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Le moment thermidorien – un « laboratoire politique » ?

A Conversation between

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Les différentes contributions réunies par Laura Mason permettent de mesurer le regain d'intérêt porté au moment thermidorien. Après les travaux désormais classiques de Bronislaw Baczko, de Sergio Luzzatto (...), il s'agit désormais de mieux comprendre les dynamiques politiques, sociales, culturelles à l'œuvre autour desquelles s'organise une nouvelle majorité politiques au sein de la Convention entre novembre-décembre 1794.

Jean-Luc CHAPPEY (JLC) : Pourriez-vous expliquer l'intérêt porté au « moment thermidorien » : qu'est-ce qui peut justifier le renouveau historiographique récent sur cette période ?

Laura Mason (LM): I think our present interest in Thermidor is rooted in two overlapping bodies of historical work. First, there is the groundbreaking scholarship on the period itself by Bronislaw Baczko, Sergio Luzzatto, and Jean-Clément Martin, which raised new questions about Thermidor by challenging the assertion that Robespierre's defeat marked a fundamental rupture. Baczko was the first to propose a more complex relationship between Terror and Thermidor than one of action and reaction. He underscored how uncertainly the Thermidorians extricated France from a political moment they had themselves constructed. Luzzatto and Martin placed Thermidor on a broad historical continuum, highlighting its creativity by explaining how Thermidorians appropriated (and not just repudiated) existing political and cultural practices, some of which dated from the Old Regime. All three of these historians rejected claims by Thermidorians and modern historians like Albert Mathiez that this was a moment outside of the French Revolution, encouraging further investigation into how Thermidor continued and reconfigured the Revolution. Baczko's claims to the contrary notwithstanding, I think all three works raise the question of whether Thermidor did or even could end the Revolution.

Secondly, the new historiography of the Directory which has emerged over the last twenty or so years plays an important part in bringing our attention to Thermidor as a significant link between the radical and conservative phases of revolution and republic alike. This historiography—originated by Isser Woloch in 1970 and elaborated more than a generation later by Pierre Serna, Bernard Gainot, Suzanne Desan, Howard Brown, Christine Le Bozec, James Livesey, and Andrew Jainchill—challenged nineteenth-century accounts of a corrupt, apolitical Directory and bypassed the twentieth-century focus on how revolutions begin and radicalize to ask, instead, how revolutions end, why the first republic failed, and what it bequeathed to the nineteenth century. In so doing, they send us to Thermidor as the origin of the Directory's institutions and key political debates.

But none of this historiography unfolded in an ivory tower. Like so much scholarship on the French Revolution, it grew up at the intersection between academic priorities and contemporary concerns. I've always thought it apt that Bronislaw Baczko's *Ending the Terror* was published in 1989, the year that the Berlin Wall came down. Although Baczko wrote his book well before then, it resonated powerfully with the moment in which it was published. I believe he wrestles there with his own disaffection with Soviet communism, just as François Furet did through the Terror but in a more nuanced way. *Ending the Terror* acknowledges some of Thermidor's shortcomings as it addresses the conundrum of how men responsible for the state violence and ideological conformity of the Terror challenged it. But I think Baczko was also hopeful about the period, persuaded that, whatever its failings, Thermidor produced a more just, lawful, and peaceful republic.

I think many of us who have written since 1989 are not so sure. The bitter disappointments that followed 1989—the West's failure to learn from the end of the Cold War and the renewal of civil wars, genocide, and despotism across the globe—have badly challenged our sense of historical hopefulness. The sour experience of the past quarter-century has encouraged many of us to more comprehensively examine Thermidor's limits, balancing the will to restore civil liberties against the will to power and confronting the perhaps insurmountable problem of emerging from violence.

JLC : Il semble que les perspectives méthodologiques choisies se rattachent à une approche privilégiant l'analyse des trajectoires individuelles (Lebon, Fréron...). Pourriez-vous justifier cette orientation ? Qu'apporte le fait de passer par l'étude de telles trajectoires individuelles ?

The second forum's focus on the individual was something of a happy accident, but it reflects the political dynamic of the Thermidorian moment. The deputies and journalists who condemned the Terror after Robespierre's defeat found themselves in the doubly difficult position of challenging a divided, recalcitrant Convention and vilifying a political movement for which they were at least partially responsible. Personality aided them in both cases. In the first instance, men like Fréron and Tallien used their celebrity, fostered through strategic legislative speeches and by their own newspapers, to mobilize extra-legislative activism and strengthen their position in the Convention. In the second instance, naming specific individuals as guilty for the Terror spared the Convention and the nation a difficult conversation about shared responsibility and simplified the search for

justice by letting the acts of a few people stand in for the complex social, political, and judicial forces that were at play in the Terror. Both articles in the second forum try to excavate the forces that personality obscured after Thermidor by taking an approach more micro-historical than biographical; in other words, they use particular lives to illuminate the broader causes and consequences of one person's notoriety.

I think it's telling that the articles emphasizing personality are the ones which focus on innovation during the Thermidorian period. In contrast, the articles of the first forum, which identify continuities across Thermidor that linked Terror and Directory, say much less about individual trajectories. That's because the essays by Colin Jones, Mette Harder, and Jeremy Popkin are concerned with more long-term and broadly based political developments that would be ill-served by focusing on a single individual.

Looking beyond our concern with the Thermidorians themselves, I would add that the second forum's emphasis on the individual also serves the historiographical project of making Thermidor and the Directory better known. There is a long and worthy debate about how narrative distorts our appreciation of the past, and the French Revolution in particular, but it continues to serve a useful function in making complex periods more readily accessible to the uninitiated. Narrative acts as a through-line, an organizing principle for moments of great complexity and eventfulness. Historians can and do contest the emphases of particular narratives or produce monographs that eschew narrative altogether, but it was narrative that brought many of us into dialogue with the past in the first place. A narrative that focuses on the individual can enhance the dialogue by marrying the intimacy of a single life to the broader contours of its historical moment, offering a singular vantage point from which to explore an unfamiliar era.

There is a crying need for more narratives, of all sorts, about the second half of the revolutionary decade. While there are competing interpretations of the revolutionary narrative of *before* 9 Thermidor, we are all pretty much agreed on principal themes, significant events, and the relevant cast of characters. The Revolution *after* 9 Thermidor remains far less familiar to all but specialists. General histories of the era, which are in any case far outnumbered by specialized monographs, tend still to chronicle events or dwell on high politics at the expense of other trends during the period. (Think of the many surveys of the Directory that begin with a detailed explanation of its peculiar executive and then tick off coups to arrive quickly at the more dramatic era of Napoleon). What the monographs of the past generation have done is broaden our sense of the key actors and principal debates of post-9 Thermidor. We are ready for a general history of the period which draws in a fuller cast of characters while elaborating an analytic narrative that highlights key themes and integrates social, political, and cultural dynamics.

JLC : Une des points originaux de votre propre étude sur Fréron est de montrer l'originalité du moment thermidorien dans la construction d'un réel discours contre-révolutionnaire et anti-républicain : vous étudiez l'émergence d'un activisme de droite qui rompt et se détache de la position contre-révolutionnaire traditionnelle (héritée du combat contre les Lumières et centrée autour de la défense du « trône et de l'autel »). Pourriez-vous expliciter ce qui vous semble réellement original dans la construction politique d'un discours contre-révolutionnaire ou anti-républicain durant cette période, en particulier à travers la place

accordée au peuple. Cette question permettrait ainsi d'aborder la question du « populisme » que l'on pourrait mieux définir, en précisant les enjeux politiques : la position de Fréron me semble en effet originale car elle propose une critique contre la construction politique, sociale et culturelle mise en place sous Thermidor et légitimée par la Constitution de l'an III. Pourriez-vous ainsi revenir sur les conditions, les modalités et les enjeux de cette construction d'une radicalité de droite pendant le moment républicain ?

LM : Stanislas Fréron's career suggests that the French Revolution produced a political Right almost as heterogeneous as its political Left. And yet we have, until now, focused only on the Right that was backward-looking in its determination to defend the church and restore the political arrangements of the Old Regime. Fréron and others like him call our attention to right-wing projects to preserve but reshape the republic. Fréron himself did so using a strategy we have associated with direct democracy: the newspaper that made personalized and emotional appeals directly to "the people." He is significant for transforming that democratic instrument into a populist weapon, using the tools of men like Marat and Hébert to combat democracy and insurgency on behalf of an authoritarian state.

Can we call Fréron a counter-revolutionary? Not insofar as he continued to endorse the abolition of privilege and the monarchy and to at least pay lip service to the principles of free press and popular sovereignty. However, his project during Thermidor does raise the question of how long a republic can remain a republic when the state is busily accumulating power.

What is undeniable is that Fréron was a reactionary demagogue. As such, he illuminates the reactionary impulses of supposedly more centrist republicans. Men like Boissy d'Anglas, the principal author of the constitution of 1795, refused to stoop to Fréron's methods or rhetoric but appropriated his ideas to justify scrapping the constitution of 1793 and crafting a more conservative republic. To make such an argument about the relationship between center and right during Thermidor may seem too presentist: I'm afraid we can all think of far too many supposedly centrist politicians who have, in recent decades, attracted constituents by appropriating the positions of the extreme right. But I think a critical dialogue between past and present encourages us to pose new questions of events we think we already know.

JLC : Un des points majeurs du renouvellement historiographique que vous proposez est de prendre au sérieux le « projet » politique de ce moment thermidorien. Loin d'être une simple période de « transition » qui serait « vidée » d'un réel projet/discours politique, les différentes contributions réunies dans ces volumes montrent qu'il y a la mise en place d'un véritable projet politique qu'il soit en faveur de la République ou en faveur de la contre-révolution. "Thermidor" ne saurait ainsi se réduire à une période de recomposition individuelle, de simple « politique politicienne » réduite à un jeu mené par des « girouettes ». Pourriez-vous définir en quelques lignes ce qui vous paraît important dans ces innovations politiques de la période thermidorienne ? Pourquoi peut-on parler d'une « modernité » politique pour cette séquence chronologique ?

LM : Bronislaw Baczko was effectively the first historian to make a sustained case for Thermidor as the site of something more than reaction or transition. Historians who follow in his footsteps

have highlighted a revitalization of civil society which renewed public debate (Luzzatto) and advanced modern religious practice (Suzanne Desan), liberalism (Andrew Jainchill), and notions of accountability (Ronen Steinberg). All are undeniably critical features of the era. But, having abolished the canard of Thermidor as a period of reversal or transition, we risk new caricature if we emphasize only progressive achievement or overstate Thermidor's victory over the Terror. To fully appreciate the period's complexity, we've got to look more closely at its conservative and reactionary qualities.

The relationship between the before and after of 9 Thermidor was painfully complex, and it is within those complexities that we can locate some of the shortcomings of the "after." Thermidorians decried many features of the Terror's political culture yet failed to eliminate them. Exceptional justice was, for example, roundly condemned; however, the Convention preserved the revolutionary tribunal for almost a year beyond 9 Thermidor and, as Mette Harder has shown, continued to purge deputies considered too outspoken or out of step with the majority. Thermidorians criticized Montagnard assaults on civil liberties but continued to encroach on free speech and assembly. Tallien famously damned a "system of terror" that pitted citizens against one another even as he and his allies encouraged familiar practices of denunciation while officials in the Midi turned a blind eye to popular retributive violence.

My point here is not to accuse the Thermidorians of hypocrisy but to suggest how incomplete was the process of "ending the Terror." I think we can more properly say that rather than ending the Terror, Thermidorians refined many of its practices and bequeathed them to the Directory.

Equally important, Thermidorian innovations were not always commendable. As Thermidorians challenged the Terror's worst failings, they simultaneously attacked some of its greatest achievements. This dimension of the era is visible in its renewal of social, political, and gender hierarchies. The Convention abolished wage and price maximums with the conviction that this was the best way to revitalize the economy. But legislators' unwillingness to ameliorate the costs of that deregulation for ordinary people—in particular, their refusal to confront the famine of 1794-95—suggests an indifference that stands in sharp contrast to the ideal of "fair shares for all" that Jean-Pierre Gross locates in the year II. Similarly, the Convention's resort to armed force after the insurrections of Germinal and Prairial is understandable in light of its determination to temper the undue influence of the Paris crowd and regularize political practice. But this was just one feature of a more comprehensive hostility to popular political activity, which was visible in the state's concerted assault on activism of any sort, its silencing of the popular contribution to Robespierre's defeat, which Colin Jones has described, and the assembly's exclusion of universal male suffrage from the constitution of 1795. And let us not forget that Thermidor witnessed the beginning of a backlash against egalitarian family reform that would culminate in the Civil Code, as Suzanne Desan has made amply clear.

Again, my point here is not to flatly condemn the Thermidorians, but to insist on the need to weigh their shortcomings against their achievements. Unless we balance both dimensions of the period, we cannot fully appreciate the paradoxical quality of many of its achievements, such as the determination to hold some deputies legally responsible for the Terror's excesses, about which Ronen Steinberg and Howard Brown have written, and the refusal to restore slavery that Jeremy

Popkin has analyzed. Without a more acute appreciation of Thermidor's paradoxes, we cannot fully appreciate the complexity of its legacy to the Directory.

JLC: Un des points importants de l'étude est de réfléchir au lien entre les innovations politiques de Thermidor et la genèse politique du projet républicain du Directoire. Pourriez-vous expliciter ce qui vous semble original dans les apports théoriques et intellectuels de la construction politique sous Thermidor au projet du Directoire ? Pourriez-vous encore revenir sur l'idée selon laquelle la construction politique thermidorienne pourrait finalement expliquer les « limites » (comme, peut-être, l'impossible construction d'un pluralisme politique) ou fragilités politiques du Directoire ?

LM : The Directory's modernity was rooted in that of Thermidor. I agree with those historians who argue that the era's desire to create a stable, liberal republic was modern. But we cannot say that is the full extent of its modernity, any more than we can say that the history of France and the West has been a Whiggish one of growing inclusiveness and social justice. Modern history has, on the contrary, witnessed an on-going struggle between inclusionary and exclusionary forces. In that regard, too, Thermidor and the Directory were modern. The political elites of those eras accepted the principle of popular sovereignty and fostered new commercial forces, but many of them also believed that stability and prosperity demanded the exclusion of certain groups from political society and restriction of their access to state benefits and institutions.

The conviction that political and social stability required exclusion produced many of the Directory's failings and, ultimately, its demise. The conviction that liberal republicanism belonged to a narrow sliver of the population, which did not include women, working people, or growing numbers of activists on the right and left, encouraged the Directory to preserve order by making assaults on civil liberties and resorting to the purge and electoral tampering that brought the republic to the fatal moment of 18 Brumaire. Thermidorian aspirations may have generated the Directory's republican legacy to the nineteenth century, but Thermidorian fears help explain why that legacy was not fully realized for almost a century. Thermidor and the Directory were modern, but modern in a complex way that foreshadows on-going struggles for political power and access to material and cultural resources in the centuries that followed.

JLC : Dans la continuité de cette dernière question, pourriez-vous revenir sur ce qui vous semble essentiel – d'un point de vue théorique, institutionnel et biographique – dans le processus que l'on peut définir sous la notion d'invention de la Terreur ?

LM: When describing Thermidor's "invention of the Terror," Annie Jourdan remarks in passing, "La Convention thermidorienne se détache de la période précédente, non point en proclamant des lois plus tolérantes et moins coercitives, mais en imitant, voire en surpassant ses prédécesseurs par la sévérité des mesures que voile la douceur des euphémismes."¹ This is an essential point, which Pierre Serna makes as well in *La république des girouettes* and which merits further examination. A critical part of the invention of the Terror was not just Thermidor's demonizing of it. It was,

¹ Annie Jourdan, "Les discours de la terreur à l'époque révolutionnaire (1776–1798) : Étude comparative sur une notion ambiguë," *French Historical Studies* 36:1 (Winter 2013): 69.

too, the obscuring of how Thermidor sustained certain aspects of the Terror by continuing to strengthen the state at the expense of civil liberties, rule of law, and popular activism. A more comprehensive examination of this dimension of Thermidor can only clarify its aspirations and illusions and those of the Directory. It ought also to encourage us to re-examine the early revolution and early republic. The overwhelming tendency to stop the history of the Revolution at 9 Thermidor has reinforced the pathologizing of the Terror by preventing us from appreciating the degree to which its innovations—both good and bad—were not cut short by Robespierre's defeat but, on the contrary, were sustained, reformed, and reinterpreted. By reintegrating all the Revolution, we may still better understand how the whole decade refashioned French politics, culture, and society.

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