

Politics. A Very Short Introduction

Page vii

Politics is the activity by which the framework of human life is sustained; it is not life itself. The sceptical philosopher, the moral relativist, the rancorous academic social critic, the religious visionary, and the artistic seer have their place in our civilization, but their intrusion into politics has not been happy

Page viii

| slough

slough off = remove something

Page 1

| disguise

disguise himself = akhfa nafsahu

| beggar

= a homeless who lives by asking for money and food

| devious

| reputed

| despotism

= dictatorship

| inclinations

Yet despotism is not a system in which justice is entirely meaningless: it has generally prevailed in highly traditional societies where custom is king and the prevailing terms of justice are accepted as part of the natural order of things. Each person fits into a divinely recognized scheme. Dynasties rise and fall according to what the Chinese used to call 'the mandate of heaven', but life for the peasant changes little

| prevailed

= sada, intassara

Page 2

| repelled

Europeans have sometimes been beguiled by a despotism that comes concealed in the seductive form of an ideal – as it did in the cases of Hitler and Stalin. This fact may remind us that the possibility of despotism is remote neither in space nor in time. Many countries are still ruled in this manner, and it can threaten pain or death

at any moment; it is like living in a madhouse.

beguiled

= charm someone

concealed

Today we define despotism (along with dictatorship and totalitarianism) as a form of government. This would have horrified the classical Greeks, whose very identity (and sense of superiority to other peoples) was based on distinguishing themselves from the despotism endured by their eastern neighbours.

One aim of this book is to explain how it came about that what used to be a limited activity conducted by

Page 3

the élites of some Western countries is now thought to be the inescapable preoccupation of mankind.

What the Greeks knew above all was that they were not orientals. They often admired the magnificent cultures of eastern empires such as Egypt or Persia, but usually disdained the way in which they were ruled. They called this foreign system 'despotism' because it seemed no different from the relation between a master and his slaves. As warriors, the Greeks despised the practice by which subjects coming into the presence of an oriental ruler prostrated themselves: they found this an intolerable form of inequality between citizens and their rulers.

disdained

= izdirae, ihti9ar

prostrated

intolerable

undiminished

= not diminished, reduced

The essence of despotism is that there is no appeal, either in practice or in law, against the unchecked power of the master. The sole object of the subjects must be to please. There is no parliament, no opposition, no free press, no independent judiciary, no private property protected by law from the rapacity of power, in a word, no public voice except that of the despot. Such powerlessness is, oddly enough, the reason why despotisms are notable generators of spiritual enlightenment

A reaction sets in against a world governed by the caprice of power, and thoughtful subjects take up mysticism, Stoicism, and other forms of withdrawal. The essence of life is then found in a spiritual realm beyond that of the senses, and social and political life is devalued as illusion.

caprice

Despotism flows so naturally from the military conquest in which most societies originate that creating a civil or political order must be recognized as a remarkable achievement. Europeans have managed it on three notable occasions, and on two of them the achievement collapsed. The first was in the city-states of classical Greece, which sank into despotism after the death of Alexander the Great. The second was among the Romans, whose very success created an empire so heterogeneous that only a despotic power could prevent it from falling apart. The first of these experiences generated Stoicism and other philosophies of withdrawal from the world, and the second was the seed-bed of Christianity. From Christianity and the barbarian kingdoms of the west emerged the medieval version of politics from which in turn evolved the politics of our modern world.

This statement is discussing how despotism, or the rule of a single leader with absolute power, is often the default form of government that emerges from military conquest. The author notes that Europe has had three notable instances in which a different form of government emerged: the city-states of classical Greece, the Roman Republic and Empire, and the medieval European political system.

The author suggests that the collapse of the Greek city-states into despotism after the death of Alexander the Great led to the development of philosophies such as Stoicism, which emphasized withdrawal from the world. Similarly, the author suggests that the complexities of ruling the Roman Empire led to the emergence of Christianity and the barbarian kingdoms of the west, which eventually gave rise to the medieval political system. This system, in turn, served as the foundation for the modern political system.

Many in recent centuries have dreamed of using the irresistible power only found in despotism for removing the evident imperfections of our world.

The project of despotism in Europe, even of a philosophical or enlightened kind, would fail unless its real character were concealed. Since politics is in part a theatre of illusion, new names and concepts are easy to invent, and in the twentieth century totalitarian versions of the dream of despotism constructed a vast political laboratory in which different versions of the project of creating a perfect society were put to the test. That they failed is currently recognized by all; it is less widely recognized that such immense convulsions must correspond to profound tendencies in our civilization. To understand politics must therefore include studying the signs which might tell us what is going on beneath the surface of this and other fault-lines in our civilization.

This statement is suggesting that the project of despotism in Europe, even if it is presented as a philosophical or enlightened form of government, will not succeed unless its true nature is hidden or disguised. The author notes that politics often involves creating illusions and using new names and concepts to conceal the true nature of a government. In the 20th century, totalitarian versions of the dream of despotism were put to the test, and they ultimately failed.