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Étienne de La Boétie, Part 1

by Wendy McElroy

A 16th-century essay entitled *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* by the French jurist Étienne de La Boétie (1530–1563) discusses a question that haunts those who love liberty: Why do people obey unjust laws?

The *Discourse* offers insight. It examines the psychology of those who obey, those who command, and those who resist. La Boétie (pronounced La Bwettie) was particularly interested in why people obey. He asked, “If a tyrant is one man and his subjects are many, why do they consent to their own enslavement?”

La Boétie did not believe that the state ruled primarily through force. For one thing, there were many more slaves than agents of the state: if even a small percentage of the populace refused to obey a law, that law became unenforceable. Moreover, most people obeyed without being forced to do so. La Boétie evolved an alternate explanation that he called “voluntary servitude.”

La Boétie acquired his renown on the basis of one short essay that argued tyranny is “automatically defeated” when people refuse to consent to their own enslavement. His argument has led many to conclude that nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience are the best strategies with which to oppose state power.

La Boétie’s background

Discourse first circulated privately in France (circa 1553) against a backdrop of foreign war and domestic conflict. European nation states — governments that claimed sweeping powers within defined territories — were on the rise. Absolute monarchs clashed with each other and with their own citizens from whom they demanded money and obedience. The 16th century gave birth to the tyranny that would eventually lead to the French Revolution.

La Boétie was well placed to observe the society around him, which was governed by King Francis I. Born into an affluent and politically connected family, La Boétie escaped the illiteracy, misery, and disease that befell most of his countrymen. Famine was so common that men carved crosses on newly baked bread to symbolize the sacredness of food. Plague erupted repeatedly. As the peasant struggled to survive, state taxes consumed one-third or more of his income, with church tithes absorbing another one-tenth. Roving bands of soldiers stole food at will and kidnapped young sons to fill their ranks. Nevertheless, 16th-century France, with an estimated population of 16 million, was the richest, most civilized, most populous nation in Europe.

France was also an absolute monarchy, which meant that national power was not distributed between parliaments or local authorities but rested with the king alone. To raise money for war, Francis sold titles to the “nouveaux riche” who formed a new aristocracy. Meanwhile, the ranks of lawyers swelled as they administered the growing state.

What role did the common man play? His obedience was essential to state authority but there were several claims upon his loyalty. God demanded obedience but the absolute monarch was anointed by God and blessed by the Catholic Church. The rise of Protestants in France — called Huguenots — meant that a growing segment of society did not recognize the king’s divine authority. There were also provincial loyalties. Most Frenchmen gave primary fealty to the province of their birth rather than the nation or king, and the provinces varied widely in customs, religious practices, and language. The king feared that foreign powers would align with rebellious provinces, especially those with a tendency toward Protestantism.

Obedience became more difficult to procure with the invention of the printing press, which made dissenting opinions available to the common man. As publications spread, so did attempts at censorship. In 1559, the first papal list of prohibited books was published.

Discourse was most likely written while La Boétie was a law student at the University of Orléans, renowned for Huguenot activity. Indeed, one of his professors would be later burned at the stake for heresy. The essay was in response to a specific event — the Revolt de Gabelle in Bordeaux. The Gabelle was a much-hated tax on salt, which was not only a human necessity but also a government monopoly. Protesters killed the Gabelle’s director general along with two of his officers. In retaliation, 140 commoners were killed, many others were whipped, and exorbitant fines were imposed.

La Boétie was an acute observer of the competing demands on people’s obedience. When the people finally rebelled, he watched and wondered why the state seemed able to do anything it wanted, no matter how tyrannical. Why did the people not rise up again, this time en masse? As a

result of such speculation, La Boétie wrote what the French historian Pierre Mesnard has called “the humanist solution to the problem of authority.”

Discourse on voluntary servitude

Why do people willingly consent to their own enslavement? For La Boétie, the collective obedience of society came from “a vice for which no term can be found vile enough, which nature herself disavows and our tongues refuse to name.” La Boétie called this monstrous vice “voluntary servitude.”

But why is voluntary servitude a vice rather than a virtue? Because it contradicts nature, La Boétie explained. Each man is given his own ability to reason, and virtue lies in cultivating his own innate independence. Even within the lower animals, there is a strong and natural urge to liberty. Animals who have tasted freedom resist entrapment, although it might cost them their lives. La Boétie exclaimed,

Since the very beasts, although made for the service of man, cannot become accustomed to control without protest, what evil chance has so denatured man that he, the only creature really born to be free, lacks the memory of his original condition and the desire to return to it?

Man’s liberty required the death of tyranny. Advocating tyrannicide against a ruler who had broken the laws of God was nothing new in European theory but La Boétie had a different slant: the way to “kill” a tyrant was to destroy his power through non-violent resistance. In that manner, the people killed not a man but the tyranny itself. Liberty required only that enough people withdraw their consent and cooperation.

After all,

he who thus domineers over you has only two eyes, only two hands, only one body...; he has indeed nothing more than the power that you confer upon him to destroy you. Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own?

Yet farmers continued to sow crops that were confiscated. People accumulated goods for soldiers to pillage and raised daughters for them to rape. They watched as sons were kidnapped into the military and died fighting someone else’s battles. La Boétie addressed the peasant,

You yield your bodies unto hard labor in order that he [the tyrant or the state] may indulge in his delights and wallow in his filthy pleasures; you weaken yourselves in order to make him the stronger and the mightier to hold you in check.

To understand why people consented to their own enslavement, La Boétie first considered the flip side of the issue: the psychology of the tyrant.

The psychology of the tyrant

Traditional political theory defined tyranny with reference to the source of a ruler's power. That is, did the ruler achieve his position through birth — the “sanction of God” — or in some other “legitimate” manner? If so, the king was deemed to justly rule even if he ruled badly.

In contrast, La Boétie declared the origin of power to be irrelevant to the definition of tyranny. If a man ruled justly he was legitimate; if he ruled badly, he was a tyrant.

Tyrants fell into three categories: those elected to power; those who inherited power; and those who claimed it by force. La Boétie refused to give importance to the means by which tyrants achieved power because their method of ruling seemed to be the same.

But the psychology of elected rulers particularly interested La Boétie because it seemed that a ruler whose power came from the people ought to be “more bearable” than the others. He ought to be grateful or at least acknowledge his dependency on the people's will. Yet, when the elected ruler tastes power, “he plans never to relinquish his position.” The trick was to engineer the future consent of the people in order to ensure his continued power. But how?

La Boétie explored the major ways that a ruler engineered consent.

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