

Despotism after Liberalism

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This is the third inaugural lecture that I have given. I mention this because the subject of my lecture this evening follows on from themes addressed in these two earlier lectures. The first lecture was given at the University of Birmingham. In that lecture I explored what I took to be the dire consequences that arose from the misunderstanding of the activity of politics as the pursuit of virtue. I addressed this question through an examination of the writings and actions of Maximilien Robespierre and the Jacobins in the period before and during the reign of terror. My second inaugural lecture was given in Paris when I had the honour of holding the Vincent Wright Chair at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques. In line with my duties as Vincent Wright Professor I there considered French responses to the so-called 'Anglo-Saxon model'. This is a fascinating debate and one still of considerable importance today. As you might expect, it was the historical dimensions of this controversy that most interested me. These go back to at least the C17th, and certainly were well in place by the time of the Glorious Revolution in 1688. In essence – and this, I'm afraid, is a gross oversimplification – it has been a debate about the rival claims of liberty (England) and equality (France).

Running through both lectures as a sub-theme was a discussion of a group of writers who have been considered members of the English school of French political theory and it is three of the principal representatives of this school whom I wish to focus upon this evening. The three writers are Charles Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville and they are usually seen as the three most important writers of the French liberal tradition.

The broad outline of liberal doctrine across Europe in the period under consideration –that is to say, up to the middle of the nineteenth century - can be easily

delineated. Liberals shared a commitment to individual liberty, to religious toleration, to limited government and the rule of law. They believed that the legitimacy of government derived from the consent of its citizens (and, for the most part, doubted that this entailed a commitment to universal suffrage). They also believed in the superior efficiency of a market economy based upon free trade and private property. They agreed less about the philosophical foundations of their beliefs – being split, roughly speaking, between supporters of Lockean natural law, Kantianism, and Benthamite utilitarianism – and, as time went on, even less about the practical implications of their principles.

The criticisms directed against liberalism can likewise be listed without difficulty. Liberalism, it is said by its critics, ignored the social constitution of humankind and was scornful of the common good. It sacrificed the public to the private and belittled political participation. It neglected the pursuit of virtue and prized only economic man, reducing individuals to pleasure-seeking machines. It disparaged authority (especially of a religious kind) and displayed an excessive faith in reason. It accepted, and even welcomed, inequality.

This much is well-known and does not require further investigation this evening.

Of late, however, another criticism of liberalism has come to the fore. It is one associated with a group of writers - most notably Philip Pettit from Princeton and Quentin Skinner, Barber Beaumont Professor of the Humanities here at Queen Mary - who have sought to revive republican patterns of thinking and, in particular, to reawaken our appreciation of what Quentin Skinner has labelled ‘a neo-Roman understanding of civil liberty’. This was done, for example, in Quentin Skinner’s own Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge, a lecture entitled

Liberty before Liberalism and from which the title of my own lecture, *Despotism after Liberalism*, clearly derives. This is not the place to examine in detail the nature of this argument but it is relevant to point out that this account insists 1) upon a sharp distinction between liberalism and an earlier republicanism, 2) that ‘the ideological triumph of liberalism’ has left us with what amounts to an impoverished understanding of liberty defined solely in terms of the absence of interference - Isaiah Berlin’s so-called ‘negative liberty’ - and 3) that the ‘entire tradition’ of liberal thought ‘has been insensitive to the range of conditions that limit our freedom of action’. With all three assertions I disagree but tonight – you will be pleased to know – I intend only to explain why I disagree with the third of these propositions: namely, that liberalism – in my case, French liberalism - has been insensitive to the range of conditions that limit our freedom.

My argument will be that each of the writers under consideration this evening developed a highly sophisticated understanding of the threats posed to liberty by despotism – indeed, that each developed not one but two accounts of despotism – and that they did so in highly innovative ways and, most importantly, with an eye to preserving liberty in the new environment created by the emergence of modern states, the growth of commercial capitalism, and the advent of political democracy.

Montesquieu was not the first in France to use the term ‘despotism’. It had been widely used by aristocratic as well as Protestant opponents of Louis XIV and had been given wide currency by Pierre Bayle and others such as Fénelon and Boulainvilliers, to the point that even before Montesquieu was to place the concept of despotism at the heart of *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) there existed a broad understanding of despotism as a form of arbitrary rule by a single sovereign power limited neither by law nor by

secondary powers. Despotism was associated subsequently with other key features of the Sun King's reign: the centralization of power, religious intolerance, the pursuit of military glory and financial corruption and mismanagement. To this Montesquieu was to add several other features, but the most important of these was the description of despotism as rule by fear.

'The nature of despotic government', Montesquieu wrote, 'is that one alone governs according to his wills and caprices'. The despot, then, had no rules by which he was bound and was strong because he was free to take life away as he chose. The despot's subjects obeyed him because he could destroy them, and for no other reason. In short, fear was used to 'beat down everyone's courage and extinguish even the slightest feeling of ambition'. The people were to be made 'timid' and 'ignorant' whilst education was reduced 'to putting fear in the heart and teaching the spirit a few very simple religious principles'. As there was no virtue, men acted only with the comforts of life in view and therefore expected to be rewarded for everything they did. 'In despotic states', Montesquieu observed, 'the usage is that one does not approach a superior, or even a king, without giving him a present'. In return all were paid for their services. As Montesquieu commented, 'the worst Roman Emperors were those who gave the most'.

The goal of despotic government was neither more nor less than order and tranquillity, where all showed 'passive obedience' and everyone 'blindly submits to the absolute will of the sovereign'. The fate of each was no more than 'instinct, obedience, and chastisement'. As in republics, so under despotism everybody was equal, but under despotism this was because everyone counted for nothing.

Montesquieu summarized this deplorable state of human existence in one observation. “When the savages of Louisiana want fruit”, he wrote, “they cut down the tree and gather the fruit. There you have despotic government”. In other words, despotic government was government driven by instinctive actions and irrational appetites. It destroyed the very thing that sustained its life. It was government where power was not counter-balanced and that lacked the all important ingredient of moderation. In institutional terms, power was not divided between the executive, legislative and judicial branches. ‘Amongst the Turks’ (that is to say, in the Ottoman Empire), Montesquieu wrote, ‘where these three powers are placed upon the head of the Sultan, there exists a terrible despotism’.

This in turn begged the question of what was meant by political liberty. For Montesquieu it was defined in terms of the absence of fear and, its corollary, an individual’s sense of personal ‘security’ guaranteed by law. ‘[I]n a society where there are laws’, Montesquieu stated, ‘liberty can consist only in having the power to do what one should want to do and in no way being constrained to do what one should not want to do...Liberty is the right to do everything that the laws permit’. ‘Political liberty’, he concluded, ‘is only to be found under moderate governments’.

There were various antidotes to despotism, of which one of the most important was commerce. By commerce was meant not merely the exchange of goods but also the creation of new patterns of social intercourse ‘[W]here there is commerce’, Montesquieu observed, ‘there are mild customs’. In the right circumstances, he believed, ‘the spirit of commerce brings with it the spirit of frugality, economy, moderation, work, wisdom, tranquillity, order and rule’.

Still, Montesquieu acknowledged, commerce could be subverted in the cause of despotism. Writing of the financier John Law and his infamous ‘System’, for example, he remarked that he ‘was one of the greatest promoters of despotism that had until then been seen in Europe’. Was there not then the danger that, in a commercial society, material interests would so dominate that citizens would place the satisfaction of physical comforts before the claims of liberty, thus opening up the possibility of a new form of despotism?

Certainly this has been the view of one influential commentator on Montesquieu. According to Roger Boesche, Montesquieu’s writings contain a second theory of despotism, one grounded upon the isolation, frivolity and self-interest of citizens in a commercial society. Here we need to recognize that Montesquieu made an important distinction between commerce ‘ordinarily founded on luxury’ and commerce ‘more often founded on economy’. If the latter rested on ‘the practices of gaining little.... and of being compensated only by gaining continually’, the former sought ‘to procure for the nation engaging in it all that serves its arrogance, its delights, its fancies’. Moreover if Montesquieu associated ‘economical commerce’ with ‘government by the many’, he associated commerce of luxury with ‘government by one alone’. The concern, in short, was that the activity of commerce would so isolate people from one another, would so lead them to be preoccupied with their own private affairs, that a new kind of despotism would emerge. As in all things for Montesquieu, what mattered was that the spirit of moderation should be observed and thus that in modern ‘commercial’ republics excessive inequalities were to be avoided.

Ultimately, however, this proved to be untenable. Commerce, like it or not, brushed aside such restrictions, in the process reconfiguring the ‘the general spirit’ of society. Once this had been perceived to have occurred, those that came increasingly to regard themselves as liberals had the task of forging a new doctrine which grafted the fundamental insights of Montesquieu concerning the nature of liberty and its preservation upon a society dominated by new social classes, new political institutions and new commercial activities. This was no easy task. Moreover, in those circumstances new forms of despotism, only half suspected by Montesquieu, were to appear.

Participants in the French Revolution did not hesitate from citing Montesquieu. He was read consistently as a fierce critic of all forms of despotism. It was also the case that the tripartite division of governmental functions outlined by Montesquieu acted as a consistent point of reference in the constitutional debates that took place after 1789. However, as the Revolution turned away from the goal of constructing a balanced constitution towards that of using the state as a moral agent, Montesquieu faded from view. Most importantly, the idea which figured at the very heart of Montesquieu’s thought – namely, ‘power must check power by the arrangement of things’ – was consistently ignored. By the side of demands for unity of political action, the moderation associated with the system of balances and manufactured equilibrium had little attraction. France slid into Terror and then into the despotism of Bonapartist rule. It was upon this experience that Benjamin Constant was to reflect

‘We have finally reached’, Constant announced at the beginning of his text *Of the spirit of conquest and usurpation* (1814), ‘the age of commerce, an age which necessarily replaces that of war’. This familiar argument – made all the more remarkable by the fact

that Europe had been consumed by war for the best part of the last twenty years - led him next to suggest that for modern nations war had lost both its attraction and its utility. War was an anachronism.

Constant reached a similar conclusion with regard to usurpation: it is impossible, he announced, for usurpation to endure, so far removed was it from the spirit of the modern age. Nevertheless, Constant was aware that, in speaking of usurpation, he was describing something that was also new. Usurpation was not the same as despotism. It was not to be confused with monarchy. Rather, it was a novel form of government displaying its own distinctive and destructive pathologies. To make the point Constant provided a sustained comparison between monarchy and usurpation, both forms of government in which power was in the hands of one person, but both very different from each other, despite the 'deceptive resemblance'.

Here is Constant's vivid account of France under the regime of a usurper, that of Napoleon Bonaparte. 'We see there', he wrote, 'usurpation triumphant, armed with every frightful memory, the heir of all criminal theories, believing itself justified by all that has been done before it, ... displaying its contempt for mankind, its disdain for reason. Around it are grouped all ignoble desires, every clever calculation, all refined degradations'. Treachery, violence and perjury were routinely required. Principles were invoked, only to be trampled upon. Greed was awakened. Injustice emboldened. For want of legitimacy, the usurper surrounded himself with guards, engaged in 'incessant warfare' and was forced to 'abase' and 'insult' all those around him in order that 'they may not become his rivals'.

Constant ended his description by drawing attention to what, in his opinion, was the most decisive innovation introduced by usurpation, an innovation which served to differentiate it from earlier forms of despotism, and which made the latter preferable to the former. Usurpation parodied and counterfeited liberty. It demanded the assent and approbation of its subjects. Through persecution it exacted signs of consent. Despotism, he wrote, 'rules by means of silence, and leaves man with the right to be silent; usurpation condemns him to speak; it pursues him to the inner sanctuary of his thoughts and, forcing him to lie to his own conscience, denies him the last consolation of the oppressed'.

How had it been possible for this descent into a new, and more extensive, form of arbitrary government to occur? It arose, Constant stated unequivocally, as a consequence of a revolution which had fundamentally misunderstood the nature of liberty in modern, commercial society. This is how at this point Constant phrased the argument for which he was later to be best known. 'The liberty which was offered to men at the end of the last century', he wrote, 'was borrowed from the ancient republics'. That conception of liberty, Constant continued, consisted 'in active participation in the collective power rather than in the peaceful enjoyment of individual independence'. The ancients, in short, gained their greatest enjoyment from public life and little pleasure from their private existence; consequently they 'sacrificed individual liberty to political liberty'. By contrast, 'almost all the pleasures of the moderns lie in their private life'. Individuals wished to be left in 'perfect independence in all that concerns their occupations, their undertakings, their sphere of activity, their fantasies'. This was a form of 'civil liberty' virtually unknown to the ancients.

Constant's next move was to sketch out a form of government which would be legitimate and where liberty could not be counterfeited. This Constant attempted most systematically in his *Principles of Politics* (1815). At the heart of his answer was the conviction that the task would be accomplished not by attacking the holders of power but rather by attacking power itself, by placing guaranteed restrictions upon the possible abuse of power, by limiting not a particular form of sovereignty but sovereignty itself. No ruler, Constant wrote, even if his claim to legitimacy derived from 'the assent of the people', possessed 'a power without limits'. The twin targets of Constant's criticism here were Rousseau and Hobbes, the latter being described as 'the man who most cleverly reduced despotism to a theoretical system'.

In terms of practicalities, and in line with the argument previously advanced by Montesquieu, the limitation of sovereignty could be made into a reality 'through the distribution and balance of powers'. As with Montesquieu, the model referred to was the English constitution where, it was imagined, there existed a 'vivid sentiment of public life', an independent judiciary, an army employed only to repel foreign invaders, as well as properly functioning municipal and local authorities. With the latter we touch upon one of the central themes of French liberalism in the nineteenth century: namely, the preservation of local independence as a means of restricting the power of despotic government. French liberals became obsessed by what they saw as the systematic destruction of all intermediary powers and the consequent subjection of an undifferentiated and amorphous population at the hands of a highly centralized bureaucratic power. Constant, for example, spoke of 'individuals, lost in an unnatural isolation, strangers to the place of their birth, cut off from all contact with the past, forced

to live only in a hurried present, scattered like atoms over an immense flat plain'. Whilst Alexis de Tocqueville is the best known exponent of this argument, he was by no means the first to diagnose the nature of this threat to liberty.

Nevertheless – and this has sometimes been overlooked – Constant also insisted that political liberty was the guarantee of ‘true modern liberty’ and thus that, if we were to preserve our freedom, we must learn to combine both ancient and modern liberty.

In the years remaining to him Constant continued to restate these principles. He did so, for example, in a long review of Charles Dunoyer’s *Industry and Morality considered in their relationship to Liberty*. What is intriguing about the latter text is that we catch a glimpse of what Constant imagined might be a second new form of despotism. Constant, like Montesquieu, was broadly optimistic about the effects of commerce upon society. In this article he reaffirmed this but (in a distinct echo of the theme to be found in the final paragraphs of his famous lecture on the liberty of the ancients when compared to that of the moderns) recognized that the pursuit of individual enjoyment and physical pleasure ran the risk of diminishing our nobler, more civic-minded sentiments.

Yet Constant suggested that this tendency should not be over-exaggerated. Rather, in a post-script to the review he turned his fire against what he termed ‘an industrial popery’ (Constant was a protestant) and which he associated with the new doctrine of Saint-Simonianism. In contrast to the *individualisme* developed by Dunoyer, this ‘new sect’ saw all diversity of thought and activity as an expression of anarchy. Terrified that not all people thought the same (or the same as their leaders), the Saint-Simonians invoked a spiritual power designed to reconstitute a broken unity. Under the guise of coordinating our thoughts and actions, they sought, in Constant’s opinion, ‘to organize

tyranny'. Constant's response could not have been clearer: this supposed 'moral anarchy' was nothing other than 'the natural, desirable, happy state of a society in which each person, according to his own understanding, tastes, intellectual disposition, believes or examines, preserves or improves, in a word, makes a free and independent use of his faculties'. Nevertheless, in these few remarks on Saint-Simonianism, Constant had identified what would become a growing threat to liberty and the breeding ground for a new type of despotism.

Only six years later Tocqueville was to provide a very different analysis of the goal towards which society was moving, but here too the threat of despotism was ever-present. The first point we might make is that in his analysis of Bonapartism or 'Caesarism' (as he tended to call it) Tocqueville added little to the meticulous dissection provided by Constant. Moreover, the very qualities of the despotism he came to diagnose in America have their roots firmly within this and the earlier analysis of despotism provided by Montesquieu. As Tocqueville's text is well known, I will limit myself to the briefest outline of his argument. In America men were more equal in wealth and in intelligence than anywhere else in the world. The aristocratic element has been destroyed to the point of extinction and thus it could be said that 'the people govern in the United States'. By dint of fortunate circumstances, this has produced moderate government, founded upon 'the enlightened will of the people' and the responsible behaviour of individual citizens. Yet, it was obvious that the opinions, prejudices, interests, and even the passions of the people, could find no lasting obstacles that prevented them from making themselves felt in daily life.

Herein lay the potential for a problem of enormous magnitude: the tyranny of the majority. 'It is of the very essence of democratic governments', Tocqueville wrote, 'that the empire of the majority is absolute'. The interests of the many were to be preferred to the interests of the few and the people had the right to do anything they wished.

The dangerous consequences of this – each with distinct echoes of arguments previously advanced by Montesquieu and Constant - were as follows. It increased legislative instability, because the majority insisted that its desires be indulged 'rapidly and irresistibly'. It favoured the arbitrariness of the magistrate, because the 'majority, being an absolute master in making the law and in overseeing its execution... regard public officials as its passive agents'. Most importantly, the tyranny of the majority existed as a moral force exercised over opinion. 'I know of no other country', Tocqueville famously observed, 'in which there is such little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America'. The majority drew 'a formidable circle around thought'. More than this, *it was a tyranny that left the body alone but enslaved the soul*. No despotism of the old order, Tocqueville opined, had had the possibility of such untrammelled power.

If, then, liberty was ever to be lost in America, the fault would lie with the omnipotence of the majority. Yet to date, Tocqueville argued, the tyranny of the majority had had little effect upon political society, the distressing consequences being limited to its impact upon 'the national character of the Americans'. The American 'is enclosed strictly within himself and tries to judge the world from there'. Americans were a prey to individualism, 'the reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him'. However, Tocqueville believed that crude self-

interest and materialism, two of the greatest dangers posed to liberty by an age of equality, could be combated by free institutions embodying the principle of association. The art of association, he argued, was the mother science of democracy and what struck Tocqueville was that Americans everywhere came together to form associations with a view to securing common aims and objectives. In short, Tocqueville believed that the political and social institutions of America had been so constructed as to strengthen the habits of freedom.

To read *Democracy in America*, as with so much else by Tocqueville, is to be constantly enriched and enlightened. Yet, the nature of the tyranny he was describing (and for which he sought an expression that exactly reproduced the idea) was one composed of elements long familiar to his fellow French liberals. This is not to suggest that Tocqueville was not the great thinker that he is rightfully taken to be: rather his genius was to have transposed this description of tyranny to a new setting, America, and to have projected it into all of our futures.

Where, then, are the differences between Montesquieu, Constant and Tocqueville to be found? At its simplest, despotism for Montesquieu derived from one ruler and was imposed upon the people: usurpation, according to Constant, was government by one ruler in the name of the sovereignty of the people: whilst for Tocqueville, tyranny was exercised by the democratic majority over and against the minority. Beyond this, it was Tocqueville himself who marked out the originality of the new form of despotism. The following is a long quotation but is one that takes us to the heart of the issue. “In past centuries, one never saw a sovereign so absolute and so powerful that it undertook to administer all the parts of a great empire by itself without the assistance of secondary

powers; there was none who attempted to subjugate all its subjects without distinction to the details of a uniform rule, nor one that descended to the side of each of them to lord it over him and lead him. The idea of such an undertaking', he continued, 'had never presented itself to the human mind, and if any man had happened to conceive of it, the insufficiency of enlightenment, the imperfection of administrative proceedings, and above all the natural obstacles that inequality of conditions gave rise to would soon have stopped him in the execution of such a vast design'. Despotism in the past – and this is the important point - 'was violent but its extent was limited'.

It is clear that Tocqueville was of the opinion that the Empire of Napoleon Bonaparte was the first to overcome these obstacles to despotism. 'Napoleon', he told his fellow members of the *Académie Française* in 1842, 'possessed the knowledge of the nineteenth century and he acted upon a nation that was almost deprived of laws, customs and sound principles....This allowed him to build a despotism that was more rational and well-constructed than anyone would have dared attempt before him. After having promulgated ... all the laws destined to regulate the countless interactions between all citizens and the State, he was able simultaneously to create all the powers charged with executing these laws and to structure them in such a way as ... to form a vast but simple machine of government, of which he alone was the motor'. It was 'the most perfect despotism' yet created.

The new ingredient made evident in the democratic social state was that, if government now possessed these extensive instruments of administrative control, it would operate in a society characterized by near equality. Therefore, as Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*, 'if despotism came to be established in the democratic

nations of our day ... it would be more extensive and milder, and would degrade men without tormenting them'. This would be a power which 'does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd'. Our leaders would not be seen as tyrants but rather as schoolmasters and we would console ourselves with the thought that we had at least chosen them ourselves.

It was at this late stage of his argument – in the second volume of *Democracy in America* (1840) - that Tocqueville identified a second form of despotism and one that was largely, if not entirely, unfamiliar to both Montesquieu and Constant. Moreover, it was a form of despotism that Tocqueville himself had overlooked in Volume I of *Democracy in America*. The thrust of Tocqueville's argument had been that it was the equality of conditions that favoured the centralization of power. Yet, this was not the whole picture. 'In the modern nations of Europe', Tocqueville now observed, 'there is one great cause thatcontributes constantly to extending the action of the sovereign or increasing its prerogatives.... This cause is the development of industry'. By bringing a multitude of people together in the same place new relations were created: 'The industrial class needs to be regulated, overseen, and contained more than other classes, and it is natural that the prerogatives of government grow with it'. To that extent, the industrial class, in Tocqueville's words, 'carries despotism within itself and that despotism naturally spreads as it develops'. More than this, as nations industrialized they felt the need for roads, canals, ports and 'other semi-public works'. The more democratic a nation the harder it was for these to be provided by individuals and the easier it was for the State to step in. In such circumstances, not only was government the 'greatest industrialist' but it tended also

to become the master of all the others. Thus, governments came to appropriate the greater part of the produce of industry. It was this phenomenon, one that was entirely new and that was simply unknown to Montesquieu and only glimpsed by Constant (for both of whom commerce was primarily a source of freedom and emancipation), that powerfully contributed to a novel form of despotism in which State control became ever more intrusive and minute and where all initiative was taken away from the private individual and handed over to a government that constantly extended its reach.

This was Tocqueville's chilling description of the new features of despotism. 'I see', he wrote, 'an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who revolve on themselves without repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others..... Above these an immense tutelary power is elevated, which alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching their fates... It willingly works for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent and sole arbiter of that; it provides for their security, foresees and secures their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their estates, divides their inheritances'. It could be argued that this has proved to be the most pervasive despotism of the modern age, and so much so that we have largely ceased to see it as a form of despotism. Be that as it may, the overall point is that Tocqueville, like Montesquieu and Constant before him, provided two accounts of despotism, with distinct causes and distinct pathologies.

Let me conclude this part of the lecture with two thoughts from Tocqueville. The first is his comment that for all the faults of the system of soft despotism just described, it was still 'infinitely preferable to one which, having concentrated all powers, would

deposit them in the hands of one irresponsible man or body'. The worst of all tyrannies was that described by Montesquieu: arbitrary and indiscriminate rule by fear. Constant would have concurred. Secondly, 'in the democratic centuries that are going to open up individual independence and local liberties will always be the product of art'.

Montesquieu, Constant and Tocqueville all agreed that liberty was a fragile construction and that it would always need protection.

This was sadly confirmed by subsequent events. Across the Channel, political developments continued to take a worryingly illiberal turn. The Revolution of 1848 brought into existence a 'social' republic committed to a recognition of the right to work, with a not insignificant number of its supporters intent on reliving the events of 1793. With its collapse came the Second Empire of Napoleon III and the suppression of political freedoms (Tocqueville himself was briefly imprisoned). In these circumstances, when the French had again fallen for the seductive charms of Caesarism, Tocqueville was led to inquire into the causes of the failure of liberty to establish itself upon a secure foundation. His answer, most famously articulated in *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856), was that the roots of despotism lay deep in French history and had yet to be eradicated. The revolutionaries of 1789 had not sought to destroy the instruments of despotism but to use them to serve their own ends. Faced with such a disturbing conclusion, Tocqueville did not hesitate to restate the core doctrine of early nineteenth century liberalism: liberty, he wrote, consists 'in the pleasure of being able to speak, act, and breathe without constraint, under the government of God and the laws alone. Whoever seeks for anything from freedom but itself is made for slavery'.

What conclusions might we draw from the argument developed above? Well, I hope that I have succeeded in my limited goal of establishing that liberals were very much alive to the conditions that might limit our freedom and that they did this through a very sophisticated analysis of the forms that could be taken by despotism in modern societies. Moreover, as I hope I have also shown, they were aware that despotism could be generated not only by political institutions but also by certain structural characteristics of commercial society leading, most notably, to an excessive individualism and lack of political participation on the part of citizens.

Had I more time I would seek to develop this argument further in order to show that the other two propositions advanced by the republican argument – that there exists a radical break between liberalism and republicanism and that liberalism has produced an impoverished conception of liberty – could also be challenged. Fortunately for you it is not my intention to delay the drinks reception for much longer. However, if I may, I would like to conclude by reflecting on the extent that the argument that I have developed tonight in any way diminishes the most substantive point made by Professors Pettit and Skinner and those who agree them: namely that the historical and conceptual analysis of republicanism allows us to recover a concept of liberty as non-domination (as opposed to non-interference). Has what I have said this evening in any way undermined this important claim? Here, I confess, I am inclined to say no and I do so, in part, as a consequence of the discussions which took place at the recent one day seminar organised by Richard Bourke and Joel Isaac of the QM History department where we were extremely fortunate to have both Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner present to discuss their new books on Thomas Hobbes. There, in the course of our discussions, I was able to

present – in only a few sentences, admittedly – a version of the argument that you have just heard and both, I think, were of the opinion that they could accept what I had said but that the cogency of the argument for a concept of liberty as non-domination was untouched by it. This point was made especially strongly, and rightly I concede, by Philip Pettit.

There are, in turn, three things which I would like to say by way of response. The first is that, as a historian, I think that it is not unimportant that we set the historical record straight, especially when, as in this case, the republican argument we have recently been presented with carries such heavy normative baggage. The second is that I think that I could further develop my argument to show that many of the ideas advanced by Montesquieu, Constant and Tocqueville with regard to the nature of despotism could be so presented as to make them quite compatible with the theory of liberty as non-domination – the fear exercised by Montesquieu’s despot, the intrusion into the inner sanctuary of the individual’s thoughts and conscience performed by Constant’s usurper, the tyranny of Tocqueville’s democratic majority, are all forms of arbitrary impediment to liberty that do not require physical coercion or interference on the part of the sovereign, do not require the body of the citizen to be physically disempowered. To that extent, in inviting us to choose between republican and liberal conceptions of liberty we are being given a false choice. The latter, I should say, is a point made with great clarity in the recent book by Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson entitled *Liberal Beginnings*, where they argue that ‘political liberalism burst from the shell of a republican chrysalis’. It is simply a mistake, for example, to imagine that either Constant or Tocqueville were unaware of the importance of civic life for the preservation of liberty. However, they did

not remain traditional republicans because recent French history had taught them to be fearful of a naïve nostalgia for a past that could only be revived at considerable cost to both life and to liberty.

The third, and final, remark I wish to make follows on from my acceptance of the cogency of the concept of liberty as non-domination. The good news here is that, had I not done so, I would have felt compelled at some stage to give a fourth inaugural lecture, a lecture devoted not merely to unpicking and displaying the inadequacies of the republican conception of liberty but also sketching out my own, rival understanding of this central concept of political theory. Fortunately I have relieved myself of this obligation and can leave it to others far better qualified than myself to undertake this important task.

However, I cannot resist making a few comments about where I might look for an answer. One of the best ways of understanding the nature of monarchical despotism is simply to pay a visit to the gardens of the Palace of Versailles. Everything about those gardens was intended to display the self-glorification of Louis XIV through the complete subordination of nature to his will (see Ian Thompson, *The Sun King's Garden*). The gardens of the Italian Renaissance tell us another story but I take it that, in theory at least, in a republic all citizens would be seen as being equally capable of being gardeners and that the republican garden would be set out not only with an eye to beauty but also the facilitation of public discourse. Nevertheless, my suspicion is that republicans would not make very good gardeners, although they would undoubtedly make better gardeners than would princes! (I admit that the current Prince of Wales poses something of a difficulty for this argument!) This is so for the simple reason that, for republicans, it is participation

in civic life, rather than tending to cabbages, that defines the best elements of the human condition. It was, however, late in the fourth century BC that Epicurus set up his ‘Garden School’ on the outskirts of Athens with the express purpose of teaching an opposite philosophy, that is to say of suggesting that a good human life could be achieved without the *polis*, away from the public space and civic life. For Epicurus – as Robert Pogue Harrison has shown in his wonderful book *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* – the private garden was a haven from public life and as such Epicurus broke with the mainstream of Greek thought by depoliticising the concept of happiness and by breaking its link with citizenship. The mistake subsequently has been to believe that Epicurus confused the attainment of happiness with the satisfaction of our appetites. Nothing could have been further from the truth. For Epicurus, peace of mind was attained through the ‘prudent pursuit of pleasure’ (Oakeshott) and the cultivation of a set of personal and social virtues, amongst which were those of friendship, conversation and gratitude, and integral to the learning of those virtues, he believed, was the tending of a garden. For Epicurus, in brief, the purpose of philosophy was not to teach us to rule the city but to enhance our own potential for happiness, sure in the knowledge of our own mortality.

In this it is hard not to see echoes of themes addressed by the sixteenth-century French writer, Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne wrote an essay called ‘That to philosophise is to learn how to die’, and in this he argued that the best way to die was to be struck down suddenly whilst setting cabbages, thinking only of how imperfect was one’s garden. In other words, if I were to think about trying to sketch out a theory of liberty, I think that I would start from the cabbage patch and work outwards from there.