TYRANNY

A New Interpretation

Waller R. Newell

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This is the first comprehensive exploration of ancient and modern tyranny as a central theme in the history of political thought. Waller R. Newell argues that modern tyranny and statecraft differ fundamentally from the classical understanding. Newell demonstrates a historical shift in emphasis from the classical thinkers' stress on the virtuous character of rulers and the need for civic education to the modern emphasis on impersonal institutions and cold-blooded political method. The turning point is Machiavelli's call for the conquest of nature. Newell traces the lines of influence from Machiavelli's new science of politics to the rise of Atlanticist republicanism in England and America, as well as the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century and their effects on the present. By diagnosing the varieties of tyranny from erotic voluptuaries like Nero, the steely determination of reforming conquerors like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, and modernizing despots such as Napoleon and Ataturk to the collectivist revolutions of the Jacobins, Bolsheviks, Nazis, and Khmer Rouge, Newell shows how tyranny is every bit as dangerous to free democratic societies today as it was in the past.

Waller R. Newell is Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at Carleton University. He is the author of *The Soul of a Leader: Character, Conviction, and Ten Lessons in Political Greatness* (2009); *The Code of Man: Love, Courage, Pride, Family, Country* (2003); *What Is a Man? 3,000 Years of Wisdom on the Art of Manly Virtue* (2000); and *Ruling Passion: The Erotics of Statecraft in Platonic Political Philosophy* (2000).

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As I was nearing the completion of this book, the world was being inspired by the struggle for freedom unfolding across the Arab lands. During that same period and for some time preceding it, according to Freedom House, the world's democracies had been in retreat while tyrannical forces were on the rise. We seem to be living through an era in which expectations for freedom and the proliferation of tyranny are intensifying simultaneously. More than ever, then, it is incumbent on us to study tyranny, attempt to identify its varieties, and try to anticipate its emergence and hostility to the forces of freedom. Tyranny is generally an unpleasant subject, but one does not think about tyranny because one wants to think about unpleasant things. Rather, if one wants to think, it must be about both pleasant and unpleasant things.

This book grew out of many years of reflection, and some of the chapters (1, 3, 4, 5, and a portion of 6) contain greatly transformed and lengthened versions of earlier articles. The Introduction, Chapters 2 and 7, and the Conclusion are entirely new. None of the chapters, however, simply duplicates the content of the earlier articles, because I only arrived at the central thesis of this book through writing them. They have now been reshaped in light of that thesis, which I set forth in the Introduction. This book can be read entirely on its own, independent of my other writings. At the same time, it does draw on, and is the scholarly culmination of, my earlier books on Plato, the manly virtues, and political leadership.

Earlier versions of some of the chapters were presented at Peterhouse College Cambridge, Yale University, and the University of Toronto. I gratefully acknowledge the stimulation and the hospitality I received

on those occasions. I also have the pleasure and the honor of acknowledging the critical insight and support that I have received from many colleagues over the years. Although they share no responsibility for the book's shortcomings, they have contributed to whatever of value readers may find in it. They include, in no special order, the following: Charles H. Fairbanks, Thomas L. Pangle, Lorraine Pangle, Clifford Orwin, Ryan Balot, Nalin Ranasinghe, Stanley Rosen, Catherine Zuckert, Barry Strauss, Paul Rahe, Robert Sibley, Steven Smith, Travis Smith, Graham Howell, Jarrett Carty, Geoffrey Kellow, Peter Ahrensdorf, Harvey C. Mansfield, Lynette Mitchell, Jeff Sikkenga, Norman Doidge, Kenneth Green, Michael Zuckert, Gregory MacIsaac, Peter Emberley, Tom Darby, Samuel Abraham, H. D. Forbes, Edward Andrew, and Gary McDowell. I also have the especially gratifying obligation to acknowledge the insights I derived from discussing the political philosophies examined in this book with students past and present, some of whom are now embarked on their own careers. Finally, I owe special thanks to my editor at Cambridge University Press, Robert Dreesen, and to the anonymous reviewers for the original proposal, who prompted me to address many important issues in advance that I had neglected.

This book is dedicated to my best friend and collaborator, my wife Jacqueline Etherington Newell.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Conquest of Eros

Tyranny is elusive. Although everyone wants to be known as just, especially when they are not, no one wants to be known as a tyrant, especially when they are. Yet this most elusive of political phenomena is one of the most widespread and shockingly real. From the innermost sanctum of the household to the politics of nations and empires, there are victims and there are oppressors. Civil war, revolution, terrorism, superpower conflict – in all these spheres of human violence, the pursuit of power over others is accompanied by the furious or heartrending demand for justice, whose first act must be to expose the aggressor for what he or it truly is. The dilemma is only complicated by the fact that, as students of politics from Aristotle to Abraham Lincoln have observed, the would-be tyrant may appear in the guise of a liberator. More extraordinary still, in the modern age, our potential oppressors are sometimes not necessarily human at all – technology is a faceless, impersonal power that nevertheless could destroy the entire planet or, some have argued, terrify us into peace and moderation. Hence one of the oldest themes in political philosophy and one of the most lastingly relevant: Who and what is the tyrant?

The word *tyrannos* in ancient Greek meant a ruler without ancestral descent from a lawful king, a *basileus*. A *basileus* was sometimes a semisacerdotal figure, sometimes, as in the Spartan dual monarchy, exercising military command. Often a king was seen as a kind of father of his people, a link to the ancestors and the womb of the country, and to the gods themselves, who were the fathers of the fathers.[1] By contrast,

1 Consider Aristotle *Politics* 1252b15–27, 1285b3–1285b20. In the first lines of *Oedipus the Tyrant*, Oedipus tries to assert his status by addressing the Thebans as "children."

a tyrant was often a "new man," someone who seized or usurped exclusive power, whether over a formerly free people or by taking the place of a lawful king. Sometimes their rule was violent or began in violence, but tyrants could also be recognized as benevolent, better at the art of ruling than a legitimate king, and so successful that their position might become hereditary for a time. However, they never entirely escaped the taint of illegitimacy. Hence Max Weber derived his famous category of "charisma" from Sophocles' *Oedipus the Tyrant*. Because he came to power by ridding Thebes of the sphinx and labors under mutterings about how the legitimate king Laius had been murdered, a crime that he must also solve to remove a famine, Oedipus must compensate for his lack of hereditary royal authority and sanctity by proving his intellectual prowess and boldness, which of course leads to his undoing as he is exposed as his father's murderer and in an incestuous relationship with his mother. Throughout the play, one senses the uneasiness of Oedipus' hold on the throne, how even in the opening lines, the priests seem unwilling to recognize his claim to authority (30–35), and his vexation with his behind-the-scenes power-sharing deal with Kreon, the representative of the nobility from which a legitimate king would normally be drawn (575–584). In another variation of the problem posed by absolute rule, for the Romans, a king (*rex*) was himself tantamount to a tyrant, hence the Latin translation of Sophocles' title as *Oedipus Rex*. The Romans' hatred of their original Etruscan kings was so intense that even men who later wielded what amounted to royal power such as Julius Caesar and, above all, his serpentine successor Augustus dared not claim this title openly but had to sheath it in the constitutional garb of "first citizen" or "commander" (*imperator*), even though Augustus was openly hailed in the Greek provinces as a monarch.[2]

There are so many ways we can use this term "tyranny" that it is difficult to isolate a common definition. At a minimum, we could define it as the use of coercive or violent force to treat others unjustly through the exercise of political supremacy. But is this not a matter of perspective? As Hobbes sourly observed, if someone does us good, we praise him; if someone harms our interests, we call him a tyrant.[3] There is

2 For the classic account of how the usurper Octavian sheathed himself in the outward garb of the restorer of the Republic, see Syme (2002).

3 Hobbes (1971) p. 722.

some truth to this observation. The tyrant's injustice is inevitably to an extent a perception held by some but not by others, although the perception of tyranny itself, valid or otherwise, is a palpably and universally observable political phenomenon. Hitler and Stalin were venerated by many of their own countrymen, despite their millions of victims. Disturbingly, they combined their projects for genocide with ordinary and needed agendas for economic and technological modernization. Indeed, the deeply paradoxical prospect of the tyrant as a political *reformer* – entertained circumspectly by the ancients and openly extolled by moderns like Machiavelli – will be a central theme of this study. However, we use the condemnatory term "tyranny" in many other ways as well – the tyranny of petty bureaucrats, vindictive high school principals, parents over their children, spouses over their partners. If the power to destroy millions, or even the entire human race, is a characteristic of tyranny, then we could even assign it to purely impersonal forces such as nuclear weapons or the devastation of the environment. Another central theme of this study is the contention that the transition from ancient tyranny to modern tyranny involves just such a shift from personal to impersonal oppression.

Sometimes tyrants are purely secular. There have been modernizing state-builders like Kemal Ataturk who used dictatorial methods to try to establish a democratic culture in a country that had never before had one. Abraham Lincoln was decried as a tyrant for provoking the civil war by endangering states' rights and for suspending habeas corpus. Franklin Roosevelt arguably acted tyrannically by interring innocent Japanese Americans because of their race. Religious zealots can also rule tyrannically, as in Iran or wherever the Taliban gain local control in Afghanistan. Finally, there are what I term "garden variety" tyrannies, the oldest and most enduring variety. These are regimes ruled by one man or clan and an extended network of cronies who exploit an entire country as if it were their private property, a network of venality sometimes laced with religious or modernizing ideology, sometimes not. Here one can think of Spain's General Franco, whose government was conflated with his personal household and whose followers were enriched with contracts and privileges, under a veneer of protecting traditional morality and the Church. More recently, we witnessed the collapse of the shambling oligarchy that was Mubarak's Egypt, with its baksheesh-run economy, purloined billions of American foreign aid for

more lavish villas for the elite, headed by a canny old mafioso survivor. Even religiously fanatical regimes such as the rule of the Ayatollahs in Iran can combine their zealotry with old-fashioned greed and graft of this kind: the mullahs are said to have stolen millions in public funds for their personal fortunes. Dictatorships like the former Soviet Union claiming to be bent on modernization also created a *nomenklatura* system of special privilege and purloined wealth for the party elite. When the regime fell, they simply stole the state's property and thereby became "entrepreneurs," a feat imitated more successfully and without a full-blown regime change by China, a mercantilist oligarchy still claiming to be Marxist. The list goes on and on.

The psychology of tyranny is also a rich vein for speculation. We all sense that there are different psychological types among tyrants – the voluptuary, the sadist, the puritan, the coldly efficient manager. Hitler was a vegetarian and teetotaler as he ordered the deaths of millions. Stalin issued similar orders while indulging in a gluttonous appetite for food and booze. Indeed, as we see at length in this study, Aristotle's identification in the *Politics* of despotism with a form of "household" authority, in which the ruler treats the country as an extension of his own property, has endured throughout history. In addition to the example of Franco, both Hitler and Stalin conducted their most important state business from their private households and dinner tables, with a blurry line at best between state official and personal retainer. Although Hitler himself was not a gourmand, the household pattern of authority was extended from his getaway home in the Alps to daily lunches in Berlin where the top paladins of the regime – Speer, Goebbels, Goering, and others – would discuss policy and monitor each other's status while sharing a common meal. According to Albert Speer, these daily lunches were the heart of the Nazi government.[4]

Two psychological types have assumed special prominence in the tradition coming from the classics – the erotic voluptuary and what we might term the rational or benevolent despot. The first of these is clearly a tyrant in a blatant way recognizable by all. Think of the mad and depraved Caligula and Nero with their endless rounds of cruelty and debauchery. The status of the second type, however – the rational despot – is much more ambiguous. Everyone has this contrast

4 See the accounts in Speer (1997) and Montefiore (2005).

encoded as a part of our cultural heritage, including popular entertainment culture. Think of Joaquin Phoenix's marvelous turn as the emperor Commodus in *Gladiator*. Besotted with pleasure, he is also gloomy, suspicious, and thin-skinned in a way that makes him lethally dangerous to those around him. Wandering his palaces sleeplessly at night, searching for a new pleasure, a new hatred, to fill his coruscating inner emptiness with a spasm of feeling, he finally provokes his own murder by outraged subjects who would rather risk death a single time than live in unremitting terror. Commodus in this film is much like the figure of the Master in Hegel's famous master-slave encounter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The Master has achieved independence by dominating his slaves, but he has no sense of personal achievement or self-worth and can only despise the honors he receives from those who fear and curry to him. Hegel's Master in turn recalls Socrates' portrait of the tyrant in Book 9 of the *Republic*, probably the single most famous denunciation of tyranny in the canon, Hegel's version being laced with a further strain of Lutheran contempt for such witless immersion in the tinsel of worldly pleasure and renown.

In contrast to this gloomy and paranoid monster typified by Commodus, think, on the other hand, of Julius Caesar as portrayed by Ciaran Hinds in the television series *Rome*. It will be difficult to visualize Caesar in the future without recalling this Irish actor's thoroughly convincing portrayal. In all the historical accounts of him, Caesar is erotic, a famous womanizer whose own soldiers sung ribald lyrics about his unquenchable thirst for both sexes. However, he was also a well-educated and cultivated man with refined tastes in literature and a great prose stylist himself. He took a huge interest in public business, including the construction of great public works, making taxation more fair, securing land distribution for his troops, and trying in general to improve Roman life as against the purblind, stubbornly reactionary resistance of his own fellow aristocrats. Above all, he was urbane. He preferred being your friend to being your enemy. He forgave almost anyone who crossed him once but then repented. All in all, he was a magnificent figure, reviled by those who regarded him as a demagogue and traitor to his class, revered by his beneficiaries and his comrades in arms. Even Cicero could not resist his charm, although he regarded him as the very death of republican liberty. As Cicero wrote to a friend after Caesar had arrived uninvited for dinner one day at Cicero's villa

with an entourage of hundreds, he found Caesar a charming and witty conversationalist at table as always, but not the sort of person with whom you would end the visit by saying, "Come again soon!"[5]

These preliminary contours add force to our original question: Who and what is the tyrant? Many books have been written on this theme. This book is concerned with a specific dimension of it: How does the modern conception of tyranny differ from the ancient one as a theme in the history of political philosophy? The core of its approach is to draw a contrast between the Platonic understanding of tyranny as a misguided longing for erotic satisfaction that can be corrected by the education of eros toward civic virtue and the modern identification of tyranny with terror deployed in the service of political reconstruction. Although Hegel is not discussed at length, my approach is very much influenced by his analysis of the French Revolution in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.[6] Hegel locates a change in the meaning of tyranny in modern politics from the tyrant's pursuit of pleasure to an impersonal, self-abnegating, and therefore seemingly "idealistic" destruction of all premodern ties to family, class, and region in the name of a contentless vision of a unified community or state. Thus, whereas Plato considered tyrants to be fundamentally venal, what is so frightening about modern terroristic rulers such as Robespierre, Stalin, Hitler, or Pol Pot is precisely their apparent imperviousness to ordinary greed and hedonistic pleasure in their rigorous dedication to a "historical mission" of destruction and reconstruction. Their savagery becomes a duty that cannot be "compromised" by their own self-interest or love of a noble reputation, which arguably puts them outside of the Platonic starting point for the diagnosis and treatment of the tyrannical personality. Their eros cannot be rehabilitated because it is absent in the first place, rooted out by an act of will.

The studies that follow concentrate on a specific hinge of the shift from personal to impersonal tyranny suggested by Hegel: the transition from the classical teachings on statecraft to the modern science of politics inaugurated by Machiavelli and his successors. Machiavelli's formulation of the relationship of princely *virtu* to Fortuna is, it is argued

5 Amusingly retold by Everitt (2003). For a masterful account of Julius Caesar as animated by a love of Greek heroism, see Meier (1997).

6 Hegel (1979) sections 582–595.

here, at the origin of an ontological shift in the meaning of tyranny, transferring to the secular prince a transformative power of creation ex nihilo formerly reserved for God. For Plato, tyranny is a misunderstanding of the true meaning of human satisfaction whose cure is the sublimation of the passions in the pursuit of moral and intellectual virtues grounded in the natural order of the cosmos. The Machiavellian prince, by contrast, stands radically apart from nature construed as a field of hostile happenstance, so as the more effectively to focus his will on attacking and subduing it. Mastering Fortuna includes the prince's mastering that part of his *own* nature – eros specifically – vulnerable to believing in the Platonic cosmology with (what Machiavelli takes to be) its unwarranted, delusory hopefulness about the success of morality, nobility, and reason in the world. In this sense, central to the conquest of Fortune is the conquest of eros. The result is a new kind of power seeking that is at once passionately selfish and cold-bloodedly methodical – a mixture arguably not accounted for in the Platonic psychology of tyranny. With Machiavelli, we encounter a new view of princely vigor according to which terror can be a catalyst for social and political reconstruction. As we will see, this places the diagnosis of tyranny on a new basis, including the grounds on which it is to be condemned. For Plato and the ancients, the tyrant is a monster of desire who plunders and ravishes his subjects. Beginning with Machiavelli, the "prince" is envisioned as dispensing terror in a disciplined and dispassionate manner to purge society of its bloated desires and corrupt "humors," thereby laying the foundations for a stable and productive social order.[7]

Using eros as a prism, my aim is to explore the extent to which tyranny possesses an ontological basis and how that basis changes between ancient and modern thought, contributing, it is hoped, to an

7 Readers of Harvey Mansfield will recognize my debt to his exploration of these themes in *Machiavelli's Virtue* (1998), *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders* (2001), and *Taming the Prince* (1993), although I do place more emphasis on explicitly metaphysical themes in my readings. Mansfield's works are discussed in the chapters to follow. For the development of my thesis about the contrast between the personal character of ancient rule and the impersonal character of modern authority, I am also indebted to Mansfield's seminal essay on Hobbes and the "science of indirect government" (1971). Other important approaches to Machiavelli and his legacy are considered in due course, including Rahe (1992, 2005, 2008) and Sullivan (1996, 2004). The identification of modern state authority with the transition to impersonal authority is also a theme of the recent book by Fukuyama (2011).

important debate in the history of political ideas that is discussed a little later in this introduction. My premise is that, interesting and salutary as it may appear to do so, one cannot posit a single psychology of tyranny that explains its ancient and modern types. The theme of tyranny is intrinsically connected to the relationship between human beings and nature. As the meaning of tyranny alters, so does the relationship of reason, virtue, will, and technical prowess to nature. The reverse is equally true: as the content of reason, virtue, will, and technical capacity undergoes a fundamental change, so does the meaning of tyranny. Tyranny thus emerges as a crucial avenue for thinking through the shift from classical political theory to that of modernity altogether, crystallized as the conquest of eros.

Now one might argue that classical and modern political theory differ most importantly in their practical, moral, and psychological implications for statesmanship. Given the richness of that debate, do we need to think about it in more purely theoretical or ontological terms? Are not the human things enough? I hope to show that, rich as those practical and psychological dimensions of statesmanship are – and this book treats them at length – they are always intertwined with more purely theoretical speculations about the ultimate character of reality, and that these streams cannot be treated in complete separation from one another.[8] That is to say, the psychological and practical dimensions of statecraft derive from a particular view of nature – because human nature is a part of nature as a whole – and in turn furnish evidence in the human realm of day-to-day civic experience for those larger cosmologies themselves.[9]

8 In this sense, Weiss's interesting book would be on a different page from mine because she argues that Socrates in the *Meno* is defending the possibility of adequate moral virtue bereft of metaphysical inquiry (2001). As Stauffer argues, Socrates in his rhetoric stresses the tension between philosophy and the city while arguing that, at the same time and for this very reason, philosophy is "the moral conscience of the city" (2006, p. 179).

9 This is why I cannot go all the way with Hadot (1995), interesting as his argument is, in seeing Socratic or Platonic philosophizing as "spiritual exercises" akin to personal therapy or mystical techniques or as if Socrates simply embodied a vague "way of life" alongside other ways of life. The Platonic Socrates does not base his argument solely on the best *askesis* for the individual but on what is objectively true and real about the cosmos, and philosophy is not presented merely as a "way of life" but as *the* magisterial guide to the truth about the cosmos, or at least the pursuit of it, and therefore as the most suitable *governor* for other "ways of life" including politics and poetry. Admirable as the postmodernist reading of Plato is in some respects as a way of freeing it from the dead