

Terror Without Virtue is Powerless: Decoding Robespierre's Festival of the Supreme Being
(June 1794)

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This presentation has been excised from a longer research project as it was meant to be delivered orally.

*[Terror and virtue have to exist simultaneously]; virtue without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so much a special principle as it is a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country's most urgent needs.*¹

- Maximilien Robespierre (Justification of the use of Terror)

Robespierre's Festival of the Supreme Being as it was staged at the height of the Great Terror, was a notorious six-week chapter of the French Revolution. During this time, the guillotine was put into overdrive in an attempt to eliminate the Republic's multitude of counter-revolutionary enemies. The Festival of the Supreme Being was held on 20 Prairial Year II in the Revolutionary calendar that the Jacobins used, which translates to June 8 1794. The festival was meant to be a national day of celebration in which Robespierre convinced the residents of Paris that true republican citizens must be transformed into beacons of civic virtue. Rousseau defined civic virtue as the love of the nation's laws as they align with the private and public interest. Virtuous citizens would in turn stabilize the Republic, which was under attack by counter-revolutionary forces at home and abroad. Once this emergency had passed and France's citizens were made sufficiently virtuous, the Terror would no longer be necessary. The Festival of the Supreme Being, both its flagship version in the capital and the provincial spinoffs that were held throughout all of France, were an attempt by Robespierre to unite the French Republic's patriotic citizenry under a Deistic civil religion. The festival's highly Rousseauian inspiration and political message will be explored through Robespierre as he reflects on the importance of classical republicanism and develops his views on civil religion and its impact during the festival itself. This carefully orchestrated event will closely be examined as a parable of republican virtue for its use of classical patriotic symbolism and the distinctive roles assigned to men, women and

¹ Robespierre, Maximilien. *Justification of the Use of Terror*.
<http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/robespierre-terror.asp>.

children; all in an attempt to strengthen the Republic's "good citizens" while the guillotine was being deployed against its "bad citizens."

As a leader of the radical republican faction during the French Revolution, Robespierre made an attempt to transform human society according to his reading of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Inspired by Enlightenment-Era deists like Rousseau, he promoted a state cult honouring the Supreme Being. In February 1794, Robespierre gave his speech on the "*Justification of the Use of Terror*," in which he identified and expressed his belief that moral virtue was the foundation of a healthy society and that it produced happiness.² Therefore, he felt it was his duty to bring forth the Rousseauian dream of a Republic of Virtue by way of the Supreme Being and the Deistic religion. His understanding was that a republic's survival was least likely in large states that endured difficulties with communicating and assembling its citizens.³ Therefore, if the citizens of Paris focused on the needs of the public as a whole rather than just their private needs, a republic was possible in Paris.

Robespierre's simple definition of virtue is worthy of notice because he believed that virtue was a natural passion, and that it was evident in an individual's sacred love of the *patriae*. On the other hand, he also recognised that "both terror and virtue had to exist simultaneously because virtue without terror was harmful as citizens would eventually lose their common love for society; terror without virtue was impotent because without virtue, the state would endure a downfall."⁴ Thus, the festival was a way for Robespierre to elicit societal participation during the

² Robespierre, Maximilien. *Justification of the Use of Terror*.

<http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/robespierre-terror.asp>, Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 38.

³ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 123.

⁴ Robespierre, Maximilien. *Justification of the Use of Terror*., Schama, Simon. *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1989), 828.

Great Terror as an attempt to educate Parisians on morality, virtue and to celebrate life itself.⁵ He arranged this festival because he felt that the French citizens and government were both lacking in virtue. By having a Deistic god, the people of France would have a civil religion with a Republic form of government, and this would ensure that citizens practised and remembered the importance of virtue.

The proposal of a Deistic religion allowed citizens to remain loyal and virtuous subjects because their daily focus would be towards the state. Robespierre's proposal of the Cult of the Supreme Being reflected Rousseau's belief that the dogmas of a civil religion ought to be simple, and that this divinity would provide happiness to the just and result in punishment to the sinners.⁶ Robespierre insisted that the land humans inhabit is filled with liberty and happiness,⁷ because the eternal being specifically influenced the destiny of the nation and was watching over the French Revolution in its entirety. Individuals who were governed by a distant ruler, were more likely to obey the laws as they were not being pressed by high power leaders, and there would be no vanity or luxury within a society to direct citizens to be consumed by their private interest.⁸ The Supreme Being was important to Robespierre and the unity of France during the Great Terror because the Supreme Being was a figure who represented a Civil Religion. As the clockmaker that he was, he left it up to the citizens of Paris to unite together and look out for the interests of the public rather than their own private interests.

The most celebrated French artist during the eighteenth-century, Jacques-Louis David, was known for his Neoclassical works such as the *Oath of the Horatii*. His role in this event was of

⁵ Smyth, Johnathan. *Robespierre and the Festival of the Supreme Being: The Search for a Republican Morality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 12.

⁶ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 165.

⁷ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 196.

⁸ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 165.

importance because he created a detailed plan which not only included meaningful symbols of classical republicanism, but it also gave meticulous instructions for the participants of the festival which included men, women and children. The Festival of the Supreme Being was a large spectacle, which included actors and a play-like scene. An artist created a painting of what the Champ de la Réunion looked like that day as the Festival was under full swing. Included in the festival was an enormous plaster-and-cardboard mountain. On this mountain stood a large, fifty-foot column that had a colossal statue of Hercules on top holding a figurine of Libertas.⁹ David designed the national costume which included an aggressive display of red bonnets and striped trousers which were the hallmark of the sans-culottes. This national costume was a marker of pride for the sans-culottes as they were part of the working class, which represented a majority of the individuals in attendance.



⁹ Schama, *Citizens*, 834.

¹⁰ The Festival of the Supreme Being on the Champ-de-Mars, 8 June 1794. Musée Carnavalet. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.macewan.ca/#/asset/ARMNIG_10313259116. October 20, 2018.

As a Neoclassical artist who was known for the stark realities within his works, David's design of the festival reflected several aspects of virtue within a republic. The image painted of the festival features several republican symbols that were depicted in David's 1794 creation of the *Triumph of the French People*.¹¹ The approach to the Jacobin culture was inspired by antique reliefs in which he chose to depict a procession of republican paragons.¹² Present in the triumph was the republican paragon of Hercules. Originally representing a symbol of unity with his lion skin and club, which were meant to be interpreted as 'crushing' the monster of monarchical power; Hercules was used to be an emblem of the radical republic. Sculpted with miniature figurines of Liberty and Equality in his hands, the three statues come to represent truth, courage, strength and labour. While this portion is of significance as it represents classical republicanism, the primary focus of this presentation will turn to the elements and symbolism that was also present in France.

The Festival was held on June 8 1794, one month before the end of the Great Terror. Participation in the festival was of inspiration because thousands of people came to learn and support the republican idea of having a distant god watching over citizens as they looked out for the citizen body as a whole. This was a representation of civic virtue and it was also reflected through various symbols representing a republic. For those in attendance, this festival would mark the end of the first stage of the Revolution and would then lead to a transition to a republic of virtue.¹³ Twenty-five hundred citizens, who all had a specific role as they portrayed what an

¹¹ *Vue de la montagne élevée au Champ de la Réunion pour la fête qui y a été célébrée en l'honneur de l'Être Suprême le Decadi 20 Prairial de l'an 2. Me de la République Française: [estampe]*, [1794]. 1 est.: eau=forte, burin, coul.; 25,5 x 39,5 cm. Notice et cote du catalogue de la Bibliothèque nationale de France A Paris. <https://purl.stanford.edu/gr780mf8155>. (Accessed 2018-10-30).

¹² Schama, *Citizens*, 830.

¹³ Smyth, *Robespierre and the Festival of the Supreme Being*, 129. Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 108.

ideal republican citizen looked like, were in attendance this day.¹⁴ Actors fulfilled their role by participating and wearing clothing symbolic to a republic and by singing the *Hymn to Divinity*. Individuals who assumed the role of a spectator were also considered participants because they were observing the political message that Robespierre was trying to bring forth. In a time of political frustration in France, the thought of a new form of government had become even more appealing to citizens.

One of the most important symbols of Robespierre's Festival of the Supreme Being was the importance of gender roles. David carefully delineated the roles of men, women, youth, elderly men and blind children, because they all had a specific role to play within in the festival and within an ideal republic; however, there was no role for elderly women. The way David delineated these roles was similar to his depiction of an idealised republic in his paintings. The men and male youths played the most important part because the boys would be fulfilling their fathers' role someday, so they were portrayed in a heroic sense. Similar to the women in neo-classical art, such as the marginalised sisters in David's famous *Oath of the Horatii*, women played an important, yet passive role.

Sons who were armed with swords in a similar manner to David's *Oath* were led by the unarmed men in a procession to the Champ de la Réunion.¹⁵ In the festival plan David notes that in the hands of both men and boys they carried an oak branch which represented strength, morale and knowledge. While women resumed a passive role, they still played a very important part because they were the mothers and wives of the individuals who were fighting for the republic,

¹⁴ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 114.

¹⁵ Schama, *Citizens*, 834., Keith Michael Baker, "The Festival of the Supreme Being (8 June 1794)," in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, ed. Keith Michael Baker, John W. Boyer, and Jules Kirshner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 385.

they were the individuals who bore virtuous men.¹⁶ Female children played an important part as they were the representations of young Roman girls. The lowering of their eyes and bunching of their skirts was a reflection of the passive nature that Roman women possessed. The young ladies promised to marry good and virtuous citizens, while the mothers thanked the Supreme Being for their fertility.¹⁷ Blind youths also took part in this festival as they provided a living image of the honoured misfortunate.¹⁸ Once the individuals completed their procession, they sung Robespierre's *Hymn to Divinity* and shouted '*Vive la République Française!*'

Citizenry roles were not the only important symbol used in the creation of the festival. There were also several other patriotic symbols that were representative of a classical republic. The next symbol worthy of notice is the liberty tree, or the *l'arbre de la République*.¹⁹ The liberty tree for the French was a symbol of the republic, the political revolution and its national freedom. It was also an important symbol as it represented the growth of the Parisian citizens who were looking for a new form of government and were willing to peacefully rise above the political chaos.

One of the most important symbols of the French Revolution and the festival was the liberty cap. The red cap that surmounted the tree was worn by almost every participant, as it was a symbol of freedom, making it part of the official Jacobin costume.²⁰ Many classical scholars know the liberty cap as the Phrygian (Greek) cap or the Pileus (Roman) cap. For both Greeks and Romans, this cap symbolised freedom from slavery,²¹ eventually becoming an attribute to the

¹⁶ Smyth, *Robespierre and the Festival of the Supreme Being*, 199.

¹⁷ Baker, "The Festival of the Supreme Being (8 June 1794)," 340.

¹⁸ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 114.

¹⁹ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 252.

²⁰ Yvonne Korshak, "The Liberty Cap as a Revolutionary Symbol in America and France," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1987): 66.

²¹ Korshak, "The Liberty Cap as a Revolutionary Symbol in America and France," 53.

goddess, Libertas. In turn both the cap and the tree symbolised the patience of the Parisians' and their struggle for freedom during a time of political uncertainty. Eventually the liberty cap became a traditional symbol of the French Revolution, making the idea of freedom more visual. David's request for all of the actors to wear this cap was representation of a common unity amongst Parisians, for everyone was dressed the same. The equality this reflected was civic virtue, meaning that everyone put the public's needs before their own which was one of the key virtues of a classical republic.

Throughout the festival, several of the tri-colored flags could be seen. The red, white and blue flag had recently become France's national flag and was also a symbol of the revolution. It embodied the three ideas of the revolution: *liberté, égalité et fraternité*. *Liberté* reflected the freedom that the Parisian citizens possessed. *Égalité* reflected the equality amongst every citizen, a key virtue, rather than the hierarchical Society of Orders and the monarchical system that the French Revolution was attempting to abolish. *Fraternité*, much like *égalité*, reflected the union amongst the Parisian citizens who were in attendance for Robespierre's festival. Citizens had gathered and acknowledged Robespierre's hopes for a Deistic religion as he understood a providential god to be the backbone of a republic.

The use of gender roles, the liberty tree and cap, and the tri-colored flag not only were patriotic symbols of civic virtue, but they were also an attempt to unite the citizens of Paris. From the festival, Parisians gained knowledge and visual examples of the importance of a civil religion and civic virtue, helping them to better understand the political message of Jacobin efforts to save and then stabilize the republic. However, the long-term efforts of the Festival of the Supreme Being were not as successful due to Robespierre's untimely death just six weeks after the festival. This came after he was declared a traitor to the republic and was executed

without trial. While the festival was a vital compliment to the Jacobin inculcation of terror, the immediate effects of the festival reflected Robespierre's personal attempt to integrate a new republican morality into the mainstream of the French Revolution.

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