

The Robespierre Syndrome

July 1, 2011 Category: Domestic Politics

Download as PDF

How do democratic movements go too far, and thus take an abrupt, drastic turn rightwards—thereby catapulting themselves into tyranny? What would cause a leader who initially fights for democracy to suddenly undergo a complete inversion, and become a tyrant?

In the French Revolution, Maximilian Robespierre started as an advocate for what we would later come to know as Marxian principles. He fought for democratic ideals. He was a champion for the proletariat who (unwittingly) echoed Thomas Paine. Once he seized power, he underwent an abrupt and extreme lurch to the right—seemingly seized by paranoia, delusion and even elements of megalomania. This transformation occurred with him as well as with other leaders in the movement. These figures proceeded to abandon the ideals that initially drove them, and to instigate (and fuel) mass hysteria. This “Robespierre-ian Inversion” is not unheard of with militant, left-wing movements—movements that, it could be said, “get carried away”...and invert themselves.

Robespierre had at first been an ardent advocate of civil liberties, speaking out against oligarchy / monarchy, and fighting for the empowerment of the peasantry. With other leaders of the initial revolution in France, he instituted the *Declaration of The Rights of Man*. Here was a document that reflected these principles—the principles that ostensibly justified the uprising against the established order. Thomas Paine promptly came to Paris to support this noble cause in its early stages...and was duly made an honorary citizen and allowed to be a participant in the process.

However, the noble movement was to be short-lived. It promptly transitioned to its own antithesis—as Robespierre transformed into his own antithesis. This “about-face” fostered a radical *rightward* shift, degenerating the noble cause into a sort of proto-fascist movement. Suddenly, the ideals were turned on their head, and civil liberties became anathema.

Subsequently, the *Declaration of Rights* was suspended, and those who spoke up for the original cause were deemed traitors (including Thomas Paine himself). Power was consolidated into the hands of a panel of oligarchs. Any/all subversives were rounded up and killed—in a McCarthyism-on-steroids “Terror”. The initial spirit of the movement had not only been betrayed, but had been utterly reversed—*all under the pretext of the original ideals*.

This bizarre phenomenon could be called the “Bolshevik Turn”, a drastic rightward lurch of an initially Marxian movement—thereby transforming into what we’ve come to misleadingly label “Marx-ISM”. When this strange transformation occurs, the driving principles become mere lip-service, and the actions no longer reflect the original spirit of the movement. (Indeed, Marxian ideals make for enticing rhetoric and effective pretense for those with anti-Marxian agendas.)

With such a “Bolshevik Turn”, the movement undergoes an abrupt transition from a democratic movement to an anti-democratic movement—inverting itself upon reaching some critical threshold. We saw this inversion take place via Lenin in Russia and via Mao in China...and to small degrees with Castro in Cuba. The archetypical example of this sudden transition, however, was the French Revolution. The phenomenon is thus appropriately explained by what we’ll label the *Robespierre Syndrome*.

The leadership's 180⁰ reversal on Thomas Paine is very illustrative. Paine had gone from being made an *honorary citizen of France* (revered as an icon of the principles on which the movement was originally based) to *being imprisoned* (as a subversive). How is such a reversal possible? How can this drastic change be explained? The about-face occurred, we find, not because Paine's position changed, but because the movement's ideals completely flip-flopped. It was because Paine MAINTAINED the original ideals that his status went from icon to subversive. Paine remained LEFT; the movement lurched RIGHT.

Meanwhile, Robespierre was turning Deism (inherently anti-religionist in nature) on its head as well, rendering it a cult phenomenon. In eerie ways, the appointment of Robespierre to "President of the Convention" foreshadowed Hitler's appointment to "Chancellor" in Germany 140 years later. God only knows what may have ensued had Robespierre managed to continue his rise to power. Of one thing we may be certain: He would have consolidated power in the name of "power to the people"—all while demanding loyalty to the movement on pain of death.

As with most initially pro-proletariat movement leaders who segue into leaders of right-wing regimes (under the auspices of populism), Robespierre essentially sought to forge his own religion (a "radical democrat" rendering of Deism) out of the movement. Robespierre concocted a new Faith whereby he was essentially rendered a prophet. *The Cult of The Supreme Being* was the result. Demagoguery is typical of the leaders of allegedly populist movements who succumb to Robespierre Syndrome. Cult activity generally accompanies right-wing movements. And so it did as the French Revolution—originally a left-wing movement—became a right-wing movement.

(In a way, Robespierre effected a perversion of Rousseau in an analogous way to how 20th century "communists" perverted Marx—into what we now know as "Marx-ism". An assessment of Thoreau's influence on the process in question—during the French Revolution—goes beyond the scope of this essay.)

If Robespierre had been successful in consolidating power around himself (and thereby rendering himself a kind of demi-god), he would have completed the transition to his new-fangled religion—a transition he'd started just prior to his implosion. (Delusion and megalomania usually cause a leader to make a grave misstep that precipitates his downfall.) We can only speculate as to how this new religion would have played itself out had Robespierre managed to continue his ascent to power. To be sure, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* would have been completely jettisoned in favor of a decree more conducive to the new French order—whereby Robespierre and his cronies would have become oligarchs...and possibly even a theocratic regime—replete with compulsory penitence. (We've seen how things come to pass when such a scenario occurs. Point in case: Kim Il Sung's Juche in North Korea, initially promoted under the auspices of "Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism".)

During the metamorphosis in France, Robespierre was not alone; there were other fiery, rabble-rousing megalomaniacs vying for influence within the revolution. The point here is that leftward-aiming movements can sometimes get carried away, go haywire, and become the opposite of what they ostensibly set out to be. The Robespierre Syndrome is a powerful thing—a pitfall that all left-leaning movements must take care to avoid. Indeed, it IS possible to go TOO FAR left...so far left that a movement ends up radically to the right.

A simple litmus test for auditing the legitimacy of a movement is as follows: See how well its ACTIONS (not its lip-service) comport with the principles of humanism (i.e. an anti-right-wing modus operandi). This is a straight-forward barometer—one that includes fundamental ideals such as secularity, civil rights, and the adherence to the categorical imperative. "Red flags" for right-wing elements include idolatry and systematically-enforced dogmatism (i.e. cult activity)...as well as demands for compliance / conformity / submission, top-down control, and highly-concentrated power (in all its various manifestations).

It is very telling that now, here in America, the far-right can only find a way to criticize the so-called “left” by pointing a finger at far-left movements that have succumbed to the Robespierre Syndrome (and thus undergone the Bolshevik Turn). This propaganda gimmick is based on a simple formula: Point a finger at such occurrences, and label them “leftist”. This semantic bait-and-switch essentially stigmatizes ANYTHING to the left of the right-wing agenda as *the road to tyranny*. In this scheme, if it’s not sufficiently right-wing, it represents the path to Stalinism or Maoism or some other horrific regime from modern history.

Labeling anti-Marxian ideals as “Marxist” is a handy way to accomplish this semantic gimmick.

The only way for the right wing to criticize the left, then, is by finding instances where leftward movements have become radical right-wing movements. The argument thus goes: “*Look what Kim Il Sung did. Therefore, Marxian principles MUST be wrong.*” This may hold the world-record for the biggest non-sequitor ever devised by man. The non-sequitor has a name; “communism” (a.k.a. the *Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism Segue*). To the untutored ear, it sounds perfectly reasonable.

In this distorted depiction, Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge and Kim Il Sung’s Juche were LEFT-wing movements...as were Stalinism and Maoism. That is: these regimes represent what happens when a movement is insufficiently RIGHT-wing. This distortion is based on equating Marxian ideals with their antithesis (labeled “Marx-ISM”)...a ridiculous rhetorical move that is persuasive to the credulous and ill-educated.

(Ancillary note: It’s important to understand exactly where Marx was *actually* wrong.

He claimed that Capitalism per se had no role whatsoever to play in an ideal society. That is, free enterprise on a large scale, in a marketplace of for-profit businesses, could not be a part of a society liberated from all domination, exploitation and alienation. He thus advocated ABSOLUTE socialism, where there was neither accumulation of private wealth nor profit-incentive for individual enterprise.

Moreover, Marx tried to predict the future—never a prudent idea—claiming that all capitalist systems would eventually collapse, and be replaced by absolute socialism as HE conceived it.

Finally, Marx posited an oxymoronic concept, the *dictatorship of the proletariat*—which essentially amounts to a paradox. Little did he know, this queer notion would prove to be a recipe for *regular* dictatorship—thereby betraying all the ideals for which he stood.)

Why did the French Revolution succumb to the Robespierre Syndrome (and thus undergo the Bolshevik Turn) while the American Revolution did not? Why was Britain’s transition from monarchy to Parliamentary government not afflicted by Robespierre Syndrome? Why not post-WWII Germany? Why not Belgium, Switzerland, Netherlands, or Scandinavia (which were at one time all monarchies)?

Let’s start by contrasting two archetypical examples of revolution that went in wildly different directions: The French Revolution and the American Revolution. Upon inspection, we find the juxtaposition of underlying conditions to be quite stark.

In France, the point of departure was an entrenched feudal system, replete with “nobility” (aristocracy) and the generations of resentment that naturally accompanied it. This was tremendous baggage, and served as a source of the suppressed rage that reached critical mass in 1788-89. Moreover, there was a horrible economic depression that hurt exclusively the peasantry, thus exacerbating the festering resentment. When the rank and file are dying of starvation, mass-rage quickly ensues—thereby setting the stage for mass-hysteria. Indeed, pent-up rage, resentment and mass-hysteria are precisely what catalyzed and fueled the

proletarian revolution in France.

Moreover, the men who emerged as leaders of the French Revolution were militant, angry demagogues who used bombast to rally the crowds around the movement. Here were men of initially noble motives that soon underwent a metamorphosis—transitioning into schemes of self-aggrandizement. They became drunk on their own high esteem.

Meanwhile, in America, there was no residual resentment towards a LOCAL aristocracy, nor a legacy of oppression WITHIN America. The “enemy” was external to the nation, and was thus only embodied in the form of the *British army*: the men in the bright red coats. This demarcation was clear-cut—no fear of a secret enemy lurking within the civilian ranks. Moreover, there was no horrible economic depression with which the citizenry was contending—no mass starvation—no conditions so desperate that people resorted to collective rage and mass-hysteria. In the American colonies, the oppression with which the rank and file were concerned was more abstract: in the form of unfair taxation and subservience to a monarchy overseas.

Finally, the men who emerged as leaders of the American Revolution were more legitimate statesmen—great minds with largely noble motives. There were leaders like Washington; there were genuine intellectuals like Thomas Paine and Jefferson—as well as Ben Franklin and James Madison. These statesmen were not nearly as susceptible to the Robespierre Syndrome as were other leaders.

There were no such figures at the helm when France’s population went ballistic. Robespierre and his ilk had good intentions at the start of the movement, but ended up being nothing more than self-aggrandizing rabble-rousers who became corrupted by their esteemed position within the movement. They were more self-righteous MILITANTS than they were humanists.

In the end, the conditions under which each revolution metastasized were drastically different. In France, the stage was set for mob-violence, mass hysteria, and groupthink. The movement was based more on a herd mentality (fueled by rage) than on widespread, principled action (fueled by noble aspiration). Moreover, the French peasantry was operating within the context of a pre-existing ORDER rather than within the open frontiers of a new country.

America was more of a “blank slate”, and thus more conducive to the erection of a noble new order *sans fatal dysfunction*. It was an open, new frontier with seemingly limitless possibilities (while France was an enclosed plot of land without a frontier, where possibilities seemed more limited).

France was a pressure-cooker for panic and paranoia. Following the initial revolts against the nobility, the masses were perfectly primed for the mass-hysteria that fueled the Terror. The stage was set for a savvy demagogue to step up and channel their sentiments into counter-democratic activity.

Unlike in America, in France those who rose to leadership positions stoked and exploited the panic and paranoia for their own ends. Indeed, there was rampant fear, insecurity and desperation amongst the peasantry in France—social conditions that rendered them more prone to anti-humanist sentiments and drastic measures. The bombastic bloviations of demagogues is what channeled their festering resentments into anti-humanist action...just as we witnessed with Hitler’s ascent. Indeed, THIS is precisely how right-wing regimes metastasize. For this is precisely how cult leaders operate.

Russia is a case in point. The Bolshevik revolution started with a noble enough cause—one that was quasi-democratic in spirit. But the man who rose to the position of leadership during the turbulence succumbed to the Robespierre Syndrome...just as would Mao and Kim Il Sung. “For the People” promptly mutated into “For the Regime”. We thus see how a populist movement in Russia (starting in WWI) became Stalin’s

purges within two decades...just as the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* mutated into Robespierre-ism in France 130 years earlier.

The French Revolution is only an archetype. We see similar conditions in the other cases where revolutionary movements succumbed to the Robespierre Syndrome. From the rise of Lenin (then Stalin) in Russia to the rise of Kim Il Sung in North Korea to the rise of Mao Tse-tung in China, we find salient parallels. These were militant leaders who thought of most things largely in terms of violent combat, using noble-sounding rationalizations and Marxian rhetoric as post-hoc ways to justify their rise to power, mobilize support, and rally the crowd around themselves. They took germinating left-wing movements and transformed them into right-wing regimes that paid lip-service to the original ideals. The Marxian causes were thus rendered oligarchies / dictatorships under the aegis of “socialist” rhetoric. In the ends, it becomes quite clear that 20th century “communism” and fascism are two sides of the same coin: anti-Marxian orders based on oligarchy and top-down control.

The *exact opposite* was the case in revolutionary movements that did *not* succumb to the Robespierre Syndrome. Here, the United States serves as the archetype. America demonstrated how certain left-leaning movements that rise up against right-wing regimes REMAIN left. We contrast this to how other movements simply become NEW right-wing regimes—following the same iniquitous formula via a new and different brand. In each case, Robespierre Syndrome was the ultimate saboteur. America’s Founding Fathers were not afflicted with the Syndrome, thus averting degeneration into a right-wing regime.

Throughout modern history, leaders have done patently anti-democratic things in the name of “democracy”. Robespierre was one of the first in the modern era pull off this stunt, but certainly not the last. The U.S. government destroyed Vietnam in the name of “democracy”. In the post-WWII era, the U.S. government has installed or propped up myriad tyrannical regimes the world over—all in the name of “democracy”—from Pinochet in Chile to the Nicaraguan contras to the Shah in Iran. Enticing pretense is an effective tool for mobilizing support for one’s agenda: Robespierre knew this...and almost every despot ever since has known this. “If WE do it, it is *by definition* right; anyone against the anointed agenda is *by definition* the enemy. We must wage war against the designated ‘enemy’ ...lest evil prevail over good.”

The right-wing tendencies here in the U.S. exhibited this mentality throughout the Cold War...and then with the so-called “War On Terror”: both alternate brands of the same “eternal war” scheme—invoking a narrative of Good vs. Evil (where Good = *us* and Evil = *them*). Such a scheme has been employed by right-wing movements since time immemorial.

In the end, we see that Thomas Paine didn’t betray the French Revolution; the French Revolution betrayed Thomas Paine. What often came to be dubbed “Marxist” regimes were not the embodiment of Marxian ideals, but the betrayal of Marx’s most basic principles. (Indeed, Stalinism and Maoism were the embodiments of the Marxian vision’s *antithesis*: top-down control, power concentrated into the hands of the few, and exploitation / domination of the many by the few. Such regimes had about as much to do with Marx as Catholicism does with Jesus of Nazareth.)

The right to challenge incumbent power structures—to speak out (and take a stand) against the established order—is the cornerstone of any democratic society. How soon some alleged “fighters for The People” forget this once THEY are part of the Machine-in-question. (Funny how things change when the shoe’s on the other foot.)

The moment heresy and sedition become “crimes” we know we live within a system that pays lip-service to democratic ideals while operating as a right-wing regime. Patriotism is, indeed, the last refuge of scoundrels. Those who fall prey to the Robespierre Syndrome lose sight of the fact that the duty of the

responsible citizen is to criticize the incumbent order. Such activity is the modus operandi of a participatory, deliberative democracy. Super-patriotism is the death-knell of a democratic society.

Upon surveying dysfunctional regimes the world over—throughout history—we find that if a movement goes *far enough* “left”, it ends up to the *far-right*. In other words, one can go so far to the so-called “left” that one is no longer in a place that remotely resembles “left” any more. It has, essentially, become precisely what we see when one goes far enough to the *right*. After all, oligarchy is oligarchy, regardless of the pretext.

In the end, too far left and too far right *are two different versions of the same thing*: HCP. That is, each approaches a *point of convergence*: one in the form of highly-concentrated STATE power, the other in the form of highly-concentrated PRIVATE power. But whether a regime converges on this point of maximal oligarchy from the left or from the right—as Statism or as corporatocracy—is a moot point. HCP is HCP, independent of the vehicle that effects it.

Meanwhile, this is not about “coming full circle”. The spectrum is not symmetrical. That is: The phenomenon doesn’t work the other way around. (One can’t go so far rightward that one ends up a leftist.) The point of convergence is on the far-right, at the epitome of HCP and cult activity. One can only go so far “left” before the Robespierre Syndrome takes hold, and the “Bolshevik Turn” occurs—precipitating oligarchy just as would have happened had one simply gone directly rightward. “Communism” and “fascism”, then, are two different brands of the same underlying phenomenon.

We must be vigilant of what we opt to label “left” and “right”, as these labels become arbitrary rubrics—schemes for stigmatization used in propaganda. The left/right dichotomy is an over-simplification that often entails a misleading taxonomy. What IS “left”? What IS “right”? *What do they even mean?* Once we define our terms, we find that movements are complicated things—sometimes exhibiting elements of “left” then exhibiting elements of “right”. How is such a turn possible? Diagnosis of the Robespierre Syndrome gives us an answer.