Tyranny and Revolution

The Philosophy of Freedom from Rousseau to Heidegger launched a great protest against modern liberal individualism, inspired by the virtuous political community of the ancient Greeks. Hegel argued that the progress of history was gradually bringing about greater freedom and restoring our lost sense of community. But his successors Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger rejected Hegel's version of the end of history with its legitimization of the bourgeois nation-state. They sought to replace it with ever more utopian, apocalyptic and illiberal visions of the future: Marx's Socialism, Nietzsche's Overman and Heidegger's commitment to Nazism. This book combines an exceptionally clear and rich study of these thinkers with a deep dive into the extent to which their views fed the political catastrophes of revolution, tyranny and genocide, including the Jacobins, Bolsheviks, Nazis, Khmer Rouge, ISIS and populist nationalism, but argues that the Philosophy of Freedom remains indispensable for understanding today's world.

WALLER R. NEWELL is Professor of Political Science, Philosophy and Humanities at Carleton University.

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Rousseau to Heidegger

WALLER R. NEWELL
Carleton University

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Preface

What is the purpose of political life? Is it meant to protect our rights as individuals, leaving us free to work hard and prosper, protected from illegal infringements on our liberty, free to do as we please in our private lives so long as others are not harmed, including the freedom to ignore politics and public life altogether? That is the recipe for the classical liberalism of Locke, Montesquieu and their heirs including the American Founders for good government: Secure the maximum net material gain for every member of the social contract to enable them to live in comfort and otherwise get out of the way – for, as Jefferson put it, that government is best which governs least. Government is not about teaching people how to be virtuous – that is a matter for individual choice. Politics is about means, not ends. As Madison wrote, the sources of factional strife are sewn into human nature. Their causes cannot be removed, but their harmful effects can be controlled by the social contract.

But what if political life is about much, much more than this? What if it is meant to give us a sense of belonging to and participating in a community of our fellow citizens, to promote virtue over vice in our public and educational institutions, to ensure a spirit of individual self-sacrifice on behalf of the common good, to shape us to be public beings first and private individuals only second, if at all? What if, in short, the purpose of political life is not merely utility but *nobility*?

The thinkers we examine in this book believed that political life should not merely protect our freedom as individuals but involve us in a communal experience that would bring us true happiness, a happiness that classical liberalism could do no more than leave to whatever private avocations and amusements we chose to pursue as a reward for our pursuit of economic self-interest. And in looking for this higher set of expectations from political life, these thinkers, unable to find what they wanted from the modern social contract thinkers like Locke and Montesquieu, searched for it in its original and unforgettable pure

source – the civilization of the ancient world, especially the ancient Greek polis, where citizen life meant a full-time involvement in public affairs promoted by an education in virtue. How could it be brought back? That is what preoccupied European political philosophy from Rousseau to Heidegger.

And yet – strangest paradox – precisely this longing to make politics noble again, beautiful again, and more entirely just than before, culminated in projects for revolutionary violence and extremism that surpassed anything in previous human experience for the scale and depravity of their cruelty and slaughter – beginning with the Jacobin Terror of 1793, continuing through the Bolshevik and National Socialist revolutions, third world socialist revolutions such as Maoism and the Khmer Rouge, and contemporary Jihadist terrorism. For every one of the thinkers we examine in this book had a connection, genuine or least alleged, to one or more of these extremist revolutionary movements. How could the attempt to raise the level of modern political life beyond mere material self-interest simultaneously launch such dangerous extremist longings? How could the desire to ennoble modern life lead to the political catastrophes of totalitarianism and utopian genocide? Exploring that paradox is the aim of this book. At its core lies not only a radically new way of looking at human experience but, more fundamentally, a radically new way of understanding the character and structure of the entire world, of all reality. The longing for political wholeness launched by the Philosophy of Freedom as the balm for the spiritual impoverishment and utilitarian crassness of bourgeois modernity, and the dangerous consequences that longing entailed, including their totalitarian implications, hinged on a massive *metaphysical* shift in the meaning of existence, the transition from nature to history, which emerged from the difficulties of reconciling the eros for human happiness with the modern materialistic conception of nature.

This book is the promised sequel to *Tyranny: A New Interpretation*, but it stands in a somewhat asymmetrical relationship to it. The first book discussed the history of tyranny as a theme in political thought from ancients to early moderns. Although the notion that an entire nation could be a tyrant was touched upon (as when, for example, Pericles tells the Athenian people they are viewed by their allies as a "tyrant city") along with an exploration of the ancient and modern understanding of imperialism and its relationship to republican self-government, that book's main focus was the assumption common to both periods that tyranny was mainly about the lawless rule of an individual. I ended the book by edging up to what I termed millenarian populism, first emerging with Rousseau, which differs from either the classical or early modern account of tyranny by treating it as a collective force, the revolutionary will of "the people." Whether observed in actuality or not, this was its principle of legitimacy. Its leaders like Robespierre, Stalin and Hitler, were not autocrats supposedly ruling for their subjects' good like Julius Caesar or the Tudors, but vehicles of that popular will and of history itself. *Tyranny and Revolution* is the elaboration of this peculiarly modern category of

tyranny, focusing on Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger. It can also be read in conjunction with the intervening book, *Tyrants: Power, Injustice, and Terror*, a brief history of tyranny from ancient times to the present intended for a general readership, accordingly fairly low on pure theory and high on biography, psychology and historical narrative. My aim here is, hopefully, to provide the philosophical depth to the subject matter of Part III of *Tyrants* – millenarian tyranny since the Jacobin Terror of 1793 – that I aimed to provide in *Tyranny: A New Interpretation* for ancient and early modern tyranny, including the intrinsic connection between the philosophies of the thinkers examined and the real or conjectural implications of their thought for extremist political movements in practice. In the case of all three books, I have endeavored not to limit myself to the theme of tyranny narrowly or exclusively speaking, but to demonstrate how this cardinal theme can be a window to the entire range of ancient and modern political and moral philosophy including its psychological, aesthetic, political and cosmological dimensions. So the three volumes comprise something of a trilogy.

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