FOREWORD BY DAVID A. BELL AND HUGO DROCHON

THE ENGRAVING, stark and horrible, shows a forest of guillotines. In the foreground, a man wearing a plumed hat and a tricolor sash, his feet trampling the French constitutions of 1791 and 1793, is dropping the blade on a helpless victim. Behind him stands a funerary monument inscribed with the words “Here lies all of France.” The caption reads: “Robespierre, guillotining the executioner after having had all the French guillotined.”¹

This is still the image that much of the world has of Maximilien Robespierre (1758–1794): a bloodthirsty monster, the mastermind of the French Revolutionary “Reign of Terror.” Yet Robespierre also has his admirers, who praise him as a true egalitarian and a precursor of socialism and continue to push to have a street named after him in Paris.² Few if any figures from the eighteenth century are still capable of provoking as intense an emotional response as this remarkably unemotional man. As Marcel Gauchet puts it in the title of this book, Robespierre is “the man who divides us the most.”

Gauchet, who has generated his own share of division in his long career as one of France’s leading intellectuals, has not written a biography of Robespierre. The book has nothing on the man’s childhood, nor indeed on any of his life before its last five years, during the French Revolution. There is nothing on his private life, nor on his relationships, personal or political, with others. There is no “setting of the scene.” Neither is the book a pure study of Robespierre’s ideas, or an attempt to relate his thought to the things he read, although there are a few invocations of Rousseau, whom he worshipped. And this is not a traditional work of scholarship. There are no footnotes, no original archival research, no explicit engagement with the historiography. Instead Gauchet bases his interpretation almost solely on Robespierre’s speeches, which, as he indicates, are easily found in his *Complete Works*.

The book then, as Gauchet states in his preface, is rather an interpretative essay, and one that operates on three distinct levels. Most obviously, it provides a new and challenging interpretation of Robespierre’s thought

1. Robespierre guillotinant le boureau après avoir fait guillot.r. tous les Français : cy gyt toute la France : [estampe], <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/frenchrevolution/catalog/tno47jn388o>.

2. See for instance <https://www.facebook.com/groups/351361054945737>.

and action—especially in regard to human rights—between 1789 and 1794. It also uses Robespierre as a lens through which to understand the French Revolution more broadly. Finally, it uses Robespierre and the French Revolution together to ponder the great problem of how modern society freed itself, in Gauchet’s words, “from immemorial submission to divine authority,” and established “the idea of power legitimately created and exercised by human beings,” with state sovereignty and individual liberty existing in harmony. For Gauchet, Robespierre is a tragic figure because he hoped to lay the foundations of the rights-respecting liberal-democratic order which we now venerate but could not escape from a fatally inappropriate vision of the people for whose rights he was fighting, and, instead of harmony, generated horror. He stands in one sense as an inspiration, but in another as a warning.

In this introduction, we will first provide our own brief sketch of Robespierre, for readers who may not have the familiarity that Gauchet could assume on the part of his French audience. We will then discuss Gauchet himself, and his prominent place in French intellectual life, and conclude with a consideration of the book and its significance.

Maximilien Robespierre lived the first five-sixths of his life without giving any indication that he would play a significant role in world history. An ambitious scholarship boy from the northern French town of Arras, he trained as a lawyer, and by his thirtieth birthday seemed destined for a future as a lonely pillar of his local bar association. Fussy, physically unimpressive, sexually repressed but intelligent and hardworking, he had a moderate reputation for taking on “enlightened” cases.³

Then, in 1789, France’s Old Regime collapsed amid fiscal crisis and political paralysis. An ancient representative body called the Estates General transformed itself into a National Assembly and pledged to write a new constitution, amid considerable popular violence, including the storming of the Bastille in Paris. After decreeing the abolition of key forms of “feudal” privilege, the Assembly issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and moved forward with many other ambitious reforms. The French Revolution had begun.

3. There have been numerous biographies of Robespierre. Two of the best and most recent are Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012) and Hervé Leuwers, *Robespierre* (Paris: Fayard, 2014). See also the essay by Jean-Clément Martin, *Robespierre: La fabrication d’un monstre* (Paris: Perrin, 2016).

As one of the twelve hundred members of the Assembly, Robespierre did not initially make much of an impression. But his passionate, closely argued speeches gradually gained him notice, as did his leading role in the political society that came to be known as the Jacobins. He argued that France should abolish the death penalty, renounce aggressive warfare, grant the right to vote to all adult men, and transform the monarchy into nothing but the passive agent of the national will. He lived simply, in rooms rented from a carpenter, and preached the virtues of austerity. His admirers named him “the Incorruptible.”

For three years, between 1789 and 1792, Robespierre remained in this position of opposition, which led him (and many others) to what Gauchet considers a phantasmagorical exaggeration of the evil intentions of the people he opposed. At the same time, Robespierre became the focus of numerous attacks. Although even his allies warned him against “making a spectacle of yourself,” he did constantly draw attention to himself, in a very Rousseauian form of moral exhibitionism. Indeed, as early as the spring of 1792 he was accused of aspiring to dictatorship.

As the Revolution turned more radical, his influence grew, and he increasingly cast himself as a champion of “the people” against counterrevolutionary conspirators. After popular militants overthrew King Louis XVI in August of 1792, leading to the proclamation of France’s First Republic, he was elected to a new governing body, the National Convention. There, as part of a faction known as the Mountain, he led the fight for the king’s execution, and for the implementation of ambitious and innovative new social programs, allying himself with the urban militants known as the *sans-culottes*. In the spring of 1793, armed sans-culottes forced the Convention to purge a rival faction, the so-called Girondins, after which Robespierre emerged as the most important and most visible political figure in France. He was no longer in opposition; he was in government.

Throughout 1793 and early 1794 the French Revolution struggled to survive, as its forces fought both a broad European military coalition and domestic rebels. The Convention’s twelve-man Committee of Public Safety, which Robespierre joined in July 1793, functioned as something close to a collective dictatorship, directing military efforts and ruthlessly suppressing dissent. Thousands of alleged counterrevolutionaries were put to death, both after hasty trials and in massacres following the defeat of rebel forces. In a series of brilliant speeches and legislative reports, Robespierre defended the need for extraordinary government action and for the use of terror against the Revolution’s enemies. He also sought to unite the French in utopian celebration of a deist “Supreme Being.”

By the spring and early summer of 1794 the Committee's efforts had defeated the threats to the Revolution, but the repression only accelerated. Leading radicals turned on each other, and Robespierre succeeded in purging more rivals from the Convention, sending both his oldest friend Camille Desmoulins and the great orator Georges Danton to their deaths. The Revolution was devouring its own. On July 26–8 Thermidor by the new Revolutionary calendar—Robespierre gave a long, rambling speech that seemed to threaten yet more colleagues. The next day, a group of them denounced him, and, in a dramatic confrontation, the Convention as a whole turned against him and voted his arrest. His allies in the Paris Commune (the municipal government) rescued him and desperately tried to mobilize the *sans-culottes*, but the Convention moved more decisively. On 10 Thermidor, in the company of his closest ally and greatest admirer, the young Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, Robespierre went to the guillotine.

The men who overthrew him, known as the Thermidorians, had themselves participated enthusiastically in the repression, but now, to justify their action, they brought it to an end and placed all the blame for it on Robespierre's severed head. They denounced him as a bloodthirsty monster and claimed he had presided over a "system of terror" (they also coined two words with an impressive future: "terrorism" and "terrorist"). It was the beginning of the black legend that continues to dominate the popular image of the man, especially outside of France.⁴

Robespierre's reputation has changed over time. In nineteenth-century France, historians tended to refight the Revolution more than to analyze it. But even those most inclined to celebrate the events of 1789–1794, including the great Jules Michelet, generally took their distance from Robespierre. In the early twentieth century, though, he found an eloquent champion in the Communist historian Albert Mathiez, who praised Robespierre as an idealistic, sincerely egalitarian statesman driven (much like Joseph Stalin) to harsh but necessary measures because of the extraordinary dangers the Revolution faced from its enemies.⁵ Throughout much of the century, the leading historians connected to the Sorbonne's Institute for the History of the French Revolution, and the pointedly named Society for Robespierriest Studies, defended versions of this thesis. Today, some historians belonging to this tradition argue that the repressive measures of 1793–94 reflected the

4. On this subject, see Martin, *Robespierre*, and Bronislaw Baczko, *Comment sortir de la Terreur: Thermidor et la Révolution* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

5. See notably the posthumous material collected in Albert Mathiez et al., *Études sur Robespierre, 1758–1794* (Paris: Messidor, 1988).

actions of a weak central government desperately trying to prevent broader eruptions of popular bloodshed.⁶

In the 1970s, however, the influential ex-Communist historian and intellectual François Furet developed a very different interpretation of the French Revolution. For Furet, the forces that radicalized the Revolution, and drove it toward terror, were not the external ones of counterrevolutionary opposition. Rather, a pathological internal dynamic rooted in an inability to conceive of sovereign power as divisible, and therefore to treat political opposition as anything but treason and conspiracy, pushed the revolutionaries into a deadly spiral of accelerating violent competition. Robespierre, for Furet, represented the absolute distillation of this internal dynamic. “What makes Robespierre an immortal figure,” he wrote, “is not that he reigned over the Revolution for a few months, but that through him the Revolution spoke its purest and most tragic discourse.”⁷

Furet’s writings provoked vitriolic debate, especially during the Revolution’s bicentennial celebrations in the 1980s.⁸ Since then, the temperature of academic debate in French Revolutionary studies has dropped, in part because Furet, who died in 1997, had relatively few doctoral students who might have continued to develop his line of thought. But the broader late twentieth-century discussions in which he played a critical role continue to shape French intellectual life today, and in particular the work of influential writers such as Pierre Rosanvallon, Pierre Manent, Pierre Nora—and also the man whose work has focused most intently on the French Revolution: Marcel Gauchet.

In 1977 Furet was appointed President of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), the most prestigious research institute and graduate school in the social sciences in France. He immediately set up an informal politics discussion group, which was to be formalized in 1984 as the Institut Raymond Aron. The title honored the postwar French political theorist best known for his critique of the Marxism of Parisian

6. See notably Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et révolution: Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national* (Paris: Perrin, 2009); Sophie Wahnich, *La Liberté ou la Mort: Essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme* (Paris: Éditions de la Fabrique, 2003).

7. François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 87. This work of Furet's represents an important evolution beyond the study he cowrote with Denis Richet, *La Révolution* (Paris: Hachette, 1965).

8. See Steven Laurence Kaplan, *Adieu 89* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

intellectuals in his 1955 book *The Opium of the Intellectuals*—leading to an infamous spat with his former friend Jean-Paul Sartre.⁹ The *Centre Raymond Aron*, as it came to be known, continues to this day, going through a number of different titles. Furet was not only a preeminent historian of the French Revolution; he was also an able institution builder.

At its peak from the late 1970s to the early 2000s, the Centre brought together some of the leading French thinkers of the day—not least Furet himself—including the liberal-conservative Manent, the “*deuxième gauche*” theorist Rosanvallon (who was its director from 1992 to 2005), the antitotalitarian thinker Claude Lefort, and the historian of representative government Bernard Manin.¹⁰ Although united in its opposition to the ambient French Marxism, the group remained a diverse one which above all shared, in Rosanvallon’s words, an “ethos of discussion.”¹¹ The Centre is widely credited for having revived democratic thinking in France, and having been at the forefront of the renewal of the French liberal tradition, notably through engagement with the work of Montesquieu, Condorcet, Constant, Guizot, and Tocqueville.¹²

Another member was Gauchet. Lefort introduced Gauchet to Furet, and Furet invited him to join the early discussion group that prefigured the Centre. Furet’s impact on Gauchet’s life was significant. He introduced him to his brother-in-law Nora, the hugely influential publisher who became famous for his work on French identity and memory.¹³ In 1980 Nora asked Gauchet to become the editor of a new journal he was launching, *Le Débat*, which, until it ceased appearing in 2020, was one of France’s leading intellectual periodicals. In 1989, with the support of Nora and Furet, Gauchet also joined the EHESS, and became a formal member of the Centre. Furet had a significant impact on Gauchet’s thought, especially in the way he saw the French Revolution above all as a struggle over the meaning and application of egalitarian and democratic ideals.¹⁴

9. Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

10. Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Pierre Rosanvallon, *The New Social Question: Rethinking the Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

11. Pierre Rosanvallon, “Sur quelques chemins de traverse de la pensée du politique en France,” *Raisons politiques* 1, no. 1 (2001): 49–62.

12. See Hugo Drochon, “Raymond Aron’s ‘Machiavellian’ Liberalism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 80, no. 4 (2019): 621–42.

13. Pierre Nora, ed., *Rethinking France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001–2010).

14. See Furet, *Penser la Révolution*, and François Furet, *Revolutionary France: 1770–1880* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

Lefort was the other significant influence. Close to the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Lefort developed a theory of democracy that was to inform Gauchet's thinking. This was the idea of democracy as an "empty space": that after the beheading of the king the political body could no longer be incarnated, and that the desire to do so is a tyrannical—or indeed potentially totalitarian—one. Democracy is the recognition of the division of the social body and the institutionalization of conflict between its different parts, with the seat of power, now a mere collection of instruments, only being held temporarily by opposing groups that must make way for one another when their time is up. In this formulation democracy is characterized by its indeterminacy, with the concomitant ever-present desire—and threat—of wanting to fill that gap, to close the uncertainty, whether it is by a political leader (Führer, Duce) or (vanguard) party.¹⁵

Gauchet, who came from a provincial, Gaullist, Catholic working-class background—he grew up in rural Normandy—first prepared for a career as a secondary school teacher, but thanks to Lefort's influence while both were at the University of Caen, he decided to pursue an academic career. In many ways Gauchet represents a dying breed of students who were able to achieve social mobility through the meritocratic structures of what the French Third Republic had dubbed the *école républicaine*: the secular schools that the state had freed from religious control.

As a young man Gauchet had been a left-wing activist, joining demonstrations against the war in Algeria and the student protests of May 68. He seemed drawn toward anarchist and spontaneous movements, and already during his time at Caen had started to distance himself from the reigning Marxism. Since then, his direction of travel has no doubt been rightward, but the extent of it is hard to measure precisely. The accusation of being a "neo-reactionary" by fellow historian Daniel Lindenberg in 2002 went too far, but Gauchet has been known to offer conservative views on individualism, immigration, and Islam.¹⁶ Certainly "liberalism," one of the principal themes of the Centre Raymond Aron, is positioned to the center-right in France, with its emphasis on political pluralism and the free market. Compared to his colleagues in French academia, still dominated by the left, Gauchet certainly seems more conservative—and his appointment to the EHESS caused an uproar there. Yet he has expressed ambiguous views, for example, on Macron's presidency, seemingly welcoming it at first but since taking a more critical stance, and reacting strongly against the accusation

15. Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," in *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 9–20.

16. Daniel Lindenberg, *Le Rappel à l'ordre: Enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

of being solely a satrap to power. Gauchet has insisted he has always been and will remain a socialist, and the conclusion of his *Robespierre* will be the occasion to review where he stands politically today.

Over the course of his career Gauchet has authored a number of important works. His first, published by Gallimard in 1980, was written with his then partner Gladys Swain and translated by Princeton University Press in 2012 as *Madness and Democracy: The Modern Psychiatric Universe*.¹⁷ In it Gauchet and Swain attacked Foucault's indictment of modern psychiatry as wanting to "lock the mad away," arguing instead that the asylum originally embodied the revolutionary—if dashed—hopes of curing the insane by saving the glimmer of sanity left in them. A subsequent book, single-authored this time, brought him to national and international attention. Again published by Gallimard in 1985, it was translated into English, with a foreword by Charles Taylor, by Princeton University Press in 1997 as *The Disenchantment of the World*.¹⁸ There Gauchet developed the ambitious thesis, perhaps linked to his own personal trajectory, of Christianity as the religion of the end or "exit" of religion: because Christianity, unlike other monotheistic creeds, recognizes a space for secular power—"render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's"—over time this allows humans to start running their own affairs, instead of following the dictates of an increasingly powerful, but also distant, God. This does not mean that religious belief has disappeared, but rather that religion, somewhat as in Nietzsche's thesis of the "death of God," no longer structures and legitimizes social and political life.

More recently Gauchet has written a four-volume history of democracy, from the French Revolution to today, under the broad title *The Advent of Democracy*.¹⁹ Throughout the four volumes he developed the distinction between what is known in French as *le politique* and *la politique*, a distinction that is difficult to render in English but that might be captured, respectively, by the difference between the foundational principles of political regimes and what might be more readily described as politics as such, namely the types of policies pursued by different rulers, and the power plays that occur between them.

There is a historical dimension to this distinction too: previous monarchical societies were organized, in theory, according to the "divine right of

17. Marcel Gauchet and Gladys Swain, *Madness and Democracy: The Modern Psychiatric Universe*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

18. Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

19. Marcel Gauchet, *L'avènement de la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007–2017).

kings,” with transcendental laws imposed from outside and above—namely from God—and with society organized along hierarchical, familial, tradition and holistic lines, where everyone knew their place in the global order of things. In a word: the Old Regime. After the French Revolution this “heteronomous” society was replaced by an “autonomous” one, in which the fundamental law is drawn immanently from society itself, natural right and equality are recognized, representation and political parties in the political system are accepted, and the individual takes precedence over the whole. Herein lies the distinction between *le* and *la politique*. Yet, “heteronomy” does not entirely disappear in the face of rising “autonomy”: there remains the need to maintain the original unity and principles upon which society itself is based, to offer a representation of the social order acting in common. Indeed, the process of increasing autonomy and individualization generates a kind of forgetfulness about its own preconditions: modern citizens come to view their freedom as an unconditioned fact about themselves, rather than as the product of a particular societal-political configuration grounded in the modern state, and that “fact” can be expanded to the point at which it threatens the very existence of the polity and the social fabric that emancipated the individual in the first place. For Gauchet, the hyper-individualism, globalization, and expansion of commercial activity since the 1970s and the advent of “neo-liberalism” has only exacerbated this tendency, and an echo of these views can be heard in his *Robespierre*.²⁰

Already in 1980, which proved to be a decisive year in his life (first book with Swain, meeting with Furet and Nora, and editorship of *Le Débat*), Gauchet penned what become a famous article entitled “Les droits de l’homme ne sont pas une politique” (“Human Rights are not a politics”), in which he sketched out some of these ideas.²¹ The immediate context was the desire of a part of the Parisian intelligentsia to show their support for Eastern European dissidents protesting communism. Given Marxism’s rejection of human rights, these intellectuals thought the defense of human rights was the best way to aid them in their struggle. Although Gauchet wholeheartedly agreed with the defense of individual rights, he warned that although human rights might provide the legitimate basis for a new regime, it offers no indication for how the relation between state and individual should be organized, and Gauchet condemned these thinkers (Foucault, Derrida, and others) for failing to formulate one. Here

20. Many thanks to Gregory Conti and William Selinger for helping to formulate this passage.

21. Marcel Gauchet, “Les droits de l’homme ne sont pas une politique,” *Le Débat* 3, no. 3 (1980): 3–21.

already we see the difference between *le politique* (human rights) and *la politique* (the need to construct a world together). In 1989 Gauchet would write a book directly on the seventeen articles of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 26 August 1789.²² Many of these themes have also found their way into his *Robespierre*, making it an ideal gateway into his thought.

As we have already indicated, *Robespierre* is not a conventional biography. Unlike the historian Peter McPhee, whose recent study of Robespierre's life places considerable emphasis on his pre-revolutionary experiences of social inequality, Gauchet states bluntly that such research is "futile . . . the events of 1789 made [Robespierre] another man, as though he had undergone a conversion." Gauchet also eschews any attempt to probe Robespierre's psychology, calling it something that "will forever remain impenetrable to us." For Gauchet, the Robespierre of 1789–94 was entirely shaped by the Revolution. "It was his destiny to grasp the motive forces of the Revolution better than anyone else, to make himself its spokesman and to reveal its meaning, as it were, to the actors themselves." The perspective is strikingly similar to Furet's.

Like Furet, Gauchet also sees the Revolution as having been driven forward by an essentially internal, political dynamic. The accelerating radicalization of 1789–93, and the systematic repression of 1793–94 both had their origin in the political stances adopted by the revolutionary movement as a whole in its early days. They proceeded neither from the need to rein in a wild, violent popular movement (summed up in Danton's famous apothegm, "let us be terrible to spare the people from being so"), nor from the need for emergency measures in the face of an existential threat.²³ Gauchet speaks of Robespierre's "delusional overestimation of the strength of opposition to the Revolution." Although his book does not come with a scholarly apparatus, he has clearly read and digested recent scholarship on the Revolution by the heirs of Mathiez and of the Sorbonne tradition (including especially the works of Jean-Clément Martin and Hervé

22. Marcel Gauchet, *La Révolution des droits de l'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989). See also Marcel Gauchet, *La Révolution des pouvoirs: La souveraineté, le peuple et la représentation (1789–1799)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

23. Cited in Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 135.

Leuwens), but still disagrees fundamentally with their approach to the subject.²⁴

Furet, however, saw the Revolution's radicalization as essentially pathological: a ruthless competition for power driven by the impossible ambition of setting an absolute sovereign people in place of the absolute monarch (Lefort's concept of the "empty space" left by the king had an influence here). Furet glimpsed in this pathology "the matrix of totalitarianism," and his horror at the crimes of Stalinism colored his interpretation of the earlier revolution and leached away his sympathy.²⁵

Gauchet, by contrast, in keeping with his professed socialism, has far more sympathy for the revolutionaries and the ends they pursued. As he writes: "The truth is that the ends were just and the means were horrifying." His Robespierre is more genuinely tragic than Furet's because—despite the man's ruthlessness, his self-aggrandizement, and his creeping paranoia—his ideal was a grand one.

How does a people rule itself, as opposed to submitting to a divinely anointed authority? This, according to Gauchet, was the fundamental question the French Revolution tried to answer. And Robespierre, he argues here, was the first to see with absolute clarity the principles upon which a democratic society could be based, namely the rights of man, that would replace the previous divine right of kings. This emphasis on human rights distinguishes Gauchet's reading of the French Revolution from both Furet's or indeed Lefort's. But if the rights of man answer the question of how to formulate *le politique*, they do not indicate how *la politique* should be conducted, namely what type of society should be built on those principles.

During the early stages of the Revolution, from the calling of the Estates General in 1789 through to August 1792, when he was in opposition to the king and to the then-dominant moderates, Robespierre used the rights of man to criticize the failings of the Revolution, in something of the same way Parisian intellectuals, according to Gauchet, used human rights to criticize the Eastern bloc after World War II. But as the Revolution continued, Robespierre had to formulate a positive vision of how society should be organized. Here, according to Gauchet, Robespierre failed, much as the French intellectuals of the twentieth century would also fail. He conjured up a fictive idea of "the people" who "always desire what is good" (even if "they do not always perceive what is good"), and

24. See references above.

25. Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, 232.

insisted, even as he forged a tactical alliance with the sans-culottes, that the problem of self-government could be solved by letting “the people” rule, initially without any real sense of how they would actually do so. In doing so, incidentally, he helped to reclaim the concept of “democracy,” which most eighteenth-century thinkers had tended to identify with chaos and mob rule.²⁶ Meanwhile, he proved utterly incapable of accepting the idea that *la politique* might require the balancing of competing interests, values, and perspectives. Instead, he dismissed all points of view different from his own as counterrevolutionary, the product of plots and conspiracies that needed to be exposed and purged from the body politic.

It was during his year as the most influential figure in French government—July 1793 to July 1794—that what Gauchet calls Robespierre’s “absolutism of power in the name of principles” had the most tragic and devastating effects. During this year, Robespierre wrote his most brilliant, his most eloquent, and his most chilling speeches and reports, justifying inhumane repression in the cause of founding a humane state. “If the mainspring of popular government in a time of peace is virtue, in a time of revolution it is at once *virtue and terror*: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless.” In this period, Robespierre rejected the sans-culotte ideal of direct democracy but still proved utterly unable to comprehend how a representative democracy might function in practice. Every challenge that the Revolution faced in this year of blood and fire simply reinforced his conviction that counterrevolutionary conspiracy lurked everywhere, even among his own colleagues in the Convention, and that the Revolution’s priority was to eliminate its enemies, wherever they might be found. “Robespierre had run up against the futility of his own vision,” Gauchet writes. “This is what brought about his downfall.”

Could the Revolution have played out differently, with the Terror avoided? Unlike Furet, who saw the road to Terror set as early as the spring of 1789, Gauchet hints that this was possible. For him, the crucial moment came with the execution of the king. From the onset of the Revolution Robespierre had only envisaged limiting the role of the king, namely as the passive agent of the nation’s will, but after the fall of the monarchy in 1792 he came to see the death of the king as the only way to break with the old regime and institute a new one on the basis of human rights. By executing

26. See Joanna Innes and Mark Philp, eds., *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

the king, the French lost the chance to reconcile the state power that the monarchy incarnated with the new form of legitimacy associated with democracy and the rights of man. England, Gauchet argues in his conclusion, had been able to accomplish its own revolution in a more gradual and peaceful way, as its democratic demands had been able to graft themselves onto a constitutional monarchy that was able to accompany it. In France, in contrast, the Revolution was able to establish itself as legitimate but, in struggling to recreate the state on the basis of pure principle, veered into terror. Later, Gauchet adds, Napoleon found himself in the opposite situation: possessing the full power of the state but lacking democratic legitimization. The Tocquevillian theme is unmissable: although the king was dead, the power of the state that the monarchy had built up continued under the new regime. The task was to combine it with the new democratic legitimacy.²⁷ Eventually the two would in fact coincide: Gauchet explicitly says that the dual legacies of the French Revolution—democracy and potentially terroristic state power—have been reconciled, but he remains vague on when this reconciliation first took place and how.

For Furet the answer was during the Third Republic, which is why he closed his final book on the Revolution in 1880. For him that is when the French Revolution formally “ended,” although the debates surrounding it continued. Robespierre himself had a plan to “end” the French Revolution, according to Gauchet, and his was to do so through a secular religious movement: the new cult of the Supreme Being. For Gauchet, however, this plan was bound to fail, because it brought back the religious aspect of the ancien régime that human rights had now replaced. Christianity in Gauchet’s thought, after all, has functioned as the religion of the “end of religion,” from which humankind would take control of its own destiny. But just because Robespierre could not bring the Revolution to a close did not mean that it had to end, as Burke evocatively put it, with nothing but “the gallows” to be seen at “the end of every vista.”²⁸ This was a failure that Robespierre himself not only embodied, but was also instrumental in bringing about: it is the position he incarnated, of being unable to separate out *le* from *la politique*, that led to terror. Other options were—and remain—available.

In Gauchet’s rendering Robespierre comes across as something of a populist figure, not in the demagogical sense but in combining the

27. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

28. Edmund Burke, *Revolutionary Writings: Reflections on the Revolution in France and the First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 79.

supposed “will of the people” with his person: Robespierre is described as the “*moi-peuple*”—“I, the People” in translation—which isn’t without recalling a recent study.²⁹ In doing so Robespierre, in Gauchet’s theory, claims to stand in that “empty space” left by the king when he took his fateful steps up to the guillotine.

The question remains whether the account Gauchet has offered us is one of France in particular or whether this is the story of modern democracy *tout court*. In his conclusion, Gauchet warns against a return of wanting to collapse *la politique* into *le politique*, as both Robespierre and the 1980s Parisian intellectuals did with human rights. He has left the exact nature of his target deliberately hard to pinpoint, but recently members of the Centre Raymond Aron have been known to come out against what they describe—drawing from Tocqueville—as the “extremes” of democracy: what we might recognize as contemporary “liberal identity politics.”³⁰ Gauchet echoes this critique when he writes that “the Revolution of the Rights of Man has begun again in a certain sense, albeit in a different manner, no longer with a view to instituting a new political and social order, but with a view to indefinitely perfecting the workings of the existing order.” He adds darkly that this development has a “destabilizing potential whose consequences are liable to be every bit as grave as those of the first eruption.”

Whether this warning should be heeded or not we will leave to the reader to decide. What is certain is that the challenges the French Revolution raised—Who speaks in the name of the people? What role should religion play in democracy? How are we to articulate the relationship between the state and the individual?—are as urgent now as they were for Robespierre over two hundred years ago. Hopefully the task of figuring out how a people should rule itself will continue to occupy us for two hundred years more. In that quest Marcel Gauchet remains an invaluable guide.

29. Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

30. Michael Scott Christofferson, “‘The Best Help I Could Find to Understand our Present’: François Furet’s Antirevolutionary Reading of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America,” in *In Search of the Liberal Moment: Democracy, Anti-totalitarianism, and Intellectual Politics in France since 1950*, edited by Stephen Sawyer and Iain Stewart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 85–109.