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Marcel Gauchet, *Robespierre: The Man Who Divides Us the Most.* Translated by Malcolm DeBevoise. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2022. xxii + 199 pp. Further reading and index. $37.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780691212944; $25.90 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780691234953.

Review by Mette Harder, SUNY Oneonta.

In March of this year, *Le Monde* published a joint protest by French historians, politicians, and other public figures against the recent auction sale to a private buyer of the only existing letter written by Maximilien Robespierre to Georges Danton. "La préservation de l'unique lettre de Robespierre à Danton est une cause nationale," it stated. Robespierre's letter was personal (his condolences at the death of Danton's wife), but the joint statement described it as "a slice of the history of the birth of the Republic."[1] This well-known document should have entered the archives rather than disappeared into a private collection. But the national-historical significance ascribed to it is puzzling. Certainly, Robespierre and Danton were "the first elected by Paris to the National Convention, the first Assembly of France [as] a Republic."[2] Yet, as Michel Biard, Philippe Bourdin, and Hervé Leuwers' new *Dictionary of Conventionnels* reminds us, the founding of that republic was a collective effort, not the achievement of one, two, or even a handful of revolutionaries.[3] More than any of the Republic's other founding legislators, Robespierre, however, still draws the attention of historians in the same enigmatic way he drew that of contemporary audiences. Robespierre's ability, already during his lifetime, to embody the Revolution and his extraordinary visibility, enduring to this day, has tended to obscure the influence of his many colleagues in the Revolution. His, not their, vision of the Revolution shapes how we perceive its legacy: its great ambitions and the violence committed in its name.

Robespierre's life, career, and myth have been the subjects of a flurry of new studies over the past decade, a cycle that began with Peter McPhee's *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* in 2012 and concluded with Colin Jones's *The Fall of Robespierre: 24 Hours in Revolutionary Paris* in 2021, with many important works published in between, particularly in France.[4] To these must now be added Marcel Gauchet's *Robespierre: The Man Who Divides Us the Most.* This engaging book, originally written for Gallimard's series "Des hommes qui ont fait la France," is both an overview of Robespierre's political thought and a reflection of his significance for France, then and now.[5] Gauchet aims to "make sense of the dual character of this enigmatic man, Robespierre, in whom is concentrated the most problematic part of the French past—the part that is at once the most inspirational and the most repellent" (p. 4). Over six chapters, his book tackles Robespierre as a leading contributor to the revolutionary discourse on human rights and also as an apologist and perpetrator of revolutionary terror. This is done exclusively by looking at Robespierre's speeches and writings, leaving aside any other existential traces. Gauchet's detached approach to his subject ("Of Robespierre before the Revolution, what is there to be said?") (p. 9) is not wholly unsuitable to one whose "disposition to impersonality…allowed him to identify himself wholly and unreservedly with the revolutionary impulse" (p. 10). At times, however, his Robespierre appears almost insentient as a result. As a trade-off, the reader discovers many less-studied sections of his speeches, interpreted here in a new and critical light.

The book's wonderful translation into English by Malcolm DeBevoise provides fresh renderings of Robespierre's interventions and clear versions of Gauchet's analysis while retaining the essential Frenchness of both their styles. This edition also includes a foreword by David A. Bell and Hugo Drochon, providing background on Gauchet's career and work as a member of the EHESS, fellow traveler of François Furet and Pierre Nora, and chief editor of *Le Débat*. The almost total lack of references of any kind, however, does the book an injustice. The bibliography cites very few works, excluding titles directly relevant to the book's focus, such as Lynn Hunt's *The Invention of Human Rights*.[6]

To Gauchet, Robespierre's revolutionary career forms an integral part of the history of democracy and human rights in France.[7] It distills the enduring problem of reconciling equality with liberty and establishing "a viable system of government from these principles" (p. 3). Robespierre's earliest interventions at the Estates-General and the National Constituent Assembly were already full of "an explosive radicalism" (p. 12) of which he himself was yet unaware and which were too progressive to determine legislation to any significant degree (pp. 11-12; p. 33). He combatted the royal veto, fought for universal (male) suffrage, and insisted on the Declaration of the Rights of Man as the basis for all revolutionary decisions and actions. But he did not concern himself with women's rights, and his attitude towards slavery is unclear, though Gauchet argues that he was ultimately opposed. The larger significance of Robespierre's unconcern regarding these matters, indicating his early willingness to compromise on the universality of human rights, is left largely unexplored here.

Camille Desmoulins' description of his friend as "less an orator…than a book of law, but of the uncreated law that is engraved in every heart" perfectly captured Robespierre's yet unfulfilled ambitions as a lawmaker (p. 21). Gauchet notes, however, that he soon came to wield considerable influence over revolutionary politics even after his own self-denying ordinance excluded him from the Legislative Assembly. In the years 1791-1792, he drew a public, particularly at the Jacobin Club, where his power grew exponentially. Gauchet rightly states that "there is something mysterious about this popularity" in the galleries but does not cite those who have explored its various aspects (p. 32).[8] To him, audiences were drawn mainly by Robespierre's tendency to a "kind of exhibitionism" (p. 49), to "the spectacle" (p. 54) he made of himself, and which increasingly revolved around extolling his own virtue, victimhood, sacrifice, and place in posterity (pp. 52-55; 68). His signature tactic of not naming supposed conspirators to hold his audience in suspense would eventually be his downfall. The root of this behavior was the Revolution itself, which fundamentally changed Robespierre's sense of self as he transformed into a revolutionary actor, engaged in a revolutionary struggle on behalf of an abstracted people. Here, Gauchet's analysis owes heavily to the rich historiography on the formation of Jacobin political identity, echoing Crane Brinton, J.L. Talmon, Patrice Higonnet, Marisa Linton, and others.[9] His later claim that historians are "unaccustomed to pay attention" to "what actors were thinking" and have neglected to study "ideas put into action" is, however, patently untrue (pp. 167-168).

The book's main section covers Robespierre's time at the National Convention (September 1792-July 1794) and as a member of the Committee of Public Safety. After the elimination of his political opponents on 2 June, Robespierre abandoned his "visceral hostility to persons in positions of power" to join the provisional executive (p. 70). Gauchet's discussion of this part of his career portrays him, at best, as a crafty politician and, at worst, as one who "practiced an

extraordinary type of dictatorship" (p. 168). This dictatorship was "anonymous" and "informal" (p. 185). It rested mainly on Robespierre's speeches at the Convention and the Jacobins, where he manipulated audiences into projecting themselves—an idealized, virtuous people—onto him, wallowing in "self-pitying narcissism" (p. 152). In his desire to identify the popular with the General Will, Robespierre refused to see the people "as they really are, animated by diverse and often contradictory interests and passions" (p. 46). Gauchet cites a contemporary critic who observed: "The fact remains that Robespierre exercised a very real tyranny and that he himself did not suspect that he was a tyrant" (p. 185). In this sense, his book, while engagingly written, does not offer us any truly new insights. There is also surprisingly little discussion of Robespierre's views on rights during this time. He came eventually to disregard the "universality of rights," allowing him to vote for the King's death, approve the silencing of the press, and, eventually, defend the Law of 22 Prairial (p. 47).[10] But we gain few glimpses into what was behind this moral and ethical decline in his politics or to what degree it constituted a dilemma of any kind for him.

For Gauchet, the string of repressive measures and political trials that gripped France in the Year II clearly indicates that "terror had been put on the agenda" on 5 September 1793 (p. 96). However, one gets little sense of the various crises that engulfed the country during Robespierre's final year. The Vendée and the war are mentioned occasionally, the Federalist Revolt only in passing. Robespierre is shown to have opportunistically taken advantage of these crises to denounce and eliminate opponents, but he is given no credit for his role in addressing them as a member of the Committee of Public Safety, which is examined exclusively via his speeches. Leaving aside sources as essential as Aulard's *Recueil* encourages inaccurate statements such as that Robespierre "[took] little part in the administrative work of the Committee," reducing him to the role of pure demagogue at the rostrum (p. 89). Examining, rather than just mentioning, Robespierre's work for the Bureau de Police in the sub-series F/7 would have provided concrete evidence of his evolving views on human rights in 1794.[11]

A final discussion in this section focuses on Robespierre's and Saint-Just's shared vision for the Republic. Robespierre is shown to have jealously siphoned ideas off his young acolyte at times, and they shared an ongoing obsession with factions as a key threat to the Revolution. Gauchet believes that they were also united in their investment in "an ancient conception of political community" (p. 130), "an ideal having its roots in the religious past" (p. 129). The exact nature of their plans is not further explored. We learn, however, that Robespierre's model for regenerating France was based on ideas, Saint-Just's on morals instilled via his Republican Institutions. Gauchet also stresses that Saint-Just maintained a certain intellectual independence from Robespierre, with whose growing political isolation, by 9 Thermidor, the younger revolutionary was "very displeased" (p. 162).

I should note in passing that there are two errors in the text that should be addressed in future editions and likely originated in auto-correct. On p. 134 we are told that "[In Prairial II] a sixteen-year-old girl named *Charlotte Corday*, acting and talking strangely, tried to gain entrance to Duplay's house, where Robespierre was a lodger." That would have been impossible unless Robespierre saw her ghost. Likewise, on p. 145, we encounter "Fouquier-*Tintin*, the public prosecutor." This would have been a truly frightening "character!"

Gauchet's *Robespierre: The Man Who Divides Us the Most* is a stimulating addition to studies of Robespierre as a political thinker and orator. To specialists, it does not offer a truly original

interpretation of his career, thinking, or legacy. It also does not consistently explain Robespierre's relevance for the democratic and rights discourse in France. For a more general readership, however, it offers a good introduction to Robespierre's core principles in the early Revolution, the compromises he made in its later years, and his visions for the Republic. To Gauchet, Robespierre's story is still relevant to a wider public. His opportunistic stance on rights and his fatal refusal to acknowledge legitimate divisions within society and politics are reflected in French political debates today. Robespierre must therefore continue to serve as the troubled Republic's cautionary tale. He would probably have enjoyed the attention.

NOTES

[1] "La préservation de l'unique lettre de Robespierre à Danton est une cause nationale," *Le Monde*, March 21, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2023/03/21/la-preservation-de-l-unique-lettre-de-robespierre-a-danton-est-une-cause-nationale_6166388_3232.html.

[2] "La préservation de l'unique lettre de Robespierre à Danton est une cause nationale," *Le Monde*, March 21, 2023. My translation.

[3] Michel Biard, Philippe Bourdin, and Hervé Leuwers, eds., *Dictionnaire des Conventionnels: 1792-1795*, 2 vols. (Ferney-Voltaire: Centre international d'études du XVIIIe siècle, 2022).

[4] Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2012); Colin Jones, *The Fall of Robespierre: 24 Hours in Revolutionary Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Among the works published between those two, in chronological order: Michel Biard and Philippe Bourdin, eds., *Robespierre: portraits croisés* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012); Marc Belissa and Yannick Bosc, *Robespierre: la fabrication d'un mythe* (Paris: Ellipses, 2013); Hervé Leuwers, *Robespierre* (Paris: Fayard, 2014); Jean-Clément Martin, *Robespierre: la fabrication d'un monstre* (Paris: Perrin, 2016).

[5] Note: A parallel series by Gallimard covers "Des femmes qui ont fait la France" but currently only features one volume.

[6] Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Human Rights* (New York: Norton, 2008).

[7] Issues that were also the primary focus of Gauchet's previous *La révolution des droits de l'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989) and *La révolution des pouvoirs: la souveraineté, le peuple et la représentation, 1789-1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

[8] For a discussion of contemporary, gendered accusations that Robespierre particularly "attracted" female audiences: Noah C. Shusterman, "All of His Power Lies in the Distaff: Robespierre, Women and the French Revolution," *Past & Present* 223, no. 1 (May 2014): 130-132.

[9] For a range of interpretations over time, see, among others, Clarence Crane Brinton, *The Jacobins: An Essay in the New History* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930); Jacob L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952); Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.:

Harvard University Press, 1998); Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[10] For an earlier discussion of the Jacobins' rejection of universal rights, see Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[11] Robespierre's work for the Bureau is mentioned on p. 125 but not further explored.

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