

### READING ASSIGNMENT (Hackett edition)

- 1) 1-9 (up to "put us all into one company")
- 2) 13 ("It is unbelievable") – 14 ("it is hard to recognize a plant one has seen in one place somewhere else")
- 3) 16 ("Why do I mention all this?") – 19 ("because he had not put a little window into his heart whereby his thoughts could be seen")
- 4) 20 ("But to return to our subject") – 24 ("his very blood to the cruelty of these magnificent emperors")
- 5) 26 paragraph on religion ("Tyrants themselves found ... saw him in the depths of Hell.")
- 6) 30 ("But now I come to a point that") – 33 ("enriching him with their own spoils")
- 7) 35 ("That is certainly because a tyrant never either is loved or himself loves") – 38.

### WHY I CHOSE THIS BOOK FOR OUR COURSE

The second "bookend" of the course will be on the American, French, and Haitian revolutions. I thought I would put this classic of European political thought early in the course to give us some basic categories – "tyranny," "servitude," "liberty," and "consent" among them – for us to consider later in the concrete cases we'll discuss.

### WHAT IS "SERVITUDE" IN THE *DISCOURSE* AND WHAT IS THE REMEDY?

- 1) The most important thing about the essay is that LaB is NOT talking about people who are constrained by "force majeure" but who are "seemingly rather charmed and enchanted" (page 3).
- 2) So he's NOT talking about slavery as we understand it – a system of torture and terror by private masters reinforced by state power – but about acquiescence of people who COULD be free, but give up that freedom to become "slaves" (understood by LaB as obeying an arbitrary or "absolute" ruler rather than arranging their own political lives).
  - a. That is, those who "when they have the choice of being either free men or slaves, give up their freedom" (6).
  - b. "If it cost them anything to recover their liberty, I would not urge them to do so.... I allow him to prefer some certainty of living miserably to a dubious hope of living happily" (6)
- 3) So he's not talking about armed revolution but about a situation where mere withdrawal of everyday recognition of the ruler would be enough to make him topple. That is, massive civil disobedience or a general strike.
  - a. "This lone tyrant does not have to be fought, there is no need to defeat him: he is defeated by himself if the country does not accept its servitude" (5-6).
  - b. "Resolve no longer to be slaves and you are free! I do not want you to push him or overthrow him, but merely no longer to sustain him and, like a great colossus whose base has been pulled away, you will see him collapse of his own weight and break up" (8).

## HOW DOES THE WILLINGNESS TO SERVE BECOME DEEPLY ROOTED?

### 1) It cannot be by nature (8-9).

#### a. LaB says:

- i. Natural rights would have us obey parents and be subject to reason, but not serving anyone (8).
- ii. Nature provides a seed of reason that must be properly nourished to "flower into virtue" (8).
- iii. Nature has made us roughly equal, so we should see each other as "comrades or rather as brothers" even if there is a distribution of physical / mental gifts (9).
- iv. But these differences are what allow for brotherly love! (You can't do something for someone who is utterly self-sufficient.)
- v. Nature has given us gift of language that allows sharing thought to "bring about a communion of our wills" (9).
- vi. So it's community or COMMON UNITY rather than individuals brought together that LaB understands as our "state of nature."

#### b. There's a lot to talk about:

- i. There's been a good bit of work done recently looking back at the "state of nature" in classical European political philosophy social contract theories (Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant).
  1. The upshot of this critical work (e.g., Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, and Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*) is that
  2. Much of the classical works presuppose that the subject in the state of nature is the head of the house, so that his equality with other subjects rests on female and labor subjection. (Note the two senses of "subject": the responsible one who stands alone and the one imposed upon or "subjected to" a treatment.)
- ii. LaB understands humans as bio-social: you need the right nurture for nature to develop properly.
- iii. Community vs union of individuals is a deep, deep issue.
  1. There are some strange temporal "what comes first, chicken or egg" aspects to it.
  2. There are also anthropological / empirical vs philosophical / normative aspects.

### 2) The force of habit or custom (13-14).

- a. One generation being conquered easily sets up the succeeding generations to servitude: "men born under the yoke, and then raised and nurtured in serfdom, are content to live as they were born" (13).
- b. Thus in nature vs nurture, LaB admits that nature's pointing us to virtue is very weak: "The seeds of good that Nature sows in us are so tiny and slippery that they cannot withstand the slightest clash with opposing nurture" (13).
- c. So, again, LaB is not condemning those born into servitude, as they don't know how bad they have it (16).

## THE POSSIBILITY OF RESISTANCE

- 1) There will be sensitive ones who despite being born in servitude will "feel the weight of the yoke" (17).
  - a. LaB calls these "better born" who look "to their natural privileges ... recalling predecessors and their original state":
  - b. Does he mean a "natural aristocracy" of spirit or real aristocrats who want their traditional rights? There's a lot to say here about feudalism and absolutism.
- 2) Books and learning increase the dissatisfaction of those who sense their servitude.
- 3) Isolation however is a powerful tool for tyrants (18).
  - a. Remember LaB's notions of natural brotherhood and community. It can't be that "restoring individuality" is the goal of resistance to tyranny.
  - b. The myth here reveals the human capacity for sympathy / empathy (there are complex ways to relate those terms, but let's just say they mean "emotional contact and understanding") (18-19).

## AFFECTS OF SERVITUDE

- 1) LaB here discusses the emotional or "affective" side of his theory (20-21).
  - a. The acquiescence to servitude is being "weak and unmanly" (20).
  - b. Subjected people have no "joy or keenness" in fighting; "their hearts are downcast and weak" (21).
  - c. Tyrants sense this lack of enthusiasm in fighting and foster it.
  - d. But free men vie with each other in battle even in pursuit of the common good.
- 2) Comments
  - a. Lots to talk about nature / nurture in re women and fighting ("unmanly").
  - b. Spinoza will talk about "joy" as feeling of increase in power, often by being part of a larger "body."
  - c. Tyrannical manipulation of feeling is a great topic, opening out onto lots of contemporary issues of propaganda, advertising, "nudging" or "paternalistic libertarianism" and so on.
  - d. We could compare the joy of warfare in the last point (for yourself and for the common good) to that of Montaigne's description of Brazilian warfare and the quest for personal valor.
  - e. Finally, we could talk about the different affective profiles of "warriors" (glory, honor, bravery, competition, thrill) vs "soldiers" (duty, obedience, honor, bravery, camaraderie).
    - i. In doing so, we should of course realize that the ideal types always have concrete mixes in individuals as well as a distribution of such varying mixes in a population,
    - ii. As well as being aware that any group training its members for violent action will have techniques for adjusting as much as they can these mixes.

### WOES OF THE TYRANT

- 1) This is a classic theme, going back to Plato at least. The tyrant lives a miserable life of fear, never being able to trust anyone (21-22).
- 2) Thus being deprived of friendship, one of the prime goods for LaB (35-36).

### TRICKS OF THE TRADE OF TYRANTS

- 1) We've discussed purposeful ignorance as a means of isolating people. Without common books and discussion, people become individuals in their imagination (18-19).
- 2) "Bread and circuses" (22-24):
  - a. Spectacles
  - b. Holidays
  - c. Food
- 3) Summary: Corruption by indecent pleasures renders "common folk" insensible to the wrongs you suffer by servitude (24).
- 4) Religion lends "spark of divinity" to tyrants (26). (Spinoza will have lots to say here!)

My comment: I think LaB neglects the way bread and circuses mostly work on the background of already miserable lives. Now that misery can be material: people who really are hungry can't be blamed for liking food. Or it can be "spiritual": if you are deprived of communal excitement, going to the circus is a bright spot in a life of daily drudgery. And it can compensate for the isolation of being out for yourself with no social support.

### THE SECRET TO TYRANNY: NETWORKS OF CORRUPTION AND PROFIT

- 1) The tyrant has close associates, who have their networks of patronage, until the society is infiltrated by profiteers (30-33).
- 2) Psychological profile: drawn by "ambition and unusual greed" (31).
  - a. They profit materially ("share of the booty")
  - b. And they profit psychologically ("petty tyrants")
  - c. They are "content to endure ill" (ruled by tyrant) "in order to do ill"
- 3) They are to pitied
  - a. For the miserable life of flattery, backbiting, and intrigue they must lead (32)
  - b. And for the fact that they won't last long (33, 37)
  - c. Everyone involved in tyranny is deprived of friendship (35-36)
    - i. They don't love, but fear each other
    - i. Even thieves are better off, if they are equals in their band
- 4) In fact, we can even take pleasure in their punishment (37-38)
  - a. They are universally despised and blamed while alive
  - b. They are remembered as monstrously evil when dead
  - c. We can even suspect God has a special place in Hell for them