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Étienne de La Boétie, Part 2

by Wendy McElroy

The beginning of a tyrant's rule was the most difficult period because those who had not consented to his rule would obey reluctantly, and brute force might be necessary. Brute force could put down dissent in the short term but it was never a good option. Violence bred martyrs, it increased popular resistance against authority, and it showed the ugly face of power too clearly.

But as time passed, the tyrant's task became easier. Through conditioning and training, future generations would accept authority passively and automatically obey. La Boétie observed,

It is incredible how as soon as a people becomes subject, it promptly falls into such complete forgetfulness of its freedom that it can hardly be roused to the point of regaining it, obeying so easily and so willingly that one is led to say, on beholding such a situation, that this people has not so much lost its liberty as won its enslavement.

Generations that were born “under the yoke and then nourished and reared in slavery” accepted their condition as natural. Thus, La Boétie viewed “custom” as the first explanation of voluntary servitude. People believed life had always been this way, life will always be this way; and, so, it took great effort to introduce a new vision.

The French Renaissance thinker Michel de Montaigne, who was La Boétie's best friend, dramatized the incredible power of tradition in his essay entitled “Of Custom.” It opens with the words

He seems to have had a right and true apprehension of the power of custom, who first invented the story of a country-woman who, having accustomed herself to play with and carry a young calf in her arms, and daily continuing to do so as it grew up, obtained this by custom, that, when grown to be a great ox, she was still able to bear it.

But, La Boétie argues, a few will always try to shake off “the weight of the yoke,” perhaps because they “remember their ancestors and their former ways.” Aware of history, they compare the past to the present and dare to long for a better future:

These are the ones who, having good minds of their own, have further trained them by study and learning. Even if liberty had entirely perished from the earth, such men would invent it.

Control of information

After the majority had become accustomed to automatic obedience, the tyrant’s main challenge was to reduce dissent. There were two basic means of doing so: by controlling the press and by monopolizing education, because “books and teaching more than anything else give men the sense to comprehend their own nature and to detest tyranny.” In this manner, the tyrant prevented people from comparing the past with the present; and he controlled what people believed was possible in the future.

Moreover, with control of information, the tyrant could “educate” people in the belief that he acted only to further public welfare. He could inculcate the belief that his administration was a living embodiment of such concepts as justice, tradition, patriotism, law and order, or the public good. Thus, to oppose the tyrant became tantamount to opposing such concepts.

The tyrant reenforced this larger-than-life image through a process of mystification: that is, he tried to appear greater than a mere human being. Thus, the ruler aligned with religion, swore to uphold the law of the land, fell back on the authority of a constitution or founding document, and so forth. He presided over displays of pomp, clothed his agents in uniforms, constructed monuments, participated in rituals of office, and housed the authority of his courts and other institutions in expensive, awe-inspiring buildings.

This was a second reason why people rendered automatic obedience — a regulated press and school system had convinced them that the ruler’s authority was legitimate. The mystification of his power led them one step further: they became awed by it and viewed him as something more than a mere human being as fallible as themselves.

Bribery

The people who could not be awed might well be bought off. And, so, the ruler also engaged in largesse.

La Boétie pointed to the state-sponsored “plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, pictures, and other such opiates” used by “ancient peoples.” These distractions were “the bait toward slavery.” The people became so fascinated by their pleasures that they did not notice their enslavement. At other times, rulers literally fed the people by distributing stocks of food. “And then everybody would shamelessly cry, ‘Long live the King!’” La Boétie remarked scornfully. “The fools did not realize that they were merely recovering a portion of their own property, and that their ruler could not have given them what they were receiving without having first taken it from them.” By providing bread and circuses — state welfare and popular distractions — the people were bribed into surrendering their liberty.

This direct bribery paled in significance, however, beside an indirect form that La Boétie called “the mainspring and the secret of domination, the support and foundation of tyranny.” This was institutionalized bribery by which millions of people were employed at state jobs and received tax funds in order to pay their bills. These state employees “cling to the tyrant” and offer him their loyalty. Some state employees, such as police officers, became the hands of the state, reaching throughout society to implement laws and policies. Tax-supported intellectuals, such as university professors and recipients of government grants, became the voice of the state, defending its legitimacy. Still others, working as clerks or minor agents, made the daily machinery of the state grind on.

Over generations, a vast new class of people emerged within society: people who served the state in exchange for a tax-funded salary. These state employees willingly destroyed their own liberty and that of their neighbors. And they did so without thinking because the force of custom led them to believe that things had always been this way and always would be.

La Boétie’s solution to voluntary servitude

Withdraw your consent, withdraw your cooperation. La Boétie advised the average man,

I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break into pieces.

For rendering this advice, Gene Sharp, author of the definitive work on nonviolence, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, commented,

[La] Boétie's Discourse is a highly significant essay on the ultimate source of political power, the origins of dictatorship, and the means by which people can prevent political enslavement and liberate themselves.

This was the legacy of *Discourse*. But what of the real man? At the young age of 33, La Boétie died in the arms of his friend Montaigne, who was moved by the event to write his famous essay "On Friendship." The essay portrayed their relationship as a "union of souls." And it is mainly through this essay that the larger world knows of Étienne de La Boétie.

It is only in political circles that La Boétie's insights on the psychology of tyranny and obedience are celebrated. There he is recognized as one of the earliest voices for civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance against authority.

If La Boétie is right, if freedom is a natural human urge, then nature itself argues the logic of not cooperating with tyranny. There is something within man and beast that resists the tension of a leash. Rather than break the tension by attacking those who hold the reigns, La Boétie told people to let the tension go slack. People should refuse either violence or submission. They should simply say No.

In that word, lies their freedom.

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