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Yannick Bosc, *Le peuple souverain et la démocratie: Politique de Robespierre*. Paris: Éditions Critiques, 2019. 216 pp. Notes, timeline, and index. €15.00 (pb). ISBN 979-10-97331-20-7.

Review by David A. Bell, Princeton University.

Marx said somewhere that people who shout “power to the people” most often really want to give power to the people who shout “power to the people.” The Marx in question was Groucho, but the point is no less suggestive for all that, and quite pertinent to Yannick Bosc’s new book about Robespierre and revolutionary politics.[1]

Bosc, who has addressed the book to the French public in general, wants to show how Maximilien Robespierre elaborated revolutionary concepts of democracy and popular sovereignty between 1789 and 1794 and also to underline the relevance of these concepts for the present day. At their heart, Bosc argues, is the idea that the sovereign people should be able to ensure that their duly chosen representatives are always acting in the interest of the common good, as defined, above all, in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. For Robespierre, he argues, the Declaration was a fundamental law: “la Déclaration *est* la Constitution [et]...fonde la société” (p. 119).

It is a grand principle—but how can the sovereign people actually exercise oversight over duly chosen representatives except through other duly chosen representatives—that is to say, through representatives chosen by some sort of regular, constitutional process? Constitutions that follow Montesquieu in establishing a separation and a concurrence of powers, allowing power to check power, have precisely this goal in mind. Allowing a group of individuals to claim oversight authority based on nothing more than their self-proclaimed membership in “the people,” or their self-proclaimed virtue, can all too easily open the door to chaos and tyranny (which is precisely Groucho Marx’s point).

The book consists of a series of case studies in which Bosc considers particular moments in the Revolution at which Robespierre advanced and developed the notion of popular oversight over representatives. In each case, Bosc provides (very) lengthy quotations and paraphrases from Robespierre’s speeches and articles. Bosc’s language makes quite clear where his sympathies lie, and what point of view he is writing from: “Robespierre dévoile le jeu de ses adversaires” (p. 74); “Robespierre tente une nouvelle fois de désamorcer le piège” (p. 77); etc.

One of the most interesting cases involves a relatively minor incident. On March 3, 1792, the mayor of Étampes, Jacques-Guillaume Simonneau, was killed when a crowd protested the high

grain prices that had resulted from the lifting of price controls and tried to carry out a *taxation populaire*. Three months later, the Legislative Assembly decreed a “festival of the law” in Simonneau’s honor. In his newspaper *Défenseur de la Constitution*, Robespierre published a lengthy petition by a radical *curé* from near Étampes, who denounced the law freeing grain prices as unjust and invoked natural right to defend the people’s decision to violently impose their own prices. The incident, in Bosc’s view, illustrates Robespierre’s distinction between laws that deserve only formal respect and laws that deserve to be loved.

Leave aside the fact that the *curé*’s petition in fact defended the people’s right to break the law. The question of popular oversight remains rather more problematic than this incident might suggest. Most of Bosc’s readers will have greater sympathy for the Étampes rioters and their notions of moral economy than for the “avides spéculateurs” denounced by the *curé* (quoted on p. 106) and the mayor who defended a law that had condemned many to starvation. But what of the peasants in Western France in the spring of 1793 who rioted against conscription, or against the dismissal of their priests? Did their attempts at popular oversight and their protest against laws they considered unjust also deserve sympathy? Robespierre himself certainly did not think so. Popular oversight on behalf of causes he approved of was an act of justice by a “people” he considered naturally “naturellement droit et paisible” (quoted on p. 110). In other cases, it was the hydra of counter-revolution spitting its venom.

Bosc succeeds admirably in showing the fundamental continuities and coherence in Robespierre’s thought. In one instance, he deftly demolishes the frequently heard charge that unlike a Desmoulins or Paine, Robespierre came very late to the cause of republicanism and could even be considered a weak or false republican. Robespierre did continue to argue, through the spring of 1792, that a large territorial state like France needed a monarchical form of government. But as Bosc notes, before the fall of Louis XVI the words “republic” and “monarchy” were not antonyms in most French usage. It was the animating spirit of a government that made it republican, not its formal constitutional structure. What mattered was less Robespierre’s defense of monarchy as a structure than his absolute insistence that the king was the *commis* (agent, or clerk) of the people, whose duties consisted of executing its will and nothing else. This aspect of the book makes it a valuable introduction to Robespierre. Although both authors would doubtless be horrified at the suggestion, it could be read with profit alongside another recent short study of Robespierre by Marcel Gauchet [2].

But Robespierre’s own career illustrates the weaknesses of his thought and the dangers it poses in real political contexts. It was not just the hereditary “executive power” that Robespierre characterized as a *commis*. Elected deputies fell into the same category. Since 1789, French deputies had no longer operated under the regime of the *mandat impératif* which formally characterized them as little more than automata executing the instructions of their constituents. The language of *commis* rhetorically revived the idea, with the difference that Robespierre designated “the people” as a whole, rather than a specific body of electors, as the source of the instructions. But who had the right to speak for *le peuple*? The simplest answer: anyone whose political views aligned with Robespierre’s own. The Parisian *sections* counted, for Robespierre approved of the violent action they staged on May 31-June 2, 1793, forcing the expulsion of his Girondin rivals from the Convention. As Bosc notes, the insurgents actually called for the deputies to be “recalled” (*rappelés*): i.e. “démis de leurs mandats—comme tout fidéicommissaire qui manque à ses obligations” (p. 131). The Federalist revolt, on the other hand, clearly did not count. As Bosc revealingly continues: “La plupart [des Girondins expulsés]

s'évaderont et tenteront de soulever contre la Convention les administrations départementales aux mains des notables, fermes soutiens de la politique girondine favorables aux propriétaires" (p. 131). Leave aside the fact that twenty-two of the Girondins did not escape but paid for their failure to fulfill their "obligations" with their lives in October 1793. On the one hand, Bosc gives us an "insurrection"—which Robespierre in his draft Declaration of Rights of 1793 called "le plus sacré des droits et le plus indispensable des devoirs" (quoted on p. 134). And, on the other hand, there is a mere "tentative de soulèvement" against a legitimate elected body. "Change places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?"[3]

The dangers of an arbitrary and deeply partisan invocation of popular oversight as justification for repression of course appeared most clearly during the period often referred to as the "reign of Terror." Following current historiographical fashion, Bosc emphasizes that the term *la Terreur* postdates the period it describes.[4] As he notes, it was invented by Thermidorian politicians desperate to justify their own seizure of power, to disassociate themselves from the events of 1793-94, and to heap all the blame for its bloodshed on the shoulders of Robespierre and his Montagnard allies. The period itself was not one of systematic repression of largely innocent victims, still less an example of proto-totalitarianism. Bosc himself never uses the term *la Terreur*, capital T, without scare quotes. The problem, here as in some of the underlying historiography, is that the dissolution of *la Terreur* into a series of complex and confusing struggles that continued after 9 Thermidor ends up occluding the decisive, proactive role played by Robespierre and the Montagne in the bloodshed that took place before that date. Robespierre and his close allies in the Committee of Public Safety were not alone in this period in seeing political opponents as mortal enemies who deserved nothing but death. But they, more than any other group, even if sometimes divided among themselves, still managed to wield the formidable resources of a wartime state against their opponents in a massive power struggle and *règlement de comptes* that spun wildly out of control. And they justified doing so in part by claiming to act in the name of the people against the *commis* who had allegedly violated their *mandats*.

Today we can sympathize with many of Robespierre's policies: his support for universal adult male suffrage, his opposition to the death penalty, his opposition to war with Austria and Prussia, and the progressive social and economic measures, to which Bosc devotes an instructive final chapter. We can recognize, as Bosc concludes, that he had a genuinely democratic vision, in contrast to that of the Thermidorians, whose ideas came much closer to what Montesquieu defined as an aristocratic republic. We can also understand the need for ways of exercising oversight over public servants who all too frequently betray the public trust. But, at the same time, we need to recognize that such oversight cannot come from broad and vague appeals to "the people" and "virtue." It is worth remembering that precisely such appeals to "the people" against public servants caricatured as "the swamp," "the deep state," and so forth are today standard weapons in the rhetorical arsenal of right-wing demagogues around the world. There need to be mechanisms in place to ensure that popular oversight really does express the will of the people as a whole rather than of a partisan faction. A genuinely democratic vision is in itself no protection against the visionary turning tyrannical in his methods and leaving corpses where he had hoped to build a better world. Maximilien Robespierre was a tragic figure but not an admirable one, and an historically interesting political thinker but not a profound one, still less a useful one for the present day.

## NOTES

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[1] Quoted in Daniel Bell, "First Love and Early Sorrows," *Partisan Review* 48, no. 4 (1981): 532-551 (quotation on 550).

[2] Marcel Gauchet, *Robespierre: L'homme qui nous divise le plus* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018).

[3] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act IV, scene vi.

[4] See most recently Michel Biard and Marisa Linton, *Terreur! La Révolution française face à ses démons* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2020).

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