Robespierre and Revolutionary Authenticity

Marisa LINTON

Revolutionary leaders regularly claimed that they were motivated by virtue (dedication to the public good, rather than to self-interest and ambition). Yet there was a gap between this ideology and their actions which were – naturally - often self-interested. This presented an insoluble dilemma for Robespierre, as for all the revolutionaries: in order to have political credibility they needed to demonstrate that they were motivated by authentic virtue, yet inner motivation was not something that could be subject to conclusive proof. Robespierre's political power owed much to his relative success in convincing his audience that his devotion to virtue was genuine; yet his claims were challenged by opponents who said his assumption of virtue was a mask to hide his ambition. The question of Robespierre's authentic self became part of a battlefield over the legitimacy of the Revolution, and even the use of terror. The article explores this problem by focusing on specific instances when Robespierre's authenticity was contested during his political career and continuing after his death.

Keywords: virtue, Robespierre, terror

Maximilien Robespierre has been the subject of many studies, yet he remains an enigmatic figure. The problem of his 'authentic identity' has been the subject of much speculation and contradictory conclusions.¹ A key question is what motivated him to engage in revolutionary politics?

Historians were not the first to pose this question. The authenticity of Robespierre’s political persona was very much contested during his lifetime. Robespierre portrayed himself as motivated by his love of virtue. Many commentators, at the time and since, have seen Robespierre’s emotional identification with virtue as a sign either of his psychological imbalance or of his hypocrisy. Thus, the temptation is to interpret Robespierre’s obsession with virtue as something that was unique to his individual psychology. Yet Robespierre was far from alone in adopting the language of political virtue: it was part of a common political culture employed by most leaders of the Revolution and virtually all of those who, at different stages of the Revolution, were leaders of the Jacobin Club. When Robespierre spoke of virtue he was expressing himself in a language that was familiar to his hearers, a language that could empower the speaker, but which also, in the unstable context of revolutionary politics, could make him vulnerable to attack by his political opponents. For a revolutionary leader to take on the identity of a man of virtue carried the risk that he could be exposed as ‘inauthentic’, a fraud, who was engaged in politics out of self-interest. In this article we shall deal with the key problem of how revolutionary leaders sought to establish the authenticity of their identity as men whose involvement in politics was based on their virtue. We shall turn first to the derivation of political virtue and examine why this came to be a central language in revolutionary politics. Then we shall turn to the specific example of Robespierre and examine how he set about establishing his identity as a man of virtue, and how the authenticity of that identity was contested by a succession of political opponents. 

Political virtue was defined as selfless devotion to the public good. This political meaning of virtue owed much to two major currents of thought: the classical republican tradition, and the concept of natural virtue. Despite the considerable divergences between these two intellectual traditions, for both the conclusion was the same - the man of virtue was devoted to his fellows, and by extension to his patrie. Both intellectual traditions emphasised the need for virtue to be authentic, that is, a sincere emotion that came from the heart. The authentically virtuous self was

(2) This article draws on my research on the political culture of the Jacobin leaders which is also the subject of Marisa LINTON, Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution, forthcoming, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.  
a familiar theme. It could be encountered in the pages of Rousseau’s *Confessions*; in the proliferation of novels, plays and works of art inspired by the cult of sensibility; even in the oratory of the pulpit and the bar. Yet some commentators pointed out that love of virtue could be feigned out of self-interest, making it difficult to distinguish between authentic virtue and disguised vice. The moralist, La Rochefoucauld, and the Jansenist theologians, Nicole and Esprit typified this mistrust of virtue, seeing it as a manifestation of *amour-propre.*

Despite this underlying uncertainty regarding the authenticity of virtue, it became the central language of revolutionary politics. In part this was because it offered a powerful tool with which to express dissatisfaction with the actual practice of old regime politics. Venality, patronage, and clientage were fundamental to the functioning of the social elite of the old regime. Hostile observers described court politics in negative terms, as founded on greed, deceit, and self-interest. Political virtue provided a striking contrast with this negative image of court politics. By the last years of the old regime political virtue had become an oppositional language which could be used to critique the practice of court politics.

With the onset of the Revolution, France acquired politicians in the modern sense; answerable not to one man, but to public opinion and to the people. Revolutionary politicians had to cultivate public opinion, play to the gallery, and establish their integrity in the eyes of their audiences. Their speeches, their actions and their conduct, were subjected to an unprecedented level of public scrutiny, above all by the revolutionary press. In principle, as revolutionary leaders, they should be ready to put the public good before anything else, before their own self-interest, and before personal loyalties to friends and family. They ought to be devoid of personal ambition, egoism or the desire for glory. The men who became deputies were on the whole hard-working, patriotic,
enthusiastic and idealistic. Yet their genuine commitment to the ideals of the Revolution does not preclude the fact that for many of them the Revolution also opened up an unprecedented opportunity to carve out a path that would have been unattainable during the old regime – to satisfy their ambitions through a career in politics. Yet to nurse such ambitions was contrary to the ideology of virtue. A man who was ambitious was a man whose motives were suspect. Since men in revolutionary politics could not admit to having ambitions we can only speculate about what their unspoken desires may have been. It is likely that the ambitions of the new revolutionary politicians were complex: some desired wealth and material success, most desired power, but there was something more too, the burning desire to have a name that mattered, to count for someone, and to be at the centre of unprecedented events. The new men who came to the fore of political life were obliged to negotiate this changed political landscape in which their own ambition was considered as inherently suspicious, their true identity subject to public scrutiny.

The ideology of political virtue was not exclusive to the Jacobin leaders, but they were strongly committed to it, and many of them were to pay a heavy price for it. It was an extraordinarily difficult ideology to live up to. The attempt to do so involved the Jacobins in a lived contradiction, in which the contingent realities of the practice of politics could never match up to the identity they professed. It is likely that many Jacobins were motivated by ambition as well as by genuine patriotic fervour. Yet it was impossible – indeed dangerous - for them to admit this publicly. They lived with the constant risk of a perceptible gap opening up between what they said and what they did, a gap which would damage their credibility in the eyes of the public, for how could they ever prove that they were authentically virtuous, as opposed to good at faking it?

What then made Robespierre stand out from so many of his contemporaries who also claimed to be motivated by love of virtue? Robespierre’s success stemmed largely from his credibility. In a political environment where there was increasing suspicion and doubt about the real motives of revolutionary leaders, he succeeded to a large extent in convincing his revolutionary audience of the authenticity of his commitment and his political beliefs. He achieved this in the face of sustained attacks on his integrity by his detractors. Whilst he and his supporters defended his authenticity,
his political opponents called it into question, claiming that Robespierre was a dissembler, who was ambitious for personal power. Robespierre’s inner motivation became part of the battlefield over which politics was fought at successive stages of the Revolution. We shall now turn to some key moments of this battlefield over Robespierre’s authentic identity and examine how this played out in the fraught world of revolutionary politics.

Before the Revolution Robespierre could freely acknowledged that he yearned for professional success in his life. When he started out on his legal studies he wrote to Mercier-Dupaty, President of the Parlement of Bordeaux, asking his advice in recommending a plan of study. Robespierre spoke of his chosen profession in the following terms: « De toutes les qualités nécessaires pour se distinguer dans cette profession, j’y apporte du moins une vive émulation et une extrême envie de réussir ». His ambition was to achieve renown and acknowledgement - the acquisition of great wealth never seems to have interested him. Before the Revolution there had been little to distinguish him from many other provincial lawyers, except that he always had a strong sympathy for the poor, the underdog, and victims of injustice. Over the years his growing sense of social injustice led him to become increasingly alienated from senior figures in the legal corps in Arras. At a time when many lawyers would have been enjoying the material fruits of success Robespierre seems to have had fewer of the kinds of cases that would have proved lucrative. Though he was in some ways well-integrated in Arras society, he was increasingly marginalised by some of the more senior amongst his professional colleagues, for his outspokenness about injustice and local corruption. When, in 1788, Robespierre protested in an open letter at being excluded from a clique of Arras lawyers invited to discuss legal reform, Liborel, who had once been Robespierre’s patron and had presented Robespierre to the bar of the Conseil d’Arras to begin his legal career, publicly rebuked Robespierre, accusing him of being motivated by: « L’intérêt sordide, l’avidité basse [...] et la jalousie rampante »9. No doubt such accusations stung, and he was anxious to repudiate them.

From the outset of the Revolution, with the elections to the Estates-General, there was a conscious rejection of what was seen as an ‘English’ model of campaigning for election. French commentators were particularly

---

suspicious of the English method of conducting elections through official candidatures that were open to corruption. French politicians would do their politics differently. French views of political representation derived partly from France’s own electoral traditions, for the Estates-General, for the provincial estates, and religious institutional precedents.\(^{10}\) There were also intellectual reasons to reject open candidacy and campaigning. According to the ideology of virtue, the very fact that a man openly stood for election indicated he had an ulterior motive and intended to use his public position to further his own career; he was therefore unworthy of holding public office. Like Cincinnatus, a revolutionary politician only deserved office if he did not actively seek it out. From the outset it was accepted that there should be no official candidates, no platforms, no manifestos, and no parties. Though this convention was disregarded by many of the Second Estate, most prospective candidates of the Third Estate took it more seriously.

Robespierre was eager to secure a place in the Estates-General, but to do this he needed to make a public impression in his native province and was hampered by his own obscurity. He handled this dilemma partly by becoming active in local politics. He became known locally as an outspoken champion of the poor and oppressed; as witnessed by the fact that he was asked by the guild of lesser shoemakers in Arras to draft their \textit{cahier de doléances}.\(^{11}\)

The standard practice of writing anonymous pamphlets where local people could guess the identity of the author, offered a discreet form of electioneering without contravening the embargo against open campaigning. Robespierre wrote a pamphlet, \textit{À la Nation artésienne} in which he warned against plots being laid by the ‘aristocratic party’ in Artois to secure election. He himself, he intimated, would be a man of virtue:

\[
... \text{cette heureuse révolution, et la fin de tous les maux qui nous accablent, dépend de la vertu, du courage et des sentiments de ceux à qui nous confierons le redoutable honneur de défendre nos intérêts}
\]


dans l’Assemblée de la Nation; nous éviterons avec soin, dans ce choix important, tous les écueils que l’intrigue et l’ambition vont semer sous nos pas; nous n’irons pas surtout nous reposer de la réforme des abus, sur le zèle de ceux qui sont intéressés à les conserver par les plus puissants de tous les mobiles, l’intérêt personnel, l’esprit de corps, l’amour et l’habitude de la domination. Songez à ce que vous pouvez attendre de ceux qui n’ont pu cacher leurs vues ambitieuses, même sous le masque du patriotisme et du désintéressement dont l’opinion publique les forçait à imiter quelquefois le langage ... 12.

The success of the Revolution would depend on the virtue of the representatives, and their ability to stand against the aristocratic conspiracy. The choice was between deputies were authentically virtuous, and those who imitated this language in order to further their own interests. Already he saw that the problem with the language of virtue was the gap between what men said and what they did.

Robespierre went further in a second pamphlet in April 1789, Les ennemis de la Patrie démasqués. Here he used the rhetoric of conspiracy to state that there was a plot by the « les hommes ambitieux qui tiennent à notre Administration municipale et provinciale, pour perpétuer le régime oppressif sur lequel ils fondent à la fois leur autorité, leur fortune, et leurs espérances ». By contrast he himself was motivated by virtue. This virtue was not the classical republican version; rather it was natural virtue, « cette sensibilité généreuse », a universal quality « que les hommes de tous les Pays et de tous les temps sont faits pour déployer ... » 13.

Robespierre’s enemies pounced upon any evidence that he was contravening the embargo on electioneering. The abbé Proyart, Robespierre’s early hostile biographer, picked up on rumours that were circulating at the time of the elections and later accused Robespierre of playing a role, and of speaking the language he thought most likely to win him supporters. According to Proyart, Robespierre sent his brother, Augustin to promote his campaign for election in the countryside round Arras, and put pressure on

---

12 Maximilien ROBESPIERRE, A la Nation artésienne (1789) in ROBESPIERRE, Œuvres, t. 11, Compléments, p. 244-5.
distant relatives. Robespierre’s tactics seem to have been fairly standard practice in the run up to the Estates-General. But his opponents had latched onto what was to be both his political strength and his weakness – the wholeheartedness of his identification with virtue. Robespierre was particularly vulnerable to the accusation that he was electioneering (even if all around him people were busily doing much the same thing) precisely because he insisted so strongly that he was the candidate of authentic virtue, and therefore opposed to practices of corruption, patronage and networking. Robespierre would spend much time during his subsequent political career in fending off similar allegations.

Two key actions by Robespierre gave tangible evidence that he was a man who would put his commitment to the patrie before personal ambition. The first of these was his proposal of the self-denying ordinance that prevented members of the Constituent Assembly from standing for the Legislative. His aim was in part to block the ambitions of the triumvirs; but in so doing he was also giving up any ambitions he might have nurtured to play a role in national politics – or so he believed at the time he made that choice. The second action - even more important - was Robespierre’s stance against the war. In the long run, when the war went badly and betrayals followed (as Robespierre had predicted) people remembered his opposition and this increased his stature, but for several months in the build up to war he was marginalised in the Jacobins, as he pursued his lonely but determined opposition to the Brissotins’ patriotic militarism.

It was not only Robespierre’s political opponents in the ‘aristocratic’ party who questioned his integrity. Challenges also came from within. The factional division between the Brissotins and Robespierre and the group that were to become the Montagnards had its origins in the opposing sides taken by Brissot and Robespierre in the debate over declaring war. At first this debate was marked by reasonable civility on both sides. Brissot and Robespierre had been on friendly terms, shared many ideological beliefs, (14) LE BLOND DE NEUVÉGLISE [pseudo. of Lievin-Bonaventure PROYART (abbé)], La Vie et les crimes de Robespierre, surnommé le tyran, depuis sa naissance jusqu’à sa mort, Augsburg, 1795, p. 69-72.

(15) On Proyart’s accusations, see THOMPSON, Robespierre, p. 201; also MCPHEE, Robespierre, p. 59-60; and Bruno DECREM, « 1788/1789 en Artois: un candidat en campagne électorale, Maximilien de Robespierre », in Jean-Pierre JESSENNE et al, eds, Robespierre: De la Nation artiste à la république et aux nations, Lille, Centre d’histoire de la région du nord, 1993.

and both were stalwarts of the Jacobin Club. But the weeks leading up to the declaration of war saw the development of a new stage in the tactical deployment of the ideology of political virtue. In the Jacobin Club the opposing groups began to accuse one another openly of corruption, and to challenge the integrity of one another’s motivation. It was Brissot and his group that took the initiative to attack Robespierre personally, calling into question his good faith. On 30th March Brissot, used *Le Patriote français* to imply that the true motive for Robespierre’s opposition to the war was that he was acting as a secret agent for the comité autrichien (the term used for the alleged conspiratorial counter-revolutionary group said to be led by Marie-Antoinette). In subsequent issues *Le Patriote français* stepped up the attack: « Pourquoi la conduite de M. Robespierre est-elle toujours telle qu’elle ne pourrait être autrement si elle étoit tracée par le comité autrichien? nous n’en savons rien; mais nous avouons que si ce n’est qu’un hasard, ce hasard est bien étrange ».

Several of the Brissotin newspapers accused Robespierre outright of being paid by the civil list. The ‘Incorruptible’, they alleged, had been corrupted by the comité autrichien. Such an accusation had become much more damaging – and potentially dangerous - in the context of the drive towards war. In January 1792 the appearance of the crime of *lèse-nation* made the position of political opponents to the leading group much more vulnerable. A link was forged between France’s ‘natural’ and exterior enemies (Austria and the *émigrés*) and ‘the enemy within’, the ‘false patriots’ whose offences against the patrie were now recast as the crime of *lèse-nation*, making them traitors and so subject to execution. Politicians who dissembled virtue as a cloak for self-interest and ambition had become secret conspirators in league with the external enemies of France. This characterisation of political opponents as ‘the enemy within’ put politicians themselves into a potentially dangerous position, and increased their anxieties over
need to maintain their credibility as authentic men of virtue. Part of the under-explored story of the split between Brissotins and Jacobins is one of how erstwhile friends became enemies, and confronted one another with the bitter sense of personal betrayal that only a fractured friendship can impart.22

There was a marked intensification in personal attacks on the credibility of opponents, conducted not only in the newspapers, but face to face on the floor of the Convention. On 28th October Robespierre spoke in the Jacobins ‘Sur l’influence de la calomnie sur la Révolution’. Calumny, he said, was responsible for all « les évènemens malheureux »23, since the origins of the Revolution. It undermined the Revolution itself, by attacking the reputations of the men of genuine virtue. It was, he said, the language of old regime aristocrats, used on their behalf by revolutionary factionalists. Robespierre’s real anger was directed at the press funded by Roland.24 He said this faction was serving the interests of the forces opposed to the Revolution: « Les riches, les fonctionnaires publics, les égoïstes, les intrigans ambitieux, les hommes constitués en autorité, se rangèrent en foule sous la bannière de cette faction hypocrite, connue sous le nom de modérés, qui seule a mis la révolution en péril ». Calumny was the new weapon of this faction, deployed to « peindre chaque vertu, sous les couleurs du vice opposé, en l’exagérant jusqu’au dernier excès ». According to these factionalists « ils sont les honnêtes gens, les gens comme il faut de la république; nous sommes les sans-culottes et la canaille [...]. Ils nous accusent de marcher à la dictature, nous, qui n’avons ni armée, ni trésor, ni places, ni parti ». In reality, he said, the situations were reversed; it was this faction that held « tout le pouvoir et toutes les richesses ». Despite this, many observers believed the factionalists’ lies, « car on connoît l’empire des mots sur l’esprit des hommes »25.

Nevertheless, Robespierre’s conclusions were moderate; he counselled only watchfulness, patience. Sooner or later the calumny writers would expose themselves. Robespierre had long held the conviction that


freedom of the press was the best way of obliging political leaders to consider what they owed to the public in the way of integrity. Nevertheless, this speech pointed to the beginnings of an ominous change in the Jacobin leaders’ attitude towards the freedom of the press. In 1791 Robespierre had thought that probity and virtue were far stronger than the ability of the press to misrepresent them. He had learned since then to fear the power of the press.26

The following day Louvet staged a dramatic denunciation of Robespierre in the Convention. It was a direct attack on Robespierre’s persona as a man of virtue. Louvet had been planning it for several weeks, with the encouragement of Madame Roland. Louvet said he had come to denounce « les complots [...] les projets de subversion, d’anarchie, d’envahissement, de destruction de la Représentation Nationale ». Robespierre was at the head of this plot. Robespierre was using his public image to consolidate his political power: « Je t’accuse de t’être continuellement produit comme un objet d’idolâtrie; d’avoir souffert que devant toi l’on dit que tu étais le seul homme vertueux de la France ». Louvet went back over Robespierre’s past history as a political leader. According to Louvet’s narrative, Robespierre’s involvement in revolutionary politics, all his actions and words, made under the cloak of his supposed devotion to the good of the people, had in reality served as a screen for his real purpose – to further his own advancement to power. Louvet’s denunciation culminated in the accusation that Robespierre was guilty of the ultimate crime in personal ambition, of secretly plotting to make himself a dictator, « tu marchais à grand pas, Robespierre, vers ce pouvoir dictatorial dont la soif te dévorait » 27.

Louvet’s accusation went well beyond the evidence. Robespierre’s lengthy response to the charges, made a week later in front of a packed Jacobin Club, made this evident, and Louvet’s reckless attack rebounded on the Girondins. Robespierre’s defence of his authenticity strengthened his reputation and his power-base at the Jacobins. Nonetheless, Louvet’s assertion that Robespierre wanted to make himself a dictator was regularly repeated in the Girondin press. Beyond the circle of Robespierre’s supporters in the Jacobins and amongst the Paris militants, many readers

(27) 29 October 1792, Archives parlementaires, t. 53, p. 52, 57.
gave credence to the allegations. In the face of these attacks Robespierre’s belief in a free press began to undergo a decisive change.  

The problem of the authenticity of revolutionary leaders was a central factor in what I have referred to as the ‘politicians’ terror’. It was a terror that turned inwards: its principal victims were the leaders of the Revolution themselves. It was a terror that revolutionary politicians directed against one another. Most of the people caught up in this form of terror, either as perpetrators or as victims (in many cases both) either were, or had previously been, members of the Parisian Jacobin Club. The numbers involved were small; but this terror was at the heart of the revolutionary project. In Paris itself, the central locus of the Revolution, much of the terror was directed at public officials, including the politicians. Ironically, they had more cause to fear the terror than most of the Parisian population. With the exception of the fugitive Brissotin deputies who engaged in the federalist revolt, few of the victims of this terror could be said to have had clear evidence against them. In most cases their ‘crime’ against the Revolution was much more ambiguous: it turned on their true identities. For the most part they were accused of having engaged in a secret conspiracy against the Revolution. This suspicion over authenticity was to reach its height during the trials of political factions in the Year Two, when in the absence of more concrete evidence of conspiracy, much of the focus lay in establishing that the suspects on trial had not been motivated by virtue, but by self-interest, ambition, egoism, and greed. Their unscrupulous attitude to politics made them open to bribery by the foreign powers, thus part of a conspiracy which, in the Year Two was characterised as the Foreign Plot.

Some of the attacks on fellow revolutionaries were conducted in a cynical way – as a way of removing political enemies. But there was more to the politicians’ terror than that. It pointed to an inner anxiety about other people’s motives; the difficulty of reading what was really in someone else’s heart. It is therefore a subject that reveals an area of the emotional, as well as the ideological, history of the Terror. The Jacobins dealt out fear, but they themselves were vulnerable to terror, and feared that at any moment it might be turned against them. As Levasseur put it: « La terreur que nous inspirions se glissait sur les bancs de la Montagne comme dans les hôtels du faubourg Saint-Germain. Elle s’asseyait sur les

(28) BOULOISEAU, « Robespierre d’après les journaux Girondins ».  
(29) See LINTON, Choosing Terror.
bancs du tribunal et apprenait à ses membres qu’ils pouvaient incessamment passer de la mission de juge au rôle d’accusé.30

The transition from opposition to ruling group was a decisive moment for the leading Jacobins, not least Robespierre himself who had always been more at home criticising the shortcomings of others than being the man at the helm of the ship. Once Robespierre entered the Comité de salut public on 27th July 1793, his position was transformed. Being in power offered new opportunities for forging a successful career in revolutionary politics. Many of the Jacobins expected to be rewarded for their devotion by material and career benefits. Like the triumvirs and the Brissotin leaders before them, the Jacobin leaders in the Year Two were faced by irresolvable tensions between the ideology of political virtue and the realities of power. With the fate of the Brissotins in mind, the position of revolutionary leaders was precarious. The Jacobin leaders feared the Paris militants who had put them in power, and they feared, perhaps even more, their political rivals within the Convention, the Jacobin Club, and the Commune. Robespierre, like the other Jacobin leaders, was subject to constant public scrutiny, above all by the Paris militants, and by his fellow Jacobins. Would Robespierre and the other Jacobin leaders succumb to the temptations of office and allow themselves to be corrupted? If not, how could they prove to their supporters, and perhaps even more crucially to themselves, the authenticity of their virtue and their commitment to the public good? Leading Jacobins regularly accused their political opponents of being « tartuffes de patriotism » , wearing a mask of virtue that hid their true motives.31 Fear stalked the Jacobin leaders, a fear all the more potent because they could not admit to it publicly, since to acknowledge their awareness of the danger in which they stood suggested that they were conscious of not being virtuous. Thus, the politicians’ terror was given a merciless edge by the fears of the men wielding it that they too would fall victim to it. It was the yawning abyss at the feet of all the political leaders who spoke in the Year Two.32

From the outset of the Revolution, the new politics had been characterised by suspicion of the integrity of leaders who appointed their friends to official posts. Now that Robespierre himself was in a position of power he too was confronted by the dilemmas of being a man of virtue in an inherently corrupt situation. The Robespierristers were constantly being importuned for posts. Robespierre’s correspondence contained a number of such letters, couched in the language of virtue. There was no shortage of self-professed patriots. The problem was whether one could believe in the integrity of any man simply because he spoke the language of virtue and patriotism at a time when it had become politically expedient to do so. According to the ideology of virtue all men were of equal value, and no leader should promote his friends simply because they were his friends. Yet in practice, leaders put a premium on men whom they knew and trusted and on whose commitment they felt they could rely. The problem for the Robespierristers can be summed up by a pragmatic observation by Saint-Just: “On ne peut gouverner sans amis.”33 The Robespierrist friendship network gave rise to resentment amongst other Jacobins who felt excluded from power by their position outside this network.34

The only way that seemed to prove one’s authenticity beyond doubt was to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for the public good – to give up one’s own life.35 This was political power as self-sacrifice rather than self-advancement. It was apparent in the way in which the Jacobin leaders faced up to the dangers of assassination.36 Lest the deputies ever felt inclined to forget the risks of assassination, they could contemplate David’s iconic paintings of the deaths of Marat and Lepeletier which hung in the Convention, ever before their eyes. The message was clear: the blades of assassins could be close at hand, and virtuous politicians must be prepared to sacrifice their lives for the patrie.37 The paintings were intended to inspire the deputies with thoughts of heroic virtue, but the daily sight

(33) SAINT-JUST, « Fragment divers » in SAINT-JUST, Oeuvres complètes, p. 960.
(35) On revolutionary self-sacrifice see LINTON, Choosing Terror, chap. 11.
of them may also have helped to make the deputies anxious and uneasy, though this was unacknowledged, or sublimated into rhetoric about the devotion to the patrie. These paintings served to remind the deputies that martyrdom was not just a rhetoric: death in the service of the Revolution was a very real possibility.

Given the unpopularity in many quarters of the Jacobin leadership in the Year Two it is remarkable how relatively unprotected they were, particularly in comparison with the kings of the old regime, or with Napoleon. They did not live in palaces; they did not have armed guards. For Robespierre, the fact that he lived as a lodger in another man’s house enabled him to demonstrate the compatibility between his public persona and his private life. His modest domestic arrangements thus had a notable effect on how public opinion viewed his reputation. Two attempts were made to assassinate Robespierre in May 1794. In both instances the would-be assassin went first to Robespierre’s lodgings in the Duplay house where Robespierre, like Marat, was guarded by little more than his devoted women-folk. When Robespierre went to the Convention he was probably accompanied by one or two friends, and that was all.

On 6 Prairial the attempted assassinations were discussed, in dramatic scenes at the Jacobin Club.\(^{(38)}\) It had been suggested that the Jacobin leaders, above all Robespierre, should be protected by guards. Legendre advised « les patriotes à redoubler de surveillance et d’activité, et à ne point laisser aller seuls les représentants du peuple, dont l’existence est très utile à la République »\(^{(39)}\). He offered to place himself between the revolutionary leaders and the blades of their would-be assassins. Legendre’s proposal was countered first by Dumas, who said that never would the representatives of the people countenance « la proposition faite de donner une garde aux représentants » even one with the name « garde d’amitié ». The representatives, he said, knew that they were already protected – by the people.\(^{(40)}\) Couthon also spoke to counter the proposal, but went further in attacking the motives of the men behind it:

On a parlé de nous donner des gardes. J’aime à croire que cette proposition est partie d’une intention pure; mais je dirai qu’il n’y a que les despotes qui veulent avoir des gardes, et que nous ne sommes pas faits pour leur être assimilés. Nous n’avons pas besoin de gardes pour nous defender;

\(^{(38)}\) 8 Prairial (27 May 1794), in AULARD, Société des Jacobins, t. 6, p. 146-8.
\(^{(39)}\) Ibid., p.150.
\(^{(40)}\) Ibid., 151.
c’est la vertu, c’est la confiance du peuple et la Providence qui veillent sur
nos jours.\(^{41}\)

Couthon claimed that the greatest dangers stemmed from those who
were close at hand, « la plupart des hommes qui nous environnent, et qui
veulent paraître les plus ardents patriotes, sont souvent nos plus cruels
ennemis » – that is, the ‘enemy within’, in which number Couthon probably
included Legendre himself.\(^{42}\) Why were the Jacobin leaders so determined
not to have bodyguards when they knew perfectly well that many people
(whether agents of Pitt or acting on their own initiative) hated them? The
answer lies, partly at least, in the importance to them of demonstrating the
authenticity of their identity as men of virtue. If they were to maintain
credibility as men of virtue then they had to be accessible to the public.

Robespierre feared that his enemies amongst the Jacobins were trying
to use the assassination attempts to blacken his public image, showing him
as a would-be king, who was personally vindictive against his enemies.\(^{43}\)
By the summer of 1794 Robespierre had cause to suspect that his most
dangerous enemies were not royalists, or counter-revolutionaries, but some
of his fellow Jacobins, men who under a mask of friendship, were conspiring
to destroy him. It was a fear that, as the events of Thermidor were to show,
was amply justified.

Contested views of Robespierre’s true identity continued in the years
after his death. It was in the interests of the Thermidoreans to vindicate their
own actions by undermining his image as a man of virtue. This process
began in the hours after his arrest with the fabrication of the story that
Robespierre had planned to marry Louis XVI’s daughter.\(^{44}\) Fréron, who
had been at school with Robespierre provided an account of Robespierre’s
private life for Courtois which portrayed Robespierre as, amongst other
allegations, an excessive drinker, who renounced this in the last months of
his life due to « la crainte de laisser échapper son secret ». Fréron asserted
that whenever Robespierre left his home he « ne marchait qu’armé d’une
paire de pistolets, et ses gardes de corps affidés l’accompagnaient partout »;
whilst some bodyguards placed themselves in readiness in the streets

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 152.
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 153.
\(^{43}\) For a cogent discussion of the ways in which Robespierre’s enemies amongst the Jacobins
used the assassination attempts against him, see Jean-Clément MARTIN, Violence et révolution: essais
\(^{44}\) Bronislaw BACZKO, Ending the Terror: The French Revolution After Robespierre,
Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 12-3; and Françoise BRUNEL, Thermidor: La
where he would pass, in order to given him prompt help if he should be attacked. The stories were implausible, but they show the Thermidoreans perfectly appreciated the need to crush the image of Robespierre as a man of genuine virtue. Fréron’s account became part of the mythologisation of Robespierre’s posthumous reputation. The Thermidoreans fabricated a series of imaginative stories designed to how that the private lives of the Robespierrists had been characterised by vice rather than virtue. Sexual hypocrisy featured strongly in these stories. Thus, Barras asserted that Robespierre had kept numerous concubines; furthermore, Robespierre, Saint-Just and Couthon had maintained secret palaces in the countryside round Paris, where they engaged in wild dissipation and orgies.

This negative depiction of the Robespierrists, begun by the Thermidoreans, was taken up and amplified by a series of royalist writers eager to expose the tawdry underside of ‘Jacobin virtue’. The most comprehensive of these accounts was by Montjoie, Histoire de la Conjuration de Maximilien Robespierre in 1795. Amongst other accusations Montjoie asserted that Robespierre, had a taste « pour le libertinage ». In addition to conducting a liaison with his landlord’s daughter, he had recourse to prostitutes whom he procured with « la terreur ou l’argent ». Montjoie denied that Robespierre was capable of sincere feeling for others, « il avoit des complices, et pas un seul ami ». The marquis de Ferrières did not endorse the unlikely image of Robespierre as a libertine, saying that he was, « sobre, laborieux, austère dans ses moeurs ». Yet he agreed with the account of Robespierre as « un fourbe dévoré d’une sourde ambition qu’il cachait avec art sous un faux semblant de popularité », held back by « son défaut de naissance » and « peu de fortune », and jealous of people higher up the social scale. According to the marquis, Robespierre saw the Revolution opening up « un vaste champ à l’intrigue et à l’ambition » in which he might further his own interest.

(46) See the claims made by Barras, Le Moniteur, réimp., 29 Thermidor, t. 21, p. 497. Barras’ imaginative account of Robespierre at the centre of a ‘sex and vice scandal’ formed the basis for many similar allegations, for example: J. LEBLANC, Vies secrètes et politiques de Couthon, Saint-Just, Robespierre jeune, complices du tyran Robespierre, et assassins de la république, Paris, Prévost, l’an II de la république française, p. 29-30.
(47) MONTJOIE (F.L.C. VENTRE DE LA TOULOBRE, known as Galart de Montjoie), Histoire de la Conjuration de Maximilien Robespierre, Paris, Chez les marchands de nouveautés, 1795, p. 216.
(48) Ibid.
By depicting the Robespierrists as lacking authentic virtue, Montjoie and subsequent detractors tried to undercut the possibility that future generations would see the Robespierrists as political models to emulate. The portrayal of Robespierre as a hypocrite, motivated by desire for power and envy of others, was intended to undermine the legitimacy of the revolutionary project by depicting it the consequence of small-minded human greed and duplicity rather than magnanimity and concern for others.

In stark contrast, Robespierre’s defenders spoke of his personal virtues as a way of defending his integrity in public life. Two of his earliest, most important defenders were women. For his sister, Charlotte he was a paragon of virtue; whilst for Elizabeth Le Bas (née Duplay), the integrity of Robespierre and the friends and political comrades who died with him was demonstrated by the fact that none of them had profited personally from their time in power, « ces hommes si vertueux sous tous les rapports; ils sont tous morts pauvres ».50

Robespierre’s political strength owed much to the conviction with which he presented himself as a man of virtue and his relative success in convincing his hearers that his commitment to virtue was authentic. However, this authenticity was repeatedly contested by his opponents who declared his assumption of virtue to be a mask for ambition. Robespierre’s experience illustrates the irresolvable problems for a politician in assuming the identity of a man of virtue. Whilst this identity could be empowering, it was also open to manipulation. Robespierre showed himself to be keenly aware of these problems. He understood that words alone in the mouth of a politician were meaningless if not reinforced by his actions, by his private conduct, and ultimately by his own body which he had to be prepared to sacrifice to prove his authenticity. Like his fellow Jacobins, Robespierre was constrained by the need to live up to the ideology he professed. From early 1792, anxiety over revolutionaries’ authentic motives were heightened by the crime of lèse-nation, whereby revolutionary politicians accused of corruption and ambition were recast as conspirators in league with France’s enemies and thus deserving of death. Doubts over authenticity underlay one of the most ruthless forms of terror – the politicians’ terror – which was fuelled by suspicion over rival revolutionaries’ inner motives. Robespierre’s

---

50 Elizabeth LE BAS, « Manuscrit de Mme Le Bas », in STÉFANE-POL [pseudonym of Paul Coutant], (ed.), Autour de Robespierre: le Conventionnel Le Bas, d’après des documents inédits et les mémoires de sa veuve, Paris, Earnest Flammarion, 1901, p. 147. It was Elizabeth Le Bas who hid some of Robespierre’s papers, including drafts of his speech on 8 Thermidor; papers which remained in the keeping of her descendants for over 200 years, and only came to light in 2011.
opponents, including royalists, Brissotins and Thermidoreans, homed in on this same pivotal point – the authenticity of Robespierre’s identity as a man of virtue. The nature of Robespierre’s authentic self was the subject of contention between himself and his opponents; it became part of a battlefield over the legitimacy of the Revolution, and even of the morality of the recourse to terror. It is a battle that continues to be fiercely contested even in the present.

Marisa LINTON
Kingston University, Penrhyn Road, Kingston Upon Thames, KT1 2EE, GB
m.linton@kingston.ac.uk