Power degree zero: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, despotism

Thomas Osborne

School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the applicability and history of the concept of despotism as a critical model of political power. In spite of its 'Orientalist' pedigree, critical perusal of the work of Montesquieu (and, secondarily, Tocqueville) reveals that the concept has also functioned as a critical ‘pure type’ that is feasibly applicable not just to all societies but perhaps especially to the West. As such, despotism has arguably been more of a satirical – or ‘inverted’ – concept than straightforwardly an empirical one.

Any reasonably reflective history of the idea of political power will encounter the concept of despotism, if only as a rather maligned and indeed more or less discredited category. These days it will likely be said that the concept of despotism is at best redundant, at worst entirely discredited; that it is – or was – Orientalist, reductive, totalizing, ‘othering’. A great deal of such charges are, if one surveys the treatment of points of empirical ‘application’ of the concept (China, Japan, Turkey, Persia), substantially true (Osterhammel 2018, Malcolm 2019; and see now, Keane 2020, pp. 200–1). Yet for all that, it can be argued that the concept might actually be defended not just as continuing to be analytically and critically useful, but as particularly relevant today, precisely in relation to contemporary demands on modern social and political life.

To appreciate this, we need to frame quite carefully what can be meant by the concept and to look critically at its semantic and performative reach. There is some evidence in recent literature, that the concept is indeed being re-framed and re-applied in constructive ways; John Keane’s recent book, The New Despotism (Keane 2020), is an excellent example, to which we shall return. Our own argument can be summed up by saying that the critical capacity of the concept of despotism is, in the rhetorical sense, satirical rather than being simply empirical or descriptive; it is the pure type of total power (as it was, a negative ‘ideal-type’) that can be used to measure and assess forms of power in general – precisely by way of their relative distance (or not) from pure despotism itself. As such, despotism can be considered not so much as a straightforwardly empirical category but as the conceptual incarnation of power degree zero.

CONTACT Thomas Osborne Thomas.osborne@bristol.ac.uk School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 1TU, UK

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1. Montesquieu and despotism

Although the concept of despotism has been treated – and judged – in many different ways, from Aristotle or Arendt right through to Zizek, common to all is the notion of centralizing power. Integral to this is the image of the despot *per se*; the one who holds all power. The despot exercises centralized, monolithic, all-determining power. However, despotism as a concept is not just about *despots*; and it is not just about centralization. The parallel concepts of tyranny, autocracy and authoritarianism are all ways of addressing that issue of what happens when power is centralized (Keane 2020, pp. 212–25). What is distinctive about despotism as a concept?

It surely has to do with the fact that during the early modern era in Europe, despotism came increasingly to be conceived not just as a type of centralizing political rule but as a type of socio-political *system*. The specificity of despotism lies not so much with the person of the despot as with its comprehensiveness as a total system of power.

Now, although he had predecessors in this respect, it is Montesquieu in the mid-Eighteenth Century who is the epitome of this more comprehensive way of thinking and it is on him that this article will mainly focus. The character of his account can be quite briefly summarized. Montesquieu not only radicalized the concept of despotism; he generalized it. For Montesquieu, despotism represented not just a type of centralizing political rule but a system of power, even a type of society; a thought-image, a ‘pure type’, of total power. In *The Spirit of the Laws* published in 1748 (Montesquieu 1989) despotism appears alongside two other categories – republics (democratic of aristocratic) and monarchies – as one of three basic types of political regime with which Montesquieu begins his famous book (Montesquieu 1989, p. 10). This is Montesquieu’s well-known trichotomy of power: republics, monarchies, despotism. Yet it needs to be emphasized that despotism, for Montesquieu, is more than just another type of political regime amongst the others; rather, it is *fundamental*. In fact, it is a sort of ‘default’ system of power, as it was previous and prior to the other two.

Each of the three forms, Montesquieu tells us, have a motivating spring; but with despotism this spring is passive not active – it is fear. Whereas republics needed the ‘spring’ of virtue to sustain them, and monarchy needed the principle of honour, despotism can be characterized by the immobilizing pressures of fear. This, then, is why despotism, for Montesquieu, actually had a rather different status from the other two types of regime; so that, after all, despotism was not merely one of three types of power but was, in fact, separate from them and opposed to both the others. In this sense, Montesquieu’s model of power is not really a trichotomy but a dichotomy. And indeed as one reads *The Spirit of the Laws* it appears that the trichotomous conception of government and power progressively gives way to a dichotomous one; the trichotomy of republics, monarchies and despotism succumbs to a *dichotomy*; that between despotism and ‘moderate government’. However, this did not mean that despotism was in some way a ‘distortion’ of moderate government. It was rather the other way round; despotism was conceived by Montesquieu, rather, as the *natural, latent tendency of all power*. ‘Monarchy usually degenerates into the despotism of one; aristocracy into the despotism of several; democracy into the despotism of the people’ (Montesquie 2012, p. 566). In other words, for Montesquieu, despotism was effectively the default setting of all human societies in
history; ‘most people are subjected to this type of government’, and escaping it takes work, initiative and above all luck, the kind of situation ‘that chance rarely produces and prudence is rarely allowed to produce’ (Montesquieu 1989, p. 63).

Latently ubiquitous despotism might be. But, for Montesquieu, hardly an optimist when it came to human nature, it is no less bad for all that. It is not merely subject to corruption, like monarchies and republics, but is innately and essentially corrupt: ‘The principle of despotic government is endlessly corrupted because it is corrupt by its nature’ (Montesquieu 1989, p. 119). In this context, the puzzle was not, for Montesquieu, why people put up with servitude – fear was enough to settle that – but how they had on various occasions, always more or less unlikely, actually escaped it.

This despotism-as-default conception was certainly an innovation on Montesquieu’s part. As such it is a long way from caricatures of Enlightenment meliorism; the idea that power gets better and better. Modernity, for Montesquieu, is not a triumph of reason but, if it is anything, an accident of power. Of course, in configuring despotism in this radical and generalized way he nonetheless took up, rehabilitated – and transformed – a well-used category. How he did so is of interest in itself not least as this history demonstrates where the originality of Montesquieu’s concept of despotism resides; above all in its status as an ideal type, a pure abstraction of the sumnum malum.

2. Genealogies of despotism

The notion of a despotic regime goes back certainly as far as Aristotle where, broadly speaking, it signifies a form of legitimate rule specifically over subjects who are in effect slaves (Aristotle 1996, Malcolm 2019, pp. 202–3; cf. Richter 1973, Koebner 1951, Venturi 1963). Strictly speaking, Aristotelian political life cannot be despotic since politics is by definition rule over a community of free men; despotism on the other hand is more like paternal power, the power of a father over his wife and children and of a master over his slaves. In other words, it intrudes into the individual or private sphere. Despotism might, however, be necessary; and there is nothing in Aristotle that marks it out as inherently corrupt, evil or illegitimate. Indeed in some contexts it is an appropriate model. For Aristotle, Asiatic or ‘eastern’ despotism was actually based – at least in some contexts – on the consent of those who were ruled; unlike tyrannies that were based on force (Osterhammel 2018, p. 341).

Tied, then, also to the ancient conception was a tendency to assume that despotism was barbaric, that it was not Greek. Here we have, certainly, the beginning of a long-standing theme; that somehow, ‘barbaric’, oriental, non-Western, non-‘civilized’ or, a little more specifically, Asian societies of various kinds, are incapable of freedom, that their subjects in fact desire their own servitude or are in some way responsible for it themselves. Of course, we are familiar with the inertia of such stereotypical conceptions from Edward Said’s concept of ‘Orientalism’; and these obviously go well beyond their origins in Ancient Greek thought, and Montesquieu certainly inherited much of this prejudice. Said, however, only mentions Montesquieu on two passing occasions in Orientalism (Said 2003, p. 119, 133).
Oriental despotism in any case is an idea that persisted through different eras, reaching culmination in the views of Hegel and even Marx with his ‘Asiatic mode of production’ (Said 2003, pp. 153–4).

Of course this history is not uniform. Recent studies have shown that European orientalist attitudes tended to oscillate in the early modern era according to the fortunes of European relations with the Ottoman Empire. As Noel Malcolm has outlined, the very real threat of Ottoman power had led, by reaction, to a resurgence of the concept of despotism in early modern Europe; culminating in the late Sixteenth Century with the particular hostility of Venetian envoys to the Ottoman court and also the very negative influence of Catholic theorists of ‘reason of State’ (Malcolm 2019). For over a century, a hostile European image of Ottoman rule had come to associate that regime with despotism of an entirely negative kind. Giovanni Botero had written in his Relationi Universali (1591–2) that: 'The rule of the Ottomans is completely despotic: for the Sultan is the owner of everything contained in his dominion, in such a way that the inhabitants call themselves his slaves, rather than subjects; and no one is owner of himself, nor of the house where he lives, nor of the land he cultivates' (quoted in Malcolm 2019, p. 227). In England, Henry Parker’s The Case of Shipmoney Briefly Discoursed of 1640 and, later, Harrington’s Oceana of 1656, pressed home this negative image; Harrington invoking despotism as consisting typically of ‘slavery, beggary and Turkism’ (Malcolm 2019, p. 354). On this ‘standard’ model, the Ottomans became a byword for despotism itself, and it was held that the despotic Emperor both owned all property in the State and that all his subjects were effectively slaves not citizens. Of course, the empirical basis behind such claims was more than questionable. As we shall come to mention, later theorists from Voltaire to more obscure figures such as Simon-Nicolas-Henre Linguet and the brilliant Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron would come to question both (Malcolm 2019, pp. 399–407, Irwin 2006, pp. 125–6, Keane 2020, pp. 202–5).

On the other hand, Montesquieu’s own conception of despotism is certainly not strictly limited to the Ottomans; or at least not overtly. In fact, he stands at the beginning of attempts to turn the analysis of systems of power – including despotic systems – into something like if not exactly a value-neutral enterprise then certainly a generalizing one. For him, despotism amounted to what would later be termed an ideal-type; a category with potentially universal application albeit to different extents in particular empirical contexts. A notable influence on Max Weber seems more than plausible. ‘Weber’s copy of L’Esprit des Lois’, observes Wilhelm Hennis, ‘is full of interesting underlinings – Montesquieu’s “principles” may well have served as godfather to Weber’s ideal-type’ (Hennis 2009, p. 211; cf Cassirer 1951). And in this sense his concept of despotism represented a framework that might be applied as it were in abstracto to all kinds of empirical context. Although Montesquieu’s own depictions tend to be more impressionistic, terse and not infrequently elliptical rather than exact or extensive, the basic idea is that ‘the nature of despotic government is that one alone governs according to his wills and caprices’ (Montesquieu 1989, p. 21). More extensively, Jurgen Osterhammel conveniently lists the characteristics of this ideal-typical conception of ‘pure’ despotism, and these can be summarized in quasi-Weberian form: a) the despot is the law, b) absence of countervailing forces, c) exercise of power via administration not aristocracy, 4) subjects
as slaves, 5) no land in private ownership, 6) rule operates by a principle of fear, 7) despotism reaches down into the family and ‘private’ life, 8) life is lived for the present not the future (Osterhammel 2018, pp. 343–4).

3. Despotism as pure type

What Osterhammel’s list rather underplays, however, is the extent to which despotism is a ‘pure’ concept for Montesquieu; not significant so much for its empirical resonances and applications in characterizing entire regimes but for its rather abstract, critical force. It is ‘pure’, of course, not in any benign sense but in the sense of being a malign ‘ideal-type’, an abstraction, a perpetually latent extreme; ‘the idea of absolute evil, the idea of the very limits of politics as such’ (Althusser 2007, p. 75). On the other hand, at least in The Spirit of the Laws, Montesquieu’s treatment of the issue may indeed look like sober empirical description and indeed Montesquieu was frequently praised by his contemporaries – including writers such as Ferguson and even Gibbon – particularly for his empirical knowledge. That sort of judgment, today, seems at best misplaced; and at least by the 1790s there was some reaction, as we shall note, precisely against Montesquieu’s empirical assumptions with regard to despotism. There is also a sort of prejudicial Orientalist transparency to Montesquieu’s actual examples and this was not lost on contemporaries. However, in empirical terms, though it is certainly true that Montesquieu’s examples were all non-European, they were not necessarily Oriental in a more narrow sense. Montesquieu understood despotic states, certainly, to include non-Asiatic (or Muslim) states such as Peru, Mexico, the later Roman Empire, and Russia (Malcolm 2019, pp. 384–5). But on the other hand, it is fair to say that the basic centre of gravity does seem to be Asiatic and Islamic; as Osterhammel remarks, if despotism is feasibly anywhere for Montesquieu, if only for geographical and ‘climatic’ reasons, it had been ‘naturalized’ in Asia (Osterhammel 2018, p. 344).

Montesquieu’s main examples of despotic rule are China and Japan on the one hand, and Persia and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) on the other. He also invokes Russia but Russia was, in this period, regarded as basically oriental at least in the very broad sense, which is to say Slavic and non-Western. At one point he mentions an actual Western example – the rule of the Emperor Domitian – and even at another point, if rather obscurely, the ‘savages of Louisiana’; but these seem to have been exceptions to or, anyway, variations upon the generally orientalist empirical assumptions that animated his work on despotism.

As already noted, these diverse states have in common, so far as Montesquieu is concerned, that they are subject to the whim and caprice of a single ruler who governs with the aid of lackeys or vizirs who are basically replicants of the despot himself. In all these states, the ruling principle is supposedly fear; and the strong term crainte is used as often as is peur, suggesting that the fear is more fundamental and pervasive than a localized concern (Shklar 1987, pp. 84–5). This sort of fear is crippling because it affects perceptions not just of the present but of the future; it is not just about an immediate peril but is generalised, embedded fear (Jaucourt 1751, p. 428). This fear is itself totalizing in its scope. As Montesquieu puts it, this fear [crainte] ‘must beat down everyone’s courage and extinguish even the slightest feeling of ambition’ (Montesquieu 1989, p. 28).
One key issue was with the role of law, Montesquieu’s argument being that despotisms were governed only by the personal whim of the despot. Of course, critics were to argue against Montesquieu that plenty of so-called despotisms – notably China – certainly did deploy clear-cut notions of law (Malcolm 2019, p. 375). But, so far as Montesquieu was concerned, systems of law in despotisms were always, so to speak, legal-personal rather than legal-rational; whereby all law comes from or is treated from the perspective of the despot – if there is law it is ‘despot’s law’. In despotism ‘the law must be in a single person’ (Montesquieu 1989, p. 126). It is worth noting briefly that Montesquieu makes a real break with the classical – and later European – political theory tradition here. This emphasis on the absence of an independent, separate rule of law makes Montesquieu’s approach in some contrast to that of Aristotle for whom despotism was a legitimate form of rule. Moreover, as Melvyn Richter points out, Aristotle would not have associated despotism generically with fear (Richter 1973). Not just Aristotle, but also Bodin, Hobbes, Pufendorf and Grotius, Montesquieu’s predecessors in the seventeenth century, had in their different ways invoked despotism or its analogues as a legitimate kind of rule amongst others. Not so Montesquieu, at least once he had developed his ideas beyond the trichotomous idea of government (republicanism, monarchy, despotism) and moved more to a dichotomous one (despotism versus ‘moderate government’).

Two things happened here. On the one hand, despotism came to be seen as inherently illegitimate (Shackleton 1961, p. 269); and on the other, it came to be seen as a general, if always latent, property of all human societies. This meant that in spite of his empirically orientalist prejudices, Montesquieu, conceptually, did not only associate despotism with oriental and non-Western societies but with all societies (at least potentially). In other words, if we are to reclaim the concept of despotism we would need to regard Montesquieu’s significance in terms of his more or less quite conventional – albeit by today’s standards reprehensible – uses of the tropes of orientalist discourse as being more a convenient vehicle for a wider argument about power than as a serious or defensible specification of those particularly societies themselves.

We shall consider the dubiousness of that specification a little more further below; for some of Montesquieu’s own near-contemporaries were hardly unaware of it. But at any rate, these factors in Montesquieu’s argument made despotism more than just another political regime like republicanism or monarchy. Unlike those, and also unlike more narrowly conceived political tyrannies, despotisms envelop society as a whole, they are a whole machinery of government that have consequences well beyond the sphere of politics itself. This is crucial, and it is an emphasis that possibly derived from Locke. In the First Treatise Locke had distinguished political power properly so-called from ‘Paternal, Political and Despotical Power’ which was more like the power exercised by parents over children. For Montesquieu, the alignment between public and private power was absolute in despotism. Despotism begins as it were in the family, or at least the private household, at home, the seraglio. This, too, is why it is a sort of default model of government; because it relies on family structure and on elemental passions, whereas moderate government with its juxtaposition of powers needs chance and prudence to get established (Montesquieu 1989, p. 63). ‘Everything comes down to reconciling political and civil government with domestic government, the officers of the state with those of the seraglio’ (Montesquieu 1989, p. 60).
In other words, despotism is ‘sociological’, even cultural, as well as political; it embraces the entirety of society such that there is no distinction between individual or personal life and the State itself. In this sense, at least, there is something actually quite depoliticizing about despotism. There is no division; everything mirrors everything else. In despotic regimes, the structure of despotism is evident everywhere; including in the otherwise hidden domains of individual and personal life – and this is why the seraglio, that magnificent and deeply Orientalist fantasy, is so integral to Montesquieu’s thinking about despotism. The seraglio represents, as Althusser points out, ‘the abdication of politics’, a privatized sphere of complete control (Althusser 2007, p. 18). But as such it is a sort of microcosm of the despotic regime. Montesquieu’s wonderful satire The Persian Letters published in 1721 (Montesquieu 1973) famously puts forward the idea of the seraglio precisely as an analogue of despotism, and there has been some argument over this (Silverman 1980; cf. Grosrichard 1979). After all, is not Montesquieu here the proponent of a somewhat complacent – not least because so ‘binary’, so sexualized – kind of Orientalist prejudice? In fact, given that The Persian Letters is in fact so obviously a satire of Western institutions, it is possible to regard the earlier work as less orientalist than his treatment of despotism in The Spirit of the Laws; but it also gives us a clue as to how we might begin to redeem the concept of despotism from its Orientalist prejudice as it appears in that later work.

4. Despotism and the seraglio

In The Persian Letters, the Persian prince, Uzbek, travels to Europe and sends back various epistolary analyses of European manners, politics and culture. There the demand is for absolute power, absolute obedience. The thematic content is dual; on the one hand the Persians’ reflections on the oddities of Europe and on the other problems that develop back home in Uzbek’s seraglio, depicted as a microcosm of despotic power itself. The satire, however, is directed predominantly one way; less pointedly at Uzbek’s ‘Persia’ than at Montesquieu’s contemporary France. This is the mantra – and we shall return to the theme – of the thèse nobiliare; that Louis XIV was undermining the age-old freedoms of the French with his policies of marginalizing the aristocratic parlements (Malcolm 2019, pp. 374–5, Althusser 2007, p. 82). Hence, the regime of Louis XIV is depicted in Uzbek’s letters home as putatively despotic or if not despotic as such then, as it were, at an incipiently despotic place on the spectrum. On this and in other cases in the work, Uzbek comes across as the enlightened analyst, a kind of savant of laws and mores – undoubt-edly a mouthpiece for Montesquieu himself – rather than as some kind of ignorant non-European ‘other’ or savage.

If this is Orientalism, it is a sort of inverse Orientalism. We can call it satirical in the rhetorical sense; the satire consists in the ironic situation of a despot exposing despotism in a putatively non-despotic land. Despotic reason turned against its own ‘other’. It is a satire of France; not in fact of France’s ‘other’, but of ‘us’. We shall return to this theme. However, in a more basic, perhaps less ironic, mode Montesquieu also conducts an analysis of Uzbek’s own relation to despotism back home in Persia. Sophisticated, civilized and tolerant as he is in some respects, Uzbek is not so enlightened when it comes to dealings with his own seraglio back home. There the necessity is for absolute power, absolute obedience – it is the incarnation of despotic rule. The eunuchs who
control the seraglio are envoys of Uzbek’s will and put down resistance from his wives with brutal resolution. If there is a plot to the book – and the reason for Montesquieu coming himself to call it a sort of novel, *un espèce du roman*, it is to do with the unravelling of this model of power, thus disclosing its brittleness (Montesquieu 1951, p. 129). Far away from his wives, Uzbek is unable to enact the continuous, authentically despotic control via the power of fear that is necessary to sustain absolute obedience to his will. He can delegate his powers but with his absence these lose their force, the wives are disobedient, things fall apart.

Some critics have claimed that this humorous yet nuanced treatment of the seraglio undermines in advance – and to good effect – Montesquieu’s later, deeply hostile analysis of despotism in *The Spirit of the Laws*. Robin, a somewhat facile writer admittedly, describes Montesquieu’s notion of despotism as it appears in the later work as ‘a cartoonish picture of terror’ and as ‘political pornography’ (Robin 2004, p. 24). On this sort of criterion, *The Persian Letters* certainly does things better. After all, in the earlier work are not the wives sprightly, engaging characters, fully capable of agency and resistance and hardly overburdened by fear? Is not Uzbek himself an enlightened figure rather than a consistently cruel one? Is not this, then, a more satisfactory depiction of the Oriental exercise of power than that provided in *The Spirit of the Laws*? These reservations, however, entirely miss the mark. For one thing, fear – backed up by force – is the principle of Uzbek’s power, whether he likes it or not, as we see towards the end of the book where he seeks, necessarily but belatedly, to restore order to the seraglio with a cold, narcissistic brutality. Uzbek only becomes a true despot when it is too late: ‘This letter gives you unlimited powers over the entire seraglio’, he writes to his chief eunuch, ‘Your commands have as much authority as my own. Let fear and terror be your companions; go with all speed to punish and chastise in room after room; everyone must live in dread, everyone must weep before you. Interrogate the whole seraglio, beginning with the slaves . . .’ (Montesquieu 1973, p. 271). The point here is not that Uzbek is dispositionally given to despotism but that the system of the seraglio is either inherently despotic or it will falter. The fact that Uzbek does not rule his wives through fear is in that sense a deficiency, and leads him – motivated by his own fear of losing his power – to resort to worst cruelties in recompense.

This, then, is fully in line with Montesquieu’s later perspective on despotism as it appears in *The Spirit of the Laws*; one cannot be a little bit of a despot; one has to be either a complete despot or not a despot at all. Or rather one has to try to be one. Actual history is messy and there are no pure types there. But it is possible to measure actual regimes by the extent to which they do or do not approximate to this kind of extreme ‘ideal’, for just as no regime has ever been *entirely* despotic, assuredly none have ever been entirely free of it.

5. Despotism and reality

At least three issues are worth pursuing further at this point. First, if despotism is indeed best seen as a pure type, this is itself because in *reality* it is always a mixed phenomenon, just as bureaucracy for Max Weber was a different thing on the ground than in the abstractions of the model, the point of the model being precisely to ‘measure’ the extent of the thing on the ground. Absolute fear is the vanishing point of despotism; it is the
ultimate resource available, but it is not that this resource will necessarily be exercised overtly and evenly at all times. The model measures reality; which means precisely that reality is likely to depart for the model, the pure type. This is true generally of Montesquieu’s concepts in The Spirit of the Laws; for instance in his treatment of England (in the famous Book 11, chapter 6) he rather fudges which category or principle is at stake. Is England a republic, a monarchy or a despotism? It is a real case, so an amalgam; none of the above – but an amalgam that is further from the despot pure type than any other political actuality known to Montesquieu. England, technically a monarchy, also bears resemblances to republics. In empirical actuality, it is hybrid. The pure types or principles are not empirical categories but concepts of measurement, just as with Weber’s ideal-types. For Montesquieu, England is not perfect; it is not the ideal state; and indeed, as he makes very clear, the English themselves are basically obnoxious – England’s merit is only its distance from the despot pure type, and so its approximation, however compromised, to something like moderate government.

Pure types measure reality; they are not reality. In the Considérations in his discussion of the weaknesses of the Eastern Roman Empire, Montesquieu had already written that a pure and complete despotism was an impossibility: ‘It is an error to believe that any human authority exists in the world which is despot in all respects. There never has been one, and never will be, for the most immense power is always confined in some way. Let the Grand Seignior impose a new tax on Constantinople, and a general outcry immediately makes him aware of limits he had not known. A king of Persia can easily compel a son to kill his father, or a father to kill his son; but as for making his subjects drink wine, he cannot do it. There exists in each nation a general spirit on which power itself is based, and when it shocks this spirit it strikes against itself and necessarily comes to a standstill’ (Montesquieu 1965, p. 210).

Secondly and relatedly, it is worth noting that Montesquieu seems perfectly aware that there will always be resistance to power, even to what seems to be total power. Again, in the Considérations, he inserted a famous paragraph: ‘But in the accord of Asiatic despotism – that is, of all government which is not moderate – there is always real dissension. The worker, the soldier, the lawyer, the magistrate, the noble are joined only inasmuch as some oppress the others without resistance. And, if we see any union there, it is not citizens who are united but dead bodies buried one next to the other’ (Montesquieu 1965, p. 94). Despotism is either/or in its structure; either it is death-like – Judith Shklar in her book on Montesquieu compares despotism to death – or it is in ferment and turmoil (Shklar 1987). This underlying, seething resentment is the reason why, in Montesquieu’s view, despotisms only seem to be secure but, in the event, tend to collapse extremely quickly. In modern parlance, despotisms have a single point of failure – the despot himself. Everyone with any kind of power, public and personal, depends on him. Once he has gone or is under serious threat, the rest tends to unravel.

A third point to note is that the question of fear actually operates both ways in Montesquieu’s analyses; both, as it were, from the top down and from the ground up. This is important if we want to characterize the originality of Montesquieu’s perspective on power. It is not just that the people and those subject to the despot live in constant fear of him, although that is certainly true. It is also that the despot himself lives in perpetual fear. This should not of course make us pity the despot; it is a problem only in that it is likely to make the despot more ruthless, punitive, paranoid and unpredictable. Fear is
dangerous in the powerful as well as miserable for the powerless. Montesquieu’s point here is that we need to fear not just the despot but, more fundamentally, more drastically, the despot’s own fear. In *The Persian Letters* Uzbek’s nightmare is not just the vulnerability of his hold on power, but his own fear – its endlessness. His wives are vibrant, ingenious and rebellious; he can have no rest. Real despotism is unachievable without the constant presence and surveillance of the despot himself, which is why Uzbek’s eunuchs repeatedly beg that he returns home. His wives are afraid to an extent, yes; but not afraid enough. If one is a despot everyone has to be completely afraid. The wives are hardly incapacitated with fear; they resist with candour, spirit and joy. Uzbek is deluded that he is loved when he is only feared; but his wives’ fear is provisional, artful; it is nothing to his own. Uzbek’s own fear is disabling and undermining; it leads him to lose control. Despotism is a rigid kind of regime; it will not acknowledge compromise or half-measures. In *The Persian Letters* the seraglio goes in the direction of more and more freedom, and ultimately collapse. But what collapses here? Not just the seraglio, but despotism itself.

### 6. Reality and satire

Let us summarize some of the implications of this discussion so far. The concept of despotism, as it functions in Montesquieu’s work, is a sort of pure type; an ideal-typical abstraction or dramatization from empirical reality. It is the *summum malum*, the worst that can happen. It is also the latent or default condition of human societies; escaping despotism and arriving at moderate government takes luck as much as skill and, even then, as the condition of Montesquieu’s contemporary France shows, moderation can be precarious. Moderation is not the ‘normal’ to the pathology of despotism; rather it is the benign exception to the more general rule. And one can use the concept as a measure not just of the ‘other’, but – precisely because it is abstract – of ‘us’. This is what connects the analysis of despotism in *The Persian Letters* and in *The Spirit of the Laws*, the one a work of fiction, the other a work, purportedly, of social science.

Now, Montesquieu certainly adopted, and extended, the prejudices of his time and constructed the physiognomy of this pure type out of more or less conventional Orientalist materials, but in such a way that he took Orientalism beyond itself.

On the one hand, despotism is potentially everywhere. It may have a more ‘natural’ setting in non-Western parts of the world – or at least those would form the setting in which most Westerners of Montesquieu’s time would have best understood it – but no one is immune. This is why Osterhammel insists that ‘Montesquieu considered his theories universally valid. The division between Europe and the Orient, which played so important a role in his theory of despotism, was irrelevant to social theory’ ([Osterhammel 2018, p. 386](#)). In other words, as we have already suggested, Montesquieu used the materials of prejudice, if one wants to put it that way, to build his concept of despotism, but then *invoked* it in a more universal way. Perhaps, we could say its context of discovery owed a lot to Orientalist prejudice, but its context of application was far wider.

So on the other hand, and to reiterate, we should insist on separating the empirical elements from the critical or satirical elements. These ‘empirical’ elements were arrived at on Montesquieu’s part, assuredly, more deductively than inductively; but out of this very
prejudice Montesquieu built a skeptical, hardly Eurocentric or complacent, critical attitude towards his own societies. We have noted how in *The Persian Letters*, the concept of despotism is used not to denigrate non-Western societies but precisely to calibrate certain tendencies in Europe itself. Now, *The Persian Letters* is obviously satire. But so, arguably, is *The Spirit of the Laws*. Let us take the example of Voltaire and his reaction to *The Spirit of the Laws*. He admired Montesquieu, above all for his inveterate hostility to slavery. But he disliked Montesquieu’s notion of despotism, and he disliked it precisely because of its critical character, a feature which he brings out all the more precisely because of this dislike. Voltaire’s own preferred telos in politics was for an enlightened form of total power, proving rather frighteningly that a liberal conscience and a democratic sensibility do not necessarily go together. Voltaire, in spite of some frosty exchanges, was at base an ally of Montesquieu (Shackleton 1988, pp. 153–169). In his *ABC* of 1768 he wrote some marvelous, caustic but appreciative pages about *The Spirit of the Laws*, which he basically regarded not just as a work of putative social science – albeit one with ‘no method in it’ – but as, at times, precisely some kind of comedy or at least satire. ‘It’s given me great pleasure because there are a lot of jokes in it, a lot of bold, hard-hitting truths, and whole chapters worthy of *The Persian Letters* . . . Everywhere he fights despotism, depicts financiers as being odious, courtiers despicable, monks ridiculous’ (Voltaire 1994, p. 89).

But Voltaire also pointed to the empirical excesses, or rather distortions, involved in this satirical project. ‘Despotism is just the abuse of monarchy, a corruption of a fine system of government’ (Voltaire 1994, p. 97; cf. Koebner 1951, pp. 275–6). So, for Voltaire, despotism is not a form of government in its own right, but – worse – it does not even exist. ‘Today we make free with this title for the Emperor of Morocco, the Great Turk . . . the Emperor of China . . . Now it’s quite wrong to think that such a government exists and, it seems to me, quite wrong to think that it could exist’ (Voltaire 1994, p. 97). It cannot exist empirically, so far as Voltaire is concerned, because in fact these societies are indeed governed, in some cases very strictly and rigorously, by elaborate systems of law and because no putatively despotic societies are as fully despotic as Montesquieu appears to describe them as being. Similar points were made against Montesquieu’s empirical treatment of despotism by later writers, most notably the French Indologist, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, deeply hostile to imperialism, in the introduction to his *Le Despotisme considere dans les trois etats our il passe pour etre, la Turquie, La Perse et l’Hindoustan* (Irwin 2006, p. 126, Malcolm 2019, Pocock 2009, pp. 17–36).

It was the empirical basis of Montesquieu’s perspective on despotism that was shown to be problematic. Montesquieu’s main sources – in both *The Persian Letters* and *The Spirit of the Laws* – were Sir John Chardin’s *Voyages de M. Le Chevalier Chardin* published in Amsterdam in 1711 and Ricat’s *Histoire de l’Etat present d’empire Ottoman* and – most importantly for the concept of despotism itself – Paul Ricaut’s *Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, first published in 1669 (see Osterhammel 2018, pp. 345–51, Dodds 1929, 1935). Muriel Dodds observes that the Persian material (Chardin) available to Montesquieu was more sympathetic towards its subject-matter than was the Ottoman material (in effect, Ricaut) and that his ‘general idea of Oriental despotism is based more particularly on the government of Turkey, than upon that of Persia’ (Dodds 1935, p. 162). And yet Turkey can hardly be said to have been a country devoid of the idea of law. Anquetil-
Duperron showed in detail in his notes and in his Législative Orientale published in Amsterdam in 1778, that Montesquieu’s sources such as Sir John Chardin and Ricasut were themselves based on limited evidence (Venturi 1963, Shackleton 1988, p. 486; cf. now Osterhammel 2018, pp. 363–367, Malcolm 2019, pp. 404–7; Keane 202: 202–5).

Empirically, these authors showed that the category of despotism simply does not work in the The Spirit of the Laws in that the detailed empirical reality in each case did not actually fit the overall model. Yet if despotism appears there as, in Althusser’s words, a ‘geographical myth’, as Althusser also insists in what is still a quite brilliant analysis – beyond the myth there is an idea (Althusser 2007, p. 75). In fact, we can even argue that the empirical shortcomings serve inadvertently to highlight the critical power of the ideal-type, the idea. In other words, despotism for Montesquieu is best seen in terms of its ideal-typical status, not directly as an empirical category at all. It is an abstraction from empirical reality, a deliberate caricature or exaggeration of particular tendencies. ‘No doubt despotism is a “caricature”. But its object is to terrify and to edify by its horribleness’ (Althusser 2007, p. 84). Despotism is the abstract sumnum malum, the limit to which any system of power might tend. But as such it is latent in any form of power, however enlightened. Here, then, is an instance of some continuity between the Persian Letters and The Spirit of the Laws. Both are reflexive; the Persian Letters through the figure of Uzbek, The Spirit of the Laws by reference to what Montesquieu and others of his ilk saw as worrying tendencies in French absolutist monarchy.

Obviously, however, the spirit of satire functions rather differently in The Spirit of the Laws than in The Persian Letters. If Montesquieu made a caricature out of his concept of despotism this was no doubt in part as a screen concept; to enable avoidance of any overt mention of its chief target, Louis XIV. It is a well-established convention to associate Montesquieu with the writers of so-called aristocratic resistance or the thèse nobiliare of the early half of the seventeenth century. Henri de Boulainvilliers, Fenélon, the Abbé de Saint-Pierre and Louis de Saint-Simon and so on. Using historical analyses of a rather mythical kind these writers bemoaned the marginalization of the aristocracy both over time but also in the present; excluded from the royal conseils d’état, impoverishing the nobility through methods of taxation and – in its eighteenth-century versions – installing a regime of centralizing officialdom throughout the country (Robin 2004, p. 52; also Tocqueville 2011: Book 2, chapter 2; Foucault 2003). Venturi invokes polemics in the second half of the seventeenth century directed against the absolutism of Louis XIV. ‘The famous pamphlet, Les soupirs de la France esclave (1689–1690) sets out, in fact, to describe “les tristes effets de la puissance arbitraire et despotique de la cour de France”. The comparison of French absolutism with the ‘tyrannie du Turc’ and with the ‘puissance du Grand Seigneur’ becomes commonplace and is often to be found as a motif in polemics’ (Venturi 1963, pp. 133–4). Montesquieu radicalises this perspective by in effect universalising it; using a putative ‘social science’ approach in a satirical way, with an intent to consciousness-raising effect. Thus, prejudice was utilized as satire; a satire – in the sense of the hyperbole of Orientalist reductionism directed against Montesquieu’s own homeland. Here, despotism really functioned as a ‘screen concept’, and as with all good satire giving what was meant to be a salutary lesson; de te fabula narratur.
7. Inverted despotism?

What, then, are the further – contemporary? – uses of despotism as a category, if we think of it in terms of a pure type or critical measuring device rather than as a tool of empirical description as such? If Montesquieu’s rooting of the concept in Orientalist discourse is to be considered problematic, as was pointed out by contemporaries, the irony is that invocation of the *sumnum malum* certainly has its critical uses from a more ‘universalist’ point of view. Extracted from that Orientalist association, despotism is usable as a reflexive concept, perhaps in parallel to what later writers have understood by the idea of ‘inverted totalitarianism’ (Rahe 2009, Wolin 2017). It is a way of measuring not ‘otherness’ but us. As such the concept of despotism has to be abstract, and remain so; its utility as a concept is rooted in the conviction that it is easier to know the worst than to legislate for the best. That is what makes it apposite in relation to tendencies in social and political theory today; where universalist normativity is under suspicion – such that agreement is more likely to be held on what is to be avoided than on what is to be achieved.

This conviction is central to what Judith Shklar called the liberalism of fear; that the only possible universalism would have to be based not so much on positive demands but on what just about all of us can agree to reject – cruelty, fear, violence, terror (Shklar 1998). Shklar’s emphasis specifically on cruelty is not without its problems; after all there are systems of coercion – for instance, even some forms of slavery – that do not necessarily entail overt cruelty as such (cf. Kekes 1996, Fives 2020). In fact, we do not have to subscribe to Shklar’s own emphasis on cruelty to appreciate, at least, the critical force of the concept of the abstract *sumnum malum*, the ‘negative’ foregrounding of what most of us would want to reject as opposed to – much more complex! – what we would all want to embrace. If there is to be any political universalism it could, surely, only ever be of this – negative – sort (Williams 2009).

The concept of despotism, whatever its empirical origins, can be of continuing use in that regard. The concept of despotism, understood as a pure type, provides an abstract, extreme image of monolithic, un-striated power in general. Montesquieu himself encapsulated this in the idea of a one-person rule that pervades an entire society with its image. Yet if we are to extend this model, the category does not need to be embodied in a personal sense at all, and we might even invoke the notion of, as it were, despotism without a despot. As already pointed out, is not unlikely that Max Weber was influenced in his concept of the pure type by Montesquieu. But more specifically, there is more than a hint in the Weberian concept of bureaucracy of the rather dramatized notion of the *sumnum malum*; Weberian bureaucracy is not just an ideal-type, an abstraction from any actual empirical reality, but also something that is presented by Weber with a certain amount of negative hyperbole; the iron cage and so on. Bureaucracy is impersonal, monolithic power; and it is dramatized by Weber as fate. As such it has many of the attributes of Montesquieu’s despotism, even if there is no despot as such.

What is essential to the idea, anyway, is that despotism is monological; there is no differentiation, no divisibility of powers, and without differentiation or divisibility there can be no moderation. Despotism reduces everything to a straitjacket of one kind or another, reducing everything to its terms so that there is no escape, no divisions in its world. A good synonym for despotic power might, then, be non-moderated power, or
monological power, or just *totalizing* – not necessarily ‘totalitarian’ power. Here, there are no divisions of power. Power here is one-dimensional domination. In the end, that is all that despotism means as a pure type. Of course, it is a phantasm; no such thing ever existed! But it is an abstract measure, an ideal-type; and there are elements and aspects of despotisms just about everywhere.

8. **Beyond Montesquieu?**

The analysis here in favour of the concept of despotism no doubt bears parallels (at least in intention, if not in depth and scope) with John Keane’s recent and impressive defense of the concept with applicability specifically to new times (Keane 2020). However, it differs in some basic respects. Whereas Keane’s notion of despotism is, in essence, empirically realist, focused on what can be termed ‘actually-existing’ despotisms, the version invoked here is, as has been stressed, ideal-typical. But it is not a question of ‘refuting’ Keane’s perspective; for concepts are analytical tools, and these differing versions can co-exist; indeed, they might – hopefully – illuminate each other, even though the differences can themselves be equally part of this illumination.

Keane argues that we are witnessing a global trend towards more despotic regimes in certain parts of the world today. Despotism, for Keane, is not an ‘ideal’ or abstract measure of reality but is a ‘mode of power’, effectively a type of regime (Keane 2020, p. 227). It exists, empirically, in particular places and not in others. As such, Keane’s analysis is not in fact particularly reliant, at least empirically, on Montesquieu’s own conception of despotism; and indeed the great strength of his analysis lies with showing the extent to which what we are witnessing today in many parts of the world is a form of *neo-despotism*, differing quite radically from its ‘classical’ predecessor. Keane elucidates these differences with some elegance, for instance in terms of the prevalence of cronyism and client–patron relations in such regimes. And he demonstrates that the new despotism is not, as Montesquieu thought, inimical to economic development or to commercial capitalism, nor is it even inimical to processes of the ‘rule of law’, albeit processes conceived on the terms of particular neo-despotic regimes themselves. Above all, Keane shows that the new despotism has, as it were, domesticated at least the surface rhetoric of democracy. On the more ‘classical’ conception, democracy and despotism, as Keane himself showed some decades ago in a pathbreaking analysis, were contrastive terms (Keane 1988). In contemporary times, the new despotisms embrace – in their own obviously restrictive ways – the principle of elections, of certain types of populist advocacy, of social media marketing and indeed embrace, albeit on their own terms, the vocabulary of democratic participation itself.

This, then, is a different form of power from that described by Montesquieu, and Keane’s depiction of this differentiation certainly needs to be seen as an advantage of this type of empirically-realist analysis. But there is perhaps a restriction – or at least a limitation in focus – in one particular sense, which is that the critically useful notion of ‘inverted despotism’ is not as available to Keane’s sort of analysis as it might be were one, as advocated here to conceive of despotism as a pure type. Indeed, Keane’s examples tend to be the paradigmatic non-Western types of regime; China, Turkey, Russia and Saudi Arabia such that it would be not entirely flippant to say that he has adopted a certain latter-day Orientalism in his empirical emphases. Certainly, figures from within
the Western democratic complex such as Donald Trump barely feature in his analysis; nor does the whole (largely Western, putatively ‘democratic’) populist explosion. And although his emphasis on the ‘democratic’ credentials of contemporary neo-despotism allows him to indicate the extent to which there might be parallels with more overtly democratic regimes, for Keane the pathway seems on balance to run in one direction – from actually-existing forms of neo-despotism to more established forms of democracy. ‘No continent or community enjoys immunity’ (ibid: 227).

Quite predictably in this context, Keane cites Tocqueville’s analysis of the despotic tendencies of US democracy; ‘Tocqueville was on the right trail: descriptively speaking, democracies are not straightforwardly the pure opposite of an impure despotism’ (ibid: 227–8). But we might ask, in what sense was Tocqueville on the right trail? He was right, surely, not least in that for him despotism was – as with Montesquieu – primarily a reflexive concept, indeed something of a pure type and not straightforwardly an empirical one. It was not that despotism spread, so to speak, exogenously, from corrupted regimes to non-corrupted ones. It was rather that tendencies towards despotism were endogenous to democracy itself. This ‘reflexive’ stance connected Tocqueville to Montesquieu; for each of them, despotism starts here.

Let us explore this more reflexive conception briefly. Tocqueville once wrote that he read a little bit of Pascal, Montesquieu and Rousseau every day to keep his spirits up (Hennis 2009, p. 129). Montesquieu was in Tocqueville’s political blood; but it was, as it were, the reflexive rather than the empirical Montesquieu, and it was because despotism was an abstract, ideal-typical category that it could be a properly critical one. In Democracy in America Tocqueville paused critically over the concept of despotism only to renew it, and in quite a different direction from Montesquieu, in terms of what we could call the despotism of conformity. The kind of state that de Tocqueville was surveying in the USA was, he knew, entirely unknown to Montesquieu – for whom the term democracy tended to be restricted only to small states. In the first volume of Democracy published in 1835 (Tocqueville 2004), Tocqueville had invoked the possibility of the tyranny of the majority – or the ‘omnipotence of the majority’ – but had argued that the US had in fact shown little actual tendency towards it even though the latent risk was high (Tocqueville 2004, pp. 288–318). The balance-sheet was, however, mixed; freedom of thought, Tocqueville believed, was more or less non-existent: ‘I know of no country where there is in general less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America’ (Tocqueville 2004, p. 293). In this way, tyranny had powers to affect the soul as well as merely the body. Moreover, under democratic conditions, the leaders are not themselves the despots but are only the slaves of the tyranny of public opinion. Fortunately the people – thus far – have been endowed with more spirit than their leaders themselves. ‘I have met with true patriotism among the people; I have often searched for it in vain among their leaders. This fact is easily explained by analogy: despotism corrupts the person who submits to it far more than the person who imposes it’ (Tocqueville 2004, p. 297).

In the first volume of Democracy in America, however, Tocqueville treated such tyranny as limited, not least by the spirit of State activism inspired by the Federal system (ibid: 299). Once this spirit breaks down, however, it was possible to envisage the worse: ‘If America ever loses its liberty, the fault will surely lie with the omnipotence of the majority, which may drive minorities to despair and force them to resort to physical
force’ (ibid: 299). But half a decade later, in the second volume, published in 1840 (Tocqueville 1967), there emerges such a monster as modern despotism (ibid: 816–821). And it appears to be already with us, ‘we moderns’, and not merely latent. Of course, this despotism would be different from previous varieties. ‘It would be more extensive and more mild, and it would degrade men without tormenting them’ (ibid: 817). Again the issue appears to be the risk that leaders will submit too easily to the tyranny of public, majoritarian opinion; ‘what I fear is not that they will find tyrants among their leaders but rather that they will find protectors’ (ibid: 817–8). It is a haunting description: ‘I see an innumerable host of men, all alike and equal, endlessly hastening after petty and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn into himself, is virtually a stranger to the fate of all the others . . . Over these men stands an immense tutelary power, which assumes sole responsibility for securing their pleasure and watching over their fate. It is absolute, meticulous, regular, provident and mild . . . ’ (ibid: 818).

By the time of The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution (1856), Tocqueville was prepared to go further. Of course, in Democracy in America, he had always really – implicitly – been invoking France; and really both that great text and Montesquieu’s Spirit of the Laws are actually examples of ‘reverse anthropology’; they are more about ‘us’ than ‘them’ (Jaume 2008). For Tocqueville, America was, after all, only the spectre of Europe from the perspective of the future. If anything, France was worse off; precisely because it lacked the forms of localized spirit – those famous ‘habits of the heart’ – analogous to the communitarian types of activism inspired by the Federal system in America itself. Here, the fuel of despotism seems to be an anti-political privatism rather even than a spirit of equality. ‘Despotism . . . deprives citizens of all common passions, all mutual needs, all necessity to reach a common understanding, and all opportunity to act in concert. It immures them, as it were, in private life’ (Tocqueville 2011, p. 5). In place of activism and ‘spirit’ there remains only greed, since money is the only remaining form of social distinction.

But what, really, is this despotism? Tocqueville describes it without tracing its source. It is not simply the tyranny of the majority. Rather it is, as Althusser wrote of Montesquieu’s conception of despotism, a sort of void; an emptiness. It is a hollow place, fearful; but ultimately without the challenge of politics. ‘Despots’, writes Althusser, ‘not only do not know . . . differences, they destroy them. They reign only over empty uniformity, over the void constituted by the uncertainty of tomorrow, abandoned lands and a commerce that expires at its birth: over deserts . . . The space of despotism is no more than the void . . . ’ (Althusser 2007, pp. 78–9).

And this is not simply an existential void, but – connectedly – a political one; or rather it is a place where politics themselves have become void. Indeed, to resist despotism in this sense would be to re-politicize civil society. Now, Keane himself briefly invokes, and in keeping with his own influential work of some three decades standing, Tocqueville’s associational idea of civil society as antidote to the spread of neo-despotism (Keane 2020, pp. 251–2). But he is critical of the idea that neo-despotisms have hollowed out civil society, and he questions the notion of moral atomism as being central to these types of power (ibid: 37). Patron–client relations, for instance, do not represent a form of atomism; but are, in their own way, a kind of associationalism, even perhaps a kind of (albeit negatively) moral force.
Keane is right about this. On the other hand, in so far as they occlude the political with the personal, such relations do represent a form of de-politicization, and in that sense they are connected to the ‘voiding’ of the political. Here, power becomes about who you know; the political, as it were, becomes the personal. Now, Tocqueville’s own conception of civil society, although often conceived in rather moralistic terms, was itself precisely about, as it were, re-politicizing it (Villa 2006, Osborne 2021). His sort of civil society entailed civic associations in a political sense, and not merely in the communitarian sense of civil society as moral ‘density’; such political associations including ‘permanent associations’ such as cities and forms of local and regional governance, ‘voluntary associations’ such as political parties or charity organizations, and ‘civil associations’ such as press and public sphere organizations (Villa 2006, pp. 124–5, Tocqueville 2004, p. 215, 595–603).

At any event, if we regard the ‘voiding’ of politics in this way, then we can have more recourse to notions of ‘inverted despotism’ than is readily supplied by Keane’s more empirically-realist sort of analysis. The voiding of politics may not be to do with ‘atomism’ as such but is assuredly to do with the ways in which, in all kinds of society, civil society has been hollowed out and made ‘personal’ and ‘de-politicized’. Indeed, this can be shown as a symptom not just of the sorts of actually-existing neo-despotism described by Keane – although it would most certainly apply to his examples, such as contemporary Russia – but also in terms of putatively ‘non-despotic’ societies; for instance, in terms of what Keane himself brilliantly labels ‘vaudeville’ styles of political engagement – surely as prominent in the West, in fact probably more prominent, as in his chosen, actual despotisms; or, equally, with populist movements that invoke the moral purity of ‘the people’, generally undefined; or, even more generally, perhaps even more prevalent, the emergence of varieties of moralized ‘identity politics’ (an oxymoron, if ever there was one). Such tendencies seek to invoke a sort of generalized moral-personal space, a sort of pre-political conformism. After all, the ‘people’ and ‘identity’ are examples of moral or at least affective but not political notions. In each case, there is typically a sort of moralizing blackmail involved; you are either with us or against us.

Despotism, then, starts here. Perhaps, though, we can scarcely know the limits of this despotism, if it can be called that, since it is as much within our skins as without. Its effects are not derived exogenously, or not only that; they are also internal, internalized. Such tendencies may not, empirically-speaking, amount to the sorts of actually-existing neo-despotisms so well highlighted in Keane’s work, but that is surely not least the point – their parameters can all the better be measured in relation precisely to that extreme ideal type, first delineated in such different circumstances by Montesquieu. De te fabula narratur indeed. Their existence, and increasing prevalence, signals that the struggle against despotism has to be not just a struggle against actually-existing despotism beyond our borders but a struggle against the de-politicization of power per se.

Perhaps, this will sound like Carl Schmitt; yet another plea for a return to the political! But it is the opposite of Schmitt’s sort of emphasis, at least from that of The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy (from 1923) where the domain of liberal politics was itself seen as a de-politicizing force (Schmitt 1985). On the contrary, the best antidote to the varied types of contemporary neo-despotism and the de-politicization of power more generally might be a more robust return to liberalism itself, a genuinely political liberalism not in Rawls’s sense so much as in the sense of Montesquieu. Here, the task
was to build the ‘political system of liberty’ from heteroclite materials, from the law, from opinion, from religion, from commerce, from the activity of politics itself, indeed from all those disparate instruments, none necessarily good in themselves (religion, commerce – all had negative sides) but which might serve at least as barriers to uniform, despotic power; heteroclite material for the crucial division and disaggregation of powers and, thereby, antidotes, never final, always provisional, to an always-and everywhere-latent despotism.

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Notes on contributor

Thomas Osborne is Professor of Social and Political Theory at the University of Bristol, UK. He is the author of Aspects of Enlightenment: social theory and the ethics of truth (London: UCL Press, 1988) and The Structure of Modern Cultural Theory (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2008) and many articles in academic journals.

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