of 1793, those who introduced this slogan positioned themselves within a performative discourse.[60] In doing so, however, those initiators made it possible for "terror" (the lexical component of the slogan) to be used against them. By approaching terror as a system and creating the neologism *terrorisme*, Roederer had the ability to exploit this emphasis by drawing a conceptual boundary between legitimate and illegitimate violence.

WHAT IMPACT?

While we do not know exactly how the printed version of Tallien's speech was distributed and received, we do know that its lexical innovations—originally the work of Roederer—found wide acceptance. Although Roederer was apparently not the first to use the expression "system of *the* terror,"[61] he was first to conceptualize the notion. It was used by Guyomard at the session of 10 Vendemiaire III (October 1, 1794) at the National Convention and by Fréron at the session of 11 Nivose III (December 31, 1794). Moreover, the wide adoption of the synonymous neologism *terrorisme* demonstrates most clearly the significant and rapid influence of Roederer's ideas. As early as September 1794, the word *terrorisme* made its way into the political lexicon in the press and political discourse in 1795.

Critics observed that the term became so widely used that it lost its meaning. In the summer of 1795, Edmond Dubois-Crancé, speaking at the National Convention, denounced the way the term was abused in political discourse.[62] After 9 Thermidor, the word acquired a negative connotation that allowed it to be used rhetorically to cast anathema on political opponents. It is important to consider the morphological family of this neologism. Contrary to what Geffroy and Gerd van den Heuvel have suggested, the word *terroriste* was derived from the word *terrorisme*, and not the

[60] Jacques Guilhaumou, "'La terreur à l'ordre du jour': un parcours en révolution (1793–1794)," 6 January 2007, https://revolution-francaise.net/2007/01/06/94-la-terreur-a-lordre-du-jour-un-parcours-en-revolution-juillet-1793-3–mars-1794.

[61] Cesare Vetter identified an occurrence in a letter written by a Girondin deputy in June 1793.

[62] *GN*, 9 August 1795.

other way around.[63] It was a new rhetorical weapon in the ideological battle. Pierre-Antoine Antonelle, a Jacobin imprisoned during the Reign of Terror, urged his readers "to renounce this vague and indefinite word 'terrorist,' which the masses of malicious, misguided, or frivolous men apply indiscriminately to all former Jacobins."[64] Edme-Bonaventure Courtois, a member of the commission charged with examining Robespierre's papers after 9 Thermidor, considered that the "terrorist epithet" had become "a dangerous weapon in the hands of the wicked, and consequently a pretext for the most horrible revenge."[65]

Terror, *terrorism*, and *terrorist* were thus fundamentally ambivalent words. On the one hand, they were instrumentalized in political discourse and were rejected by those who considered that this manipulation of language served partisan purposes. On the other hand, they were all concepts whose aim was to help grasp the specificity of state violence that had distorted the revolutionary process. Roederer was clearly among those who held this stance. He had forged a neologism that had undeniably negative connotations, but which denoted a system of government that he sought to define rigorously. Making use of a notion that the rhetoric of revolutionary discourse had established as a slogan, he used it to develop what he himself conceived as a "theory" of extreme state violence. In Roederer's mind, *terroristes* were those who practiced *terrorisme*, a use of terror that corresponded to an extreme form of political violence that dissolved social ties. It is uncertain whether he would understand all the contemporary uses of the notion he forged.

The extension of the concept to violence against the state and, above all, the attempts by European lawyers to use the word *terrorism* as a legal concept in the 1930s created a situation of inextricable complexity. The challenge facing those who embark on writing a history of terrorism or terror now lies in identifying differences and similarities between the expanding variety of phenomena referred to as "terrorism." The solution that

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[63] Gerd Van den Heuvel, "Terreur, terroriste, terrorisme," in *Actes du 2e colloque de lexicologie politique, Saint-Cloud, 15–20 septembre 1980*, ed. Danielle Bonnaud-Lamotte (Paris: Klincksieck, 1982), 3:904.

[64] "Renoncez à ce mot vague et indéfini de terroriste, que la foule des hommes malveillants, ou abusés, ou frivoles, applique indistinctement à tous les ci-devant jacobins," P. A. Antonelle, *Quelques idées à l'ordre du jour, mais peut-être pas à la couleur du jour* (Paris: Imprimerie de R. Vatar, 1795), 92.

[65] "Une arme dangereuse dans les mains des méchants, et par suite le prétexte des vengeances les plus atroces," E. B. Courtois, *Réponse aux détracteurs du 9 thermidor* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1796), 33.

consists of separating *terror* from *terrorism*, as Mikkel Thorup and many others have done,[66] does not seem satisfactory in light of the original conceptualization of "terrorism." Reducing this first conceptualization of terrorism to a mere etymological problem hardly seems satisfactory either. As for the possibility of articulating the different meanings of the word with a view to making terrorism an object of knowledge, it is at risk of leading to what Julian Bourg calls "legitimation games."[67] This kind of game was certainly Tallien's concern. Roederer's approach was less instrumental. In Roederer's approach, the twofold question of the legitimacy and illegitimacy of state violence was not merely related to immediate political concerns but was firmly rooted in a conceptual reflection that took into account the various concepts used in political philosophy (including those proposed by Hobbes) to assess the legitimacy of how state power was exercised.

CONCLUSION

According to Bronislaw Baczko, Tallien's speech "posed problems that no thought about Terror could henceforth avoid."[68] What is true for historians of the French Revolution is probably also true for terrorism scholarship—not because the etymology of "terrorism" would constitute a straitjacket limiting reflection on political violence, but because Roederer's statement does raise relevant questions. Let us mention a few of them:

- *Can reflection on terror be dissociated from terrorism—that is, can terrorism be conceived outside a system of power?* In making terrorism a synonym for "system of terror," Roederer intended to clarify the meaning of a word whose significance was very approximate in its rhetorical uses. Posterity has mainly retained the notion of terror which, especially in the English language, has the largest variety of meanings, without paying enough attention to the notion of "system."

[66] "*Terrorism* is a violent activity of non-state actors . . . but *terror*—and anti-terror—is for everyone," Mikkel Thorup, *An Intellectual History of Terror: War, Violence, and the State* (London: Routledge, 2010), 12.
[67] Julian Bourg, "In nostris extremis (Terror and Fanaticism in the Western Mind)," *Modern Intellectual History* 11 (2014): 720.
[68] Baczko, *Ending the Terror*, 53.

- *Regarding the relationship between fear and terror, can we define more precisely the psychological impact of political violence according to the modalities of its use?* Since all forms of violence are, by definition, anxiety-inducing, precise criteria must be defined to determine what types of violence induce more anxiety than others. It was Roederer who sought to distinguish two types of fear and who attempted to determine the behavioral consequences of the anxiety-inducing state violence deployed during the period of the Reign of Terror. From this point of view, Ronen Steinberg rightly observes that the language of Tallien's discourse "traversed the domains of political analysis and medical diagnosis, and that brings to mind modern definitions of PTSD" (post-traumatic stress disorder).[69]
- *Is the the notion of power a key factor in understanding political violence?* For Roederer, the notion of power is the third component that puts the notions of fear and violence—the other two—into perspective. Terror is a system only because it is institutionalized by an authority that aims to increase its control over the population. Hence those definitions of terrorism that eliminate the political factor would seem incomplete, such as the one proposed by Michael Stohl: "an act in which the perpetrator intentionally employs violence (or its threat) to instill fear (terror) in a victim and the audience of the act or threat."[70] Without the political factor, a reflection on terrorism is nothing more than a reflection on violence.

From the point of view of historical analysis, Roederer's reflection on terror undoubtedly overemphasizes the systematic nature of state violence during the period of the Reign of Terror. Although very real, repressive violence was more chaotic, less conceptualized, and less institutionalized than the notion of a "system of terror" suggests, and it would probably be more appropriate to speak of "zones of terror" and "actors of terror" affecting the country and its inhabitants in different ways. That being said, Roederer's contribution to the conceptualization of the Thermidorian rupture is noteworthy, just as it is remarkable that he found in *De Cive* the means to subvert the rhetoric of terror and turn it against its initiators.

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[69] Steinberg, *The Afterlives of the Terror*, 18.

[70] Michael Stohl, "State Terror: The Theoretical and Practical Utilities and Implications of a Contested Concept," in *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*, ed R. Jacskon and S. J. Sinclair (London: Routledge, 2012), 45.

But the value of Roederer's argument is not limited to its historical dimension. Above all, its "abstract nature"[71] makes it possible to think of political terror independently of the circumstantial events of the French Revolution. By equating terrorism with an extreme form of political—and in this case, repressive—violence, Roederer durably influenced the political lexicon and created a concept of great complexity that continues to generate reflection and controversy.

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[71] Baczko, *Ending the Terror*, 52.