Heads Lost & Found: Rationalizing the Guillotine
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The guillotine is a universally known object. Introduced by the French National Assembly not long after the July 1789 Revolution, the guillotine was introduced into use for multiple reasons. It was seen as a social leveler in a society where noble criminals were beheaded while commoners were subject to slow and painful methods of execution. With the guillotine, all French men and women would face equal justice and punishment. But the guillotine also came to symbolize quick, even rushed, justice to many during the Revolution. As the French politics became more radical over the 1790s, the guillotine came to be seen less as an instruments of equality and more as a tool of repressive justice, used to kill scores of French who did not agree with the increasingly radical view of politics supported by Robespierre and his political allies. As France expanded its political influence first through Napoleonic Wars and later by nineteenth century colonialism, the guillotine became a multi-faceted symbol of French rule. It was a device of quick and supposedly humane execution as well as the means of enforcing compliance with the dictates of the French political and criminal justice system. Although its use was abolished in 1977, the guillotine remains a powerful symbol of French power and the system of capital punishment.

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