

Adam Michnik

The Ultras of moral revolution

Translated by Elzbieta Matynia

We need a moral revolution!¹

Do we really need one?

But of course! Replied an ultrarevolutionary, a Jacobin.

But of course! Replied an ultrareactionary, a partisan of the Counterrevolution.

Radicals, adherents of extreme solutions, Ultras of all the colors of the rainbow, have a need for revolutionary upheavals, because only upheavals that turn the world upside down allow them to fulfill their dream of a great cleansing.

I

The Jacobin, the revolutionary Ultra, says:

Adam Michnik is editor-in-chief of "Gazeta Wyborcza," Poland's leading daily newspaper. He founded the paper in 1989 to support the independent trade union Solidarity during the first free elections in the history of the Communist bloc. Michnik has published numerous books, including "Letters from Prison and Other Essays" (1985), "The Church and the Left" (1993), and "Letters from Freedom: Post-Cold War Realities and Perspectives" (1998).

© 2007 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

We need a moral revolution because we are surrounded by 'souls of mud' – reactionaries, hidden royalists, petty individuals, one-day patriots – who are conspiring against our revolutionary government. We need a moral revolution because vice is spreading. Reactionary newspapers are sowing lies; so one has to force them into silence. Corruption is spreading; so we must look carefully at the rich. "I regard wealth," said Robespierre, "not only as the price of crimes, but as a punishment for them; I want to be poor, so as not to be unfortunate." France is surrounded by traitors – those poisonous insects sowing shamelessness, deceit, meanness. It is they who caused the collapse of a state and society functioning according to one system of values, discovered in 1789, with rules that allowed us to maintain a dignity and a brotherhood founded upon the need to do good. We need a moral revolution today, now that we have a chance to leave the crisis of nonmemory and the curse of a fresh start. We need a cleansing, a capacity to do good for the Revolution. It also means a recognition of one's own errors – one's fatal tolerance for 'moder-

¹ For Professor Barbara Skarga, with a deep bow. This article was first published in Polish in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 15, 2005.

ates,' for the forgiving and the temperate.

The conservative, the reactionary Ultra, says:

We need a moral revolution because now, after the return of the Bourbons, the tide of revolution has receded. The time has passed when vice ruled triumphant over France; when regicide was a law unto itself; when those responsible for regicide dictated their own laws; when virtue was humiliated, loyalty persecuted, and property confiscated. It's true that a cruel despotism and the omnipotent guillotine, that revolution – this huge gutter of filth – polluted France. Nevertheless, France still has many virtues; so one can, wrote Joseph de Maistre, "start the nation anew." France, washed clean from the dirt of Jacobinism, restored to its monarchic and Catholic roots, will become a symbol of reconciliation between the King and his subjects. We need a moral revolution in order to restore the dream of a state and society functioning according to one system of values, with rules that allow us to maintain the loyalty and dignity befitting royal subjects, always inclined to do good. We need a moral revolution because today everything is possible, 'even the resurrection of the dead,' not to mention the resurrection of 'our own moral subjectivity.' One must avoid at all costs a compromise with the bastards of Jacobinism and Bonapartism, who want a constitutional monarchy, that is, a king without royal power – they don't understand that 'every constitution is regicide.'

II

What familiar voices despite such different historical costumes. I hear them continuously today – with mounting

sadness and amazement. After all, those who echo them ought to know where it all leads.

Does history repeat itself? Karl Marx once wrote, paraphrasing Hegel, that each historical fact repeats itself twice – the original drama turns into farce. Marx was wrong: history repeats itself much more frequently. The world is still full of inquisitors and heretics, liars and those lied to, terrorists and the terrorized. There is still someone dying at Thermopylae, someone drinking a glass of hemlock, someone crossing the Rubicon, someone drawing up a proscription list. And nothing suggests that these things will stop repeating themselves.

We like to reiterate that history is a teacher of life. If this is indeed true, we listen very poorly to its lessons. That is why I am reflecting today on the Ultras of the Revolution and the Ultras of the Counterrevolution, who dreamt about a Big Cleansing and a Moral Revolution – not so that the language of that reign of terror may never repeat itself, but because I'm convinced it will inevitably do so.

III

After a victorious civil war, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, the Roman dictator, began his rule by taking revenge on his opponents. He did it with an exacting method, namely, by ordering the drawing up of proscription lists, that is, lists of outlawed enemies – and designating a reward for their heads. "With nerve-racking premeditation," write historians Max Cary and Howard Hayes Scullard, "Sulla prolonged the listing of new victims, announcing from time to time additional proscription lists. Terror reigned. This modernized system of

mass murders was aimed with particular viciousness at those adversaries who were wealthy. Their property was confiscated, and the cities of Italy became theaters of execution.”² This was the purpose of the proscription lists Sulla announced: it was terrifying to find one’s name on such a list.

For centuries the list of names has been an irremovable element of social history: the lists of witches burned at the stake; the lists of heretics examined by the Inquisition; the lists of Jesuits condemned to exile; the lists of Masons; the lists of Jews; the lists of Christians suspected of Jewish background; the lists of Communists and those suspected of having Communist sympathies; the lists of royalists and other enemies of revolution; the lists of agents of Tsarist Okhrana; the lists of hostages; and the lists of those beheaded by guillotine or axe, or those who were shot.

Executions were usually preceded by the lists of suspects – those suspected of revolutionary or subversive activities, of a sinful past or present, of betrayal. Suspicion marched ahead of accusation and execution.

IV

The French Revolution overturned an absolute monarchy and established a constitutional monarchy. “This constitution was also vitiated,” wrote Hegel, “by the existence of absolute mistrust; the dynasty lay under suspicion, because it had lost the power it formerly enjoyed Neither government nor constitution could be maintained on this footing, and the ruin of both was the result.”

2. H. H. Scullard and M. Cary, *Dzieje Rzymu* (Warszawa: n.p., 1992); translated from the Polish edition.

Hegel later writes:

A government of some kind, however, is always in existence. The question presents itself then, Whence did it emanate? Theoretically, it proceeded from the people; really and truly, from the National Convention and its Committees. The forces now dominant are the abstract principles – Freedom, and, as it exists within the limits of the Subjective Will – Virtue. This Virtue has now to conduct the government in opposition to the Many, whom their corruption and attachment to old interests, or a liberty that has degenerated into license, and the violence of their passions, render unfaithful to virtue. Virtue here is a simple abstract principle and distinguishes the citizens into two classes only – those who are favorably disposed and those who are not. But disposition can only be recognized and judged of by disposition. *Suspicion* therefore is in the ascendant; but virtue, as soon as it becomes liable to suspicion, is already condemned. Suspicion attained a terrible power and brought to the scaffold the Monarch, whose subjective will was in fact the religious conscience of a Catholic. Robespierre set up the principle of Virtue as supreme, and it may be said that with this man Virtue was an earnest matter. *Virtue* and *Terror* were the order of the day; for Subjective Virtue, whose sway is based on disposition only, brings with it the most fearful tyranny. It exercises its power without legal formalities, and the punishment it inflicts is very simple – *Death*.

V

And it had begun so beautifully. The Revolution began under a hopeful sign of Freedom, Equality, and Brotherhood. The Bastille – a bastion and symbol of tyranny – was captured. King Louis XVI

*The Ultras
of moral
revolution*

chose a path of compromise with the revolutionary camp; absolutism collapsed. It looked like ‘the King with the people, the people with the King.’

Speaking parenthetically: in July of 1789, the Bastille, where opponents of the King had been imprisoned, had only seven prisoners – four counterfeiters, two mentally ill, and one imprisoned at the request of his father. Such was this bastion of tyranny. Such a bastion; such a tyranny. It was already absolutism with broken teeth.

In spite of that, an historic event took place, the event of an epoch: in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen it was proclaimed that people are born and remain free and equal under the law. The words of Marie Joseph La Fayette were repeated: “People become free as soon as they want to be free.” And the revolutionaries repeated: “It was different in England, where so much blood was shed; our revolution triumphed almost without bloodshed.” And they repeated that the Revolution opened the gate through which France advanced from tyranny to freedom.

VI

The Restoration also began beautifully. After a quarter century of revolutionary and Napoleonic turmoil, there began – along with Louis XVIII – a time of gentle words and conciliatory gestures. François René de Chateaubriand, the most distinguished Bourbon ideologue, wrote in 1814 that Louis XVIII is “a prince who is known for his enlightened mind, is unsusceptible to prejudice, and is a stranger to vengeance.” He quoted the words of Louis XVI: “I forgive with all my heart those who for no reason from my side became my enemies, and I ask God to forgive them.”

Speaking on behalf of the supporters of the Restoration, Chateaubriand declared: “We want a monarchy based on the principle of equal rights, the principle of morality, civic freedom, political and religious tolerance.”

The Restoration did not end in words. Louis XVIII proclaimed a charter that was an act of reconciliation between the Restoration and the Revolution. It guaranteed the inviolability of property from the Napoleonic period and maintained the nobility of the status of the empire; but it also declared the equality of citizens and their fundamental freedoms. And it even promised amnesty to those who were involved in regicide.

Louis XVIII wanted to reassure Frenchmen that he did not want revenge, as his enemies claimed. He declared that only “a system of moderation could prevent France from tearing itself apart with its own hands.”

VII

Every revolution has its own dynamic; each is too slow, unfinished, betrayed. From within each revolution is a demand for acceleration, completion, protection against betrayal.

On the very threshold of the French Revolution the demand that the monarch give in to the National Assembly was revolutionary. A compromise between the Revolution and the monarch on behalf of constitutional rule and a Declaration of the Rights of Man was celebrated as a victory of the revolutionaries. But soon this compromise, built on a dualism (the self-limitation of the monarch in his power and of the Revolution in its demands), turned out to be fragile. The radical monarchists saw in it the capitulation of the King; the radical revolutionaries saw it as a betray-

al of their ideals. The Revolution ought to be crushed by the army. The King ought to be removed; long live the Republic, retorted the revolutionary Jacobins.

The Jacobins came out on top. Monarchists escaped abroad, and the King was imprisoned, judged, and guillotined. Any voice against the dissolution of the monarchy – the constitutional one – was called treason, as were voices that demanded a normal judicial process or at least a renunciation of the death penalty.

The Revolution, begun in the name of freedom, transformed itself into an aspiration for a republican order against the constitutional monarchy. It was not about freedom anymore but about the Republic, and any critic of this solution was suspected of treason. And the controversy over the Republic transformed itself into a ruthless fight for power in the revolutionary camp.

VIII

Every restoration has its own dynamic; each is too slow, unfinished, betrayed. Each restoration hides within itself the guardians of the holy flame of past institutions and customs – the Ultras. The Ultras have to reject any compromise between tradition and revolution, because the Revolution was for them an absolute evil, without a grain of good – the height of absurdity and moral decay. It is “a pure impurity,” said Joseph de Maistre. “It is a wonder of decay, a wonder of absurdity, and a wonder of banditry.”

For an Ultra then, the Charter of Louis XVIII was nonsense, an absurdity, “a work of madness and darkness.” One has to break with the chimera of the Rights of Man, restore censorship and

the privileges of the aristocracy. And the Catholic Church has to guard against “the scum of equality.” The Ultras clearly had nothing against France tearing itself apart with its own hands.

IX

There is no reason to question the good intentions of the Jacobins, those Ultras of the Revolution. They really wanted to save the Revolution from the royalists, from foreign armies, from superstition, from treason and corruption. They, diligent readers of the Encyclopedists and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, really wanted France to be ruled by virtue.

But in order to fight monarchists and émigré aristocrats, the Jacobins confiscated the aristocrats’ properties and closed their newspapers; to win the war, they demanded unity around the revolutionary government and punished anyone who deviated. To remove superstition, they demanded the loyalty of Catholic priests and exiled those who refused to take an oath. To prevent treason and corruption, they announced a ‘Great Vigilance’ with regard to traitors and the corrupt. Moreover, they introduced a law on suspects – each loyal citizen was obliged to denounce suspects. The measure of revolutionary fervor was the number of denunciations. Long lists of suspects were compiled, then long lists of those imprisoned for being suspect. France was taken over by fear. The Reign of Terror had begun. The theater of the revolutionary guillotine was launched.

The Jacobins saw in the guillotine an instrument for the defense of the Revolution. They believed that it was they who were the Revolution and that they were the guarantors of the durability and continuity of the rule of Freedom and Virtue. This is why they defended

*The Ultras
of moral
revolution*

their power without scruples, and why any critic was branded a traitor to the Revolution.

It all began with the trial of Louis XVI. Nobody cared to collect any evidence of guilt or observe normal judicial procedures. The King was guilty because he was King. He had to be guillotined; the people had sentenced him through their representatives. A motion was made to ask French citizens whether they supported the carrying out of the death penalty. Antoine Louis de Saint-Just, a Jacobin Ultra, retorted passionately: "This appeal aims at creating a conflict between the people and the Legislature, and therefore a weakening of the people. This intrigue is a way to bring back the tyrant to his palace." The crime has wings, argued Saint-Just. It will spread. This intrigue to save the King through "votes bought by foreign gold" will win the ear of the people. But the monarchy is an eternal crime, and the monarch is a barbarian, a tyrant, and a foreigner. The public good requires the death of the King, and the only ones who could think otherwise are either allies of the tyrant or people who have been bribed.

After such arguments, which terrorized the National Assembly, the execution of the King was a mere formality. Justice and the public good – as understood by the Jacobins – won out over the logic of mercy, forgiveness, and conciliation.

Not only was Louis XVI guillotined, but symbolically the old order was sentenced to death. The guillotine for the King defined the norms of the new order. Freedom and Virtue entered into a marriage with the guillotine.

X

In any revolution the dialectics of moderation and radicalism takes place. At each revolutionary turn, yesterday's radical person turns out to be today's moderate. If he is lucky, he is accused of cowardly opportunism; if he is not lucky, of treason and participation in counterrevolutionary conspiracy.

Vladimir Lenin, quite fluent in revolutions, wrote this about the Girondistes (moderates): "They wanted to deal with autocracy gently, in a reformatory way, without hurting the aristocracy, the gentry, the court – without destroying anything." But the Jacobins – according to Lenin – wanted people "to deal with the monarchy and the aristocracy 'in a plebeian way,' mercilessly exterminating the enemies of freedom, strangling by force their resistance, without making any concessions on behalf of the accursed legacy of subjection."

This is how Lenin imagined the Jacobin moral revolution, and this is how – in a Bolshevik way – he implemented it personally. It is not difficult to understand why he glorified Jacobin terror, calling it "plebeian." It is more difficult to understand why the gentle and compromising path of the Girondistes deserved contempt; and why the Girondistes were still accused of moral relativism, of blurring the boundary between good and evil – why the aspiration to pluralism and compromise with opponents was taken as an abandonment of moral principles.

The Jacobins perceived their adversaries as conspirators against Freedom and Virtue. In these they believed fanatically, but they understood them in a peculiar way. The symbol of Freedom was the capture of the Bastille, from which seven people were freed, while in the

prison of France ruled by the Jacobins, there were thousands. And Virtue? The Reign of Terror, as Friedrich Engels, also interested in the topic of revolution, soberly wrote, was “a rule by people who spread fear around them, and on the other hand it was a rule by people who were themselves full of fear.” Those were “cruelties committed by people who themselves were in fear,” and in this way they reassured themselves.

Fear and denunciations, those were the methods of Jacobin Virtue.

The Jacobins declared that they defended Freedom against treason, against enemy conspiracy, but conspiracy, simply speaking, was opposition to Jacobin rule and the methods of governance applied by the Ultras. Conspiracy, in the opinion of Furet, an historian of the Revolution, is an idea typical of the traditional religious mentality, which is “accustomed to treating evil as a product of hidden forces.” It is also an idea characteristic of revolutionary consciousness. Thanks to this idea, any obstacle could be explained as the result of enemy actions – high prices, food shortages, corruption scandals. The belief in a conspiracy “reinforces the horror of the crime because it cannot be admitted, and expresses the cleansing function of its elimination; it frees one from having to point out the perpetrators of the crime and from revealing what their plans were, because one cannot describe perpetrators who are hidden and whose goals are abstract.”

Saint-Just unmasked the Girondistes: he said that within the very body of the National Convention conspirators aimed at the restoration of tyranny had built a nest. Their plans were “sinister” and their actions “refined.” They were neither courageous nor open enemies of Freedom. They spoke its language; they appeared to be its defenders.

The conspirators were unmasked – some of them escaped, the rest were imprisoned. “Not all the imprisoned,” explained Saint-Just, “are guilty. The majority of them were just confused. But in the struggle with the conspiracy, the salvation of the nation is the highest law.” Then, it is very difficult to distinguish an error from a crime, and one has to sacrifice the freedom of a few in order to save all. A faction of the conspirators, “secretive and politically sophisticated, seemingly caring about freedom and order, skillfully opposed freedom with freedom, did not distinguish inertia from order and peace, nor republican spirit from anarchy.” It walked with the people and freedom to direct them toward their goals – toward monarchy – “by making current conditions and the horror of these days look repugnant.”

This is the language of Saint-Just, whom Albert Camus considered a great man. Robespierre was also called ‘The Incorruptible,’ ‘The Spotless.’ Yet it is they, Robespierre and Saint-Just, who became symbols of the cruel Terror, the monstrosity of informers, and the guillotine, which killed anybody who got in the way.

It is worth remembering that behind the backs of those idealists of cruelty and apostles of terror hovered out-and-out scoundrels, who used revolutionary slogans and the guillotine to settle dirty accounts, to blackmail, and to pursue shady interests. The idealist fanatic is followed by thugs, scoundrels, and hypocrites. This is the fate of every revolution. But the scoundrel is less interesting – he appears wherever one can fish in murky waters, get rich by informing on others, get promoted through intrigue, get famous by kicking someone who is down.

More interesting is the idealist: this one is ready to give his life for his ideals,

*The Ultras
of moral
revolution*

but more willingly he puts others to death on behalf of those ideals. Before he puts them to death by guillotine, though, he puts them to death with words. A fanatic idealist, he reaches for mud before he reaches for his sword. Before he exterminates his enemy, he has to dehumanize him, defile him. If the absolutism of Jacobin Virtue was to justify absolute terror, then their enemies – the victims of terror – had also to be absolutely evil, the embodiments of total treason and perfect degradation.

Among the Jacobins – including the leaders – were plenty of corrupt people hungry for power, privilege, and money; people guilty of corruption and theft; people with many complexes; ne'er-do-wells; incurable schemers; careerists at the service of any government. For idealists, it could not have been very pleasant. But, as they say in Polish, when you chop wood, the chips fly. If an informer served Virtue, his very contribution eliminated all character flaws. If the intriguer hurt the enemies of Virtue, the intrigue became the servant of the Revolution. The service of Virtue manifested itself in only one way: hatred of the enemies of Virtue. Hatred – as Barbara Skarga has recently reminded us – is a feeling that does not know how to look at the world other than from the perspective of negation. Even in what to others seems valuable and important, it notices exclusively trickery and deceit. Because, for one who hates, this is the natural state of the human condition. Hatred does not aim at improving. Quite to the contrary, it favors the existing situation and with satisfaction cites every error and unsuccessful endeavor, confirming the correctness of its attitude. But above all, with such an orientation, it wants to poison everybody around. And it begins to ooze out until it embraces the whole society.

France ruled by the Jacobins was taken over by the madness of searching for enemies and traitors. Informers, revolutionary tribunals, guillotines – everybody was suspect. Denunciations triumphed along with meanness and fear – all in the name of Virtue.

In trying to describe the people of hatred, Skarga writes about those who have a dispersed identity, about people who are “weak” and “susceptible to influence,” “ambition-driven,” “pathetic” people. Indeed, there were plenty of those in Jacobin clubs and revolutionary tribunals. But more fascinating are the strong people, the honest ones, the idealistic, who are blinded by the drug of revolution and transformed into skillful manipulators, cynics of the political game, demagogues of fluent speech and dried-up heart – people of a religious sect transformed into a gang of bandits.

The idealist fanatic, the Jacobin Ultra, believed that one could build a better world according to the ideals of Rousseau and through revolutionary methods, by excluding from public life the people of the *ancien régime*, which had been based on the oppression of subjects by the mighty of the world. Rousseau said, “I hate subjection because it is the source of all evil.” The Ultra Jacobin believed that the revolution would help to end all evil. This is why the Jacobin never spoke in his own name; but in the name of the Revolution and the Nation, in the name of Freedom and Virtue, in the name of those humiliated by subordination, he sent to the guillotine people suspected of vice. Virtue is possible and fascinating only when surrounded by vice. This is why the ‘just and spotless’ need popular injustice and all-embracing sin.

The Jacobin “glorifies the poor,” observes Hannah Arendt, so that “his praise of suffering as the spring of Vir-

tue” becomes dangerous, usually serving as a “mere pretext for lust for power.”³ Was the Jacobin sincere in declaring his compassion for the poor and the suffering? We have no reason to doubt it. On the other hand, it was not a compassion for any specific, individual persons. The Jacobin identified with the “boundless suffering of the masses,” the suffering of millions. “By the same token,” wrote Arendt, “Robespierre lost the capacity to establish and hold fast to rapports with persons in their singularity; the ocean of suffering around him”⁴ drowned all particular reasons – reasons of friendship, truthfulness, loyalty to principles. The Revolution in the name of Virtue and Freedom turned into a dictatorship of sacrilegious liars – the Jacobins in power became perfectly indifferent to the fate of individuals who had been victimized or humiliated. Such people could already be sacrificed without scruples in the name of Revolutionary Cleansing. The cleansing became a purge – a purge that was meant to wash the dirt of hypocrisy and duplicity from the clean face of revolutionary Virtue.

“The Revolution,” wrote Arendt, “before it proceeded to devour its own children, unmasked them.” In the end, “No one is left among the chief actors who does not stand accused, or at least suspected, of corruption, duplicity, betrayal, conspiracy with the court, and accepting money and instructions from London or Vienna.”⁵

Preparing the accusation of Danton, Robespierre wrote in his notebook:

3 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 89.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 98.

There is in Danton a certain feature which reveals a thankless and petty soul: he praised the recent productions of Desmoulins, at the Jacobins he dared to demand for them freedom of the press, when I suggested to them the privilege of burning. [...] When I showed him the system of calumny of the Girondistes, he answered, ‘What does that matter to me? Public opinion is a whore, posterity is nonsense!’ The word Virtue made Danton laugh: ‘There is no more reliable virtue,’ he said laughingly, ‘than that which I cultivate every night with my wife.’ How could this man, to whom any moral idea was alien, be a defender of Freedom? Another maxim of Danton’s was that one ought to use rascals; that is why he was surrounded by the dirtiest intrigants. He believed in a tolerance for vice, which was to ensure him as many supporters as there are corrupted people in this world. [...] At every time of crisis Danton took a vacation.

When the Jacobins were cursed,

he remained silent. When he was attacked himself, he forgave. All the time he appeared to the Girondistes as a tolerant mediator, he bragged publicly that he had never denounced any enemy of freedom, he constantly reached out to them with an olive branch. [...] He did not want the death of the tyrant; he wanted people to be satisfied with his exile. [...] He desired amnesty for all of the guilty; therefore he wanted counter-revolution.

This is an accounting of Danton’s crimes drafted by Robespierre. And a close friend of Danton said to the Jacobins: if you kill the Girondistes, the next ones will do the same with you. And that is what happened. The day before his execution Danton was to say: “In revolutions power remains at the end with the biggest scoundrels.”

*The Ultras
of moral
revolution*

Led to the square where the guillotine loomed, he was to shout, "Robespierre! You will be following me!" And that is what happened four months later. Louis Auguste Blanqui, an icon of French revolutionaries in the nineteenth century, imprisoned in 1848, prepared a ruthlessly honest portrait of Robespierre, whom he called "a would-be Napoleon." He wrote: "No other personality was as destructive as he was; when he demanded that others give up their personal dreams, it was only so that they could put them onto the altar of his own pride." The National Convention, the highest revolutionary power, "was like a herd speechless from fear, standing at the gate to the slaughterhouse. All tongues were frozen, all eyes were glazed, all gestures were petrified in horror."

Robespierre declared: "We need to instill in each person a religious respect for man, this deep sense of obligation that constitutes the only guarantee for introducing a state of social happiness." Blanqui commented:

It was apparently in order to instill religious respect of man for man that Robespierre sent to the guillotine all his rivals, including the least dangerous opponents. A furtive glance was enough to send his best friend to the guillotine. Camille Desmoulins, a friend from youth and a comrade in the struggle and an admirer, was executed because he dared to say 'Burning is not an answer.'

All of those godlike warriors were cruel people, hungry for power, armed with hypocrisy and their blessed stilettos. Robespierre, mercilessly beheading all those who opposed his ambitions or awakened distrust, constantly presented himself as a victim. On the heaps of corpses murdered by his hand, he con-

sistently repeated the pathetic refrain of Socrates: "They want to force me to drink hemlock . . . and I know that I will drink it." A magnificent pretext for serving it to his opponents.

For Robespierre, the end justified the means, even the most vicious means, when the real goal, wrote Blanqui, was "the desire for power."

XI

But every restoration also swings from moderation to radicalism. Every restoration is unfinished, inconsistent; it does not fulfill the expectations of its supporters.

After initial declarations on behalf of moderation, conciliation, and accord comes a moment when the Ultras of restoration – also known as White Jacobins – feel disappointed. In France, after a short honeymoon, Napoleon returned to power for a hundred days; after those hundred days, the Ultras retaliated against the thankless French. If the symbol of the beginning of restoration were the appeals to forget about the hatred dividing France, now the Ultras declared that conciliatory Louis XVIII was a "Jacobin with a lily." They called to stop the appeals for reconciliation because there can be no reconciliation between the party of the hangmen and the party of the victims. The time of doing justice had begun – in the name, of course, of the Great Cleansing of France from this hellish dirt of both the Revolution and the empire. Because – the Ultra argued – revolution was the child of haughtiness and madness, which fed upon corpses; it was a monster enjoying looting, arson, and butchering. Now one ought to bring back the old prerevolutionary laws, customs, and privileges for the gentry, aristocracy, and the Church –

as well as discipline and censorship. “The freedom to print and freedom of the press,” said the Ultra, “are the most horrible plague of our unfortunate times.”

And he was sincere in these confessions: he believed that the return to the prerevolutionary golden age is necessary and realistic, but he warned that the revolutionary forces are still powerful, that the majority of the positions in the administration are still occupied by Jacobins and Bonapartists. This is why a Great Cleansing is needed. “The time for handling with kid gloves is over!”

And indeed it was over. The White Terror flooded France with blood; paramilitary units of royalist guerillas introduced a climate of vengeance, inquisition, and repression aimed at all suspects; and anybody could be suspected of Jacobinism, of Bonapartism, of anything. In Avignon, the Napoleonic Marshal Brune was murdered. His body was dragged down the street and thrown in to the Rhône.

The royal government released proscription lists of enemies; censorship was restored. A ban was announced on “provocative shouting and subversive journals.” The newly created lists of suspects were kept secret. After the first trials, the first heads rolled. The acts of the executioner brought order and calm. “There is a need for chains, hangmen, torturers, death; let the heads of the Jacobins roll; there is the need for a fear that redeems.”

Among those the Chamber of Peers judged was a famous Napoleonic Marshal, Michel Ney. The perfidy of this trial was that those who were to sentence him were his comrades-in-arms. And it was to be chaired by Marshal Jeannot de Moncey. Distressed by the situation, de Moncey sent a letter to Louis XVIII in which he wrote: “Allow me to ask

His Majesty, where were his accusers when Ney was fighting on so many battlefields? Can France forget about a hero of the Bersina battle? Am I to put to death someone who has saved so many French lives? I know that I am arousing the hatred of the courtiers, but standing near my grave, I can say, like one of your distinguished ancestors: ‘All lost but honor.’ I will die satisfied.” For these words de Moncey was thrown out of the Chamber of Peers and locked up in a fortress.

The witness for the defense was Marshal Louis Nicolas Davout, who defended Ney to the very end. Unfortunately, other marshals were short on honor and courage. So Ney was sentenced and shot. In the name of the restoration of knightly virtues, people were used as marshals who had behaved despicably, choosing obsequiousness, cowardice, and betrayal.

The violence that was to guarantee Virtue became an instrument of villainy. The moderate and the lenient in the camp of restoration were losing; the Ultras were winning. Their restoration was to be the Grand Counterrevolution, that is, revolution – also moral – with a minus sign. All changes introduced by the Revolution were to be erased; all the chimeras of the philosophers of the Enlightenment concerning the state of nature, the social contract, the constitution, the rights of man and the citizen, and parliamentary representation were to be abandoned. The absolute monarchy was to be restored, as this was the only way to return to God’s order guarded by the Catholic Church.

Tradition provided an easy model: the Inquisition. The Spanish Inquisition, argued the Ultra, understood that one needs to beat to death any serious assassination of religion. Nobody has the

*The Ultras
of moral
revolution*

right to criticize the kings of Spain. They know their enemies, and under the law they can punish them. Nobody ought to feel sorry for evildoers, who deserve the punishment for questioning Spanish dogmas. Those who spread heresies ought to be put among the worst criminals. After all, heresy led Europe to the Thirty Years' War.

If there had been an active Inquisition in France, the Revolution would never have happened. Therefore, the ruler who does without the stakes of the Inquisition deals a deadly blow to humanity. "The Inquisition on its own," argued de Maistre, the perfect Ultra, "is a blessed institution that provides Spain with an extraordinary service which a sectarian and philosophical fanaticism has derided, and shamelessly."

The direct consequence of such reasoning was a law on sacrilege that the Ultras introduced during the Restoration. It stated that "sacrilege is recognized as any active insult to religion made consciously and out of hatred. The profanation of Church vessels is subject to the death penalty. The profanation of consecrated bread calls for the same punishment as parricide."

We should add that those guilty of parricide first have their hand cut off and then their head. The Ultra argued eagerly that "as far as someone guilty of sacrilege is concerned, in sentencing him to death one is after all simply sending him to face his natural judge." The author of those words, Louis Gabriel Bonald, a philosopher of the Ultra camp, certainly believed that it would serve the Cleansing and the Moral Revolution.

Chateaubriand – an unquestioned legitimist – tried unsuccessfully to argue that the principle of religion is mercy, and if it needs the guillotine it is only a triumph for their [the Church's] mar-

tyrs. The Ultras won. Because they believed that only the use of similarly forceful means could prevent huge political defeats and push back particularly forceful attacks on the state. And the most effective of those means was violence; it is violence that creates order, "that stops the hand of man, and threatens with chains, with the sword, with the knout, and with the guillotine." Against rebels one ought to send "soldiers and executioners."

The executioner is the guarantor of order who struggles with chaos, dirt, and rebellion. The executioner is a man who metes out punishment.

De Maistre asked:

Who is this inexplicable being, who, when there are so many agreeable, lucrative, honest and even honourable professions to choose among, in which a man can exercise his skill or his powers, has chosen that of torturing or killing his own kind? This head, this heart, are they made like our own? Is there not something in them that is peculiar, and alien to our nature; Myself, I have no doubt about this. He is made like us externally. He is born like all of us. But he is an extraordinary being, and it needs a special decree to bring him into existence as a member of the human family – a fiat of the creative power. He is created like a law unto himself.

Consider what he is in the opinion of mankind, and try to conceive, if you can, how he can manage to ignore or defy this opinion. Hardly has he been assigned to his proper dwelling-place, hardly has he taken possession of it, when others remove their homes elsewhere whence they can no longer see him. In the midst of this desolation, in this sort of vacuum formed round him, he lives alone with his mate and his young, who acquaint him with the sound of the human voice: without them he would hear nothing but groans.

The gloomy signal is given; an abject servitor of justice knocks on his door to tell him that he is wanted; he goes; he arrives in a public square covered by a dense, trembling mob. A poisoner, a parricide, a man who has committed sacrilege is tossed to him: he seizes him, stretches him, ties him to a horizontal cross, he raises his arm; there is a horrible silence; there is no sound but that of bones cracking under the bars, and the shrieks of the victim. He unties him. He puts him on the wheel; the shattered limbs are entangled in the spokes; the head hangs down; the hair stands up, and the mouth gaping open like a furnace from time to time emits only a few bloodstained words to beg for death. He has finished. His heart is beating, but it is with joy: he congratulates himself, he says in his heart, 'Nobody quarters as well as I.' He steps down. He holds out his bloodstained hand; the justice throws him – from a distance – a few pieces of gold, which he catches through a double row of human beings standing back in horror. He sits down to table, and he eats. Then he goes to bed and sleeps. And on the next day, when he wakes, he thinks of something totally different from what he did the day before. Is he a man? Yes. God receives him in his shrines, and allows him to pray. He is not a criminal. Nevertheless no tongue dares declare that he is virtuous, that he is an honest man, that he is estimable. No moral praise seems appropriate to him, for everyone else is assumed to have relations with human beings: he has none.

And yet all greatness, all power, all subordination rest on the executioner. He is the terror and the bond of human association. Remove this mysterious agent from the world, and in an instant order yields to chaos: thrones fall, society disappears. God, who has created sovereignty, has also made punishment; he has fixed the

earth upon these two poles: 'For Jehovah is master of the twin poles and upon them he maketh turn the world'⁶

*The Ultras
of moral
revolution*

"Translating this apology of the executioner," the modernist writer Boleslaw Micinski wrote in an essay, *On Hatred, Cruelty, and Abstraction*, "I had the impression that my fingers were stained with blood."

One must analyze the style of this excerpt to notice," wrote Micinski, "that the source of this spirit is sadism. From behind the mask of the defender of conservative principles, "the face of a sadist appears." And also the conviction arises that "man is evil and must therefore be ruled with an iron truncheon."

So much for Micinski. Isaiah Berlin, after reading *The Saint Petersburg Dialogues*, observed that de Maistre is sincerely convinced that "men can only be saved by being hemmed in by the terror of the authorities [...] must be purged by perpetual suffering, must be humbled by being made conscious of their stupidity, malice, and helplessness at every turn. [...] Their appointed masters must do the duty laid upon them by their maker who has made nature a hierarchical order by the ruthless imposition of the rules – not sparing themselves – and equally ruthless extermination of the enemy."⁷ All in the name of Moral Counterrevolution and Cleansing.

6 Joseph De Maistre, http://www.newphilsoc.org.uk/Freedom/berlinday/a_great_and_virtuous_man.htm; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, quoted in Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 116 – 117; also in http://maistre.ath.cx:8000/st_petersburg.html, quoted in *ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, 118 – 119.

XII

Who is the enemy poisoning the order of Freedom and Virtue during the Revolution? Who is the enemy destroying God's order on earth and the established hierarchy with Christ's envoy at the top? The Red Ultra will answer the same way as the White Jacobin: this enemy is a sect. There exists in France a political sect, argued Saint-Just. This sect that poisons public life is made out of monarchists both open and hidden, who wanted to remove Louis XVI but did not want to end the monarchy. Today the members of this sect demand moderation and leniency, amnesty for the enemies, and reconciliation with the enemies of Virtue. Those people are criminal and arrogant; they are émigrés and British agents. They are corrupted and depraved, thieves, bribe-takers, and dishonest speculators; people who are weak and vain, malcontents and sowers of disagreement, hypocrites and fruitless shouters.

Public life is entangled in the web of this sect. Should not such a society – in which self-interest and envy are the hidden springs of many enemies and criminals who through bribery want to escape justice – launch the greatest possible effort to cleanse itself? And those who try to stop this cleansing, are they not trying to corrupt society? And those who want to corrupt it, are they not trying to destroy it?

“There is no hope of prosperity,” explained Saint-Just, “if the last enemy of Freedom would breathe; you ought to punish not only traitors but also those who are neutral; you ought to punish everyone in the Republic who is passive and does not do anything for it.” The flame of Freedom would cleanse us just as liquid crude iron throws off any dirt.

“It is time,” appealed Saint-Just, “for everybody to return to moral principles, and for terror to be used against the enemies. It is time to declare war against wild corruption, and to require everybody to lead modest and frugal lives and to observe civic virtues, and to wipe out the enemies of the people who favor crime and the passions of the depraved.”

In this way Saint-Just declared war on the sect and announced a Great Cleansing and Moral Revolution.

And what was ‘the sect’ for de Maistre? They are those who try to corrupt people or overthrow the existing order. “They are the disturbers and subverts,” wrote Berlin. “To the Protestants and Jansenists he now adds Deists and Atheists, Freemasons and Jews, Scientists and Democrats, Jacobins, Liberals, Utilitarians, Anti-clericals, Egalitarians, Perfectibilians, Materialists, Idealists, Lawyers, Journalists, Secular Reformers, and intellectuals of every breed; all those who appeal to abstract principles, who put faith in individual reason or individual conscience; believers in individual liberty or the rational organization of society; reformers and revolutionaries: these are the enemy of the settled order and must be rooted out at all costs. This is ‘*la secte*,’ and it never sleeps; it is forever boring from within.”⁸

This sect ought to be annihilated by force, firmly and mercilessly, in the name of the divine order. De Maistre – like any conservative – was convinced that those who launch revolutions in the name of freedom end up as tyrants. Summarizing the Jacobins’ doctrine, he remarked sarcastically what people hear from their leaders: “You think that you do not want this law, but we want to assure you that in fact you really desire it. If you dare to reject it, we will punish

8 Ibid., 119.

you by shooting you for not wanting what you want.” And that is what they do, concluded de Maistre.

One ought to agree with this ‘White Jacobin,’ the most distinguished of the Ultras. This is exactly how the Jacobins, the Red Ultras, acted. They proclaimed themselves the emancipation of Freedom and Virtue; they privatized the Revolution in order to privatize the nation. The guillotine caused all the French people to become the property of the Revolution. But the White Ultras privatized God and proclaimed themselves the emancipation of the evangelical teachings, while undertaking, intellectually and practically, an effort to convert the French using the executioner’s axe.

Blanqui accused Robespierre of sending to the guillotine spokesmen of atheism in order to win back the favor of the Church. This is why he presented as an offering to Catholic priests the head of Chaumette, a preacher of atheism. Blanqui wrote: “What a pleasant surprise it was for the sons and heirs of the Inquisition to see that God had again found Himself under the care of the guillotine. The beautiful times of the mightiness of the divine spirit could be reborn as heads rolled to honor the immortality of the soul.” Heretics were made dependent upon the supreme ruler of the torturer. The guillotine had replaced the stake.

Let us set aside the tone of anticlericalism typical of French revolutionary circles, here carried *ad absurdum*, because it is absurd to think that Catholic priests appreciated the cult of the Supreme Being created by Robespierre. Let us emphasize, rather, the well-captured intimate relationship between the guillotine and the stake. The guillotine of the Jacobins was the natural daughter of the Inquisition’s stake. And it doesn’t really matter at this point that it was an illegit-

imate daughter. Both the stake and the guillotine were to serve the Cleansing, Moral Revolution, but they have always served the arbitrary claims of the authorities, convinced that they have Absolute Virtue at their disposal.

And such thinking has always ended badly.

XIII

The Red Ultras, whether Robespierre or Saint-Just, have legions of defenders. So does the White Jacobin de Maistre.

The defenders emphasize that Robespierre was spotless, incorruptible, indomitable; that Saint-Just, a fascinating dreamer, was a good and pure man; that de Maistre was famous for his personal charm and kindness toward people, and that his apology for the executioner was the result of his horror at the Jacobin terror, a kind of revenge, as he saw in the victim of the executioner either Robespierre or Saint-Just, not just an ordinary mortal.

I gladly agree with the advocates of the Red Ultras and the White Jacobins. But in the rhetoric and mentality of the Red Ultras we can recognize, after all, the early outlines of the rhetoric and mentality of the Bolsheviks; in the icon of Robespierre we can see Lenin and Stalin; and in the terror of the Jacobin guillotine we can see a preview of the platoons of CheKa death squads.⁹

On the other hand, in the catalog of opponents of the Divine Order prepared by de Maistre we see the same people twentieth-century Fascism added to their enemy list.

“De Maistre’s violent hatred of free traffic in ideas,” wrote Isaiah Berlin,

9 VeCheKa, known better as CheKa, stands for Vserossyckaya Chrezvychainaya Komissiya (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission).

“and his contempt for all intellectuals, are not mere conservatism, . . . but something at once much older and much newer – something that at once echoes the fanatical voices of the Inquisition, and sounds what is perhaps the earliest note of the militant anti-rational Fascism of modern times.”¹⁰

You will say that those are just words, just ideas, written down on paper. But words are not innocent. They have a life of their own. Words create a system of ethical and intellectual interpretation of the world, an interpretation that allows one to see in the guillotine a gate to Freedom and Virtue and in the executioner’s axe a path to God. The history of the Jacobins and Ultras, Red or White, teaches us that there is a need for ethical knowledge, that there are no honest values that would justify reaching for such peculiarly dishonest means and methods. This is why one cannot put people down in the name of lifting them up; this is why one cannot spread the poison of fear in the name of Virtue and Moral Revolution; this is why one cannot push the drug of suspicion in the name of Truth and Cleansing. This is why one cannot forget that God did not give any person power over any other person; that no one should give up caring about one’s own salvation in caring about someone else’s salvation; that one cannot force anyone into faith either through force or blackmail; and that the cross is the symbol of the Lord’s suffering, not a baseball bat for clubbing adversaries.

XIV

I already hear the ironic commentaries: those are the nauseating platitudes of an aesthete, empty moralizing that does not

wish to understand that revolution has its rights.

Jacobins and Ultras always reply the same way. After all, to be a Jacobin is to transcend limits. It means to attack the constitution in the name of utopia, and the republic in the name of a perfect republic. It means to criticize the guillotine for being too gentle to enemies; to label the partisans of moderation traitors of the revolution; to be redder than the Reds, more plebeian than the plebeians, more ‘mad’ than the extreme radicals, more vigilant than the tribunals of vigilantism, more suspicious than the lieutenants of suspicion. To be opponents of the death penalty while ordering new executions daily; to be such a relentless hound of the ‘tolerant’ left that one finds oneself to the left of common sense; to be such an enthusiastic defender of the Revolution that one sends other revolutionaries to the guillotine.

“To be ultra,” wrote Victor Hugo,

is to go beyond. It is to attack the scepter in the name of the throne, and the mitre in the name of the altar; it is to ill-treat the thing which one is dragging; it is to kick over the traces; it is to cavil at the fagot on the score of the amount of cooking received by heretics; it is to reproach the idol with its small amount of idolatry; it is to insult through excess of respect; it is to discover that the Pope is not sufficiently papish, that the King is not sufficiently royal, and that the night has too much light; it is to be discontented with alabaster, with snow, with the swan and the lily in the name of whiteness; it is to be a partisan of things to the point of becoming their enemy; it is to be so strongly for, as to be against.¹¹

¹¹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, ch. 3, http://www.online-literature.com/victor_hugo/les_miserables/170/.

¹⁰ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber*, 150.

The Jacobin and the Ultra will agree on one thing: when one chops the wood, chips fly. Well, I am such a chip. And before I am treated like such a chip by moral revolutionaries in the name of Virtue and Freedom, in the name of the Divine Order and Revealed Truth, allow me to say, "Without me, ladies and gentlemen. I have already learned this lesson." Then you will ask me, "Do you know, you Malcontent from the sect of the eternally dissatisfied and afraid, any revolution that would be different?" And I would answer, "Well, there have been different revolutions . . ."

The English Revolution of 1689 was called the Glorious Revolution, and not because of heroic acts and victorious battles, nor even because of a victory over a stupid monarch. "The true glory of the British revolution," wrote George Macaulay Trevelyan, "lay in the fact that it was bloodless, that there was no civil war, no massacre, no proscription, and above all that a settlement by consent was reached of the religious and political differences." This settlement stood the test of time; it stabilized freedom in political life and practical compromise in the world of religious passions.

"The men of 1689 were not heroes. Few of them were even honest men. But they were very clever men, and, taught by bitter experience, they behaved at this supreme crisis as very clever men do not always behave, with sense and moderation."¹²

This dangerous situation compelled the bickering Whigs and Tories to make a compromise known as the Revolution Settlement. This was accompanied by the Toleration Act, in which some saw the right to live according to one's con-

science, and others "a necessary compromise with error."¹³ That compromise ended "continuous and mass sufferings, hatreds and wrongs."

"After a thousand years," concluded Trevelyan, "religion was at length released from the obligation to practice cruelty on principle, by the admission that it is the incorrigible nature of man to hold different opinions on speculative subjects."¹⁴

The Toleration Act will be called by this historian "a curious patchwork of compromise, illogicality, and political good sense."¹⁵ Wise Britons, wise Macaulay Trevelyan.

XV

We, the Malcontents from the sects of the eternally unsatisfied and afraid, dream of something similar. We do not want further moral revolutions; a tightening of the reins; special commissions to track down the enemies of Virtue or the Divine Order; the proscription list of enemies, those who are suspected of animosity. We the Malcontents dream of just such a patchwork of compromise and good sense. We the Malcontents do not want further revolutions in a country that has not yet recovered from the last several . . .

¹³ Ibid., 474.

¹⁴ Ibid., 476.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹² G. Macaulay Trevelyan, *History of England* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926), 473.