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**Caroline Weber**, *Terror and its Discontents: Suspect Words in Revolutionary France*. London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. xxii + 298 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$63.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8166-388; \$22.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8166-3887-X.

Review by James Livesey, Trinity College, Dublin.

One can only rejoice that Professor Weber was not on the Committee of Public Safety, the Committee of General Security, or the Revolutionary Tribunal. Her sensitivity to counter-revolutionary deviance is greater than that of the most committed Jacobin, and she identifies revolutionary justice with the most pitiless will to eliminate all the enemies of the republic. More *enragé* than Jacobin, she rejects every mediation of the deathly logic of Terror and follows that logic to its end through her exploration of its language. Weber argues that revolutionary republicans were committed to the elimination of any plurality, any assertion of particularity. They were impelled to this end by the adherence of republicans to Rousseau's vision of a regenerated citizenry in the society of the general will. The society of the general will, as defined by Rousseau, viewed every assertion of particularity as a threat to the unanimity of the citizenry. However any use of language is by its very nature interpretable, plural, ambiguous; whatever the citizen said the utterance was not co-existent with the unanimity of the people. The best attitude of a citizen therefore was active silence, spontaneous activity in accordance with the popular will. Terror, in this definition, is the antidote to speech. To speak at all was to be suspect. In Weber's Terror every word spoken, or signed, carried the risk of death; it would be curious that anyone survived.

The opposition of Terror and speech structures this book, and the deconstruction of the opposition is its most elegant feature. Weber argues that the fear of plurality, and so of speech, was rooted in Rousseau's awareness that speech threatened the unitary moral consciousness demanded of the citizen and all citizens. She argues that it was precisely his sensitivity to the instability of language that drove Rousseau to theorize such institutions as the Legislator and the General Will in order to arrest the slippage of language. Moral truths would not degenerate because meaning would be fixed and controlled. She devotes a lot of space to her reading of the figure of the Legislator. The Legislator, for her, is a privileged though tortured figure in the Social Contract. The Legislator seeks to shape society by creating or composing it. He does this by speaking "in the voice of God," instituting a set of dogmas beyond criticism and beyond interpretation. To do so the Legislator must be an artist, slyly using the very poetic resources of language he denies to others in order to create his effect of stability and natural authority. The paradoxes inherent in the Rousseauian project of arresting interpretation become apparent in this figure. His collapse from inspiration of liberty to uncontrolled and manipulative authority in the text prefigures the same trajectory performed by the Jacobins in fact.

In subsequent chapters the presence of this paradox, that unanimity could only be performed in language while language subverted unanimity, is established in the speeches and writings of Robespierre, Saint-Just, Desmoulins, and Sade. Three characteristic responses to this paradox are described. In Weber's account, which acknowledges its debt to Marie-Hélène Huet, Robespierre and Saint Just seek to overcome it through a particular species of rhetoric, the revolutionary sublime.[1]

There is much made here of the imagery of thunderbolts and of the voice of God, of representations of experiences that overwhelm the senses and directly affect the mind. Virtue should be instantly recognized, "a flame burning in the tomb" in Saint-Just's phrase, beyond discussion and debate. This version of the experience is understood through an amalgam of Kant and Longinus as the use of figural language in an anti-representational mode, more icon than figure (p. 24). Terror is defined as the "literalization of the rhetorical values associated with the sublime" (p. 80). Those who are not instantly and spontaneously struck by the truth of the revolution become potential icons themselves, taken up by its dominant rhetoric. Their bodies, in death, can become icons of the sublime power of the sovereign people even if their souls were deaf to its power. Desmoulins' response to the paradox is ironic. He is unwilling to give up the revolutionary goal of unveiling, unmasking, "telling all" in one revelatory gesture. He is nevertheless aware that the gesture, Terror, renders everyone speechless. His Vieux Cordelier moves back and forth between Terrorist poetics and anti-Terrorist critique, trying to find a mode of revolutionary speech between the two. Sade revels in the paradox which he exploits to find a mode of voicing arbitrary authority. The inability to speak virtue univocally is celebrated by him as an opening for vice.

The argument of the book is clear and coherent, and the theme is relevant to the concerns of the time. As Sophia Rosenfeld's recent book illustrates, issues of language and representation were very present in the minds of at least some revolutionaries.[2] Unfortunately it is also unconvincing as an interpretation of the language of Terror and its consequences. There are two weaknesses in the reading. The account of Rousseau's handling of the complex problems of the politics of beings located in language is much too positivist. Rousseau's response to this problem was far more subtle than that presented here. Similarly, the revolutionaries, even the Terrorists, were not driven by the poetics of immediacy in the manner described. Something like the terrorist sublime did indeed operate at the heart of the Terror, but it was hedged about by any manner of mediating languages and practices.

Weber argues that the society of the general will was designed to freeze the process of interpretation, to eliminate the ambiguous nature of language. Further, she sees Rousseau as the unwitting victim of the nature of language working, behind his back as it were, to dissolve his patterns of control. In both cases the very opposite is closer to the truth. As Rousseau argued in the introduction to the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, perfectibility was just another word for language. The ambiguity of meaning is what allows humans to be authors of themselves, through creative misinterpretation. His critique is that the vital difference between humans, who are unstable creatures always becoming something else, and things, always only themselves, is in danger of being eliminated by the cancerous metaphor of property. Rousseau consistently defended the primarily expressive, as opposed to denotative, nature of language; this was the reason for his promotion of Italian opera, closer to the voice of the emotions. Denotation is simply cliché, a dead metaphor. A historical contingency, property, threatened to create an equivalence between people and things, between expression and fact, through ownership. The image of self-possession was, for Rousseau, an illegitimate analogy between one's relationship to the world and one's relationship to one's self. If to be is to have, then those that have more have more humanity. The society of the general will was imagined as a construct designed to rescue the language of the sentiments, of value, of creativity from the over-extension of the metaphor of property. In the terms of game theory, it is a proposed solution to the collective action problem of setting the rules of interaction, not a description of social life.

There are similar problems with the reading of the figure of the Legislator. The General Will is a structural possibility for a complex society of language users. Moral consensus on the terms within which individuals will act, or in other words finding new basic norms, is always possible. Rousseau had a problem conceptualizing how such a latent potential could become actual: what would cause a society to advert to its ground of consensus if it was not already aware of it? After Rousseau such fractures in continuity in which a society becomes aware of new possibilities would be termed "revolution." Working with a different notion of that concept Rousseau imagines the exogenous catalyst as a single

person, along the lines of Moses bringing the law to the Hebrews, who by definition cannot enter into Israel. To catalyze a new relationship to its possibilities, the agent has to be external to the society. Weber, on the other hand, misses the distinction between government form, which Rousseau thought might very well be monarchy, constitutional norms, imagined through the fiction of the General Will, and historical moment, represented by the Legislator. Weber falls prey to a species of backward causation by using the actions of the Committee of Public Safety to illustrate the meaning of the Legislator in Rousseau's text and so fixing the meaning of the text by association. Finally, much of what Weber identifies as "terroristic" in the work of Rousseau forms part of the theory of the sovereign. Sovereignty--ultimate power in a defined territory--had been an element of political theory from Hobbes at the latest and of accepted political fact since the Treaty of Westphalia. Such uses of power as deciding who will be protected by the laws (the others being foreigners), when to suspend the constitution, under what terms citizens can be put to death, and so on are not elements of terrorist exceptionality but of everyday sovereign exceptionality.

Weber's monolithic integration of the disparate elements of Rousseau's thought is mirrored in her treatment of the Terror itself. It would be unfair to criticize her lack of a treatment of how the Terror operated, the difference between Paris and the provinces, or between the various courts, since the goal of the book is to examine Terror as a cultural phenomenon rather than as a lived experience. However even within this approach there are lapses. The discussion of the idea of the "suspect" is a case in point. Weber argues that the Law of Suspects of September 17, 1793 accelerated the logic of Terror, "aspersions against a fellow citizen's character now carried the weight to put their target to death" and illustrated the "Manichaean nature of Robespierre's worldview"(p. 81). Quite to the contrary, the point of the Law of Suspects was to create some middle ground between "liberty or death". Suspects had a legal status that protected them from popular vengeance, most graphically represented in the September massacres of 1792, even as it made them vulnerable to state violence. As Sophie Wahnich explains, the idea of the suspect was designed to put a break on the cycles of vengeance, not to accelerate them.[3] The problem is to explain how this mediative idea became the core of the murderous law of 22 prairial an II. Weber's approach turns the Terror into a monolith (rather than a process), and gives us no way to even pose such questions of inflection or change.

The author states in her introduction this is not a work of history; her core interest is the experience of Terror, of being frozen into silence, and her approach is deliberately not contextual. Questions of causality, comprehensivity, or of originality of sources would therefore be inappropriate; however, there are some confusions here that are not genre related. These include asserting that Austria and Prussia declared war on France (p. 61), confusing the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies (p. 62), getting the provisions of the Law of Suspects and the Prairial Laws confounded (p. 80), and promoting Fréron to general (p. 161). There is also a more pervasive lack of clarity about such matters as the status of the Convention as a constitutional body, and the difference between revolutionary government and the Terror.

## NOTES

[1] Marie-Hélène Huet, *Mourning Glory: The Will of the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1997).

[2] Sophia A. Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press: 2001).

[3] Sophie Wahnich, *La liberté ou la mort: essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme* (Paris: la Fabrique, 2003), 65-6.

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