

'Despotism' and 'Tyranny'

Unmasking a Tenacious Confusion

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ABSTRACT: Terms such as 'despotism' and 'tyranny' which proved efficacious in clarifying political debate until the beginning of the 19th century, have been eliminated from the vocabulary of political science because of a confusion that has muddled their sense. This vocabulary has thus become impoverished to the advantage of terms like 'autocracy', or yet others, especially 'dictatorship', equally vague and imprecise. This article demonstrates (through the adventures of the term 'despotism' during 23 centuries) that we have forgotten a distinction between these two 'conceptual terms' which was clear in the past, and it attempts to understand at which moment in history the confusion occurred and why. There is no question of restoring the distinction in contemporary political vocabulary. This work would simply like to encourage people to reflect on the political terminology inherited from tradition, on the correct use of concepts and of their definitions, in order to reintegrate political vocabulary and render it more useful in decrypting contemporary reality, which remains often complex and even undecipherable.

KEY WORDS: *autocracy, despotism, dictatorship, political oppression, right of resistance, tyrannicide, tyranny*

A 'Vital' Confusion

From the early 19th century onwards, 'tyranny' is a word that has fallen into desuetude in our political vocabulary. For almost two centuries, the word has ceased to have meaning. Among the many reasons for its abandonment, the most important is that it is now hardly distinguishable from the word 'despotism'. Between these two terms, an ambiguity has crept in which has led to the word 'dictatorship' being preferred over both 'tyranny' and 'despotism'. But 'dictatorship' has added no clarity to our thinking, since it is even more ambiguous than the other terms. This is because its meaning has been transformed over the years to an extent that it has been reversed: the positive has become almost a negative. Originally 'dictatorship' designated a legitimate and legal responsibility conferred by the Roman Senate. Now, it refers to a government which hides (with varying success) civil, economic or judicial malpractice. This confusion is not like other

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essentially contested political concepts that bedevil the debates between historians, political analysts and philosophers of politics. It is a 'vital' confusion because it is a matter of life and death.

The right of resistance is and remains a right under the condition that it is directed against tyranny and not against despotism. That is the result of 25 centuries of debate that I study in my book *Tyrannie et Tyrannicide*.¹ Before giving the definitions of tyranny and despotism, I should like to ask the reader to note: 1) both are forms derived from proper constitutions, which is the reason why they are similar but distinct (and it is the difference that interests us the most); 2) these definitions come from sources that have been analysed in their chronological context, in their original languages and in their traditions, passing from one language to another and from one civilization to another. Here are the definitions to be retained:

Despotism is a form of government which, while being authoritarian and arbitrary, is legitimate if not legal, in some countries, whereas tyranny, in the most rigorous sense, is a form of government which is authoritarian and arbitrary and which is illegitimate and illegal, because exercised not only without, but against the will of the citizens, and also scorns fundamental human rights.

Judicial and moral considerations delimit the frontiers between the one and the other. So, as Condorcet reminds us, 'where there is violation of humanitarian rights', there also is tyranny.²

This 'vital' aspect occurs when the head of a government is designated a tyrant. That implies an active *tyrannicide*. A right of resistance becomes, in consequence, directed against the tyrant. It does not exist against the despot. 'Despoticide' has no place in the history of political thought. Hence the vital importance of distinguishing between these two terms.

Misunderstood Terms

When one thinks of tyranny today, despotism comes immediately to mind, and vice versa. Those who use these concepts may feel that they are not completely synonymous, but they are incapable of explaining the distinction between them. The proof lies in dictionaries of modern languages, even the most important among them (including the *OED*). After having defined, sometimes making several distinctions, the essential characteristics of these types of power or government – arbitrary, absolute and authoritarian – they always end up explaining one term in the light of the other.³ This is no doubt inevitable, considering the common base exploited by dictionary compilers for their definitions. It remains the case, however, that dictionaries do not offer their readers sufficient historical reference to understand in what ways and why these two terms are not synonymous, especially when they are used in the context of political thought.

The problem began as a historically based misunderstanding which has gradually become more deeply rooted and is now a chronically embedded confusion.

The word 'confusion' signifies here a lack of clarity of thought and of the meaning that one should give to concepts, that is to say, in Cartesian language, the opposite of clear and distinct ideas. In this article I propose to show what has been abandoned by way of clarity in the past in order to try and understand the origins of this confusion. It is a matter of tracing the roots of a semantic confusion between these two 'word-concepts' which has contributed to their exclusion from our political lexicography, and aggravated the impoverishment of today's political language.

The translation of the Greek word 'despot' into modern vernaculars is a history of 'vicissitudes'.⁴ One must remember the context in which the word was often deployed: a contempt towards political regimes which have behaved oppressively. But those showing such contempt often wanted, for political reasons, to stop short of using the term 'tyrannical'. As a result, the distinction between 'despotic' and 'tyrannical' gradually lost its force. In addition, whereas 'tyranny' remained a term in continual use and stable valency, the term 'despot', forged in 14th-century France, disappeared for three centuries, only to reappear towards the middle of the 17th century, losing its precise signification in the process. The reintroduction of the word 'despotism' towards the end of the 17th century gave rise to controversies which would preoccupy the best minds of the 18th century.

This confusion between despotism and tyranny was further confounded from the end of the 18th century by the muddle between despotism and 'absolute power', and especially with the introduction of the term 'absolutism' in the 19th century. This latter has had serious consequences for historiography, political lexicography and political ideas. Here, I confine myself to the distinction between despotism and tyranny since that between despotism and absolutism I have analysed elsewhere.⁵ However, we should bear in mind that these are linked confusions.

Greek thought: Aristotle and the Conceptualization of Politics

Over the centuries, writers have examined political lexicography. Aristotle furnished a common conceptual framework. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, he sought to clarify the concepts of moral philosophy, law and politics, offering future generations an arsenal of fundamental political language. A connoisseur, expert in all the subtleties that characterized the different forms of government (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy), Aristotle provided an analysis appropriate to each constitution, including its state of greatest degradation. According to Aristotle, whatever the form of government, its integrity or corruption had nothing to do with the number of those involved in its government. In the same way, the number of people had no influence on the degraded or tyrannical form of government, whether exercised by a single person, a group or a multitude. From his analysis of types of tyranny, Aristotle deduced that their

common characteristics could be summarized in three ways. It was a government that: 1) seeks its own profit rather than that of its subjects; 2) governs against the will of its subjects; and 3) violates law and justice.

As for the difference between tyranny and despotism, Aristotle considered these concepts not as two opposing forms of government but as distinctive degradations from uncorrupted forms. That which distorts a government is the degree of its corruption. Thus we can observe a variety of decadent forms going from the most corrupt ('absolute monarchy', *pambasileia*) to the least corrupt ('democracy'). 'Democracy is the least degenerate form of power, as this kind of constitution is only marked by a slight deviation.' The degree of corruption determines if, and in what measure, an oligarchy (for example) is tolerable or intolerable – to the point of provoking its own ruin. 'Some oligarchies were abolished for having been too despotic . . . overcome by some discontented members of the government; as happened for those of Cnidus and Chios.'⁶

However the similarity of meaning must not make us lose sight of the distinction Aristotle draws between the tyrant and the despot. Although both exercise authority, he distinguishes their different modes of functioning. Aristotle explains that it is a misreading to think, as some people do, that the qualifications for a statesman (*politikon*), king (*basilikon*), householder (*oikonomikon*) and master (*despotikon*) are the same, and that they differ, not in kind, but only in the numbers of their subjects. So, it is commonly held that Aristotle designated the ruler of the few as a master; over more, the manager of a household; and over a still larger number, a statesman or king, as though he made no difference in kind between the rule of a great household and a small state. Equally, the distinction between the rule of a king and that of a statesman which is commonly read into Aristotle is that, when the government is personal, the ruler is a king; and when, according to the rules of the political science, the citizens rule and are ruled in turn, then he is called a statesman. These are, however, misconceptions (*Politics* I, 1.1. 1252a7–11; tr. B. Jowett).⁷ It is not the number of subjects which counts but the way by which power is exercised by the ruler. So, for Aristotle, tyranny and despotism are not interchangeable. Under a despotic regime, typical of Asian peoples, the ruler governs under the law and in accord with the subjects, whereas under a tyrannical regime, neither law nor consensus exist. In consequence, the criterion determining the distinction between despotism and tyranny is the violation of rights. In the centuries after Aristotle, theoreticians were always careful to maintain that distinction, accepting that it was based on other aspects (in particular, natural law) which Aristotle had not ignored, but which he had not explored.

Roman Thought: Cicero and Natural Law

The structures of the Roman *civitas* developed independently from, but, in some ways, parallel to, their Greek counterparts. If Greek vocabulary exercised a great influence on the formation of Roman technical terms, it did not go so far as to

substitute for ingrained Latin terminologies. That is as true for Roman judicial as for its political lexicography. Even the term *politikos*, Latinized later as *politicos*, and its derivations, did not enter classical Latin, nor did the term *despotes*, translated as *dominus*. On the other hand the Latinized word *tyrannus* became widely used towards the end of the Roman republican period. If we concentrate on Cicero we can see how he used three words to define the possessor of political power: *rex* (which generally meant a *bad* king); *dominus* (a concept in Roman law); and *tyrannus*, a Latinized word from the Greek. These terms are comparable, but they are not equivalent. Each has to be understood in its context. *Tyrannus* causes the least difficulty, because it is always negative and nearly always offensive. *Dominus* on the other hand is more complex, but also nearer in sense to the word 'despot'. In Roman civil law, the *dominus* exercised the *dominium*, that is to say he had full power over the serf or slave in the same way that the father of a family exercised the *munus* over his wife, children and other members of his family. Over the children he has *patria potestas*, whereas over the serf, slave or goods he exercises *dominica potestas*. It is when thinking of the almost absolute power of the *dominus* that Cicero attributes to him the characteristics of a tyrant, simply sliding the notion of private law into the realm of public law. In this field, the *dominus* is the person who imperils public liberty. Cicero, steeped as he was in Greek culture, considered the Romans nevertheless as being the exclusive possessors of freedom: 'other peoples can support slavery, but freedom is proper to the Roman people' he affirms in one of the *Philippics*.⁸ So the worst crime for a country is to imperil freedom. He who does so is a *dominus*, such as Tarquin the Superb, who is sometimes called *tyrannus* or *rex*, the more pejorative equivalent. However, the subtleties of Cicero's language cannot be reduced to an apparent synonymy of the three terms in question. They are not, as it might seem, interchangeable. The term *dominus*, for example, is equivalent for most part to the Greek term despot. The proof lies in *The Republic* (2. 26), where its careful translators have rendered the word *dominus* by despot:

You may here remark how the king sometimes degenerates into the despot (*de rege dominus extiterit*), and how, by the fault of a monarch, a form of government originally good, is abused to the worst of purposes. Here is a specimen of that despot over the people, whom the Greeks denominate a tyrant. For, according to them, a king is he who, like a father, consults the interests of his people, and who preserves those whom he is set over in the very best condition of life. This indeed is, as I have said, an excellent form of government, yet still inclined, and as it were, biased, to a pernicious abuse. For as soon as a king assumes an unjust and despotic power (*se inflexerit hic rex in dominatum iniustiore*), he instantly becomes a tyrant, than which there can be nothing baser, fouler – no imaginable animal can be more detestable to gods or men – for though in form a man, he surpasses the most savage monsters in infernal cruelty. (Tr. F. Barham)

Notice the gradation – already observed in Aristotle – of corruption, which becomes tyranny as it leans more and more towards an unjust despotism. Evidently, therefore, *dominus* cannot always be translated by 'despot'; it all depends on the context.

Cicero was, of course, the first important theoretician to evoke natural law as legitimizing tyrannicide against those who in a free state aspired to absolute power (according to the expressions: *dominationem adpetere, regnum occupare*). Among the three terms he used to define a bad government, *rex* can mean equally a good or a bad king: *dominus* qualifies the master as a despot or lord, not necessarily bad, despite the fact that it often signifies a pejorative title; and *tyrannus* is always negative and designates the worst government that can exist.

The Middle Ages: The Imperial Route of 'Despot'

Cicero did not specifically treat the difference between lord and tyrant, in the way Aristotle did for tyrant and despot. One has therefore to refer to the Greek philosopher to inform our comprehension of the distinction between these two terms and evaluate their evolution in the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, knowledge of Aristotle's *Politics* was not uniform or continuous through to the central Middle Ages (i.e. from c. 300 BC to c. 1300). Such a precious instrument for political analysis and the elaboration of judicial concepts was not used precisely during the formation of the most important social and economic organizations around the Mediterranean: that is to say, those of the Roman world from the Empire and the Byzantine world, including the Roman Catholic Church.

In that period, 'tyrant' was used to designate a head of state who was absolutely bad, the wicked king or perfidious sovereign who oppresses his people against all laws. From the time of Augustine of Hippo through to Isidore of Seville, from Alcuin of York to John of Salisbury, indeed until the 12th century, political thought was studied in relationship to the empire and the Church, and in terms of the states which were emerging in Europe. Whereas 'tyrant' continued to be used in theoretical treatises to describe the worst form of government, 'despot' came into its own since it was increasingly used as an honorific title by oriental sovereigns to designate the power of their own government.

In the Eastern Empire,⁹ the 'despot' was a title emperors attributed to themselves or conferred on their children, their parents or their designated heirs. It varied in use and over time, evolving in relation to how often and when it was used, whether in everyday parlance, in ceremonial circumstances, in official titles or on minted coins. The title 'king' was ill-appreciated in republican Rome, but it made its reappearance in texts and inscriptions in the 2nd century AD before regaining its everyday use in the 4th century. *Basileus* was a title theoretically exclusively reserved for Persian kings. It was only after the defeat by Eraclius in 629, that the title passed 'de jure' to the Byzantine emperors. 'De jure' needs qualification, however, because 'de facto' Justinian already, according to Procopius,¹⁰ liked to be called *basileus* and also 'despot' (*despotes*); his empress, no less exigent, also adopted the title (*despoina*). The following titles were admitted for Justinian's official protocols: Emperor (*praenomen*), Caesar Flavius Justinianus (*nomen*), Francisus Germanicus, Vandalicus, Pius Felix, Inclutus, Victor ac Triomphator semper

Augustus (*cognomina*). In everyday language, especially in the Orient, custom required that one address him as *dominus (kyrios)*, *despotes* as well as *basileus*. In the Eastern Empire, *basileus* was not considered the equivalent of *rex* but rather of emperor and that would remain so almost until 1453. This gives us a glimpse of the rise of the title 'despot' during the Middle Ages, a title as coveted as it was rich in historical reference back to the great era of the beginning of the Eastern Empire. Meanwhile, during the 13th century, the texts of Aristotle's *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* arrived in Europe, not just as Arab summaries¹¹ but in the original Greek, soon to be published in Latin translations.

Taking into account that the fact that 'despot' was a title adopted by some vassal princes of the Turkish Empire (Walachia, Serbia, Morea, Epirus) in the early modern period, western theoreticians who used Aristotle's concept of 'despot' (translated by *dominus*), knowing that it figured in the imperial and Ottoman nomenclature, created an amalgam between Aristotle's theory and Turkish practice. Perhaps they believed that the texts of the Greek philosophers would serve to understand the nature of these contemporary 'despots'. This error of historical appreciation was to divert, mislead and confuse the historical judgement of western thinkers through to at least the 17th century and beyond.

William of Ockham: 'Non tamen tyrannis proprie est despotia'

I am not seeking to marginalize the importance of Robert Grosseteste, Wilhelm von Moerbeke, Thomas Aquinas, Ptolemy of Lucca and Marsilius of Padua¹² in this discussion by simply concentrating on William of Ockham (c. 1290–1349).¹³ William was particularly scrupulous and attentive to political language and he retained Aristotle's multiple distinctions of rulership that reflected different political situations. Corruption occurred in a royal principedom which intentionally (*ad intentionem*) consecrated itself to the common good but which in fact (even if only slightly) lent towards favouring its own interests. To what degree? The quality of the tyrannical or despotic ruler depended upon the answer to that question since, even if the quality of the rulership respected the limits of royalty, it still had something of the tyrannical or despotic about it, and was somehow transformed 'in a manner of speaking into a mixture of despotic, tyrannical and royal principedom (*quodammodo mixtus ex principatu despotico tyrannico et regali*).¹⁴ So, according to Ockham, one can speak of a royal principedom when power is exercised by one person, not according to his will but under the protection of law and respecting the customs of each country to which he has sworn allegiance. Having established that such a royal principedom is distinct from despotism and from tyranny, the author can now define what separates the two kinds of government despite their similarities.

Whether a king governs according to his will or according to the law, if he primarily rules his non-consenting subjects in his own interests, he becomes a tyrant (*fit tyrannus*); if he

rules his consenting subjects in his own interests, he becomes, in the strict sense of the word, a despot (*fit proprie despotes*). Sometimes this principate is called a tyranny by Aristotle by reason of its similarity to the despotic form (*ad despotiam*), but tyranny is not properly speaking despotism (*non tamen tyrannis proprie est despotia; ibid*).

Unlike despotism, the particular characteristic of tyranny is the oppression exercised on non-consenting subjects against natural and divine law. Thus William understood the essential definition of tyranny, which could also be clearly distinguished from other oppressive forms of government, including despotism. How right McIlwain was to observe that this passage represents 'the fullest and clearest discussion of these important distinctions that I have found among the political writing of the fourteenth century'.¹⁵

An Anonymous Florentine and Nicolas Oresme

In accounting for these distinctions in the later Middle Ages, there is a much-neglected, anonymous text in the Florentine tradition of *defensor pacis*, published in 1966 by Carlo Cincin. It brings together the terminology of despotism, reflecting the vocabulary of Marsilius of Padua. The substantive 'despotism' is used in its three forms: 'dispocia', 'disposicia'¹⁶ and 'dispotise' ('ingiusta dispotise').¹⁷ The verbal form is 'dispotiser', similar to the French form; despot is defined by 'dispota',¹⁸ whilst the adjective is 'dispotiche' in the singular.¹⁹ These uncertainties of vocabulary show how difficult it was to translate words unknown in daily life.²⁰ The undertaking was even more arduous as the translator did not have access to the French translation of the works of Aristotle which was produced by a contemporary a little later.

It is from about 1370 that one can date Nicolas Oresme's (c. 1320–70)²¹ French translations (from the Latin) of the *Politics*, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and of the *Economics*. He introduced into French the neologisms 'despot', 'despotic' (and derivations), and commented independently on Aristotle's thought. Thus he clearly distinguishes despotism from tyranny: 'A princely despot is princely over the serfs, and they tolerate it because of their servile nature': the allusion he was making was to the people of Asia, who consent because they cannot remember being free. Tyranny, on the other hand, is recognizable when two conditions are present: 'one is when a prince governs to his own profit: the other is when he oppresses his subjects by force and violence and keeps them in servitude against their will'.²² Here again, albeit with less emphasis, William of Ockham's fundamental distinction once more emerges, since Oresme considered tyranny especially as a violation of natural law ('by force and by violence') and as a contempt for the consensus among subjects, whereas despotism, despite many flaws, is exempt from these two components.

First Renaissance: Leonardo Bruni's Choice

The most important turning point in the use of the word 'despot' in the West was undoubtedly that undertaken by 15th-century humanists. They did not find the term or its derivations in the classical Latin vocabulary of Cicero, Seneca and other recognized authorities on political, judicial and philosophical thought. Why then, they asked themselves, resort to this neologism (which sounded so wrong to their philologically critical ears), when in Latin there was a convenient translation to avoid the predicament? Aristotle's despot was none other than the *dominus*, the master of the house, who could dispose at will of the freedom and goods of the members of his family: wife, children and slaves. So the *principatus despoticus* exercised by oriental sovereigns, on the subject of whom Thomas Aquinas, Marsilia of Padua and William of Ockham had all written in Latin, was nothing if not a *dominatus*. This was surely the reasoning of Leonardo Bruni Aretino, who wanted to undertake a new, Latin translation of Aristotle's work, one worthy of a master of *studia humanitatis*.²³ He systematically translated 'despot' by *dominus* and the derivations by *dominatus*, *dominicus*.

The historian of political lexicography is bound to reflect on why the term 'despot' followed this route, when other terms from the same stable of classical Latin political vocabulary (e.g. *monarchia*, *democratia*, *oligarchia*, *oeconomia*, *monarchizare*) were all readily adopted by the humanists. Was it, as Richard Koebner ironically suggested, a question of euphony? Apart from philological or purist humanistic considerations, one hypothesis is that the dangerous advance of the Ottomans – who, by their conquest of Constantinople, had driven out the despots from the Eastern Empire and usurped their titles – had persuaded scholars to contaminate the theoretical terminology left by Aristotle in order to delineate those features they equated with Turkish administration. The hypothesis merits further investigation. However it may be, Bruni had made a singularly fortunate choice of translation.²⁴ His chosen term (*dominus*²⁵) was not new. It emphasized a solid scientific tradition, despite the fact that it could embrace other meanings than those of despot in a non-ambiguous way. This was the problem that Bruni would leave to later generations who, wishing to differentiate tyranny from despotism, would lose sight of the definitions of those among their predecessors who had made such an effort to distinguish them in their lexicography.

Bodin: The Legal Distinction Polished

In France, the publication of the translation of Oresme in 1489 failed to popularize the word despot and its derivations. In 1568, the elegant French translation of Aristotle's *Politics* by Loys le Roy referred to Bruni's Latin version, confirmed in the meantime by the renowned Latin edition by Lefèvre d'Étaples,²⁶ the glory of French humanism, which came off the press in Paris at the beginning of the 16th century. Le Roy rendered *dominus* by 'seigneur (lord)' and the adjective by

'seigneurial (lordly)'. *Despoteia*, which referred to the Latin expression *principatus despoticus* (Ockham) and in French to 'princely despotic' (Oresme), now became 'Seigneurial Empire' (Le Roy), a new and moreover problematic expression. It certainly was not a solution of convenience because not only the term but the concept also were destined to be confronted by the casuistry of French feudal law, which had struggled over the significations and the prerogatives of the words 'seigneur', 'censier', 'direct', 'dominant', 'feudal', 'foncier (land-owner)', 'lige et prochain', 'plus près du fond (nearer to the bottom)', 'subaltern', 'utile' and 'de Loix'.²⁷ The commentaries of Le Roy did not exclude the possibility of assimilating into contemporary reality the concepts of despotic Asian systems from the Ancient Greeks:

As these are barbarian kingdoms, howbeit legitimate and hereditary, nevertheless [they] retain a lordly empire such as in the Turkish state, the Muscovite and Prester John, formally the kingdom of Persia (according to Plato in the *Laws*), and Isocrates in his *Opera Panegyrica*.²⁸

This inevitable assimilation eventually became common usage and the subject of important writings and debates in the 18th century.²⁹ However, at their basis there was an error in the method of analysis which blurred the distinction between tyranny and despotism on the one hand, and absolutism and despotism on the other.

Le Roy's text was published at just the right moment for Jean Bodin (1537–96), who two years previously had published his *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* and who was preparing a masterly work on the legal and political thought of the Renaissance, *Les six livres de la République* published in 1576. He doubtless profited from the new French translation of the works of Aristotle. Having an exceptional knowledge of classical culture, Greek and Latin, in the Christian and Jewish world of the Middle Ages, Bodin treated the distinction with rare lucidity.³⁰ In the meantime, *despoteia* would be transformed into 'seigneurial monarchy', and, in the Latin version published in 1586, into *dominatus unius*. The author took pains in his definitions of 'royal monarchy', 'seigneurial monarchy' and 'tyrannical monarchy'. Here is how he understood the distinction between these last two:

Royal, or legitimate, monarchy is one in which the subject obeys the laws of the prince, the prince in his turn obeys the laws of God, and natural liberty and the natural right to property is secured to all. Despotic monarchy is one in which the prince is lord and master of both the possessions and the persons of his subjects by right of conquest in a just war; he governs his subjects as absolutely as the head of a household governs his slaves. Tyrannical monarchy is one in which the laws of nature are set at naught, free subjects oppressed as if they were slaves, and their property treated as if it belonged to the tyrant (*Commonwealth*, II. 2).³¹

Bodin defined the differences between the three kinds of monarchy by use of the notions of natural law and the right of conquest. Royalty is legitimate and legal when it rests on respect for natural and positive law, according the right of owner-

ship to the subjects. Despotism is a legitimate judicial condition, a situation resulting from conquest founded on a *justum bellum*. Tyranny, on the other hand, tramples on natural law and on the freedom of ownership of free subjects. So it is always illegitimate and illegal. Bodin wanted to underline the difference between despotism and tyranny for, since they were both forms of deviation from royal monarchy, their distinction would not be clear if one lost sight of another factor of a juridical, political and social nature: the consensus on the nature of rule among the ruled, legalized by the *jus gentium*. This is the reason why despotism and tyranny must not be confused:

Here, perhaps, someone will say, that seigneurial Monarchy is tyrannical, it being understood that it is directly against the law of nature, which retains people in their freedom and for the lordships their goods. To which I answer that it is in no way against the law of nature to make free men slaves and take the goods of others; but if the people consent that the goods which were acquired in a just battle should go to the victor, and all those vanquished should be slaves, one cannot say that a Monarchy thus established is tyrannical. (II. 2; p. 278)

If the conqueror in a just war departs in some way from natural law, he must be considered as a despot and not a tyrant. Again, and in a peremptory fashion, Bodin warns the reader against 'mixing' and 'confusing' the two political concepts (II. 3): 'if we mix and confuse the seigneurial state with the state of tyranny' (*ac dominatum cum tyrannide, confusa rerum ac verborum appellatione, misceamus*) we annul:

... the difference between right of an enemy in time of war and the thief, between the just prince and the brigand, between war justly denounced and unjust and violent force, which the ancient Romans called thievery and brigandage.³²

One might apply to Bodin what was once said of William of Ockham, namely, that the author of the *Commonwealth* takes us to a summit, perhaps even higher, of that political thought which marks the history of the development of the concepts of despotism and tyranny. According to current usage, Bodin theorized and exemplified, basing himself on the one hand on Aristotelian conceptualizations and on the other on concrete figures of despotism in his times, such as the princes of Asia and Ethiopia and, in Europe, of 'Tartary and Muscovy', without excluding the Emperor Charles V of Habsburg. So – although this risks upsetting historians of political thought – the text of the *Republic* and its Latin translation form the most rigorously scientific treatise of the 16th century on despotism. One must underline however that the substantive 'despot' and its derivations are absent from Bodin's French and Latin texts, although the concept it embodies is very much present.

The 17th Century: The Beginning of Misunderstanding

Bodin's intellectual precision is exceptional in 16th-century France. The rare appearances of the term 'despotic' at the end of the century are imprecise from a conceptual point of view and inevitably lead to an amalgam with the term

tyranny. Richard Koebner has listed some of them.³³ With typical British humour, he wryly notes that in England the term 'despotic' – translated at first by *misterlike* (*misterlike sway*) or *lordly* (*lordly monarchy*) – marks in the 17th century an outbreak of unusual conceptual precision. That 'renaissance' was achieved by the great masters of the century: Hobbes and Locke. These two authors, with contrasting objectives, meticulously analysed despotism and tyranny, conscientiously drawing upon the definitions of their predecessors.³⁴

Both welcomed Bodin's thesis according to which the origins of despotism are the consequences of a military conquest in a just war: a thesis which, in between, Grotius had made his own.³⁵ Locke devotes chapter 16 of his *Second Treatise of Government* to the right of conquest. His thoughts followed the comparative analysis of paternal, political and despotic rights set out in chapter 15. Locke denounced the derivations caused by an abusive use of words, seeing them as a manipulation of public opinion for contemporary political and religious purposes.³⁶ Indeed, modifying the sense of words as expressed in their sources leads to a confusion which meant, according to Locke, that it was impossible to understand the underlying concepts. He takes as his example the *great mistakes* inherent to such confusion (*confounding*) as concerns forms of government. However, the explanation of despotism given by Locke seems complex because it contains much more by way of implication (such as the notion of pact) even though it is clearly expressed: 'Despotic power is an absolute, arbitrary power one man has over another to take away his life whenever he pleases' (ch. 15, § 172). This is a strong definition. It confers on the despot the power of life and death over the subject. But, as Locke explains, only those captured in a just war are submitted to this despotic power. And when it comes to the idea of a pact (the author does not use the term *contract*),³⁷ despotic power can never be derived from an accord or convention (*compact*), as it corresponds to 'the state of war continued'. In his concise way, Locke devoted a chapter each to the right of conquest, usurpation, tyranny, and the right to resist. Tyranny is defined in diverse ways. The despot, odious as he is, can boast rights (*despotic right*),³⁸ but the tyrant tramples over all rights: 'Tyranny is the exercise of power beyond right, which nobody can have a right to' (ch. 18, § 199).

To this fundamental particularity is added other vices such as the personal interest of the tyrant in the administration, the management of public life, dictated by his own will in contempt of the law, in order to satisfy his ambition, avidity, or wish for vengeance. These grave flaws are not only the marks of a king turned tyrant (*ex parte exercitii*), but also of magistrates who arbitrarily administer public affairs. In a general way, to be absolutely beyond the law is the characteristic which best distinguishes the tyrant from all other forms of bad government, including despotism: 'Wherever law ends, tyranny begins if the law is transgressed to another's harm' (§ 202).

By these definitions Locke brings us to the zenith of the parabola describing the historical path of the distinction between despotism and tyranny. Thereafter, it is

decline all the way. At the end of the 17th century³⁹ the substantive *despotism* appears in France, established in 1704 by Pierre Bayle in the chapter 'On despotism' in his *Reply to the questions of a provincial*.⁴⁰ It is an important term, the birth of which marks the beginning of new reflections on the subject of government and its gradations: 'arbitrary', 'absolute', 'Turkish', 'tyrannical'. These were the last years of Louis XIV's reign, whose style of government was compared by many to those of Turkish and oriental governments. Concerning the qualifying adjective 'despotic', it was the subject of a hot debate over nearly half a century, from the Fronde onwards, when the adjective 'seigneurial' did not seem adequate to the criticism levelled against Mazarin's government and his successors.

For French authors, too, the term 'despotic' had polemical overtones. But neither the conscious attempt to restore the terminology timidly advanced in the 14th century by Oresme, nor the concern to re-establish the precise significance of the term in itself or its related synonyms, started from a precise understanding of the term tyranny. On the contrary, it seems that no one was particularly concerned to verify its precise significance on the basis of historical sources. The general tendency was to assimilate 'despotic' to 'tyrannical'. There is a good example of these trends in the works of Didier Hérauld (c. 1575–1649) professor of Greek at Sedan, then a lawyer at the Parlement of Paris, a recognized expert in Greek law.⁴¹ He affirms: 'Among the ancients it is the same thing to command despotically or tyrannically . . . Δεσποτικῶς ἄρχειν (*Despotikos archein*) apud eos idem est quod τυραννικῶς ἄρχειν (*tyrannikos archein*).'⁴² His misunderstanding is blatant. This lack of rigour appears in other authors, too, who sometimes offer a new interpretation or attribute new significance to terms that were already clarified, for example, that of 'royalty', now understood as the opposite of 'monarchy', with an explicit criticism of Bodin. As an anonymous author in the middle of the 17th century put it: 'the aim of *Royalty*, is commonly used; the aim of *Monarch*, is its particular aim'.⁴³ If one admits that the significance of terms varies through circumstantial evolution, one must take into account the first signs of the confusion which was to emerge in French political language from the middle of the 17th century. The confusion is more evident in the light of the relative clarity reached through the conceptual efforts of the preceding century. By the 18th century, there was an emerging amalgam between despotism and tyranny.

Stability of the Misunderstanding in the 18th Century: Montesquieu

In the 18th century, this conflation, with its accompanying loss of clarity, gained authority through the elaboration of political concepts by the great thinkers of the century of Enlightenment, especially Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau.

Montesquieu barely mentions tyranny in *L'esprit des lois*. The very notion evokes Ancient Greece for him in its 'intention to destitute government and above all democracy'.⁴⁴ Montesquieu distinguished two types of tyranny: 'one real,

which consists in violence of government, the other an opinion, which makes itself heard when governments set up mechanisms that shock the thought process of a nation' (*De l'esprit des lois*, XIX. 3). His short chapter 'Of tyranny' provides random thoughts, scattered ideas and opinions, but nothing by way of a scientific or historical definition. It is as though he were not really interested in understanding the historical phenomenon of tyranny nor, consequently, in using the political concept in a rigorous way. Yet he wrote a great deal about despotism which, in his system becomes a kind of government alongside that of a republic (whether democratic or aristocratic) or a monarchy. In his meticulous analysis of the nature of the forms of government and of the principle which motivates them, Montesquieu understood that it is fear alone that keeps despotism alive: that fear which for long had been conceived as the basic element of tyranny.⁴⁵ It is through terror that the prince represses any act of courage and smothers any idea of revolt. 'One cannot speak without a shiver about these monstrous governments', Montesquieu wrote regarding the Persia of his own day (III. 9). The effects of terror show themselves in the manner of obedience proper to the subjects of despotic government and even in the way of educating children and the people. This, in part, explains why Montesquieu was able to write in his *Pensées* (Thoughts) 'that monarchy degenerates into the despotism of a sole person; aristocracy into the despotism of many; democracy into the despotism of a people'.⁴⁶ Following a similar line of thought, he wrote that 'in the same way that rivers flow into the sea, monarchies will lose themselves in despotism' (*De l'esprit des Lois*, III. 17). Despotism was transformed into a general category which included tyranny, oligarchy and ochlocracy.

However, considered in the overall framework of his work, reflections about despotism occupy a large part of it. In comparison with Bodin's text of two centuries previously, the differences are striking: 1) by the 18th century, despotism had triumphed; 2) the distinction between tyranny and despotism had faded away, as though Montesquieu never fully distinguished the two concepts. It was certainly not a strong facet in his writings.

It is fascinating to study how Montesquieu, the irrefutable master of political and legal thought in modern times, bequeathed to future generations an important ambiguity and indistinctiveness that has been the cause of misunderstanding.⁴⁷ Thanks to him, 'despotism' gained significance, but 'tyranny' lost out, deprived, for example, of its link to doctrines of natural law such as those which were used in the 16th and 17th centuries by theoreticians of tyrannicide and the right of resistance. Tyrannicide – we should recall the conclusions of Bartolus and Bodin – is not legitimate except as regards a 'manifest' tyrant and not a despot. As a consequence, since the traditional theory of tyrannicide combined with the more modern theory of the right of resistance was temporarily relegated to the background, the revolutionaries of the 1780s/90s had to make great efforts to rethink and reappropriate them. But, at the crucial moment, these theoretical uncertainties were overtaken by the pressure of more practical demands: those of

being able to justify passing a death sentence upon Louis XVI, Saint-Just and Robespierre. To do this meant basing arguments on tyranny and tyrannicide in order to stir up the hatred of the Convention against the 'tyrant-king'.⁴⁸

Voltaire's Dilemma

From this analysis we can understand better why Voltaire was so violently critical of Montesquieu's description of despotism. Voltaire attributed to him some 'false relationships to Turkey and Persia', because of which, he argued, 'the abuses of these empires were purposefully mistaken for the laws of these empires'. That is to say:

... one dared to claim that the same despotism reigned in the vast Chinese empire ... That is how a hideous ghost was created to fight it; making a satyr of this despotic government which is only the right of brigands, we made it into a monarchy, which is that of fathers of families.⁴⁹

In brief, Voltaire rejected the idea that one could compare the government of Louis XVI with those of the East, to the point where he cast doubt upon the existence of despotism such as it was described by the author of *L'Esprit des Lois*: 'It is false to say such a government exists, and it seems to me false that it might exist'.⁵⁰ The 'Prince of the Enlightenment', albeit he eschewed doctrine and made a virtue of not having a systematic approach to matters of philosophy (shortcomings to some, benefits to others), understood that a certain indistinctiveness had befallen the term 'despotism'. He often used the notion and showed a certain imprecision when he defined it, precisely because he did not know how to distinguish it from tyranny:

I have a necessary observation to make here on the word *despotic* which I have used on occasion. I do not know why this term, which, in its original form, was only the expression of a weak and limited power of a small vassal of Constantinople, signifies today absolute and sometimes tyrannical power.⁵¹

Voltaire did not understand why there had been this change in meaning, and it hardly seemed appropriate to blame Montesquieu for it, as Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger explicitly did in his *Recherches sur les origines du despotisme oriental* (Research on the Origins of Oriental Despotism).⁵² Faced by the harsh criticisms of his own work, *Le siècle de Louis XIV* (The Century of Louis XIV), Voltaire hid behind attributing ignorance and contradiction to his contemporaries:

I do not wish to enter into such detail which would lead me too far; but I should say that I have heard that by Louis XIV's despotism was understood the too firm and sometimes too large use that he made of his legitimate power.⁵³

Despite having understood that despotism had legitimacy on its side, he did not deduce the necessary consequences from this fact, and remained perplexed. Despotism as absolutism; or despotism as tyranny? Whatever the conclusion we reach there is an ambiguity which the author lamented but which he could not

eradicate. Furthermore Voltaire's dilemma was a very modern one in the sense that it raises questions about the political thought of practising historians in the 21st century. Such semantic uncertainties do not seem to have attracted historical research, despite their evident doctrinal and historical importance.

Rousseau's Contradictions

More perhaps than Voltaire, and at least as much as Montesquieu, Rousseau left his mark on western political thought in a singular way, awakening in his followers an ineffable admiration. If we seek in his work a distinction between despotism and tyranny we find it in an important page of his *Contrat social* (Social Contract),⁵⁴ in which he seemed to clarify the term 'tyrant' by presenting as a personal opinion ('I would add') that royalty necessarily degenerates into tyranny. Tyranny was a type of degenerate monarchy. On the subject of tyranny, Rousseau recognized that:

This last word is ambiguous and demands an explanation. In a popular sense a Tyrant is a king who governs with violence and with no respect for laws and justice. The precise meaning of Tyrant is someone who takes upon himself royal authority without having the right to it. It is thus that the Greeks understood the word Tyrant: they gave it indifferently to good or bad princes whose authority was not legitimate. Thus *Tyrant* and *Usurper* are two perfectly synonymous words. (*Contrat social*, III. 10)

It is interesting that Rousseau, despite claiming to share the opinion of the Greeks and referring explicitly to some authors of classical antiquity (Aristotle and Cornelius Nepos), seems to follow the traditional medieval distinction (Bartolus de Sassoferrato) of *tyrannus ex exercitio* ('who governs with violence and without regard to laws and justice') and *tyrannus ex defectu tituli* ('someone who takes upon himself royal authority without the right'), which is proper to a usurper. I say 'seems' because, in his conclusion Rousseau does not draw the consequences of the distinction he has just made between 'a popular sense' and 'a precise meaning' of the term 'tyranny'. Instead, he makes 'tyrant' and 'usurper' converge into one. A reader who knew about the medieval and modern discussion about tyranny would say – today, as in Rousseau's time – that he was correct, but only partially so. How strange, then, that a Calvinist citizen of Geneva, proud of his citizenship there, and a connoisseur of its history, should have forgotten or misunderstood the teachings of its 16th-century masters on the subject of tyrannicide and the right of resistance. These included: 1) the anonymous *De jure magistratus in subditos* published in 1574, and which no one in the 18th century attributed to Théodore de Bèze, who based all his work on the distinction drawn by Bartolus between *tyrannus ex exercitio* and *tyrannus ex defectu tituli*; 2) the *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* of 1579, the best work of the century, and the other works on the same subject, well known in the 17th and 18th centuries. These Calvinist writings would have helped him unravel the distinctions that confronted him:

To give different names to different things, I call *Tyrant* the usurper of royal authority, and *Despot* the usurper of Sovereign power. The tyrant is he who seizes power against the law but governs according to the law; the Despot is he who puts himself above all law. Thus the Tyrant cannot be a Despot, but a Despot is always a Tyrant. (III. 10)

According to this affirmation, the tyrant and the despot are both usurpers, the first of the king's power, the second of the people's power. Although Rousseau chose an elegant expression, he does not show much conviction in his conceptualization of the definitions: 1) a few lines prior to this passage, he had affirmed that the tyrant, in the two cases mentioned ('in the popular way' and 'in the precise manner'), acts against the law, whereas now he says that the tyrant ends by governing according to the law; 2) less contradictory, but important, is the assimilation of the despot to the usurper. The consequence of this assimilation is that it sheds no light on the question. On the contrary, the author becomes more confused in the correlations that he establishes between the two types of usurper and the law. The tyrant who 'seizes power against the law but governs according to the law' ends by governing legally, in contrast to the despot, who governs with complete illegality. It is difficult to say where the author drew this interpretation from, since his opinion contrasts so completely with both classical and modern tradition, which up until then had proved to be coherent and clear when making the difference between tyranny and despotism, according to legitimacy and sometimes legality only to the latter. Moreover, Rousseau who was habitually condescending to his predecessors betrays an imprecision by identifying sometimes the tyrant, sometimes the despot, with the usurper.

These are the contradictions of a great thinker. It is an occasion to invite the reader to engage in an elementary exercise of Aristotelian logic, with its careful use of divisions and subdivisions: A, B, C, type, species, subspecies. The last quotation from Rousseau, incisive and peremptory, makes tyranny the species, of which despotism is a subspecies. If it is true that the first contains necessarily the second ('a Despot is always a Tyrant') and the second is a particular case of the first ('the Tyrant cannot be a Despot'), Rousseau neatly and symmetrically contradicts all that had been said on the subject by his predecessors from antiquity through to the 17th century. They had qualified tyranny as a degeneration of despotism, which was itself already a corrupt form of government. Putting it another way, if we start from royalty (A, type) as a correct form of government, and take into consideration the gradations of degeneration, we have first despotism (B, species) which, even though arbitrary, and derogating in a small measure from human law, is not in conflict with natural law; in the following degree, comes tyranny (C, subspecies), because, apart from being arbitrary as is despotism, it scorns all rights, natural, divine and human. To convince ourselves of Rousseau's contradiction, let us try to reverse the terms of his last affirmation: 'The Despot is able not to be a Tyrant, but the Tyrant is always a Despot.' Here is an affirmation that would have gained the approval of thinkers from Aristotle to Locke. However it is diametrically opposed to Rousseau's opinion. Following the

example of his contemporaries such as Montesquieu, he placed despotism at the extreme end of the degenerate forms of subspecies in order to designate the worst kind of government. In the perspective of longer-term developments one must conclude that, by reversing the terms and their respective definitions (i.e. by attributing to despotism that which belongs to tyranny and vice versa), these two authors made considerable efforts to give internal coherence to their thought. Without questioning that coherence, we should note that the systemic confusion detected by our analysis reveals a conceptual difficulty which requires underlining. On the one hand, it resulted in a progressive contamination of the future speculations of politicians and students of political thought; on the other, it has contributed to rendering almost unusable two key concepts of the western cultural heritage which proved useful and even indispensable in deciphering certain characteristics of repressive regimes.

In general, thanks to the authors I have analysed here amongst the most important masters of French Enlightenment, it seems evident that it is in their writings that we find the roots of the confusion, of the loss of clarity in the definitions of the concepts of tyranny and despotism, a confusion which would be enshrined by the authority of their philosophical works and those of their epigones. Their intellectual heirs include historians and philosophers, who, having studied the thoughts of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, admire them and follow their teaching without undertaking a critical analysis. But, as we have seen, some of the philosophers of the century of Enlightenment, despite being masters in numerous fields, failed precisely on the theme of despotism and tyranny. To study them in depth and to appreciate the true value of their teachings, the historian of thought must resurrect and keep in mind older sources, both medieval and modern.

'True Despotism' in 1770

Before leaving the 18th century, I must refer to an anonymous work published in 1770. This is both because of its relevance to this subject, and also because it does not seem to be sufficiently known by specialists.⁵⁵ Titled *Il vero dispotismo*, it came from the pen of Count Giuseppe Gorani (1740–1819).⁵⁶ Noble by birth, adventurer by nature, a prolific and original author who became implicated in the revolutionary torment, Gorani boldly confronted the theme of despotism. In doing so he interestingly deplored the contemporary confusion (as he saw it) between despotism and tyranny:

It seems to me that most authors who have treated politics are mistaken, and have confused *Despotism* with *Tyranny*, and sometimes even with simple *Monarchy*, for they have not correctly identified the principles and confuse the different natures.⁵⁷

If it is true that certain thinkers were mistaken when speaking of despot and monarch, one must recognize, says Gorani, that other authors were very meticulous and clearly established the differences, beginning with Plato and Zeno, and

ending up with the philosophers of today 'such as the illustrious Montesquieu, and many others before him'. Something very different had happened to the distinction between despotism and tyranny, which 'Montesquieu and other great men, speaking of despotism, understand nothing else but tyranny' (p. 18). Gorani's remarks strengthen the validity and the historicity of the argument proposed here. Moreover, if we follow him further, we can appreciate the conceptual error that he deplors and the definitions that he proposes:

If numerous writers are mistaken, and others have perfectly understood the difference between *Monarch* and *Despot*, all fall into error when they speak of *Despotism*. . . . All the Politicians and Philosophers describe *Despotism* as a form of government which destroys and tramples on all virtue, which breaks social order and links, and which produces nothing that is not vicious and bad. They confuse it with *Tyranny*, and make both things one and unique being. (p. 6)

By speaking clearly of 'error' and 'confusion' Gorani shows that he has conceptualized a problem which was already clear in his eyes. The perspicacity of this young author, fascinated by the France of the Enlightened, deserves recognition, especially as it comes just at the time when the error, which is at the base of the confusion, had become chronic. If we search for proof of this phenomenon, we find it in the work of his friend whom he admired immensely, the young Honoré Gabriel Riquet, count of Mirabeau. Published in 1775, five years after Gorani's book, *L'Essai sur le despotisme* (Essay on Despotism), it enjoyed a genuine success in both editions and reviews. Mirabeau does not seem to have learnt his lessons or (more generously) appreciated the force of Gorani's work as to the definitions in question. In the first page of his *Essai*, Mirabeau writes:

No one ignores the etymology of the word DESPOT [see note], a denomination used before for the holder of authority, which has become in our language the sign of tyranny and the awakening of terror. (*Essai sur le despotisme*, p. 1)

Note at the bottom of the page:

This word comes from the Greek *Δεσποτής* (*despotes*) and signifies master or lord. *Usurper*, *despot*, or *tyrant*, in modern use given to these words, was expressed in Greek by *Τύραννος* (*Tyrannos*).

Here is error affirmed as a truth in the most assertive way. What was his source? The resemblance with the last quotation of Rousseau that I have just analysed leaves us in little doubt. Apart from generously sharing the opinion of the 'eloquent citizen from Geneva', the young author does not hide – like most of his generation – his unconditional admiration for 'one of the greatest men of whom France can boast' (M. de Montesquieu). Mirabeau's is, nevertheless, a brilliant and enriching essay. Although the frequency of the word despotism is the greater in it, the terms despot and tyrant are used interchangeably in respect of the definition the author gave at the beginning. That is not the case for Gorani, who tries to maintain the difference between despotism and tyranny when he is at the

heart of the subject. He provides his own definitions, which are not lacking in originality:

Because I clearly distinguish between them, I separate *Despotism* from *Tyranny*. I could subdivide those complicated objects but, so as to be clearer, I limit myself to this simple and natural division. By *Despotism* I understand that will which acts alone, without consulting others, and which holds all power, legislative and executive. By virtue of its power of attraction, it absorbs and attracts all the vigour and the forceful ramifications of the Sovereign, of the Government and of the whole State, for from its motion depends the motion of the entire political apparatus. (*Il vero dispotismo*, pp. 6–7)

Here is not the place to follow Gorani's arguments further in their seductive and original detail. But his final remarks are of great interest for our purposes. On the last page of the first volume Gorani ends on a note of rare precision as to the distinction between tyranny and despotism:

Having deepened our understanding of the principles, deduced the immediate or close consequences, gathered together the strong points of diverse forms of government, and by a truly philosophical regard analyzed the customs and abuses of multiple legislations, having made an examination of the intrinsic nature of the *social contracts*, I shall describe for you the unavoidable result which follows:

Tyranny (improperly described as Despotism) is a violent state which contains in itself the mortal virus (*il germe mortifero*) of its own ruin. It makes the Tyrant tremble and the subjects groan. There is not in nature a more abominable Monster.

The Despotism of Virtue is sweet. It spreads its influence through the whole body of the State; it loves and is beloved; it commands without harshness (*senza impero*) and is obeyed without fear. No one is tempted to destroy it because everyone loves himself. The way of Tyranny is thorny and difficult, that of virtue open and easy. Who could hesitate over this choice? (pp. 223–4)

Who, indeed, could hesitate? Only those who had misunderstood this fundamental distinction. Without allowing himself to be diverted by the authority of authors who created conceptual confusion, and without referring explicitly to the old tradition, medieval and modern, Giuseppe Gorani nevertheless developed an original thesis on 'true despotism'. His work merits further detailed analysis in its contemporary context,⁵⁸ not least because his text – as he himself assures us – was read, corrected and approved by his master Cesare Beccaria.

So we can conclude that the misunderstandings, both conceptual and terminological, mourned by the authors of the later Middle Ages such as William of Ockham, and by those of modern times such as Bodin and Locke, and by those of the century of the Enlightenment such as Voltaire (in part) and Gorani (absolutely), as being a true 'error', represent one of the fundamental reasons, and indeed perhaps the most important, for the decay of the two terms in question in their most rigorous scientific use. It is a phenomenon that is present today both among specialists in political theory and practice, including those specializing in the manipulation of modern media of communication. The confusion has contributed to the impoverishment of our political language.

Notes

1. M. Turchetti (2001) *Tyrannie et tyrannicide de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, Collection 'Fondements de la Politique'.
2. Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Cariat, marquis de Condorcet (1847) 'Idées sur le despotisme, à l'usage de ceux qui prononcent ce mot sans l'entendre', in *Œuvres*, éd. A. Condorcet O'Connor and M.F. Aago, vol. 9, p. 164. Paris. Cf. Turchetti (n. 1), p. 694.
3. Cf. the items such as 'despot', 'despotism', 'tyrant', 'tyranny' and derivatives. (1989–) *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner. Oxford: OUP. (1961) *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, ed. Philip Babcock Gove. London: G. Bell & Sons. And in the best dictionaries of other languages.
4. Cf. R. Koebner (1951) 'Despot and Despotism: Vicissitudes of a Political Term', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institut* 14: 272–302. See M. Richter (1973–4) 'Despotism', in P.P. Wiener (ed.) *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons. M. Richter (1987) 'Absolutism, Despotism', in D. Miller (ed.) *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought*. Oxford: B. Blackwell. M. Richter (1971) 'Despotie, Despotismus', in J. Ritter, K. Gründer and G. Gabriel (eds) *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. Basel and Stuttgart: Schwabe. (1984) *Tyrannie, despotisme, dictature*, Colloque du 3 mars 1984. Paris: Université de Paris-Sorbonne. H. Mandt (1972–97) 'Tyrannis, Despotie', in O. Brunner, W. Conze and R. Koselleck (eds) *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta. J.-L. Labarrière (1998) 'Tyrannie et despotisme', in *Dictionnaire de philosophie politique*. Paris: PUF. D. Felice (ed.) (2001–2) *Il dispotismo: Genesi e sviluppo di un concetto filosofico-politico*, 2 vols. Naples: Liguori. M. Richter (2002) 'Le concept de despotisme et l'abus des mots', *Dix-huitième siècle* 34: 373–88. M. Richter (2005) 'A Family of Political Concepts: Tyranny, Despotism, Bonapartism, Caesarism, Dictatorship, 1750–1917', *European Journal of Political Theory* 4(3): 221–48. I am honoured by the detailed attention that this author pays to my book (n. 1). Since I cannot to answer him here, I answer him in another article. In general, one sees that specialists make interesting differences between despotism and tyranny, applying themselves to describe or resume the opinions of the authors who have been studied, opinions that are as numerous as approximate, with some notable exceptions. The result is that the reader, confronted with such variety, abandons the idea of seeking the correct definition, if one admits that there is such a thing. Indeed, it is very rare to find a specific and comparative analysis that confronts the concepts. For my part, so as to avoid an enumeration of the various opinions, I chose to privilege the criteria that make a clear and unambiguous distinction between the diverse definitions of the concepts. I have chosen a comparative and critical method, even if this means questioning authors recognized generally as being authorities on the matter.
5. Turchetti (n. 1), ch. 24, 'Despotisme et tyrannie'. Cf. C. Millon-Delsol (1985) *Essai sur le pouvoir occidental: Démocratie et despotisme dans l'antiquité*. Paris: PUF.
6. *Politics*, V. 5. 1306b2–3.
7. For a detailed presentation, see Turchetti (n. 1), pp. 85–95.
8. VI. 7. 19; cf. the same opinion of Aristotle about the barbarian people and the Greeks, in *Politics*, III. 15. 1285a18–23.
9. See L. Bréhier (1970) *Le monde byzantin*, vol. 2, *Les Institutions de l'empire byzantin*, pp. 41–8, 118–23. Paris: A. Michel.
10. Procopius of Caesarea, *Anecdota*, A, ch. 30, quoted by Bréhier (n. 9), p. 46, n. 255.
11. Cf. Turchetti (n. 1), p. 266, n.
12. *Ibid.* pp. 238–82.
13. *Ibid.* pp. 283–6.
14. (1995–6) *Dialogus de potestate papae et imperatoris*, pars III, tractatus I, lib. II, cap. 6, ed. J.

- Kilcullen. London: British Academy (Latin online, <http://www.humanities.mq.edu.au/Ockham/w3rdtx.html>, translation mine).
15. C.H. McIlwain (1932) *The Growth of Political Thought in the West*, p. 400. New York: Macmillan. (See Koebner [n. 4], p. 281.) McIlwain is conscious of the confusion introduced by modern authors in political terminology (especially in that which concerns the terms of absolutism, despotism, and tyranny). This is the reason why the historian of constitutionalism reproduces in appendix II, entitled 'Monarchy "absolute" and despotic, and Tyranny', two long extracts from Aristotle's *Politics*: the first (I. I. 2-3, 1252a) is followed by the Latin translation by Moerbecke and the commentary by St Thomas Aquinas, the second (I. 6-7, 1255b) is followed by Moerbecke's translation, the full commentary by William of Ockham, and by Bodin's definitions (*Commonwealth*, II, 2), that I shall analyse later.
 16. Marsilio da Padova (1966) *Defensor pacis, Il difenditore della pace e tranquillità, traslatato di francesco in fiorentino l'anno 1363*, Prima dizione, XVI, 15-16, pp. 96-7. Turin: Fondazione L. Einaudi.

Però che dispocia addiviene a 'ccolui che 'ddé principare e 'ssingnoreggiare politicamente, o d'inprudenza o 'ddi malizia, o dell'uno e dell'altro . . . E 'ccierto e' conviene che quella che così opposano otrrieno del primaio elletto, giassia che insieme colla sua succiessione la moltitudine de' suggiети sofferire dispocia.
 17. *Ibid.* p. 126.
 18. *Ibid.* pp. 44-5.

L'altra maniera è per la quale i monarci sengnoreggiano nella terra d'Asia, abbiendo la signoria de' loro predecessori per succiessione, secondo la legge tuttavia, al profitto du monarchies, cioè a 'ddire del prenze e sengnoreggiante, più che al comune semplicemente, siccome un disposta.
 19. *Ibid.* p. 113: 'altrimenti chatuno principante dispotiche sarebbe'.
 20. In contemporary debate they did not use the term *despoticus* or derivatives; cf. the fundamental treaties of the 14th century such as those of Bartolo of Sassoferrato, *De Guelfis et Gibellinis e De tyranno*, published c.1356. The author makes use of other terms even when he describes the household tyranny that is the typical 'despotism' according to Aristotle (1983) *De tyranno*, ch. 4, *Quarto quaero an in una domo possit esset tyrannus*, ed. D. Quaglioni, pp. 183-4. Florence: Olschki.
 21. Cf. Turchetti (n. 1), pp. 304-8.
 22. N. Oresme (1970) *Le Livre de Politiques d'Aristote*, ed. A. Douglas Menut, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, NS 60: 106 b-c, p. 146.
 23. (1473-4) *Ethica ad Nicomachum. Politica. Oeconomica*, tr. L. Brunus Aretinus. Valencia: L. Palmart. Bruni was suspicious of anything new:

Consuetudinis vero figurarumque loquendi, quibus optimi scriptores utuntur, nequaquam sit ignarus; quos imitetur et ipse scribens, fugiat et verborum et orationis novitatem, presertim ineptam et barbaram.
 - L. Bruni (1996) *De interpretatione recta*, in *Opere letterarie e politiche di L. Bruni*, ed. P. Viti, p. 158. Turin: U1ET.
 24. Among the exceptions see Denis Lambin (c.1516-72, professor of Greek at the Collège royal), who did translate the Aristotelian term *despotikon* sometimes with *despoticum*, sometimes with *herile*. Cf. the preamble of his edn, *Politics* (I. 1): 'si paucis praeesse atque imperare possit, esse despoticum, hoc est, ad herile imperium idoneum natura', in *Aristotelis opera omnia quae exstant, Graeca & Latine, veterum ac recentiorum interpretum*. Auctore Guillelmo Du Val, II, Lutetiae Parisiorum, Typis Regis, apud Societatem Graecorum Editionum, 1629, fol. 296, cfr. 298.
 25. The other form *erus* (less correct than *berus*) master, lord, and the adjective *erilis* will have a limited diffusion, but neither the honour of a debate, nor a place in the history of political concepts.
 26. Aristotle (1506) *Contenta, Politicorum libri Octo, Economicorum Duo, Hecatonimiarum Septem, Economiarum publ. Unus, Explanations Leonardi in economica Duo*. Commentarii Jacobi Fabri Stapulensis, Apud Parisios primaria superiorum operum editio typis absoluta prodijt ex officina Henrici Stephani erogione Schole decretorum.
 27. Cf. F. Ragueau (1969) *Glossaire du droit français*. Geneva: Slatkine; Paris, 1704.
 28. (1568) *Les politiques d'Aristote, esuelles est monstree la science de gouverner le genre humain en toutes especes d'estats publics, traduites de grec en françois, avec expositions prises des meilleures aucteurs, specialement d'Aristote mesme, & de Platon conferez ensemble, ou les occasions des matieres par eulx traictées s'offroyent, dont les observations & raisons sont elarcies & confirmées par innumérables exemples anciens & modernes*, par Loys le Roy, dict Regius, A Paris, Par Micel de Vascosan, p. 5, cf. Koebner (n. 4), p. 284. 'Preteian' designates the Priest John, the legendary head of the Ethiopians.
 29. Cf. Turchetti (n. 1), ch. 24.
 30. See M. Isnardi Parente (2001-2) 'Il significato di Tiranno nella Repubblica di Jean Bodin', in Felice (n. 4), vol. 1, pp. 127-44. On the subject of the difference that concerns us, the author arrives at the following conclusions. 'Tyranny 'è profondamente diversa dalla signoria dispotica non solo in quanto appartiene a un'altra sfera giuridica, ma in senso più radicale, in quanto è illegale nella sua essenza' (p. 128), 'la monarchia "seigneuriale", pur contravvenendo a uno di questi comandi, e a un comando primario e fondamentale, non solo è sempre da Bodin distinta dalla tirannide, ma, abbiam visto, considerata addirittura la più coerente a quella ch'è la immediata e primitiva natura dell'essere umano' (p. 134). It must be underlined that the specialists have not taken into account these clever observations that distinguish tyranny clearly from despotism.
 31. Bodin (1599) *Les six livres de la République*, s. I, p. 273. Lyon: G. Cartier. Cf. Turchetti (n. 1), pp. 452-60.
 32. The original quotations in French edn of 1599, p. 278, and Latin edn of 1620, pp. 301-2.
 33. Koebner (n. 4), pp. 286-7, 292ff.
 34. *Ibid.* pp. 288-92, cf. Turchetti (n. 1), pp. 593-609.
 35. Grotius (1625) *De jure belli ac pacis*, III, 7-8, cf. Turchetti (n. 1), pp. 563-9.
 36. See the magisterial treatment of Locke in his book, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book III, ch. 9, 'Of the Abuse of Words', and ch. 10, 'Of the Remedies of the forgoing Imperfections and Abuses'. (1975) Ed. P. H. Niddith, pp. 490-509. Oxford: Clarendon.
 37. Cf. Turchetti (n. 1), p. 604, n.
 38. Locke (1690) *The Second Treatise of Government*, XVI, § 196. (1976) Ed. T. P. Paerdon, p. 109. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

The short of the case in conquest is this: the conqueror, if he have a just cause, has a despotical right over the person of all that actually aided and concurred in the war against him, and a right to make up damage and cost out of their labour and estates, so he injure not the right of any other.
 39. 1698, according to the (1992) *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, vol. 1, p. 588. Paris: Le Robert.
 40. Koebner (n. 4), pp. 292-302. Unfortunately Koebner interrupted here his study without entering the 18th century.
 41. Cf. F. Laplanche (1986) *L'Écriture le sacré et l'histoire: Érudits et politiques protestants devant la bible en France au XVII^e siècle*, p. 815, n. 225. Amsterdam: Holland University Press.

42. *Recueil de maximes véritables et importantes pour l'institution du Roy contre la fausse et pernicieuse politique du cardinal Mazarin, prétendu sur-intendant de l'éducation de Sa Majesté. Avec deux Lettres [sic] apocryphes pour ledit Recueil contre l'extrait du S. N., avocat du Roy au Chastelet.* (Par Claude Joly) Paris, 1663 (first ed. 1652), p. 426, in reference to Aristotle, Politics, III. The citation is quoted by Koebner (n. 4), p. 294.
43. From *Le Raisonnable plaignif sur la dernière Déclaration du Roy*, 19 Aug. 1652, published by C. Moreau (1853) *Choix des Mazarinades*, vol. 2, p. 465. Paris: Société de l'Histoire de France.
44. We do not know whether the author knows and can allude to Greek notion, *katalysis tou demou*, dissolution of democracy (cf. Turchetti [n. 1], pp. 97–107), but he does not mention it.
45. See e.g. Seneca about a theme treated again by Calvin, Turchetti (n. 1), pp. 173 and 409–10.
46. Montesquieu, *Mes pensées*, no. 235. (1949–51) *Œuvres complètes*, éd. R. Caillois, vol. 2, p. 1851. Paris: Gallimard. By and large see Turchetti (n. 1), pp. 611–17, cf. R. Boesche (1990) 'Fearing Monarchs and Merchants: Montesquieu's Two Theories of Despotism', *Western Political Quarterly* 43(4): 741–61, now in chap. 5 of his (1996) *Theory of Tyranny from Plato to Arendt*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press. B. Maulini (2003) *Les parlements et le thème du despotisme: Montesquieu et l'idéologie parlementaire (1748–1788)*. Paris: Université Panthéon-Assas.
47. Turchetti (n. 1), p. 618.
48. *Ibid.* pp. 668–85.
49. Voltaire, *Supplément au Siècle de Louis XIV* (1753): (1830–40) *Œuvres*, éd. A.-J.-Q. Beuchot, vol. 20, p. 520. Paris: Didot.
50. Voltaire, *Pensées sur le gouvernement* (1752): (n. 49), vol. 39, p. 431, in reference to Montesquieu, V, 14 e VIII, 21. See Turchetti (n. 1), p. 623.
51. Voltaire (n. 49), vol. 20, p. 518. Cf. G. Maltagliati (1999) 'De Calas à Beccaria: le combat contre le "despotisme intermédiaire"', in *Pour en finir avec Voltaire*, ed. J. De Cock, pp. 53–102. Lyon: Fantasque. T. J. Hochstrasser (2000) 'Eighteenth-Century Despotism and the Physiocratic Concept of Legal Sovereignty', in *Souveränitätskonzeptionen: Beiträge zur politischen Wissenschaft* 119: 59–84.
52. Geneva, 1761, cf. Turchetti (n. 1), pp. 623–6. G. Cristiani in 'Teocrazia e dispotismo in Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger', in Felice (n. 4), vol. 1, pp. 257–80. Cf. T. Kaiser (2000) 'The Evil Empire? The Debate on Turkish Despotisms in Eighteenth-Century French Political Culture', *Journal of Modern History* (March): 3–34. Cf. S. Neaimi (2005) 'Un fantôme philosophique: le despotisme oriental', in *L'horloger du sérail*, pp. 155–66. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose (Beyoglu-Istanbul: Institut français d'études anatoliennes).
53. Voltaire (n. 49), vol. 20, p. 520.
54. Rousseau, *Contrat social*: (1964) *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and M. Raymond, p. 423. Paris: Gallimard.
55. For example, it was missed by the authors of the two volumes *Il dispotismo*: Felice (n. 4). These are a few advance conclusions of a work in progress. Cf. J. Barrell (2006) *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
56. See the article by E. Puccinelli in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*. Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia italiana. Also her edn of G. Gorani (1998) *Dalla Rivoluzione al volontario esilio, 1792–1811*, with intro. by C. Capra. Rome: Laterza.
57. (1770) *Il vero dispotismo*, vol. 1, p. 4, the italic is in the original text. London/Geneva (1769, according to Puccinelli).
58. Cf. my lecture (2005) 'Un aventurier italo-français: le comte Giuseppe Gorani et son livre, *Il vero Dispotismo* (Genève 1770)', 14 April, at the Société des Études Italiennes of Geneva.