Revolutionary France in 1794 was a crucible, combining all the elements that would embody Western politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All eyes were on Paris. Depending on who was looking, Maximilien Robespierre was either a hero or a villain. Robespierre, once an obscure lawyer from northern France, had in four short years transformed himself, or so it seemed, into the chief architect of the transition from the hated ancien régime to an uncertain new order. That new order was threatened by invading armies from neighboring countries, counterrevolutionaries in the Vendée region, and intense divisions within the revolutionary ranks, including the Jacobin faction to which Robespierre belonged. The Catholic and conservative right feared the idea of a republic and desired a return to stability. The left wanted to create a virtuous society—but also simply wanted more bread. Welcome to modern politics.

Unrelenting in his attacks on all those whom he accused of wanting to stop the revolution, and fearless in his denunciation of corruption, Robespierre secured a place on the 12-member Committee of Public Safety, which served as the executive branch of government from 1793 to 1794. In that position, he wielded tremendous power. But his maneuvering space was, in fact, quite narrow. Robespierre faced the same dilemmas that have troubled all democratic revolutionaries ever since: how to uphold the defense of property while also pursuing universal rights, how to balance individual rights with those of the wider community, and how to achieve an outcome consonant with
revolutionary ideals without resorting to means that would reproduce the sins of the old order. Fatefully, Robespierre chose to resolve this problem by trying to impose virtuous citizenship on French society by force.

Robespierre’s response to resistance (real or imagined) was, in Hegel’s formulation, to chop heads off as if they were cabbages. During the Reign of Terror, some 17,000 people were condemned to death by guillotine. Tens of thousands more were imprisoned. And all told, hundreds of thousands died during the civil wars that followed the revolution and which only ended with Napoleon Bonaparte’s rise to power in 1799.

Why did Robespierre take the path of terror, or “terrorism,” a term that was first used in a political context by Robespierre’s enemies to describe his methods? Peter McPhee’s new biography aims to untangle the personal and psychological motivations that shaped Robespierre’s actions. But it also reminds readers that the Terror resulted from quandaries faced by all revolutionaries—including those attempting to construct brave new worlds today.

THE REVOLUTION MADE ME DO IT
To understand Robespierre, one must see the French Revolution in tragic terms. The revolution did not devolve into the Terror owing to the revolutionaries’ zealous pursuit of liberté, égalité, and fraternité. To the contrary: it devolved because by July 1794, the overwhelming majority of the revolutionaries no longer wanted to reach those goals, whose immediate effects for them, they feared, might be the confiscation of their property, or the guillotine, or both. Indeed, once in power, the Jacobins proved completely incapable of resolving the contradictions of their own revolutionary program.

But it is also true that the revolution was influenced by Robespierre’s internal conflicts. Robespierre detested violence and was opposed to capital punishment. Yet he persisted, against all evidence, in believing that smashing invisible (and usually imagined) conspiracies and executing his opponents would solve his problems and those of the revolution.

McPhee concedes that Robespierre was ultimately paranoid and made grave errors of judgment. He was not, however, “the emotionally stunted, rigidly puritanical and icily cruel monster of history and literature.” For McPhee, it wasn’t Robespierre who ruined the French Revolution: it was the revolution that brought a decent, sincere, and hardworking democrat to his doom.

But McPhee has little to say about why there was a French Revolution in the first place, or about why it proceeded so relentlessly. Most historians have relied on deterministic explanations of the revolution’s deeper causes to explain its trajectory. For some on the left, such as the writer Jean Jaurès and the historian Albert Mathiez, 1789 was a critical step in a proletarian advance that would build strength in the European revolutions of 1848, the Paris Commune of 1871, and the Russian revolts of 1905, before finally coming to fruition in 1917, when the East was Red and the West was ready. For others, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, the nature of the French Revolution was revealed more by its continuity with the past, rather than its discontinuity. In 1789, the Old Regime died, never to be reborn. But the revolution that destroyed it nonetheless failed miserably because the
French were incapable of self-government, corrupted as they were by bad habits born of centuries of absolutist monarchy.

In this debate, McPhee's softly stated preference is to see the revolution—and, by extension, Robespierre—as an enduring model for all those who yearn for civic republicanism. To this effect, McPhee quotes the French historian Georges Lefebvre, who wrote that “Robespierre should be described as the first who defended democracy and universal suffrage . . . the intrepid defender of the Revolution of 1789 which destroyed in France the domination of the aristocracy.”

Subscribing to this view, McPhee claims that the revolution shifted from the fraternal celebration after the fall of the Bastille in 1789–90 to the murderous terror and civil war of 1793–94 because Robespierre’s dedication to the principles of republican democracy were unfortunately unshared. “Throughout the Revolution,” McPhee writes, Robespierre “had seen those whom he had trusted betray that trust by compromise or treachery.” Thus, to save the revolution from itself, Robespierre had to act as he did.

FOR IT BEFORE HE WAS AGAINST IT

But McPhee has frustratingly little to say about Robespierre’s moral responsibility for the executions and bloodshed of the Terror. It might be true, of course, that if Robespierre wanted to retain his authority, he had no choice but to embrace violent repression. That, however, does not explain why he did it so brutally. Prior biographers have proposed all sorts of psychological explanations. But McPhee finds these unconvincing. "There is nothing
in the evidence we have of Robespierre's actions and beliefs before May 1789 that would enable one to predict that, in particular circumstances, he would find repression and capital punishment the answer to dissent,” he writes.

McPhee does nevertheless delve into Robespierre's troubled childhood, the signal events of which were the death of his beloved mother when he was seven years old and his derelict and shameful father's abandonment of the family soon after, which left young Maximilien, his younger brother, and their sister to be raised by various relatives. Although McPhee does not do so, it is possible to conclude that this childhood turmoil helped turn Robespierre into a man who both loved and hated bourgeois life and authority and tended to resolve his personal and professional problems by abstracting them as best he could, raising them from an insoluble, quotidian, and material context to a higher plane, on which he was never wrong. Politically, the most obvious instance of this psychological habit was his unvarying insistence that something that might at first have looked like the criminal act of a faction—for example, the Jacobins' seizure of power—was in fact a national and universalistic movement. The reverse was the case, of course, when it came to the actions of his enemies. In practice, this kind of self-deception allowed Robespierre to oppose authorities of all kinds until it became necessary to transform himself into a murderous authoritarian.

But the revolution posed a number of contradictions that he could not resolve through mental abstraction. In the spring of 1794,
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leading the Jacobin revolution required Robespierre to be for the rule of law and for its suspension, to defend and attack private property, to support and reject nationalism, to embrace feminism and antifeminism, and to promote religion and irreligion.

Likewise, although McPhee makes a persuasive case that Robespierre was totally dedicated to the ideal of fraternité, there is no denying that he was often viscerally opposed to applications of that ideal. In February 1793, when the Parisian sans-culottes rioted for food and soap, Robespierre scolded these cold, hungry, desperate foot soldiers of the revolution. “I am not saying that the people are guilty,” he complained, “but when people rise, must they not have a goal worthy of them? Must paltry goods be of concern to them? ... The people must rise up, not to collect sugar, but to bring down the tyrants.”

In late July 1794, some of “the people” did just that, and Robespierre’s failure to determine where bourgeois democracy might find its true limits finally led him to the guillotine. Afraid that they would be the next ones to be purged and sentenced to death, a number of Robespierre’s former allies on the Committee of Public Safety and in the National Convention, the legislative assembly, ordered him to be arrested. Captured some hours later, and after having probably tried to shoot himself, he was guillotined the next day.

GOD, GUNS, AND GUILLOTINES?

In the contemporary era, Robespierre is often held responsible for the birth of terrorism. McPhee rejects this as unfair. “The Terror,” he writes, “was not [Robespierre’s] work but a regime of intimidation and control supported by the
Robespierre’s Rules for Radicals

National Convention and ‘patriots’ across the country.” It is true that Robespierre did not dictate policy to the Committee of Public Safety. But he was nonetheless its most dedicated member, and he was rightly seen as its first spokesperson. Had he not been in power, the Terror might well have been less fierce and quite probably would not have lasted as long as it did.

But were Robespierre’s ideas, and not just his actions, also to blame for the Terror? That is the contention of some on the contemporary American right, eager to link liberalism with authoritarian overreach. According to Rick Santorum, the erstwhile Republican candidate for president and a current standard-bearer of American conservatism, the godlessness of 1789 inevitably led to state terrorism. “What’s left is a government that will tell you who you are, what you’ll do, and when you’ll do it,” Santorum declared while campaigning. “What’s left in France became the guillotine,” he concluded, warning that if Americans “follow the path of President Obama and his overt hostility to faith in America, then we are headed down that road.” In that prediction’s broad outlines, Santorum might incidentally be surprised to find himself in the company of some former Marxist historians, who resoundingly and approvingly believed that the circumstances of Paris in 1794 were likely to be repeated someday.

Of course, both the right-wing and the left-wing versions of that prediction are unlikely to be borne out, at least in the West. The French in 1789–94 were the first modern nation forced to choose between political universalism and the realization of populist or utopian goals, and what happened to them has generally chastened their successors. Americans did not face that choice after 1776, and their descendants probably will not have to face it anytime soon. Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party might represent steps toward that type of conflict. But short of a major economic collapse, it is hard to imagine that these two movements could capture the American political imagination as Jacobinism did for the French, and their enemies, in 1789–94.

But a situation closer to that of revolutionary France now exists in the nascent democracies of the Arab world. When confronted by the rise of Islamist parties, liberal revolutionaries in countries such as Egypt might be tempted to bracket their universalistic, democratic goals and resort to force and military rule to secure order. Of course, illiberal forces can face a version of Robespierre’s dilemma, as well, and Salafi hard-liners might prove willing to put aside their commitment to genuine theocracy to seek accommodation with the wholly secular military.

But perhaps the most salient lesson Robespierre can offer today’s Tea Partiers and Occupiers, Salafists and secularists, is that, contrary to what they might sometimes wish, economic, political, and social problems cannot be solved by simply cutting off somebody’s head.