

# Abdelwahab Elmessiri Memorial Lecture

Annual series of lectures, to honour the memory, scholarship and achievements of the late Egyptian thinker.



## The New Despotisms of the 21st Century

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# The New Despotisms of the 21st Century

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Prof John Keane

# The New Despotisms of the 21st Century: Imagining the end of democracy

*Synopsis: We are living in times marked by a quantum jump in anti-democratic ways of exercising power. In the first Dr Abdelwahab El-Messiri Memorial Lecture [The New Despotism of the 21st Century: Imagining the end of Democracy], John Keane will examine the growth of a new 21st-century type politics he calls the new despotism. He sketches a future world in which governments, backed by democratic rhetoric and election victories, massively expand their executive powers by means of economic nepotism, media controls, strangled judiciaries, dragnet surveillance and armed crackdowns on their opponents. Best developed in China but found in contexts otherwise as different as Egypt, Vietnam and Russia, the trend is having global effects and represents a serious long-term alternative to power-sharing democracy as we have known it in recent decades.*

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Ladies and gentlemen:

A new spectre is haunting these early years of the 21st-century: the spectre of despotism. Various powers and types of political regimes are entering into an unholy alliance, an unplanned arrangement that includes red princelings in China, Russian apparatchiks, strongmen in central Asia, oil industry magnates in Brunei, gold-hungry mine owners in South Africa ..... This alliance of despots is presently loose, and cluttered, but its effects are global and this means that despotism is most definitely a phenomenon entangled institutionally with so-called democracies as we know and experience them. These 21st Century Despotisms are not going away, are not a passing phenomenon they may well be on the rise, and it's all too easy to imagine that in the years and decades to come, they may turn out to be forms of power, despotic forms of power that will actually change the institutional dynamics of the global order, for example in the Asia and Pacific region. They have no precedent, and may well prove to have great resilience, staying power over a long cycle of time.

## **Authoritarianism?**

In speaking of the despotisms of the 21st-century, I'm aware that within the human sciences, and public life more generally I'm very much out of season rather out of step in using this conceptual language. The term 'despotism' sounds so old-fashioned, so antiquated, so time-out-of-mind. That's because, during recent decades, most scholars, journalists and pundits prefer the fashion of speaking of 'authoritarianism' and 'authoritarian regimes'. Take the case of China, where the booming business of China watching and China assessment has produced an assortment of glib orthodoxies, none more potent than the conclusion that the political system of China is 'authoritarian'. For example the American businessman James McGregor speaks of China as a 'one-of-a-kind system of authoritarian capitalism that is in danger of terminating itself and taking the world down with it.'<sup>1</sup> Or to take another instance Surprisingly similar language is used, for quite different purposes, by the darling of the hard Left, the Bolshevik clown Slavoj Žižek, who insists that the virus of 'authoritarian capitalism is slowly but surely spreading around the globe,

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nowhere more so than China'. Žižek questions the claim that 'political democracy' is 'the "natural" political accompaniment of capitalism' by posing a provocative question: 'What if China's authoritarian capitalism is not a stop on the road to further democratization, but the end state toward which the rest of the world is headed?'<sup>2</sup>

What these contrasting interpretations [of China] have in common is their deep attachment to the nebulous notion of authoritarianism and the belief that an 'authoritarian regime' is the opposite of American-style 'democracy'. The claim that 'authoritarian' China is fundamentally at odds with American-style 'democracy' has a notable pedigree (traceable to a classic essay on the subject by Samuel Huntington<sup>3</sup>), but in the comments that follow, I want to question this key term, authoritarianism and the appropriateness of this term. I would like to encourage you to nurture your own sense of wonder about the myriad dramatic and contradictory and novel things that are happening in the world of arbitrary power. My arguments caution against closed minds, along the way inviting you to admit uncertainties, to explore your own ignorance, and mine too!, above all to see that contemporary despotisms are no simple or straightforward actuality, but instead a cauldron of contradictions, a kaleidoscope of confusing and conflicting trends, a 'reality' which ought to make us feel, in matters of observation, the truth of the common saying that in these times all of us rather resemble the blind person sizing up different parts of an elephant that cannot be summarised in simple terms.

So how should we proceed? It may seem strange, or fatuous, to begin by saying that understanding the new 21st-century despotisms, and the threats they pose to monetary democracy, is for me a state of mind, a way of using words, which really count when analysing these despotisms. Language matters when analysing, probing and poking power, which is why I reject the prevailing orthodox language of authoritarianism. Those commentators and critics who suppose that 'authoritarian' regimes like Russia or China or Saudi Arabia are polities tottering through a transition towards, or at odds with, American-style

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'liberal democracy', itself the normative standard by which despotism should be adjudged, are mistaken on normative and strategic grounds. Despotisms are not proto liberal democracies. My objection is not that this way of describing things destroys the precious meaning and rich political significance of the root word 'authority' (which it does). My refusal of the term 'authoritarianism' is not primarily grounded in normative objections, for instance the presumption that American-style 'liberal democracy' is the highest standard by which these despotisms are to be measured, and judged. In what follows I instead show that when used as a synonym for haughty power, the term 'authoritarianism' wildly underestimates the kaleidoscopic quality of the new despotisms, above all their 'proto-democratic' techniques of rule of people struggling to live their lives, often under difficult conditions. In sum: the grip of phrases such as 'authoritarianism', 'authoritarian rule' and 'authoritarian capitalism' needs to be broken, arguably because their popularity stems from their imprecision, hence from their malleability in the hands of a wide range of scholars, journalists, politicians and pundits, all of whom like to portray regimes such as China, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia as 'authoritarian regimes', usually to suit their own undeclared scholarly and political standpoints, which all too often suppose without justification that 'liberal democracies' are the highest standards for judging these regimes.

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## Despotism

So I return to the concept of despotism. It's a concept with an astonishing history. It has its roots in ancient Greece, where the word *despotes* referred to the legitimate, presumed-to-be benevolent rule of a father over his wife and children and slaves within the household, the word survived into modern times, revived with gusto in modern Europe. Under modern conditions, it had TWO overlapping phases in the revival:

In the first phase the term despotism was used to differentiate Christian Europe from powers to the East. Despotism was a term of abuse, a key word in the European imaginary to castigate the East, a concept that functioned as the heir to the Christian disparagement of the world of Islam. Ottoman Turkey was in the sight of those who used the term despotism, it was the perfect embodiment of the hypocrisy, licentiousness and baseness of despotism: despotism was the inversion and subversion of natural law; decrees of the sultan ruler were based on arbitrary will, not reason; property belonged not to individuals, but to the sultan; nobility not being hereditary, the natural order of ranks was routinely violated; women subverted the 'just' rule of men; darker races subverted the more 'natural' rule of whites; widespread ignorance resulted from the state ban on printing presses; currency, constantly debased, was worthless; rampant homosexuality meant a declining population. The whole political order centred on the sultan's seraglio, a space of unimaginable luxury.

Phase two in the modern reception of the category despotism is more interesting. Because sometime during the 18th century in particular, the word despotism underwent a second change of meaning, and function. The 'phantom of despotism' (18th-century writer Anquetil-Duperron) became a contagion, it was the subject of intense debate, and above all because there were many scholars and writers who said that the phenomenon despotism was a European problem. That is to say it may have had roots in the East but it was a virus that was spreading in the West. European monarchies were beginning to resemble despotisms elsewhere, for instance in their efforts to increase



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their tax base, suppress religious minorities and regulate the organs of public opinion that protested against arbitrary power even to win the consent of those they subjugated. Montesquieu's celebrated formulation of a theory of despotism proved to be a vital catalyst in the mood swing that happened. It was even said that despotism was spreading like a virus through the tissues of daily life (Paine, Rights of Man, part 1). During this second phase, the term becomes an aggressive political term; in spite of its intended meaning, it turns revolutionary. There was much talk of the 'monster' of despotism. There was fear that despotism would bring about an end to European freedoms from within Europe itself. It was a certain edification of the category, of the horribleness of a future without freedoms, a future governed by arbitrary power. So the category became a deadly weapon in resistance to arbitrary power. It had the quality of a meme, that is the figure of a despot. The trend was evident on many fronts, for instance the figure of the despot featured during the revolt of the American colonists against the British empire; (Tom Paine?) and (as Foucault pointed out in his lecture of 29 January 1975) it proved to be a powerful 'political monster' of the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup> An originally pejorative aristocratic term prevailed, so that, as Melvin Richter has noted, 'every group involved in French oppositional politics ... applied it to any and all alleged abuses in every domain'.<sup>5</sup> Talk of despotism and despots spread into everyday life; it even had disruptive effects in relations between men and women. Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John Adams, asking him to 'remember the ladies in the new code of laws'. 'Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands', she wrote (March 31, 1776). Adams replied (April 14, 1776) that 'we know better than to repeal our masculine systems' because, he argued, everybody knows that women rule men, so that changing laws in favour of women would 'completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat'.

Despotism of the petticoat! The language of despotism lived on after the revolutionary episodes of the 18th century: for example, Scotsman James Mill argued that despotism was a 'semi-barbarous' form of government that exists in all nations in their

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formative stages, rather than an impossible regime imaginable only in exotic Asia. In Mill's work despotism represents the origins of government in a time when desire and the imagination are unrestrained by knowledge and discipline.<sup>6</sup> But for a variety of reasons that I cannot here explore - its disappearance has everything to do with the coming of democracy in its European heartlands - the concept gradually faded from view, to become a 'dead' concept of the political thought of yesteryear.

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## Why Despotism?

So why now try to revive a term that has such a chequered history, and that seemingly belongs to a bygone era?

There are THREE reasons, corresponding to the 3 types of usage of any concept.

**First**, in the way I am using it here tonight, the concept has a normative sting in its tail, in an unusual sense. It is not a 'liberal' or 'Anglo-American' or straightforwardly 'Western' term. It rather highlights the problem of arbitrary power. It is a foghorn, an early warning signal – a power monitoring concept. The philosophers might say it is a counterfactual thought experiment: to understand the significance of something, power-sharing democracy for instance, try to imagine its absence and see what changes in our understanding of that same thing. Despotism, in other words, is a pre-figuration of where arbitrary power could eventually lead us. It is a warning of what might be lost if ....

**Second**: despotism has a strategic value in that it raises critical questions about how to deal with forms of power that have a strange but threatening architecture. If I call Yanukovich (?) or Muammar Gaddafi or Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi a despot, the language is strong, and intended to be so. The term is what the Germans would call a *Kampfbegriff*, a concept designed to cause political trouble by raising questions about power. Consider the close-to-home case of the emerging Egyptian despotism: to call this regime, which terrorises and takes the lives of its citizens by its proper name is to cast grave doubts on the credibility of those (Tony Blair's ITN interview, 9 July 2013) who claim that because Egypt was 'sliding into total chaos' military intervention was necessary and a vital condition of moving to 'democratic elections'. 'You map a path back out to democratic elections', Blair said, 'and have independent observers of those elections so that the types of debates as there were around the previous election don't take place'. A few weeks ago (in a London speech in April 2014), Blair repeated himself, this time appealing to Western leaders to support the Egyptian regime, and to forge a new rapprochement with Putin's Russia for the sake of forging an

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alliance to fight against 'radical Islam'. So, to say that Tony Blair is here defending despotism is not just a re-description of his words; rather than using euphemisms such 'reasonable opinions', or 'realistic', it is to do what almost certainly Professor el-Messiri would have done, to call things by their proper name, so raising practical strategic questions about how best in practice to break the tightening grip of the Egyptian despotism.

The **third** reason is least obvious: especially during the 18th century, as we have seen, the concept of despotism spotlighted a strange paradox that remains important until this day: those who exercise arbitrary power over others can develop the arts of 'democratically' ruling them using mechanisms that have the effect of interpolating subjects who in turn allow themselves to give their 'consent', upon which the despotism happily nourishes itself. To put it crudely, despotism has democratic qualities and that should disturb us. This point, that despotism cultivates popular support, that it manages to construct something like a working 'silent contract' with its subjects, was noted during the early- to mid-18th century, especially among aristocrats (the faction led by Fénelon and Montesquieu) who feared the possibility of a durable alliance of the king and the people. Tocqueville was radically to extend this idea, in his famous 1840 discussion of 'What Type of Despotism Democratic Nations have to Fear?' 'I think the type of oppression threatening democratic peoples is unlike anything ever known', he wrote. He characterised it as a new form of popular domination: an impersonal centralised power, at once benevolent, mild and all-embracing, a disciplinary power that treats its citizens as subjects, wins their support and robs them of their wish to participate in government or take an interest in the common good. As we shall soon see, this insight has great relevance three centuries later.

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## The New Despotisms

My attempt to clarify the meaning and possible usages of the key term now to be used makes it clear that the concept of despotism has a history; its meaning has varied through time and space, which provides the licence for asking the fundamental question: is it a useful concept for our times and, supposing it is, what exactly defines the new despotisms of the 21st-century? What are the secrets of their success? What are their organising principles and why is it that in practice they show signs of long-term durability? Are despotisms fated to play a leading role in our political lives in the coming years of the 21st century?

One way of providing answers to these tough and testing questions is to imagine a Tocqueville-style journey into the Asia and Pacific region, broadly defined to include the geographic space stretching from Turkey, the Gulf States and Iran in the west through to the central Asian republics, China and Japan, Indonesia and Australia and New Zealand in the Far East. It is well-known that this region contains the bulk of the world's population; in the current Atlantic crisis, it has out-invested, out-produced and out-exported the rest of the world. The world's future is currently being forged there. It is the new geo-political centre of gravity of our planet; it is also the heartland of the new despotisms, which are proving to be powerful actors in the region. I include under this category regimes such as Iran; Saudi Arabia; Russia; the UAE; Turkmenistan; China and Brunei. Note that these despotisms are members of various regional bodies - despotism should not be thought of simply as a type of territorial state - and that they radiate their effects well beyond their borders. Despotism is a phenomenon with global potential.

But what do despotic regimes have in common? What follows is an account of a more or less convergent set of trends summarised through the use of despotism as an ideal type...by which I mean that the trends which I am going to describe to you to analyse and to reflect upon aren't to be found in their pure form in the face of this earth, there is no model extant despotism. In a way I am using it as a dystopia, but I do put to you that there are regimes that

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embody some or all of the following eight qualities.

### GUANXI (PATRON-CLIENT) STATES

First I want to begin with the **first** feature of these despotisms. I call this Guanxi, the Chinese term patron client states. Those of you who think and there are many social scientists who have in recent decades that clientelism is a relic of the past, but in fact it is making a comeback. Contemporary despotisms comprise webs of connections that run from top to bottom of the structures of power. They are special forms of organised clientelism. Goods, services and especially money are exchanged for political support of the nested power arrangements that make up the overall system. Despotism naturally sustains corruption, and corruption nurtures despotism. Sometimes it involves paying off everyone who matters: a demi-monde of journalists, bureaucrats, legislators, judges, opinion pollsters, celebrities and businesspeople. It is top-down, vertically organised power in action structured by asymmetric relations between patrons and clients. The motto is – I give you this, you take that – flourishes, to the perceived advantage of all parties. Guanxi produces selectivity in the access to key resources, whether they be schooling and reputation, jobs or money, factories or guns. Those with access, the patrons, and the myriad of sub-patrons and brokers depend upon the subordination and dependence of clients. It is often assumed that clientelism is a vestige of political underdevelopment, a form of corruption, and that political modernization will reduce or end it. But the despotisms of the 21st century show otherwise: they highlight the persistence of clientelism and the mostly invisible systems of patronage associated with it.<sup>7</sup>

### PLUTOCRACY

**Second:** This term is making a comeback partly because of people like the French economist Thomas Piketty. The despotisms of our time are forms of governing power deeply dependent upon concentrations of capital. They follow Deng Xiaoping's first principle: 'Let some people get rich first'. Vast fortunes are made. Within these systems markets are hardly 'free'. Wealth and income patterns are highly skewed. Daniel Kimmage has called the present Russian regime a 'kerdocracy', a form

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of rule based on the desire for material gain.<sup>8</sup> That captures the point, symbolised in the unfolding Turkish mine catastrophe by media revelations of a dark underbelly of the Erdogan government, cosy and corrupt links between government officials and business tycoons, such as Alp Gurkan, CEO of the Soma Holding Company, a pro-AKP businessman who has boasted publicly of lowering his operating costs, a coal tycoon linked directly to the AKP's election time tactic of handing out free coal to voters, a man who admitted in the past few days that he had not visited the Soma mine since the accident, nor for 3 years...

The case of Gurkan shows how the profoundly corrupted elites of despotism care first and foremost for manipulating the machinery of the state to serve their private business interests. They run a 'wealth protection racket'. They are hooked on lavish dinners, carefully vetted marriages and access to celebrities, champagne, luxury holidays in secluded locations. Intellectuals who favour the democratic principle that arbitrary power is illegitimate and dangerous are considered a bore. The struggling poor are of little or no interest to them, they'll say privately. True, there is much big talk from the top. Despotisms come clothed in ideologies: of national interest and national solidarity; law and order and protection from 'foreign enemies'; the creation of a new political order through revolution; divine inspiration and allusions of climbing Jacob's ladder to heaven; talk of anti-imperialism or ethnic mobilisation; and displays of benevolence. In China, there are key phrases such as 'socialism', 'harmonious society', 'ancient Chinese civilisation' and the 'China dream', plus lots of talk of the 'people' and 'democracy'. But none of this is the reality. The reality is that these are plutocratic regimes.

## MIDDLE CLASSES

**Third:** the most stable despotisms are those that enjoy the support of the middle class. The new despotisms promote embourgeoisement, but the middle classes that result are quite quietly comfortable with despotism. Concentrated in interconnected cities such as Guangzhou, Nanchang, Singapore, Bandar Seri Begawan, Moscow, Budapest, Ho Chi Minh City, Riyadh, middle class chains of interdependence are heavily

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concentrated in the Asia and Pacific region. A 2010 OECD report predicts that the size of the global middle class will increase from 1.8 billion people to 3.2 billion by 2020 and to 4.9 billion by 2030. Almost all the growth (85%) is expected to come from the Asia and Pacific region; the same pattern is expected in the growth of purchasing power of the middle class (80% in our region). The report foresees a steep increase in Asian demand at the expense of US consumer demand: In 2000, Asia (excluding Japan) only accounted for 10 per cent of the global middle class spending. By 2040, this could reach 40 per cent, and it could continue to rise to almost 60 per cent in the long-term.'

What is interesting is that these expanding middle classes are politically promiscuous. Writing in the 19th century, the most astute early analyst of democracy Alexis de Tocqueville had good reason to fear the advent of a peculiarly modern form of despotism backed by a bourgeoisie and its selfish individualism and live-for-today materialism, a class (as he put it) 'constantly circling for petty pleasures', a stratum of so-called citizens willing to embrace an 'immense protective power' that treats its subjects as 'perpetual children', as a 'flock of timid animals' in need of a shepherd. One lesson of the despotisms of our time is that (cf Aristotle, Barrington Moore Jr, Lipset, Fukuyama) the middle class have no automatic affinity with power-sharing democracy. In more than a few cases, in different parts of the world, especially when the poor grow uppity, the middle classes display symptoms of what might be called political neurasthenia: lassitude, fatigue, headaches and general irritability about disorder. In oil-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia, Brunei, Kuwait and the UAE, the middle classes, guided by fear and greed and professional and family honour and respectability, seem happy to be co-opted or kidnapped by state rulers, willing to be bought off with lavish services and cash payments and invisible benefits. That's true for Russia; and it may prove to be the case in China, where one of the great political questions of our age is whether the expanding middle classes will opt for regime stability by way of a 'decentralized predatory state' (Minxin Pei) that ensures they can cash in on the boom by getting rich as quickly as possible, in accordance with the Deng Xiaoping principle of self-enrichment.



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## PERIODIC ELECTIONS

There is a **fourth** feature of 21st-century despotisms worth noting: their reliance upon periodic elections, to the point where they come to resemble psephocracies. This is a desire and almost a kind of fetish to prove that you actually have legitimacy in the eyes of the people whom you dominate. Why does the arch-despot Bashar al-Assad announce the staging of a presidential election (scheduled for June 3rd)? Is it because (as the western-backed National Coalition opposition group thinks) because he lives in a 'state of separation from reality, a state of denial'? No, or not necessarily. Among the strange and distinctive qualities of despotism is its knack of cultivating popular legitimacy. Elections are one way of doing this. Despotisms are forms of psephocracy. From Belarus to Brunei, Azerbaijan to Kuala Lumpur, despotisms embrace the institutional facades of electoral democracy. Previous anti-democratic regimes (e.g. apartheid in South Africa) utilised elections, but the despotisms of our time do so differently, without precedent: they universalise the franchise (except for women in Brunei, Saudi Arabia, UAE<sup>9</sup>); offer (some) candidates the chance of higher office; subject the head of government to electoral confirmation; and allow a measure of multi-party competition. Despotisms also bring to perfection the dark arts of manipulation: the exclusion of candidates considered undesirable; sensational media events; vote buying and voter intimidation; gerrymandering; alteration of electoral lists; mis-counting and disappearance of ballots. Despotisms do all this for a variety of clever reasons; they are not just cynical exercises in propaganda-massaged plebiscites. Elections are useful instruments of despotism. They enable dissenters in the governing hierarchy some room for manoeuvre; electoral contests can offer low-cost exit options for discontented regime politicians. Elections create opportunities to distribute patronage, to spot new talent (potential accomplices of power), to identify opponents (they serve as early warning detectors of disaffection), to settle disputes. They may also have the effect of reinforcing legitimacy of the 'sultans' who rule from the saddles of high power. And they often serve to place opposition parties in a quandary: their almost certain loss means they suffer demoralisation and demobilisation. Not to be overlooked is the fact that the razzamatazz of elections can double

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as an awesome celebration of the mighty incontestable power of the regime – and a chance for everyone to behave as if they believe in the regime, through an ‘election contract’.

Staging elections can of course be risky. When despotic rulers hold elections they expect to win. But things can go wrong (as in 2009 in Iran). Hence the resort to ‘election stealing’ and, failing all else, the last word, in a hail of truncheons and bullets, goes to the police and army. The exercise of electoral democracy (to paraphrase Oscar Wilde) then comes to mean the bludgeoning of the people by the rulers of the people for the claimed good of the people.

## THE SOVEREIGN PEOPLE

Speaking of the people: a **fifth** striking feature of the despotisms of our time is the way officials from top to bottom of the political system regularly deploy the rhetoric of democracy and refer constantly to the presumed source of sovereign authority, ‘the people’. The cleverest despots know that though it’s important to have the secret police and censors on their side, they must acknowledge the fundamental principle (as Hannah Arendt put it) that it is ‘people’s support that lends power to the institutions of a country’.<sup>10</sup> Using means that have a strongly ‘democratic’ feel, the new despots try to nurture their own public authority: the unquestioning recognition by millions of people that obedience to their dictates is right and proper, and that all the institutions of the polity are the materialisation of their collective power.

Within 21st-century despotisms, that is to say, it is as if there is a silent or unwritten or tacit contract (more or less) between the ruling authorities and their subject population. ‘We rule and deliver you things in exchange for your loyalty to us’. These are not fascist regimes in the earlier 20th century sense. The people are expected to be dutiful, and to see that politics is not their business.<sup>11</sup> Virtually everything that is done (for instance) by the CCP rulers is done in their name. The mín are part of the prevailing wen ming, even when the cross-referencing borders on the hypocritical, the comical, or the tragic, as during early July 2013, with the approach of the fourth anniversary of public disturbances in the far western

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province of Xinjiang, when a form of martial law was imposed in the name of the people, or what officials called a ‘people’s war’. Yu Hua’s *China in Ten Words* notes that there isn’t another expression in the modern Chinese language that is such an anomaly, in that ‘the people’ are ‘ubiquitous yet somehow invisible.’ That’s an important point: despotisms thrive on representations of the people as a living phantom. They are (in the imaginary of despotism) both being and non-being, of supreme political importance and of no importance at all.

## THE PERMANENT CAMPAIGN

**Sixth:** the new despotisms, just like democracies elsewhere in the world, show signs of embracing the tactic of permanent campaigning that feels ‘open’, ‘consensual’ and ‘for the people’. Despots learn that diction and decor, manners and charm are vital ingredients of successful politics. Their mode of rule embraces the aesthetics of the permanent campaign. They step out from behind closed doors, and go walking among the people. As if unscripted, they appear in unusual locales. There they pause to breathe the local atmosphere, to establish themselves as the guardians of the political order, to measure the loyalty of their supporters, to charm cynics or win over the suspicious. The appearance is a way of walking through a treacherous political terrain. It posits the common touch. It is designed to divine support among an imagined public, and to gauge existing levels of support. The whole exercise has a Walt Whitman feel about it: it is as if the public appearance is a celebration of the political community in family situations, among friends, at work places and in public squares, amidst buildings that symbolise a republic that is founded on the common people.

Think of Fujimori’s Peru, where the leader constantly played the role of ‘man of the people’, offering up simple, direct and optimistic messages, promising a *cambio de rumbo* (a change of course), dressed in a poncho, riding a bicycle, driving tractors (dubbed *Fuji-mobiles*) and speaking to audiences in down-home ungrammatical Spanish. A democracy with style (*democracia con estilo*). ‘The people have learned a lot’, he once said in a much-quoted interview. ‘They have said: Enough of this kind

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of democracy. We want democracy that is more efficient, that resolves our problems. Democracy is the will of the people – good administration, honesty, results. They don't want speeches, or to be deceived by images.'

There are signs that the aesthetics of the permanent campaign is now being self-consciously practised in all fields by top-level CCP leadership. Xi Jinping shows the common touch by making an appearance (in early 2014) in a Beijing bun shop. His earlier New Year address was filmed with him at a desk featuring red encrypted telephones and books on the wall and humanising family photos, including one of a younger Mr. Xi pushing his late father, Xi Zhongxun (a communist revolutionary purged by Mao Zedong and later rehabilitated), in a wheelchair. Xi's good family man cameo and bun shop outing seem to be part of a growing trend, in which high-ranking officials engage in 'showboating'. Wu Tianjun, Party chief of the Henan provincial capital Zhengzhou, is filmed travelling on a metro train after he 'incidentally encountered' reporters from Zhengzhou Television, who then broadcast a long report on its evening news programme. Following widespread ridicule on the Internet, an unnamed official of Zhengzhou city committee speaks to the People's Daily to confirm that the metro journey was indeed an impromptu happening. Beijing's police chief and deputy Public Security minister, Fu Zhenghua, is meanwhile photographed mingling among shoppers near Tiananmen Square while leading a uniformed armed patrol of police officers.<sup>12</sup> The populist charm offensives also feature a former singer and opera star Peng Liyuan (*di yi fu ren*), the first-ever First Lady, who has brought a proto-democratic 'style' for the first time into the field of high-level diplomacy and foreign policy.<sup>13</sup>

## THE CULTIVATION OF APPEARANCES

**Seventh:** under conditions of despotism, the powerful must never be seen naked. There is much pretence, and cultivation of the art of pretence. Everybody knows that the principle of WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) doesn't apply. What they see, or hear, or read, is NOT what you get. The wise subjects of despotism are people who cultivate the art of interpreting dog whistling – what the Italians call *dietrologia*, or 'behindology', the

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art of decoding surface or official explanations, in order to grasp the behind, or dietro.

The most sophisticated new despotisms strive to have a Dolce & Gabbiano and Givenchy appearance. They mount the catwalk.<sup>14</sup> Dominant media, especially television, radio and print, are used as the medium of political performance (the field of the Internet is another matter). Despotisms are 'mediacracies': corporate media, journalism, advertising and government merge and meld, especially in contexts where constitutional and political resistance to the integration of organised media and political power is weak.

Remarkably, some despots try to turn their political regimes into works of art. The new despotisms like pomp and circumstance: Winter Games (Russia), Olympics (China). Especially if it generates and spreads the sense/gives off the impression that progress is being made on all fronts. This will to 'feel good' explains why despotisms are unusually jumpy about bad news; why they are nervous about the past; censorial and ceremonial; and why they strive to bring to perfection the old arts of bread and circuses.

Consider the case of Abu Dhabi, a cosmopolitan metropolis and potent symbol of the trend.<sup>15</sup> Capital city of the United Arab Emirates, the largest of its seven semi-autonomous city-states and currently ranked as the richest city in the world, Abu Dhabi, or at least its royal family rulers, have pulled out all stops to transform its reputation as one of the world's largest oil producers into the new skyscraper Hollywood of the 21st century. Home to Etihad Airways, state-controlled mosques and nearly a million people, including a wealthy middle class and a large majority of un-unionised and often badly treated migrant workers, Abu Dhabi has become a haven for global media conglomerates. It aspires to be the king link in a global media production and supply chain that 'unites the world'. Huge oil and gas revenues and sovereign wealth funds (the world's largest) have been pumped into Abu Dhabi Media, the state-owned group that owns and directs much of the domestic media, including the world's first fibre-to-home (FTTH) network, mobile phone services, newspapers, television and radio stations, including one that is devoted to readings from

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the Koran. Abu Dhabi Media has working partnerships with Fox International Channels, a unit of News International, and enjoys Arabic-language programming deals with such giants as National Geographic and Comedy Central. Abu Dhabi Media also hosts Imagination, a body which underwrites the production of feature films. An office park free zone project called twofour54 (named after the city's geographical coordinates) houses foreign news agencies, including CNN, which produces a daily news show for its global channel. Twofour54 boasts state-of-the-art production facilities as well as a venture capital arm to invest in promising Arabic-language media start-ups; and it hosts a world-class media training academy that offers short skills-based courses targeted at young and talented media workers.

For culture consumers, there is the government-controlled Abu Dhabi Exhibition Centre, the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, the Abu Dhabi Classical Music Society, which boasts a strong and visible following, and the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation, which works to preserve and publicise 'the art and culture of the city'. Of vital strategic importance to the ruling authorities is the government marketing and entertainment body called Flash Entertainment. 'Put simply, we make people happy' is its motto when advertising big-name acts like Beyoncé, Christina Aguilera, George Michael and Aerosmith. Vexed questions about whether, or to what extent, the citizens and non-citizens of the UAE are happy, what happiness means, or whether they or their journalist representatives might freely be able to remedy their unhappiness, remain unanswered. More than a few local expatriates simply don't care about answers.<sup>16</sup> The point is that Abu Dhabi is the new Hollywood without the old California. Governed by leading members of the ruling family, open public monitoring of power is abolished. Citizens are 'rentier' citizens, beneficiaries of state-guaranteed jobs, transfer payments and other forms of untaxed income and wealth. Free and fair elections are an ancient thing from yesteryear. Democracy makes no political sense, say the local kingdom rulers, privately. It causes unwanted social divisions, they add, hence the priority they give to blocking hundreds of Web sites considered publicly offensive and routinely cleansing local media infrastructures of pornography and other blasphemous

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commentaries on the God-given noble blood of the ruling royal family.

## ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE

**Eighth:** The new despotisms are police states with a difference. These are regimes determined to stamp out the first signs of dissent, no matter what the potential cost. In Belarus, President Lukashenko, rails against ‘senseless democracy’ while his provocateurs in the KGB (as it’s still called in Belarus) beat senseless its opponents; in Kazakhstan, it is recorded that human rights workers have been set upon, their chests bared and a large X – the mark of the censor – carved on their skin. Putin likes to quote Alexander III, to the effect that Russia has only two allies: its army and navy; in his recent speech about the annexation of Crimea, he went out of his way to emphasise a ‘fifth column’ and ‘national traitors’ who are working to block the forward advance of the motherland. And, yes, there are moments when the whole machinery of state repression is mobilised against its perceived opponents. Concentrated violence rains down, as in the ongoing repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang in western China, or the brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or when around the time of the Sochi Winter Olympics protesters were greeted with pepper spray, horse whips or heavily armed riot police, Interior Ministry troops and operatives of the Federal Security Service. In certain situations, fear is a vital lubricant of despotic power. ‘The strength and power of despotism consists wholly in the fear of resisting it’, said Tom Paine (Paine, Rights of Man, chapter 5). That’s why head despots tend to be paranoiacs (Putin’s tasters) and why enemy thinking flourishes under despotic conditions: for instance, fear of ‘terrorist attacks’ by Islamist insurgents of the North Caucasus dominated much of the media coverage in Russia in the build-up to Sochi.

Yes, despotisms can be brutal; their unrestrained violence can be sickening. The army and police are at all times on stand-by, but the violence is concentrated, terrible, measured, outsourced and (until the moment it strikes) a shadowy affair. Despots know the famous maxim of Mao Zedong, that political power grows from the barrel of a gun, but the employment of force is seen to have

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its limits. Efficient coercion is supplemented with charm, cool, organised artful practices of persuasion. Despotisms parade their respect for law while exercising a stranglehold over judiciary, and the legislatures supposed to enact the laws. Despotisms typically have fine constitutions, and there is much trumpeting of the coming of peace at home as the fruit of the tough enforcement of order through law ('dictatorship of the law', as the doublespeak of the Kremlin calls it). But the reality is that politics at the top degenerates into a 'permanent coup', a steady evisceration of constitutional precepts and rule of law procedures. No tanks or armoured personnel vehicles for this. Through a combination of patron-client relations, bribes, promotions and sackings, the legal profession and the courts (as in Russia) are notoriously subservient to the reigning political powers. So are parliaments; as M. Steven Fish has shown in his use of the Legislative Power Index, despotisms weaken legislatures, and weakened legislatures strengthen despotism.

Trumped up charges and convictions are meanwhile commonplace, sometimes to the point where the malfeasance of police and judicial officials seems indistinguishable from that of the crooks and criminals they're supposedly hunting. Arrests and convictions are couched in terms of: 'membership of a criminal group operating networks of unlawful gambling sites'; or violation of parole from a previous sentence.

So there is an economy of violence, symbolised by Kafka's machine inscribing words in blood on the body of its selected enemies. Despotisms are skilled at camouflaging their violence. In Russia, for instance, the national government is not principally responsible for orchestrating political violence. Most of it is the work of local political bosses, secret service, plain-closed thugs and organised crime. The methods may be crude (slipping radioactive poison into tea) but the invisibility and selectivity of the forces of violence bear some resemblance to the outsourcing of means of violence and security in AEDs (see TC piece), where (for instance) in the European Union the most recent data we have points to a deep-seated trend towards greater private provision of policing and security services, with growth from around 600,000



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security employees in 1999 to well over a million today.

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## Implications

What are the implications of my interpretation of the 21st-century phenomenon of democracy? There are several.

I hope my reflections on the new despotisms prompt in your mind's eyes some troubling questions to do with the long-term significance of drift towards despotism. I have tried to show that the new despotisms are not understandable through the standard terms of political science. They aren't 'defective democracies' or 'delegative democracies' (O'Donnell) that lack checks and balances, or 'illiberal democracies' (Zakaria) that fail to uphold the rule of law. They are not in-between, 'hybrid regimes' (Diamond) or 'semi-democracies', or 'semi-authoritarian regimes' or 'semi-dictatorships'. They are something other, something new. So the questions: are these despotisms proof that 'end of history' (Fukuyama) and 'third wave' (Huntington) interpretations of the triumph of 'liberal democracy' were always pipe dreams? Yes. Further proof of an old 'law' in the history of democracy: that democratic ways of handling power have no historical guarantees of success or survival, and that they're much easier to destroy than to build? No doubt. Doesn't the rise of despotism show that contemporary democracies, especially when their market foundations collapse, are quite easily tempted to commit 'democide'? Certainly.

Just as disturbing is the implication – implicit in everything I have said – that despotism is not just 'out there', in far-flung places at a safe distance from 'our' democracies. Despotism operates 'close to home', in a double sense. It is not just that they help each other (the bazaars of the central Asian despotisms are full of Chinese goods; since the coup d'etat in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait have pumped an estimated \$12 billion into Egypt), or that they try to interfere with the workings of vibrant monitory democracies: the Chinese authorities excel at what I call the 'spooking effect' (Dalai Lama; June 4th); and Azzam Tamimi has shown how the UAE has tried to pressure the British government into banning the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Hiwar TV channel. But there is another, equally troubling trend: the quantum entanglement of the spirit, language and political style of 'monitory

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democracies' and 'despotisms'.

Tocqueville was the first to see and say that modern despotisms lie on the same continuum as democracies. Just as his account of 'soft despotism' highlighted their common qualities, so I have emphasised the ways despotism mirrors and mimics democracies. The drift towards plutocracy, talk of the people, permanent campaigning and the hiding away of violence are examples, and they should make us wonder about where our own democracies are heading...

## HUBRIS, FOLLY

We should tremble as well at the follies and pranks, the crazy things produced by the new despotisms. Montesquieu was not the only 18th century analyst of despotism to suppose that in the end hubris would bring ruin to despotism and that despotism always tends to dig its own grave. To speak of despotism is to forewarn of its instability, to spotlight its inner and outer weaknesses. Early treatments of the Ottomans, François Eudes de Mézeray's *Histoire des Turcs* (1650), for instance, were obsessed with the endless cycles of assassinations and bloody plots, many of them organised by women. Some observers were so astonished by the strange staying power of despotism that they considered it to be sanctioned by God as punishment of Christians for their sins.

The despotisms of the 21st century are certainly prone to the disease of hubris. Their habits of arbitrary power go to the heads of their rulers. They induce fantasies of omnipotence, and their opposite: surrealistic, dreamlike absurdity. Putin, a leader who has a personal food taster to ensure he's not poisoned, behaves like a character in *Dead Souls*, a novel by Gogol, a story centred on a 'messianic paradigm of greatness, large size, central control by the state'. Meanwhile, in the same week that Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced he was relinquishing his military leadership role to run for the presidency, to save his country, 500 members of the Muslim Brotherhood are sentenced to death in one day in a kangaroo trial presided over by Judge Saeed Elgazar (whose surname means 'the butcher'). Then there are figures

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like Saparmurat Niyazov, the Turkmenistan despot who (after his first election to the presidency with 98.3 % of the vote) went from strength to strength: declaring himself God's Prophet on Earth, his face stared out from all banknotes, coins and postage stamps, ordered his cabinet ministers to undertake 5-mile long walks, banned ballet and opera and cinemas; published a 400-page guide to the people of Turkmenistan (the Ruhnama, passages from which were plastered on mosque walls), renamed the months of the year (September became Ruhnama, the month when Niyazov finished writing his magnum opus), banned listening to car radios (which he claimed were used to camouflage subversive talk by citizens). When a string of weather forecasts proved unreliable, he personally dismissed the lead weathermen and banished dogs from Ashgabat because of their 'unappealing odour'.

Niyazov's megalomania was extreme, but it illustrates the way those who rule, guide and manage despotisms pass through a looking glass into a strange world of shouting sheep and talking flowers, white queens and red kings, hares and hatters, Tweedledees and Tweedledums.

The events in Egypt and Crimea, just like the events in Xinjiang and Tibet, should serve as warnings of the damage and devastation that despotisms can bring into the world. We should be worried that some despotisms show signs of turning themselves into 'enlightened despotisms'. There's no clearer example than the way the despotisms are using the Internet to control the Internet (example of China). We need to be on guard, vigilant, wary of the old Montesquieu principle that despotisms always dig their own graves. For, in the end, the new despotisms survive because their subjects let them survive. Their longevity is guaranteed by people's willingness to conform, to do nothing to disrupt the regime and its routines, to cultivate blind eyes and cloth ears in the face of the dysfunctions and injustices of the regime. Durable despotisms turn their subjects into memes or carriers of despotic ideas, ways of speech and other symbolic practices.<sup>17</sup> That they are managing to do so, and doing so with some finesse, ought to worry every thinking woman and man who values life freed from the clutches of arbitrary power.

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## End Notes

1. James McGregor, *No Ancient Wisdom, No Followers: the Challenges of Chinese Authoritarian Capitalism* (Westport, CT, 2012), p.
2. Slavoj Žižek, 'Capitalism: How the Left Lost the Argument', *Foreign Policy* (November 2012).
3. Samuel P. Huntington, *Authoritarian Politics in Modern Society* (New York 1970); and Pei Minxin, 'A Discussion on Authoritarianism with Samuel Huntington, the Pioneer of the Theory of Authoritarianism', in *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology*, volume 23, 4 (Summer 1991), pp. 67-75.
4. Foucault, M 2003, *Abnormal: lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, trans. G Burchell, Picador, New York; see also Grosrichard, A 1998, *The sultan's court: European fantasies of the East*, trans. L Heron, Verso, London.
5. Richter, M 2007, 'The concept of despotism and l'abus des mots', *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, no. 3, p. 17 and pp. 5–22.
6. Majeed, J 1992, *Ungoverned imaginings: James Mill's 'The history of British India' and orientalism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.  
McInerney, DJ 2009, *James Mill and the despotism of philosophy: reading 'The history of British India'*, Routledge, New York.
7. Stokes, Susan C., Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco. 2013. [Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics](#). Cambridge University Press.
8. Daniel Kimmage, 'Russian 'Hard Power' Changes Balance In Caucasus', at [http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia\\_Changes\\_Balance\\_In\\_Caucasus/1190395.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia_Changes_Balance_In_Caucasus/1190395.html)
9. Saudi Arabia: women can be appointed to the Consultative Assembly, known also as the Shura Council, which advises the king and debates current affairs, but cannot pass or enforce laws; enfranchisement of women in local elections is planned for 2015; in the sultanate of Brunei neither women nor men can vote in national elections, though both can

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vote in local elections when they reach the age of 18; in Lebanon women can exercise the vote, but only upon proof that they minimally have had an elementary education, a condition that is not applied to men; in the United Arab Emirates, as in Brunei, there are no national elections, though for some time plans for the introduction of a universal franchise have been discussed; and in Vatican City, the tiny country located in the centre of Rome, the leader of the Holy See is elected by the all-male College of Cardinals.

10. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York and London 1970), p. 41.

11. The despotisms I have been describing represent an alternative world beyond monitory democracy as we know it. Some observers interpret them as a regression to early twentieth-century 'fascism', but that is to miss their utter novelty. The mingling of government and corporate media, their corresponding efforts to control the ebbs and flows of communication, amidst much talk of 'the people', is not a repeat of the 1920s and 1930s, when the world witnessed the crystallisation of the fascist and Bolshevik models of limited-spectrum, state-controlled broadcasting media geared to the top-down sacralisation of power. The advance of phantom democracy takes place under conditions of unlimited-spectrum communicative abundance. Business-government manipulations are more subtle, sophisticated and (hence) seemingly 'democratic' than the heavy-handed political methods of the early twentieth century. The days are over when millions of people, bubbling and huddling together as masses, were captivated by skilfully orchestrated newspaper, radio and film performances led by showbiz demagogues dressed alternatively in morning suits, military uniforms, muscular riding clothes and stripped to the waist helping sweating labourers gather harvests (Mussolini's specialty). Millions no longer celebrate in unity, marching in step, across a stage built from the glorification of heroes, cults of the fallen, national holidays, anniversaries, triumphs of the revolution, and electrifying performances of the Leader. The pseudo-democratic trends within the age of communicative abundance require no political cults and no intense struggles for recognition and enfranchisement of the People. Today's leaders, Silvio Berlusconi among them, do indeed pay lip service to 'the people', but flesh and blood citizens are expected to stay quiet, locked down in circles of work, family life, consumption and other private forms of self-celebration.

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12. <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2014/01/xi-jinpings-image-crafting-sets-trend/> (accessed 10 March 2014)

13. See for example, Shanghai Daily: 4th June, 2013: 'President Xi Jinping made history as the first Chinese leader to visit Trinidad and Tobago, but it was his glamorous wife Peng Liyuan who turned the trip into a media sensation.' Media coverage of Michelle Obama's informal visit to China in March 2014 was punctuated with references to Peng Liyuan. 'First lady diplomacy can be an important method for bringing together China-U.S. relations', wrote a commentator on the People's Daily Internet forum. 'It plays an important role in keeping up the development of friendly relations between the two countries'. 'Our lady Peng is a true fashionista', one fashion-obsessed netizen from Guangzhou wrote on Sina Weibo. 'Wearing high heels for a stroll around the Forbidden City? I salute you!' The whole trend can be understood as a functional response to a great paradox encountered by regime officials: wealth and power do not automatically produce respect from the wider world, which is why some observers (Shen Dingli, for instance) have reached the conclusion that as an emerging global superpower China cannot win respect abroad unless it treats its people at home with respect.

14. Not without a measure of anxiety, despots come to sense that when all is said and done very little props up the political order except people's belief in it. *Potestas in populo* is the classic Roman formulation to summarise this dynamic, and it applies well to the Chinese case. The Chinese version might be: *shu k zài zh u yì k fù zh u* (the water that floats the boat can overturn it as well). If the power of a regime is its ability to get others to act as it chooses, then violence is ultimately a limited resource. Command and obedience turn out to be tricky elements in any political equation, for power over others functionally requires that they feel comfortable with the instructions, directives and commands issued by those who rule. The ruled have to be quietly or openly persuaded that they will not be devoured by the 'jaws of power' (as John Adams famously put it) despite their native suspicion that those who rule would like to 'destroy the freedom of thinking, speaking, and writing'.

15. See the background details in Christopher M. Davidson, 'The United Arab Emirates: Economy First, Politics Second', in Joshua Teitelbaum (ed.), *Political Liberalization in the Persian Gulf* (New York and London, 2009), pp. 223-248.

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16. A point captured in the lengthy report by Johann Hari, 'The dark side of Dubai', *The Independent* (London), 7 April 2009: 'When I ask the British expats how they feel to not be in a democracy, their reaction is always the same. First, they look bemused. Then they look affronted. "It's the Arab way!" an Essex boy shouts at me in response, as he tries to put a pair of comedy antlers on his head while pouring some beer into the mouth of his friend, who is lying on his back on the floor, gurning [pulling a grotesque face].'

17. See Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, part one: 'When despotism has established itself for ages in a country, as in France, it is not in the person of the king only that it resides. It has the appearance of being so in show, and in nominal authority; but it is not so in practice and in fact. It has its standard everywhere. Every office and department has its despotism, founded upon custom and usage. Every place has its Bastille, and every Bastille its despot. The original hereditary despotism resident in the person of the king, divides and sub-divides itself into a thousand shapes and forms, till at last the whole of it is acted by deputation.'









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