Review

In defense of the terror: Liberty or death in the French revolution

Sophie Wahnich

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Sophie Wahnich's succinct and bold essay on the French Revolution seamlessly integrates an admirable command of historical detail and philosophical analysis in a highly seductive argument. Wahnich argues that the (Reign of) Terror was neither the necessary outcome of the French Revolution nor a policy of arbitrary violence and intimidation. Rather, it was a conscious attempt to defend the revolution and contain and control outbursts of popular violence. Her argument is a conscious attack on the revisionist accounts of the French Revolution, which have displaced the traditional republican celebration of the revolution as the birthplace of modern democracy, instead identifying it as the origin of the greatest political catastrophes of the twentieth century, from the Shoah to the Gulags and contemporary terrorism. The primary avatars of this revisionism are historians such as François Furet and his followers, but also include political thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben.

In the introduction Wahnich offers her analysis of this revisionism, which she summarizes as the 'construction of a Revolution as the other to democracy' (p. 9). The inverse of this construction is the idealization of contemporary liberal democracy, wherein assertions of popular sovereignty, such as the French Revolution, are 'the figure of what is politically intolerable today' (p. 3). Although the immediate subject matter is historical, it is clear that this essay simultaneously constitutes an intervention in contemporary political debates: 'every history is a history of the present' as Slavoj Žižek reminds us in the preface (p. xi). Wahnich identifies the revisionist critique with a decontextualized moral condemnation, which ignores both the historical situation and the distinctly political content of the French Revolution. Her analysis of the revolutionary dynamic focuses on what she describes as its 'emotional economy', particularly the shift in the popular mood from fear of counterrevolution over anger to a demand for vengeance (p. 20). As such it is not a defense of the Terror, as the (mis-)translation of the title suggests (the original French title was *La liberté ou la mort: Essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme*), but an attempt to analyze and understand the political dynamic that produced the Terror.

Wahnich's historical analysis commences *in medias res*, immediately after the murder of the radical journalist Jean-Paul Marat, but subsequently backtracks to 1792, where the Revolution was threatened on all sides: The French nobility and clergy cooperated with other reactionary elements to undermine the Revolution, while foreign armies amassed on the borders. The people demanded that action be taken to defend the Revolution, but the National Assembly remained paralyzed in discussion. She shows that representatives were acutely aware of the situation and the necessity of translating the popular mood into political practice, if they were to avoid marginalization and uncontrollable explosions of popular violence. Yet they remained locked in discussion about the appropriate measures and on 10 August angry citizens stormed the royal residence at Tuileries, efficiently ending the French Bourbon monarchy. A few months later angry mobs stormed the prisons of Paris and executed political prisoners en masse, in what has subsequently come to be known as the September Massacres.

Wahnich argues that these outbursts of popular violence were not fueled by bloodlust, but a general feeling of duty to defend the revolution and avenge attacks against it, in the absence of decisive action on behalf of the their political representatives. In Wahnich's own words 'the representatives of the people refused to translate the voice of the people and thus brought them to this replay of sovereign foundation' (p. 48). According to Wahnich the representatives acknowledged this and did not condemn these events, which they considered unfortunate, but ultimately legitimate attempts to defend the revolution. Moreover, they recognized that they could not continue to stall or repress the revolutionary fervor of the people, but had to mediate it, in order to attain a degree of control over its most extreme expressions and reintroduce a regulatory political function for themselves. The National Convention created the Revolutionary Tribunal and began to formulate the policies that would come to constitute the Terror; in Georges-Jacques Danton's famous words, they would 'be terrible so as to save the people from being so' (cited on p. 63).

This was the origin and motive for the Terror, according to Wahnich, who concludes that it was an attempt to '[put] a brake on the legitimate violence of the people and giv[e] a public and institutionalized form to vengeance. Terror as justice was thus a desperate and despairing attempt to constrain both political crime and the legitimate popular vengeance that could result from it' (p. 65). However, Wahnich proceeds to admit that this logic, which aimed at the restoration of peace, continued to coexist uneasily with a logic of war, which aimed at the complete annihilation of the enemy (pp. 70–71). Wahnich analyzes the Terror in the conceptual vocabulary of Giorgio Agamben as a sovereign exception, but avoids his critique of the French Revolution, through the displacement of its conceptual origins in Walter Benjamin's opposition of mythical and divine violence. Wahnich suggests that the Terror was not lawless sovereign violence as suggested by Agamben, but a form of mythical, law-making violence, that is, an attempt to (re-)establish the rule of law (pp. 9–10, 45).

However, this theoretical maneuver ignores the coincidence of law and sovereign violence, which is at the heart of Agamben's analysis. Her engagement with Arendt's critique of the French Revolution is much more convincing: here she deploys Jacques Rancière to argue that the Revolution was guided by a commitment to democratic inclusion of the poor and exploited, rather than a quixotic and dangerous desire to level socio-economic differences (p. 83).

Wahnich's essay is a convincing reinterpretation of the transition from the Revolution to the Terror. Her analysis of popular emotions is original and yields some novel insights, but is slightly problematic in some regards, insofar as it tends toward a strange collective psychology that appears at odds with the political self-determination at the heart of her account of the French Revolution. The political element is only introduced by the representatives' necessary 'translation' of popular emotions into policy, thus threatening to reduce the people to nothing but a formal source of legitimacy. These issues could have been resolved, but unfortunately are not addressed in the course of the essay.

Žižek's foreword complements the essay nicely in terms of a conceptual elucidation of the relationship between the objective and subjective violence, previously explored in his book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008). Žižek describes subjective violence as the visible violence carried out by immediately identifiable agents, such as the September Massacres or the Terror. He suggests that subjective violence always occurs against a backdrop of systemic and almost invisible violence, which he describes as objective violence: the violence that we are so used to, that we no longer perceive it as violent. However, it is only if we begin to examine objective violence that we can begin to understand seemingly irrational and unpredictable explosions of subjective violence. This serves to emphasize the importance of the historical context of objective violence (that is, the Ancien Régime and the continued counterrevolutionary violence) for a proper understanding of the Terror, thus illustrating the necessity and relevance of Wahnich's brilliant essay.

Reference

Žižek, S. (2008) *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. London and New York: Verso.

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