AGAINST THE LOGIC OF THE GUILLOTINE

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FURTHER READING

The Guillotine At Work, GP Maximoff
I Know Who Killed Chief Superintendent Luigi Calabresi, Alfredo M. Bonanno
Critique's Quarrel with Church and State, Edgar Bauer

FOOTNOTES

1. As reported in the official journal of the Paris Commune:
"On Thursday, at nine o'clock in the morning, the 137th battalion, belonging to the eleventh arrondissement, went to Rue Folie-Mericourt; they requisitioned and took the guillotine, broke the hideous machine into pieces, and burned it to the applause of an immense crowd.

"They burned it at the foot of the statue of the defender of Sirven and Calas, the apostle of humanity, the precursor of the French Revolution, at the foot of the statue of Voltaire."

This had been announced earlier in the following proclamation:

"Citizens, we have been informed of the construction of a new type of guillotine that was commissioned by the odious government [i.e., the conservative Republican government under Adolphe Thiers]—one that it is easier to transport and speedier. The Sub-Committee of the 11th Arrondissement has ordered the seizure of these servile instruments of monarchist domination and has voted that they be destroyed once and forever. They will therefore be burned at 10 o'clock on April 6, 1871, on the Place de la Mairies, for the purification of the Arrondissement and the consecration of our new freedom."

2. As we have argued elsewhere, fetishizing "the rule of law" often serves to legitimize atrocities that would otherwise be perceived as ghastly and unjust. History shows again and again how centralized government can perpetrate violence on a much greater scale than anything that arises in "unorganized chaos."

3. Nauseatingly, at least one contributor to *Jacobin* magazine has even attempted to rehabilitate this precursor to the worst excesses of Stalinism, pretending that a state-mandated religion could be preferable to authoritarian atheism. The alternative to both authoritarian religions and authoritarian ideologies that promote Islamophobia and the like is not for an authoritarian state to impose a religion of its own, but to build grassroots solidarity across political and religious lines in defense of freedom of conscience.

- Emile Henry, anarchist
- Sante Geronimo Caserio, anarchist
- Raymond Callemin, Étienne Monier and André Soudy, all anarchist participants in the so-called Bonnot Gang
- Mécislas Charrier, anarchist
- Felice Orsini, who attempted to assassinate Napoleon III
- Hans and Sophie Scholl and Christoph Probst—members of Die Weisse Rose, an underground anti-Nazi youth organization active in Munich 1942-1943.

Hans and Sophie Scholl and Christoph Probst.

"I am an anarchist. We have been hanged in Chicago, electrocuted in New York, guillotined in Paris and strangled in Italy, and I will go with my comrades. I am opposed to your Government and to your authority. Down with them. Do your worst. Long live Anarchy."

—Chummy Fleming

The Paris Commune burned the guillotine—and we should too.

adversaries, we ought to maintain a profound faith in their potential, for we hope to live in different relations with them one day. As aspiring revolutionaries, this hope is our most precious resource, the foundation of everything we do. If revolutionary change is to spread throughout society and across the world, those we fight today will have to be fighting alongside us tomorrow. We do not preach conversion by the sword, nor do we imagine that we will persuade our adversaries in some abstract marketplace of ideas; rather, we aim to interrupt the ways that capitalism and the state currently reproduce themselves while demonstrating the virtues of our alternative inclusively and contagiously. There are no shortcuts when it comes to lasting change.

Precisely because it is sometimes necessary to employ force in our conflicts with the defenders of the prevailing order, it is especially important that we never lose sight of our aspirations, our compassion, and our optimism. When we are compelled to use coercive force, the only possible justification is that it is a necessary step towards creating a better world *for everyone*—including our enemies, or at least their children. Otherwise, we risk becoming the next Jacobins, the next defilers of the revolution.

> "The only real revenge we could possibly have would be by our own efforts to bring ourselves to happiness."
>
> —William Morris, in response to calls for revenge for police attacks on demonstrations in Trafalgar Square

APPENDIX: THE BEHEADED

The guillotine did not end its career with the conclusion of the first French Revolution, nor when it was burned during the Paris Commune. In fact, it was used in France as a means for the state to carry out capital punishment right up to 1977. One of the last women guillotined in France was executed for providing abortions. The Nazis guillotined about 16,500 people between 1933 and 1945—the same number of people killed during the peak of the Terror in France.

A few victims of the guillotine:

- Ravachol (born François Claudius Koenigstein), anarchist
- Auguste Vaillant, anarchist

Anarchism is a proposal for *everyone* regarding how we might go about improving our lives—workers and unemployed people, people of all ethnicities and genders and nationalities or lack thereof, paupers and billionaires alike. The anarchist proposal is not in the interests of one currently existing group against another: it is not a way to enrich the poor at the expense of the rich, or to empower one ethnicity, nationality, or religion at others' expense. That entire way of thinking is part of what we are trying to escape. All of the "interests" that supposedly characterize different categories of people are products of the prevailing order and must be transformed along with it, not preserved or pandered to.

From our perspective, even the topmost positions of wealth and power that are available in the existing order are worthless. Nothing that capitalism and the state have to offer are of any value to us. We propose anarchist revolution on the grounds that it could finally fulfill longings that the prevailing social order will never satisfy: the desire to be able to provide for oneself and one's loved ones without doing so at anyone else's expense, the wish to be valued for one's creativity and character rather than for how much profit one can generate, the longing to structure one's life around what is profoundly joyous rather than according to the imperatives of competition.

We propose that everyone now living could get along—if not *well,* then at least *better*—if we were not forced to compete for power and resources in the zero-sum games of politics and economics.

Leave it to anti-Semites and other bigots to describe the enemy as a *type* of people, to personify everything they fear as the Other. Our adversary is not a kind of human being, but the form of social relations that imposes antagonism between people as the fundamental model for politics and economics. Abolishing the ruling class does not mean guillotining everyone who currently owns a yacht or penthouse; it means making it impossible for anyone to systematically wield coercive power over anyone else. As soon as that is impossible, no yacht or penthouse will sit empty long.

As for our immediate adversaries—the specific human beings who are determined to maintain the prevailing order at all costs—we aspire to defeat them, not to exterminate them. However selfish and rapacious they appear, at least some of their values are similar to ours, and most of their errors—like our own—arise from their fears and weaknesses. In many cases, they oppose the proposals of the Left precisely because of what is internally inconsistent in them—for example, the idea of bringing about the fellowship of humanity by means of violent coercion.

Even when we are engaged in pitched physical struggle with our

148 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK, ON APRIL 6, 1871, ARMED PARTICIPANTS IN THE revolutionary Paris Commune seized the guillotine that was stored near the prison in Paris. They brought it to the foot of the statue of Voltaire, where they smashed it into pieces and burned it in a bonfire, to the applause of an immense crowd.[1] This was a popular action arising from the grassroots, not a spectacle coordinated by politicians. At the time, the Commune controlled Paris, which was still inhabited by people of all classes; the French and Prussian armies surrounded the city and were preparing to invade it in order to impose the conservative Republican government of Adolphe Thiers. In these conditions, burning the guillotine was a brave gesture repudiating the Reign of Terror and the idea that positive social change can be achieved by slaughtering people.

"What?" you say, in shock, "The Communards burned the guillotine? Why on earth would they do that? I thought the guillotine was a symbol of liberation!"

Why indeed? If the guillotine is not a symbol of liberation, then why has it become such a standard motif for the radical left over the past few years? Why is the internet replete with guillotine memes? Why does The Coup sing "We got the guillotine, you better run"? The most popular socialist periodical is named *Jacobin*, after the original proponents of the guillotine. Surely this can't all be just an ironic sendup of lingering right-wing anxieties about the French Revolution.

The guillotine has come to occupy our collective imagination. In a time when the rifts in our society are widening towards civil war, it represents uncompromising bloody revenge. It represents the idea that the violence

of the state could be a good thing if only the right people were in charge.

Those who take their own powerlessness for granted assume that they can promote gruesome revenge fantasies without consequences. But if we are serious about changing the world, we owe it to ourselves to make sure that our proposals are not equally gruesome.

VENGEANCE

It's not surprising that people want bloody revenge today. Capitalist profiteering is rapidly rendering the planet uninhabitable. US Border Patrol is kidnapping, drugging, and imprisoning children. Individual acts of racist and misogynist violence occur regularly. For many people, daily life is increasingly humiliating and disempowering.

Those who don't desire revenge because they are not compassionate enough to be outraged about injustice or because they are simply not paying attention deserve no credit for this. There is less virtue in apathy than in the worst excesses of vengefulness.

Do I want to take revenge on the police officers who murder people with impunity, on the billionaires who cash in on exploitation and gentrification, on the bigots who harass and dox people? Yes, of course I do. They have killed people I knew; they are trying to destroy everything I love. When I think about the harm that they are causing, I feel ready to break their bones, to kill them with my bare hands.

But that desire is distinct from my politics. I can want something without having to reverse-engineer a political justification for it. I can want something and choose not to pursue it, if I want something else even more—in this case, an anarchist revolution that is not based in revenge. I don't judge other people for wanting revenge, especially if they have been through worse than I have. But I also don't confuse that desire with a proposal for liberation.

If the sort of bloodlust I describe scares you, or if it simply seems unseemly, then you absolutely have no business joking about other people carrying out industrialized murder on your behalf.

For this is what distinguishes the fantasy of the guillotine: it is all about efficiency and distance. Those who fetishize the guillotine don't want to kill people with their bare hands; they aren't prepared to rend anyone's flesh

enmity, destabilizing fixed positions, undermining the allegiances and assumptions that underpin authority. We should never hurry to make the transition from revolutionary ferment to warfare. Doing so usually forecloses possibilities rather than expanding them.

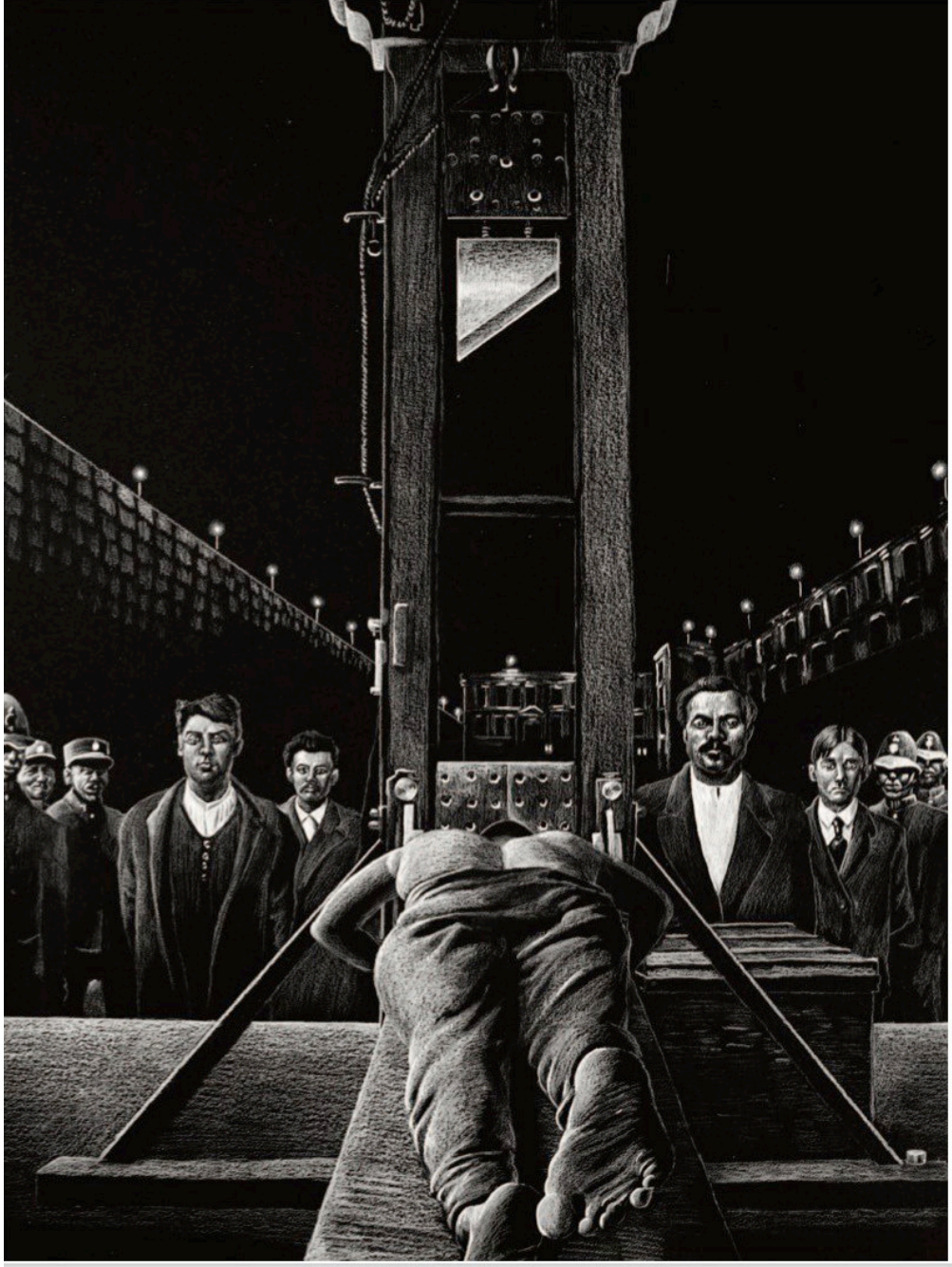
As a tool, the guillotine takes for granted that it is impossible to transform one's relations with the enemy, only to abolish them. What's more, the guillotine assumes that the victim is already completely within the power of the people who employ it. By contrast with the feats of collective courage we have seen people achieve against tremendous odds in popular uprisings, the guillotine is a weapon for cowards.

By refusing to slaughter our enemies wholesale, we hold open the possibility that they might one day join us in our project of transforming the world. Self-defense is necessary, but wherever we can, we should take the risk of leaving our adversaries alive. Not doing so guarantees that we will be no better than the worst of them. From a military perspective, this is a handicap; but if we truly aspire to revolution, it is the only way.

LIBERATE, NOT EXTERMINATE

> "To give hope to the many oppressed and fear to the few oppressors, that is our business; if we do the first and give hope to the many, the few must be frightened by their hope. Otherwise, we do not want to frighten them; it is not revenge we want for poor people, but happiness; indeed, what revenge can be taken for all the thousands of years of the sufferings of the poor?"
>
> —William Morris, *How We Live and How We Might Live*

So we repudiate the logic of the guillotine. We don't want to exterminate our enemies. We don't think the way to create harmony is to subtract everyone who does not share our ideology from the world. Our vision is a world in which many worlds fit, as Subcomandante Marcos put it—a world in which the only thing that is impossible is to dominate and oppress.



Weekly Drawing by Théophile Bouchet: Execution of an Anarchist

André Soudy, Edouard Carouy, Octave Garnier, Etienne Monier, anarchists of the Bonnot Gang that met there fate via the guillotine.

with their teeth. They want their revenge automated and carried out for them. They are like the consumers who blithely eat Chicken McNuggets but could never personally butcher a cow or cut down a rainforest. They prefer for bloodshed to take place in an orderly manner, with all the paperwork filled out properly, according to the example set by the Jacobins and the Bolsheviks in imitation of the impersonal functioning of the capitalist state.

And one more thing: they don't want to have to take responsibility for it. They prefer to express their fantasy ironically, retaining plausible deniability. Yet anyone who has ever participated actively in social upheaval knows how narrow the line can be between fantasy and reality. Let's look at the "revolutionary" role the guillotine has played in the past.

> "But revenge is unworthy of an anarchist! The dawn, our dawn, claims no quarrels, no crimes, no lies; it affirms life, love, knowledge; we work to hasten that day."
>
> —Kurt Gustav Wilckens—anarchist, pacifist, and assassin of Colonel Héctor Varela, the Argentine official who had overseen the slaughter of approximately 1500 striking workers in Patagonia.

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GUILLOTINE

The guillotine is associated with radical politics because it was used in the original French Revolution to behead monarch Louis XVI on January 21, 1793, several months after his arrest. But once you open the Pandora's box of exterminatory force, it's difficult to close it again.

Having gotten started using the guillotine as an instrument of social change, Maximilien de Robespierre, sometime President of the Jacobin Club, continued employing it to consolidate power for his faction of the Republican government. As is customary for demagogues, Robespierre, Georges Danton, and other radicals availed themselves of the assistance of the *sans-culottes*, the angry poor, to oust the more moderate faction, the Girondists, in June 1793. (The Girondists, too, were Jacobins; if you love a Jacobin, the best thing you can do for him is to prevent his party from

killings of pro-fascist clergy during the Spanish Civil War—have enabled our enemies to depict us in the worst light, even if they are responsible for ten thousand times as many murders. Reactionaries throughout history have always disingenuously held revolutionaries to a double standard, forgiving the state for murdering civilians by the million while taking insurgents to task for so much as breaking a window. The question is not whether they have made us popular, but whether they have a place in a project of liberation. If we seek transformation rather than conquest, we ought to appraise our victories according to a different logic than the police and militaries we confront.

This is not an argument against the use of force. Rather, it is a question about how to employ it without creating new hierarchies, new forms of systematic oppression.

The image of the guillotine is propaganda for the kind of authoritarian organization that can avail itself of that particular tool. Every tool implies the forms of social organization that are necessary to employ it. In his memoir, *Bash the Rich*, Class War veteran Ian Bone quotes Angry Brigade member John Barker to the effect that "petrol bombs are far more democratic than dynamite," suggesting that we should analyze every tool of resistance in terms of how it structures power. Critiquing the armed struggle model adopted by hierarchical authoritarian groups in Italy in the 1970s, Alfredo Bonanno and other insurrectionists emphasized that liberation could only be achieved via horizontal, decentralized, and participatory methods of resistance.

> "It is impossible to make the revolution with the guillotine alone. Revenge is the antechamber of power. Anyone who wants to avenge themselves requires a leader. A leader to take them to victory and restore wounded justice."
>
> —Alfredo Bonanno, *Armed Joy*

Together, a rioting crowd can defend an autonomous zone or exert pressure on authorities without need of hierarchical centralized leadership. Where this becomes impossible—when society has broken up into two distinct sides that are fully prepared to slaughter each other via military means—one may no longer speak of revolution, but only of war. The premise of revolution is that subversion can spread across the lines of

they've done is regarded as embarrassing—for them to have to sit in assemblies in which no one listens to them, to go on living among us without any special privileges in full awareness of the harm they have done. If we fantasize about anything, let us fantasize about making our movements so strong that we will hardly have to kill anyone to overthrow the state and abolish capitalism. This is more becoming of our dignity as partisans of liberation.

It is possible to be committed to revolutionary struggle by all means necessary without holding life cheap. It is possible to eschew the sanctimonious moralism of pacifism without thereby developing a cynical lust for blood. We need to develop the ability to wield force without ever mistaking power over others for our true objective, which is to collectively create the conditions for the freedom of all.

> "That humanity might be redeemed from revenge: that is for me the bridge to the highest hope and a rainbow after lashing storms."
>
> —Friedrich Nietzsche (not himself a partisan of liberation, but one of the foremost theorists of the hazards of vengefulness)

INSTEAD OF THE GUILLOTINE

Of course, it's pointless to appeal to the better nature of our oppressors until we have succeeded in making it impossible for them to benefit from oppressing us. The question is *how* to accomplish that.

Apologists for the Jacobins will protest that, under the circumstances, at least *some* bloodletting was necessary to advance the revolutionary cause. Practically all of the revolutionary massacres in history have been justified on the grounds of necessity—that's how people *always* justify massacres. Even if some bloodletting *were* necessary, that it is still no excuse to cultivate bloodlust and entitlement as revolutionary values. If we wish to wield coercive force responsibly when there is no other choice, we should cultivate a distaste for it.

Have mass killings ever helped us advance our cause? Certainly, the comparatively few executions that anarchists *have* carried out—such as the

coming to power, since he is certain to be next up against the wall after you.) After guillotining the Girondists en masse, Robespierre set about consolidating power at the expense of Danton, the *sans-culottes*, and everyone else.

> "The revolutionary government has nothing in common with anarchy. On the contrary, its goal is to suppress it in order to ensure and solidify the reign of law."
>
> —Maximilien Robespierre, distinguishing his autocratic government from the more radical grassroots movements that helped to create the French Revolution.[2]

By early 1794, Robespierre and his allies had sent a great number of people at least as radical as themselves to the guillotine, including Anaxagoras Chaumette and the so-called Enragés, Jacques Hébert and the so-called Hébertists, proto-feminist and abolitionist Olympe de Gouges, Camille Desmoulins (who had had the gall to suggest to his childhood friend Robespierre that "love is stronger and more lasting than fear")—and Desmoulins's wife, for good measure, despite her sister having been Robespierre's fiancée. They also arranged for the guillotining of Georges Danton and Danton's supporters, alongside various other former allies. To celebrate all this bloodletting, Robespierre organized the Festival of the Supreme Being, a mandatory public ceremony inaugurating an invented state religion.[3]

After this, it was only a month and a half before Robespierre himself was guillotined, having exterminated too many of those who might have fought beside him against the counterrevolution. This set the stage for a period of reaction that culminated with Napoleon Bonaparte seizing power and crowning himself Emperor. According to the French Republican Calendar (an innovation that did not catch on, but was briefly reintroduced during the Paris Commune), Robespierre's execution took place during the month of Thermidor. Consequently, the name Thermidor is forever associated with the onset of the counterrevolution.

"Robespierre killed the Revolution in three blows: the execution of Hébert, the execution of Danton, the Cult of the Supreme Being…The victory of Robespierre, far from saving it, would have meant only a more profound and irreparable fall."

—Louis-Auguste Blanqui, himself hardly an opponent of authoritarian violence.

But it is a mistake to focus on Robespierre. Robespierre himself was not a superhuman tyrant. At best, he was a zealous apparatchik who filled a role that countless revolutionaries were vying for, a role that another person would have played if he had not. The issue was systemic—the competition for centralized dictatorial power—not a matter of individual wrongdoing.

The tragedy of 1793-1795 confirms that whatever tool you use to bring about a revolution will surely be used against you. But the problem is not just the tool, it's the logic behind it. Rather than demonizing Robespierre—or Lenin, Stalin, or Pol Pot—we have to examine *the logic of the guillotine*.

To a certain extent, we can understand why Robespierre and his contemporaries ended up relying on mass murder as a political tool. They were threatened by foreign military invasion, internal conspiracies, and counter-revolutionary uprisings; they were making decisions in an extremely high-stress environment. But if it is possible to understand how they came to embrace the guillotine, it is impossible to argue that all the killings were necessary to secure their position. Their own executions refute that argument eloquently enough.

Likewise, it is wrong to imagine that the guillotine was employed chiefly against the ruling class, even at the height of Jacobin rule. Being consummate bureaucrats, the Jacobins kept detailed records. Between June 1793 and the end of July 1794, 16,594 people were officially sentenced to death in France, including 2639 people in Paris. Of the formal death sentences passed under the Terror, only 8 percent were doled out to aristocrats and 6 percent to members of the clergy; the rest were divided between the middle class and the poor, with the vast majority of the victims coming from the lower classes.

The story that played out in the first French revolution was not a fluke. Half a century later, the French Revolution of 1848 followed a

PUNISHING THE GUILTY

"Trust visions that don't feature buckets of blood."

—Jenny Holzer

By and large, we tend to be more aware of the wrongs committed against us than we are of the wrongs we commit against others. We are most dangerous when we feel most wronged, because we feel most entitled to pass judgment, to be cruel. The more justified we feel, the more careful we ought to be not to replicate the patterns of the justice industry, the assumptions of the carceral state, the logic of the guillotine. Again, this does not justify inaction; it is simply to say that we must proceed most critically precisely when we feel most righteous, lest we assume the role of our oppressors.

When we see ourselves as fighting against specific human beings rather than social phenomena, it becomes more difficult to recognize the ways that we ourselves participate in those phenomena. We externalize the problem as something outside ourselves, personifying it as an enemy that can be sacrificed to symbolically cleanse ourselves. Yet what we do to the worst of us will eventually be done to the rest of us.

As a symbol of vengeance, the guillotine tempts us to imagine ourselves standing in judgment, anointed with the blood of the wicked. The Christian economics of righteousness and damnation is essential to this tableau. On the contrary, if we use it to symbolize anything, the guillotine should remind us of the danger of becoming what we hate. The best thing would be to be able to fight *without hatred,* out of an optimistic belief in the tremendous potential of humanity.

Often, all it takes to be able to cease to hate a person is to succeed in making it impossible for him to pose any kind of threat to you. When someone is already in your power, it is contemptible to kill him. This is the crucial moment for any revolution, the moment when the revolutionaries have the opportunity to take gratuitous revenge, to exterminate rather than simply to defeat. If they do not pass this test, their victory will be more ignominious than any failure.

The worst punishment anyone could inflict on those who govern and police us today would be to compel them to live in a society in which everything

> Reminding "tankies" of the atrocities and betrayals state socialists perpetrated from 1917 on is like calling Trump racist and sexist. Publicizing the fact that Trump is a serial sexual assaulter only made him more popular with his misogynistic base; likewise, the blood-drenched history of authoritarian party socialism can only make it more appealing to those who are chiefly motivated by the desire to identify with something *powerful*.
>
> —Anarchists in the Trump Era

Now that the Soviet Union has been defunct for almost 30 years—and owing to the difficulty of receiving firsthand perspectives from the exploited Chinese working class—many people in North America experience authoritarian socialism as an entirely abstract concept, as distant from their lived experience as mass executions by guillotine. Desiring not only revenge but also a *deus ex machina* to rescue them from both the nightmare of capitalism and the responsibility to create an alternative to it themselves, they imagine the authoritarian state as a champion that could fight on their behalf. Recall what George Orwell said of the comfortable British Stalinist writers of the 1930s in his essay "Inside the Whale":

> "To people of that kind such things as purges, secret police, summary executions, imprisonment without trial etc., etc., are too remote to be terrifying. They can swallow totalitarianism because they have no experience of anything except liberalism."

similar trajectory. In February, a revolution led by angry poor people gave Republican politicians state power; in June, when life under the new government turned out to be little better than life under the king, the people of Paris revolted once again and the politicians ordered the army to massacre them in the name of the revolution. This set the stage for the nephew of the original Napoleon to win the presidential election of December 1848, promising to "restore order." Three years later, having exiled all the Republican politicians, Napoleon III abolished the Republic and crowned himself Emperor—prompting Marx's famous quip that history repeats itself, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."

Likewise, after the French revolution of 1870 put Adolphe Thiers in power, he ruthlessly butchered the Paris Commune, but this only paved the way for even more reactionary politicians to supplant him in 1873. In all three of these cases, we see how revolutionaries who are intent on wielding state power must embrace *the logic of the guillotine* to acquire it, and then, having brutally crushed other revolutionaries in hopes of consolidating control, are inevitably defeated by more reactionary forces.

In the 20th century, Lenin described Robespierre as a Bolshevik *avant la lettre*, affirming the Terror as an antecedent of the Bolshevik project. He was not the only person to draw that comparison.

"We'll be our own Thermidor," Bolshevik apologist Victor Serge recalls Lenin proclaiming as he prepared to butcher the rebels of Kronstadt. In other words, having crushed the anarchists and everyone else to the left of them, the Bolsheviks would survive the reaction by becoming the counterrevolution themselves. They had already reintroduced fixed hierarchies into the Red Army in order to recruit former Tsarist officers to join it; alongside their victory over the insurgents in Kronstadt, they reintroduced the free market and capitalism, albeit under state control. Eventually Stalin assumed the position once occupied by Napoleon.

So the guillotine is not an instrument of liberation. This was already clear in 1795, well over a century before the Bolsheviks initiated their own Terror, nearly two centuries before the Khmer Rouge exterminated almost a quarter of the population of Cambodia.

Why, then, has the guillotine come back into fashion as a symbol of resistance to tyranny? The answer to this will tell us something about the psychology of our time.

FETISHIZING THE VIOLENCE OF THE STATE

It is shocking that even today, radicals would associate themselves with the Jacobins, a tendency that was reactionary by the end of 1793. But the explanation isn't hard to work out. Then, as now, there are people who want to think of themselves as radical without having to actually make a radical break with the institutions and practices that are familiar to them. "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living," as Marx said.

If—to use Max Weber's famous definition—an aspiring government qualifies as representing *the state* by achieving a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory, then one of the most persuasive ways it can demonstrate its sovereignty is to wield lethal force with impunity. This explains the various reports to the effect that public beheadings were observed as festive or even religious occasions during the French Revolution. Before the Revolution, beheadings were affirmations of the sacred authority of the monarch; during the Revolution, when the representatives of the Republic presided over executions, this confirmed that they held sovereignty—in the name of The People, of course. "Louis must die so that the nation may live," Robespierre had proclaimed, seeking to sanctify the birth of bourgeois nationalism by literally baptizing it in the blood of the previous social order. Once the Republic was inaugurated on these grounds, it required continuous sacrifices to affirm its authority.

Here we see the essence of the state: *it can kill, but it cannot give life*. As the concentration of political legitimacy and coercive force, it can do harm, but it cannot establish the kind of positive freedom that individuals experience when they are grounded in mutually supportive communities. It cannot create the kind of solidarity that gives rise to harmony between people. What we use the state to do to others, others can use the state to do to us—as Robespierre experienced—but no one can use the coercive apparatus of the state for the cause of liberation.

For radicals, fetishizing the guillotine is just like fetishizing the state: it means celebrating an instrument of murder that will always be used chiefly against us.

Those who have been stripped of a positive relationship to their own agency often look around for a surrogate to identify with—a leader whose violence can stand in for the revenge they desire as a consequence of their own powerlessness. In the Trump era, we are all well aware of what this looks like among disenfranchised proponents of far-right politics. But there are also people who feel powerless and angry on the left, people who desire revenge, people who want to see the state that has crushed them turned against their enemies.