

Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect

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"In our world," observes Paul Rahe, "there are states popular and there are states despotic ... in principle, there is no reason to suppose that states of the former sort cannot become states of the latter sort" (*Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009; 240–41). In fact, if one is to judge from Rahe's two companion volumes (both published in the same year) addressing the past and present situation of the modern republic, there is a considerable risk that popular states will deteriorate—perhaps by ominously insensible degrees—into despotic states. The first of his two volumes is devoted to exploring Montesquieu's analysis of the political-psychological dispositions fostered by modern republics (especially the characteristic *inquiétude*, or uneasiness, to which citizens of republics are prone) that put liberty both within reach and at risk (32–59). The second, which I discuss here, develops this consideration of Montesquieu to include an analysis of the different ways in which Rousseau and Tocqueville expanded upon the account of the defects of and dangers to liberal republicanism found in their great predecessor. The threat with which Rahe is especially concerned here is what Tocqueville defines as soft despotism. Soft despotism, unlike its hard counterpart, entails the reduction of citizens to coddled infants rather than brutes, although infantilization, Tocqueville suggests, itself entails a sort of brutalization.

The end result of soft despotism is the deterioration of a democratic people via a process through which the government gradually assumes control of decisions directly affecting the lives of its citizens (who are presumed to be incompetent to make such decisions on their own) into "a flock of timid and industrious animals, with the government as its shepherd" (*Democracy in America*, New York: Library of America, 2004; 819). This process of decline is not activated by foreign enemies but lies in the nature of the popular state itself: "In Tocqueville's estimation, soft despotism is democracy's drift" (193). The erosion of liberty forecast by Tocqueville, Rahe indicates, is well underway in the United States: "With every passing year, in every sphere of life, Americans have less and less control over the decisions that shape their lives" (258).

Rahe's overall project, like that of Tocqueville, aims to disclose and define what he sees as the present danger of soft despotism, and to prompt resistance to it, especially but not only by Americans. Such resistance, he suggests, requires that "we come to a crystal clear understanding of the inexorable logic unfolding within our regime and set out—under the guidance of the political science fashioned by Montesquieu and Rousseau and reconfigured by Tocqueville—to reverse the tide" (274). It is just such an understanding that Rahe's work aims to further. His task in conducting us on a guided tour through the political science of these three figures is twofold. First, Rahe seeks to alert us to the seriousness of the current plight of modern republics (namely, their perceived lapse into malaise and a corresponding unwillingness to assume the responsibilities of active citizenship) and to trace the sources of this condition to the tensions within modern republicanism detected by Montesquieu, Rousseau and Tocqueville. Secondly, he proposes that we return to these three thinkers in the spirit of an open-ended intellectual journey.

This excellent—and genuinely important—book succeeds admirably on both fronts. Works that employ the language of disease, malaise, nightmare, and the like to characterize a given predicament must convince us that the ills to which they refer are something more than problems inflated to make the works in question appear to

be necessary responses to crises, and prophylactics against what may ensue if matters do not change. Rahe's occasional tone of urgency is fully commensurate with the scope and seriousness of the problem that he patiently details. The policy recommendations that follow upon his careful diagnosis of the threat to liberty in modern republics are refreshingly blunt and occasionally provocative (276–78). One might have wished that the discussion of what he terms the “profound dignity” of “citizenship in the broadest sense” (274) had been more extensive, particularly with regard to the relationship between citizen dignity, “our dignity as human beings” and “our rights as women and men” (280). Rahe correctly points that for Tocqueville, “human dignity is bound up with taking responsibility for one’s affairs” (278). Tocqueville also suggests that “wherever men of ... great power and wealth are found, the weak and poor despair utterly for themselves and allow themselves to sink below the threshold of human dignity” (*Democracy in America*, New York: Library of America, 2004; 27). One wonders how a liberal democratic remedy for this particular sort of crisis of dignity might be contrived without resorting to the means of reducing disparities in wealth and power more consistent with states despotic than states popular.

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L'État rentier. Le cas de la Malaysia

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À la suite de son indépendance, en 1957, la Malaysia a connu des progrès économiques rapides qui ont conduit au rehaussement des conditions de vie d'une large part de sa population. Ces tendances lui permettaient même d'envisager d'atteindre prochainement le rang des pays «développés», un projet ambitieux clairement énoncé dès 1991 dans sa politique *Vision 2020*. Objet d'attention et de curiosité croissante de la part des théoriciens et analystes du développement, ce petit État devenu un véritable laboratoire de la «modernisation économique» représenterait-il un cas singulier? Il pose à tout le moins, en brouillant un peu les cartes, des défis importants aux théories et aux cadres d'analyse «classiques» dans le domaine de l'économie politique. Comment expliquer les succès tous azimuts de ce pays, mais aussi sa stabilité et sa résilience sur le plan politique malgré les crises successives qui ont affecté la jeune fédération située dans la région du Sud-Est asiatique plutôt caractérisée par l'instabilité? Voilà la nature de la question posée par ce livre.

Isabelle Beaulieu nous présente dans *L'État rentier. Le cas de la Malaysia* – avec en filigrane la recherche des fondements du processus accéléré de modernisation et des succès économiques de la Malaysia – une thèse fort à propos visant à éclairer sous un angle nouveau les assises de sa stabilité politique. D'emblée l'auteure démontre judicieusement que la Malaysia est loin d'être un pays où les succès du développement économique se conjuguent avec la démocratisation des institutions. Bien au contraire, l'exercice du pouvoir n'y présente ni les caractéristiques d'un système démocratique libéral classique ni celles d'un régime totalitaire. On le qualifie plutôt de régime autoritaire car : i) l'espace public y est limité par des lois et des institutions fortement coercitives; ii) le recours à la force y est utilisé, bien que parcimonieusement; iii) la même coalition y détient le pouvoir depuis l'indépendance – le *Barisan National* dans les faits dirigé par le parti malais majoritaire, le *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO) –; et iv) l'opposition ne dispose pas de facto d'une place équitable pour se faire entendre.

Le livre, en quatre chapitres, répond à la question posée en faisant appel à la théorie de l'État rentier. L'argumentaire se fonde sur l'analyse des institutions et des