

On Tyranny, Virtue, and Habituation to Subjection

In *The Annals*, Tacitus illustrates the descent of Rome into tyranny.¹ Features characteristic of the late republic – unchecked ambition, terror, slaughter – continued and arguably intensified as Rome descended into empire. Two aspects of Tacitus's work are especially interesting as illustrations of twin corrupting effects of tyranny: the habituation of the Roman people to subjection and the corrupting nature of power on those who wield it, the latter being most clearly and explicitly illustrated in Tiberius. The former is much less explicit and relatively unanalyzed in Tacitus's thought, but nevertheless it is there. In order to draw it out, it will be useful to apply the analysis of voluntary servitude made by sixteenth-century French philosopher and statesman, Étienne de la Boétie. One of the most important questions of political theory is why a people willingly subjects itself to tyranny.

This question was the motivation for La Boétie's *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*:

I should like merely to understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him. Surely a striking situation! Yet it is so common that one must grieve the more and wonder the less at the spectacle of a million men serving in wretchedness, their necks under the yoke, not constrained by a greater multitude than they[.]²

He is not merely puzzled and curious but appalled. Surely, we cannot call cowardice the submission of hundreds, of thousands, of millions of men under the caprice of a single man – perhaps of two, or three, or four, but not such a multitude. No vice could sink to such a depth. What could be the cause of behavior for which no term vile enough could be found? La Boétie was led to the conclusion, the realization, that *all* governments are grounded on the consent of the governed, on general popular

1 Although the descent really began before the reign of Augustus, with whom Tacitus began his work.

2 Étienne de la Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, translated by Harry Kurz with an introduction by Murray Rothbard, (New York: Black Rose Books, 1997), p. 46. Boétie is pronounced “Bwettie” with a hard *t*.

acceptance, even the worst tyranny.³ No tyranny could last unless the majority of its people were at least passively resigned to it.

What could possibly make a people willingly give up their natural liberty⁴ in exchange for slavery? For, *qua* a people, that is indeed what they do.⁵

Poor, wretched, and stupid peoples, nations determined on your own misfortune and blind to your own good! You let yourselves be deprived before your own eyes of the best part of your revenues; your fields are plundered, your homes robbed, your family heirlooms taken away. You live in such a way that you cannot claim a single thing as your own; and it would seem that you consider yourselves lucky to be loaned your property, your families, and even your lives. All this havoc, this misfortune, this ruin, descends upon you not from alien foes, but from the one enemy whom you yourselves render as powerful as he is, for whom you go bravely to war, for whose greatness you do not refuse to offer your own bodies unto death. He who thus domineers over you has only two eyes, only two hands, only one body, no more than is possessed by the least man among the infinite numbers dwelling in your cities; he has indeed nothing more than the power you confer upon him to destroy you. Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy on you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you? What could he do to you if you yourselves did not connive with the thief who plunders you, if you were not accomplices of the murderer who kills you, if you were not traitors to yourselves? You sow your crops in order that he may ravage them, you install and furnish your homes to give him goods to pillage; you rear your daughters that he may gratify his lust; you bring up your children in order that he may confer upon them the greatest privilege he knows – to be led into his battles, to be delivered to butchery, to be made the servants of his greed and the instruments of his vengeance; you yield your bodies unto hard labor in order that he may indulge in his delights and wallow in his filthy pleasures; you weaken yourselves in order to make him the stronger and the mightier to hold you in check. From all these indignities, such as the very beasts of the field would not endure, you can deliver yourselves if you try, not by taking action, but merely by willing to be free. Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal

³ David Hume independently discovered this principle two centuries later: “Nothing appears more surprising to those who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission, with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we enquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find, that, as Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular.” (David Hume, “Of the First Principles of Government,” in *Essays, Literary, Moral and Political* (London: Oxford University Press [1966, c1963])).

⁴ I do not mean natural liberty in the modern state of nature-social contract sense.

⁵ There is, of course, an inherent collective action problem here and La Boétie’s full analysis attempts to address it.

has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break into pieces.⁶

La Boétie's answer is that men become habituated to subjection. They usually have to be forced at first, but over time and each successive generation they become more accustomed to servitude.⁷ The structural, ideological, ethical, and psychological dimensions of tyranny all serve to perpetuate a habituation to subjection. Many are the tools employed by tyrants over the course of human history to habituate men to subjection. The above-quoted passage illustrates a number of them.

Right from the very beginning Tacitus illustrates just how willing significant portions of the Roman population already was to give themselves up to voluntary servitude in the age of Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Tiberius. About Augustus, Tacitus writes:

[W]hen he had enticed the soldiery with gifts, the people with food, and everyone with the sweetness of inactivity, he rose up gradually and drew to himself the responsibilities of the senate, magistrates, and laws – without a single adversary, since the most defiant had fallen in the battle line or by proscription and the rest of the nobles, each in proportion to his readiness for servitude, were being exalted by wealth and honors and, enhanced by the revolution, preferred the protection of the present perils to the old. Nor did the provinces reject that state of affairs, the command of senate and people having become suspect owing to the contests of the powerful and the greed of magistrates (there being no effective assistance from the laws, which had been disrupted by violence, intrigue, and finally money.⁸

This passage not only illustrates how habituated to subjection the Romans already were, it also illustrates a number of the tools employed by tyrants to facilitate this habituation. A successful tyrant divides the people against each other, accustoming a part of the population to serving him in exchange for the great material rewards his power allows him to dispense, power he has only through them.⁹ If

6 La Boétie, pp. 52-53.

7 “Men will grow accustomed to the idea that they have always been in subjection, that their fathers lived in the same way; they will think they are obliged to suffer this evil, and will persuade themselves by example and imitation of others, finally investing those who order them around with proprietary rights, based on the idea that it has always been this way” (La Boétie, p. 65). For a recognition of this generational problem in Tacitus, see 1.3.6 – 1.4.1 in *The Annals*, translated by A.J. Woodman, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2004).

8 Tacitus, 1.2.1 – 1.2.2, p. 2. See also 1.7.1. Throughout *The Annals*, we also see numerous references to and illustrations of sycophancy; e.g., see 1.1.2, 1.13.4 – 1.14.4, 1.75.5, 4.74.1, and especially 3.65 – 3.66.1.

9 “[W]henever a ruler makes himself a dictator, all the wicked dregs of the nation – I do not mean the pack of petty thieves and earless ruffians who, in a republic, are unimportant in evil or good – but all those who are corrupted by burning ambition or extraordinary avarice, these gather around him and support him in order to have a share in the booty and to constitute themselves petty chiefs under the big tyrant” (La Boétie, pp. 78-79). For an example of the need to support, appease, and re-

necessary he can employ these active followers and soldiers of his against the rest of the people to enforce his edicts.¹⁰ But it is not upon force of arms that a tyrant's power truly rests; it is rather on the general acceptance of the people, whether because they actually support him (whether out of avarice or duty it matters not) or because they are passively resigned to his rule. The masses are often distracted and pacified by the dispensation of 'bread and circuses' as noted above, earning the tyrant the appearance of liberality. Religion is another common tool of the tyrant. Augustus was divinized and Tacitus repeatedly mentions various temples being dedicated to Augustus and Tiberius.¹¹ It becomes a god-ordained duty to obey and serve the tyrant.¹²

More important, however, is a broader ideology of militarism, republican virtue, and public service, if not to the tyrant himself then to Family, the Tribe, the Race, the State, the Republic, and/or the Empire. Indeed, I would argue that it is the tribalist character of Roman virtue, and the collectivist nature of republican virtue and the Roman duty of public service in the name of the Common (i.e., Greater) Good, that ultimately led the Romans into voluntary servitude under tyrants. Roman imperialism, spurred on by the martial virtue and culture of the Romans, gradually resulted over time in the erosion of Rome's intermediary institutions and the balance between them that protected the Romans' fragile liberty. Without a fundamental concern for individual liberty, when the intermediary institutions – the family, the tribe, the nobility, the nonprofessional army, social class and the corresponding political institutions – were eroded by the constant warfare which inevitably led to power being consolidated into the hands of one man and those who attempted to thrive under his umbrella¹³, the moral virtue of the people became corrupted as they gradually became accustomed to obedience and servitude first to their statesman-generals and then to the emperors, whose interests had become ward the professional soldiers, see Tacitus, 1.16.1 – 1.54.2. These passages also illustrate how far the Roman army had already sunk into degradation and vice.

10 Tacitus, 6.11.2.

11 On the cults of Augustus and Tiberius, and the temples dedicated to them, see for example: 1.59n. 85, 1.73.2n. 94, 1.78.1, 4.15.3, 4.37.3, 4.52.2. For reference to a temple dedicated to Rome itself, see 4.56.1.

12 On the divine right of rulership and the duty to obey, see 6.8.3 as an example.

13 See note 9.

synonymous with that of the State. The ever-present incentive to strive for ever-greater victories and glory in the name of the Greater Good (be it the family, the tribe, the State, or whatever) cannot help but tend toward the corruption of men's souls whether they are motivated by avarice or honest duty; for, under a policy of imperialism, compromises of one's principles will have to be made, evil deeds will be justified in the name of the Greater Good, and the worst sorts of men will be attracted to the top offices who will in turn seek to corrupt those they rule in order to maintain and increase their power.

Tyranny not only corrupts the people, it also corrupts the tyrant. It is interesting to examine the five phases of the degradation of Tiberius's soul as explicitly illustrated by Tacitus.

In his behavior too there were differing phases: one exceptional in life and reputation as long as he was a private individual or in commands under Augustus; one secretive and guileful in its fabrication of virtues while Germanicus and Drusus survived; he was simultaneously a blend of good and evil during his mother's lifetime; infamous for his savagery, but with his lusts cloaked, inasmuch as he felt love or fear respectively for Sejanus; lastly he erupted into crimes and degradations alike when at last, with his shame and dread removed, he had only himself to rely on.¹⁴

In Tacitus's eyes, Tiberius starts out as a relatively good man and citizen, a man possessed of republican virtue. Even early in his reign, Tiberius rejected the title "Father of the Fatherland" thrust upon him by the people and rejected the proposal of the senate that "he allow the swearing of obedience to his enactments."¹⁵ At one point, Tiberius refused to approve any more temples to Augustus or himself;¹⁶ he seems to realize he is not worthy of divinization, as his unfavorable self-comparison with Augustus seems to support,¹⁷ and the general import of *The Annals* seems to be that the Roman people must be corrupt to even be offering the highest honors to unworthy individuals.¹⁸ Yet in the very beginning, Tiberius brought back the law of treason, which would increasingly be used by him and other ambitious Romans for the elimination of rivals and perceived threats – e.g., for criticizing or seeming to criticize Tiberius in any way.¹⁹ In the beginning, Tiberius resists the providing of entertainment as

14 Tacitus, 6.51.3, p. 194. The translator notes that the five phases are dated as follows: to A.D. 14; to A.D. 23; to A.D. 29; to A.D. 29; to A.D. 31; to A.D. 37. For reference to the influence of Tiberius's mother, see 4.57.3, 5.3.1.

15 Ibid., 1.72.1.

16 Ibid., 4.37.3 – 4.38.5.

17 Ibid., 1.11.1.

18 In addition to my other citations, this interpretation is reinforced in part by 1.1.2, 1.9 – 1.10, 3.65.1, 4.32-33.

19 Ibid., 1.72.2 – 1.72.4, 4.31.1, 4.34.2, 4.42.3.

a tool, employed by later emperors, for pacifying the masses. He even recoils from such spectacles.²⁰ Under Tiberius, the people, for their part, not yet fully accustomed to their servitude but no longer very virtuous, were very disruptive with their games, festivals, theater, poetry, and so forth.²¹ However, he is all too eager to employ his wealth, the wealth of the State, or both, (it is not clear), to ingratiate himself with the people. And, it seems that as he spent more time in power, he increasingly gave in to his lusts, indulging his base appetites and slaughtering his perceived enemies.²² As Lord Acton once said, and as La Boétie recognized, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”; he continued, “Great men are almost always bad men.”²³

Tyranny, then, rests primarily upon the habituation of the people to subjection. Tyranny robs the people of their liberty and, consequently, of their virtue. Ironically, tyranny not only involves the enslavement of the people, it also involves the enslavement of the tyrant: to his baser desires, to his sycophants and supporters, and to the people as a whole. He becomes a parasite, no longer living by his own productive effort, dependent upon his supporters and the people as a whole for his life and his power. As La Boétie recognized, tyrants live “in torment” because they “find themselves obliged to fear everyone because they do evil unto every man,” and because they must constantly be acting to ensure the continuation of their power, which means pacifying the population in general as well as their supporters. “For it is plainly evident that the dictator does not consider his power firmly established until he has reached the point where there is no man under him who is of any worth”; and since this is an impossible goal to achieve permanently, he can never be secure. Tacitus describes the soul of the tyrant well: “Not without reason did the most outstanding man of wisdom [Socrates] customarily affirm that, if the mind of tyrants could be opened up, mutilations and blows would be visible, since, just as bodies were mauled by lashings, so was the spirit by savagery, lust, and evil decisions. In Tiberius’ case neither his fortune nor his solitude protected him from admitting the tortures of his soul and his own punishments.”²⁴

20 Ibid., 1.76.3, 4.14.3. For the behavior of the people after Tiberius’s death with regards to their entertainment, see 4.62.2.

21 Ibid., 1.77.1; see, also, note 20.

22 Ibid., 6.1.1, 6.19.2, 6.29.1.

23 Lord Acton, letter, 3 April 1887, to Bishop Mandell Creighton (published in *The Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton*. Louise von Glehn Creighton, ed. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1913).

24 Tacitus, 6.6.2, p. 168.

Appendix

La Boétie on the methods of the Roman emperors, pp. 69-71: “Truly it is a marvelous thing that they let themselves be caught so quickly at the slightest tickling of their fancy. Plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, pictures, and other such opiates, these were for ancient peoples the bait toward slavery, the price of their liberty, the instruments of tyranny. By these practices and enticements the ancient dictators so successfully lulled their subjects under the yoke, that the stupefied peoples, fascinated by the pastimes and vain pleasures flashed before their eyes, learned subservience as naively, but not so creditably, as little children learn to read by looking at bright picture books. Roman tyrants invented a further refinement. They often provided the city wards with feasts to cajole the rabble, always more readily tempted by the pleasure of eating than anything else. The most intelligent and understanding amongst them would not have quit his soup bowl to recover the liberty of the Republic of Plato. Tyrants would distribute largess, a bushel of wheat, a gallon of wine, and a sesterce: and then everybody would shamelessly cry, “Long live the King!” The fools did not realize that they were merely recovering a portion of their own property, and that their ruler could not have given them what they were receiving without having first taken it from them. A man might one day be presented with a sesterce and gorge himself on a public feast, lauding Tiberius and Nero for handsome liberality, who on the morrow, would be forced to abandon his property to their avarice, his children to their lust, his very blood to the cruelty of these magnificent emperors, without offering any more resistance than a stone or a tree stump. The mob has always behaved in this way – eagerly open to bribes that cannot be honorably accepted, and dissolutely callous to degradation and insult that cannot be honorably endured. Nowadays I do not meet anyone who, on hearing of Nero, does not shudder at the very name of that hideous monster, that disgusting and vile pestilence. Yet when he died – when this incendiary, this executioner, this savage beast, died as vilely as he had lived – the noble Roman people, mindful of his games and his festivals, were saddened to the point of wearing mourning for him. Thus wrote Cornelius Tacitus, a competent and serious author, and one of the most reliable. This will not be considered peculiar in view of what this same people had previously done at the death of Julius Caesar, who had swept away their laws and their liberty, in whose character, it seems to me, there was nothing worth while, for his very liberality, which is so highly praised, was more baneful than the cruelest tyrant who ever existed, because it was actually this poisonous amiability of his that sweetened servitude for the Roman people. After his death, that people, still preserving on their palates the flavor of his banquets and in their minds the memory of his prodigality, vied with one another to pay him homage. They piled up the seats of the Forum for the great fire that reduced his body to ashes, and later raised a column to him as to “The Father of His People.” (Such was the inscription on the capital.) They did him more honor, dead as he was, than they had any right to confer upon any man in the world, except perhaps on those who had killed him.

“They didn’t even neglect, these Roman emperors, to assume generally the title of Tribune of the People, partly because this office was held sacred and inviolable and also because it had been founded for the defense and protection of the people and enjoyed the favor of the state. By this means they made sure that the populace would trust them completely, as if they merely used the title and did not abuse it. Today there are some who do not behave very differently; they never undertake an unjust policy, even one of some importance, without prefacing it with some pretty speech concerning the public welfare and common good.”