

Interpretation

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It would be hard to read Waller R. Newell's latest book, *Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice, and Terror*, and not think that its publication, on the eve of the election of Donald J. Trump to the most powerful position in the free world, was nothing less than fortuitous—a case of providential scholarship if there ever was one. After all, since Trump became president, our more progressive politicians, pundits, and public intellectuals, shocked at the apparent return of atavism to our enlightened liberal shores, have warned us of an impending tyranny. Newell's political analysis of tyranny and its manifestations over nearly three millennia appears most timely for our troubled democratic times; it promises to help us navigate the dangers of our brave new world.

But if one takes a closer look at the impulses underlying the progressive hysteria surrounding Trump, one will discover that they are inspired as much by a commitment to dogmatic ideology and partisanship as they are informed by an understanding of the dynamics of a free society and the genuine threats posed to it. Such impulses are every bit as vulnerable to the temptations of tyranny as the president they criticize. This insight, that tyranny is a political possibility for both the political Right and Left, is the central insight of Newell's latest book. Indeed, according to Newell's analysis, tyranny is a permanent aspect of political life because it reflects a permanent temptation of the human condition, one manifested chiefly in the

overwhelming desire to secure justice and order in a world that seems to do everything to obstruct both. Our world may not be so new after all.

And yet it is part of the brilliance of Newell's book to recognize not only the common strands underlying tyranny wherever it may arise, but those distinctive methods and goals that constitute a typology of tyranny. Tyranny may be coeval with political life, but the forms it takes, the ends it pursues, and the instruments it employs differ in ways that are important for all lovers of liberty who would protect democratic regimes from its dangers. *Tyrants* thus makes a case for the perduring challenges that tyranny poses through a brilliant, witty, dense, and deeply learned account of the political, social, and historical conditions that give shape and direction to the forms tyranny has assumed all over the world.

After a brief introduction, in which our author outlines the challenges posed by tyranny today, Newell divides his work into three parts, each devoted to exploring the causes, character, and problems facing a distinct form of tyranny: the "garden-variety" tyrant, the tyrant as reforming state-builder, and millenarian tyranny. In each case, Newell joins to his broader theoretical reflections a case study of those individuals who best illuminate the particular category. Newell concludes his work by recommending a "homeopathic cure," one where defenders of liberal democracy learn to identify and get inoculated against the temptations to tyranny by reading those accounts of tyranny found in the texts that form the backbone of a genuinely liberal education.

According to Newell, "the garden-variety tyrant" is the "oldest and still the most familiar from our own world" (3). He is the man who clubs and connives his way into power so that he, like Muhammad Ali looming over a dazed Sonny Liston, can force his inferiors to acknowledge his own greatness. Newell claims that such tyrants are inclined to "dispose of an entire country and society as if it were their personal property, exploiting it for their own pleasure and profit, and to advance their own clan and cronies" (3). While examples of this kind of tyrant can be found virtually anywhere (Nero, Caligula; Hussein, Qaddafi), it is in the "rage of Achilles" that this tyrant's political psychology comes to life in an unparalleled way. According to Newell, Homer's portrait of Achilles "offered a more dangerous and subversive alternative—an ambition for supreme glory, wealth, pleasure, and immortal fame through victorious conquest, a great adventure in which bold young men could throw off the shackles of their tired elders and set the world ablaze in comradely might" (69).

For political communities, Achilles's tyrannical longing for glory points to an imperial rule of truly global reach here on earth, while apotheosis awaits the man who would create such a universal monarchy. Naturally, both the men and the states moved by this desire for glory can be rather nasty—"notorious for their cruelty, gargantuan pleasures, and suspicion of potential competitors" (38). But for Newell, the logic implicit in Achilles's lust for glory finds its greatest manifestation not in the Caligulas of antiquity, as one might expect, but in the Roman emperor Augustus Caesar, who established Rome as a "permanent world-state disguised as a republic, ruled by a Hellenistic monarch disguised as merely the 'first citizen' of that republic" (61). Augustus represents a peak of classical tyranny because his example draws together the earlier emperor-gods of the East and the later Greek and Roman dedication to an ordered liberty grounded in a reasoned grasp of human nature.

If the prospect of creating a "rational universal monarchy," one that combines liberty and stability with attention to the rights of citizens, does not sound entirely awful, that is because it is not. The numerous achievements of men like Augustus show that not all tyrants are bad and that tyranny can be desirable for securing the political good, especially when current regimes are corrupt, vulgar, or ineffective. Newell thus courageously captures the ambiguity surrounding tyranny, an ambiguity preserved by the architects of classical political thought. Newell's treatment reminds us of Thucydides's famous praise of the Peisistratid tyranny's moderation and virtue, a praise that should compel any thoughtful reader to re-evaluate the motives of the so-called Athenian tyrannicides Harmodios and Aristogeiton, who initiated its demise. Unfortunately, Newell does not exploit this opportunity. This is a shame insofar as reflection on the digression about Harmodios and Aristogeiton, in the context of Thucydides's narrative of the Sicilian campaign, sheds light on the tyrannical potential within Athenian democracy.

While partisans of Athenian democracy liked to claim these men as their founders, Thucydides indicates that this pair of lovers was in fact driven by something other than public-spiritedness. Instead of civic virtue, these men were moved to attack the regime in power by personal sleights and the private desire to enjoy erotic satisfaction in a world free from all interference. Given such concerns, it should come as no surprise that a democracy inspired by these "defenders of freedom" should also pursue the conquest of Sicily in a bid to become the imperial overlord of the Greek Mediterranean. Thus when Newell writes of Achilles that "his unbridled selfishness, passion, and craving for honor make him very capable of tyrannical behavior. Everything is

personal, everything is about him” (49), he could just as easily be referring to the lovers who died opposing tyranny as to his model of tyranny; Thucydides’s narrative effectively curbs his readers’ prejudice against moderate forms of tyranny by showing how dangerous—even *tyrannical*—opposition to tyranny in all its forms can become.

Newell’s complex appreciation of tyranny deepens when he turns to the tyrant as reforming state-builder. Like their “garden-variety” brethren, these men (and women) “seek eternal fame,” but they seek it as a reward for imposing “order on a chaotic world for the benefit of mankind” (4). While their tyrannical predecessors often used power to satisfy their lusts and benefit their friends, the modern reforming state-builders “are often ascetic or at least restrained, employ violence for concrete aims rather than whimsical cruelty, and are willing to endure the same hardships as their soldiers” (4). Among the ranks of such tyrants, Newell counts Henry VIII and Elizabeth I of England, France’s Louis XIV, Frederick the Great of Prussia, and Peter the Great of Russia. Of course, such individuals do not meet the criteria for this category in all particulars (Henry VIII was hardly ascetic). But as architects of some of today’s most powerful, most prosperous, and freest states, their examples show how “the aggressive, ambitious, and willful qualities of tyrants can shade into those of great statesmen to the point where it’s difficult to tell them apart” (94). By capturing such “shades,” Newell’s portraiture complicates our view of these men, preventing us from rejecting their example *tout court* out of knee-jerk recourse to the pieties of democratic progressivism. Newell’s brief political histories of these tyrants and their careers make for fascinating reading from which every student of power will benefit. But Newell’s gift for political history is outdone by his trenchant political analysis, especially his ratiocination of modern tyranny’s deepest causes.

Newell deftly locates the conditions for the emergence of the “reforming tyrants” in the unique interplay between the Protestant Reformation and the Renaissance, movements that were themselves shaped by historical developments within the Catholic papacy and the widespread influence of Niccolò Machiavelli’s political thought. The weakening of the political authority of the Catholic Church and the rebirth of republican liberty and self-government effected by this combination called forth a new kind of prince, a “scientist of power” capable of “rebuilding society methodically for the sake of maximizing everyone’s security and well-being” (100). As Newell points out, this required “not moral education but a disciplined method for the application of force to achieve power, and that means that princes must employ force and

violence with a cool head” (100). The tyrannical students of these princely lessons possessed “the domineering strength of will to shape human nature and external circumstances” (119), allowing them to modernize their countries from above, often with total disregard for conventional and legal restraints.

Newell’s treatment of Machiavelli’s enormous influence, especially his teaching’s effective transfer of “God’s power to a secular human ruler” (101), is one of the highlights of this tremendous book. But Newell is also careful to note that Machiavelli was no advocate of the kind of tyranny witnessed over the last two hundred years. It is true, as Newell notes, that Machiavelli’s “expansion of tyrannical political power” also made it possible for man “to tyrannize over nature and the world itself” (101). Properly understood, however, *The Prince* instructs its most ambitious readers to found new modes and orders that will benefit their people, saving them from the pious cruelties of regimes haunted by superstition and religious dogma. By contrast, the “millenarian blueprint” to create a society in which “all privilege and alienation will forever be eradicated” (4), the kind of society we have seen attempted with disastrous results in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, belongs to the French Revolution and the theoretical work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx.

Of course, while Machiavelli would not endorse the terror and tyranny of Lenin and Stalin, or Hitler and Islamic jihadists, he also is not entirely free of blame for the “modern radical extremism” behind such terror. According to Newell, it was the Enlightenment as engendered by the Florentine philosopher that fostered the tendency “to be skeptical about absolutes, about traditions of deference and restraint,” which over time “fed an atmosphere that undermined *all* authority, even that of democracy and rights, and instead worshipped sheer instinctive force of will” (172). And in this atmosphere of skepticism towards all standards, Newell writes, quoting a passage by Hermann Rauschnig that should make most English and history departments blush: “reason itself is robbed of force. The anti-intellectual intellectual attitude of ‘dynamism’ is not mere chance but the necessary outcome of an entire absence of standards” (172). Under the illusion that all standards have been destroyed, millenarian tyrants, with their “passion for justice born of righteous anger” and their “call for the wholesale destruction and reconstruction of existence” (10), pursue with clear consciences utopian goals to transform an unjust and vulgar society into “a spiritually pure, selfless” community of the future (144).

This last section constitutes the peak of Newell’s work: his analysis of the murderous secular ideologies of the twentieth century and his persuasive

linking of contemporary Islamic terrorism to the outlooks and aims driving both the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Far East and the National Socialists in Germany. According to Newell, such disparate groups commonly demonize those identified as class or race enemies as “the necessary precursor to their violent extinction at the hands of those who would purify the world of their alleged filth”; they resort to a scale of violence never seen before on behalf of their genocidal aims; and they seek an “absolute, overnight equality of condition to be imposed by revolutionary force through the leveling of all wealth, talent and status, maintained by a totalitarian state” (145). This treatment of the links between groups that at first glance appear so different allows the reader to detect the ideological tectonics whose almost imperceptible motions and frictions caused every major political cataclysm of the modern world; *Tyrants* affords a geology of politics that calls to mind the brilliant work of French political theorists Raymond Aron, Pierre Manent, and Alain Besançon. As with the other two categories, Newell rounds out his treatment of millenarian tyranny with snapshots of its emblematic individuals: Robespierre, Stalin, Hitler, and Islamic jihadists, among others.

Newell’s penetrating analysis is likely to appeal to lovers of liberty as much as to specialists in history, politics, and literature, because it is deep, gracefully written, and, at times, startlingly funny. Plato’s *Republic* is “a parents’ guide to preventing your troubled teens from turning out like” Achilles (8). Henry VIII (that “monster of gluttony”), as famously captured by Holbein, is a “veritable dirigible of jewels and velvet” (102). He calls Peter the Great, “with a head too small for his giant” frame, “a pinhead and a weirdo,” effecting a combination of a “large guileless boy and tech nerd” (122). Referring to England’s fear of “Spain with its inquisition,” Newell writes that it “was a bogeyman that in today’s terms combined Mordor, Darth Vader, and Voldemort” (113). And (my personal favorite) he likens art sponsored by communist regimes to “something from the subconscious mind of Ayn Rand on sodium pentathol” (186).

But the humor and obvious intelligence at work in *Tyrants* should not distract one from the limited, but real, problems with Newell’s book. In the first place, Newell effects an uneven treatment of the influence of religion on tyranny. For while he is not afraid to find fault with Christianity or the Catholic Church, he appears all too interested in offering an apology for Islam. Newell correctly stresses the distinctly modern, ideological strains at work in today’s Islamic jihadism, something that is almost entirely forgotten by contemporary analysts of American foreign policy. But uncovering such strains

does not exonerate Islam from the violence frequently performed in its name by its most immoderate adherents. Nor does it justify Newell's equivocation of the calls to violence found in Herbraic and Christian scriptures, which are extremely conditional, and Islamic texts, which often are not so qualified. Indeed, anyone who takes the dewy-eyed "critic" Reza Aslan as the authority on all things Islamic has some serious explaining to do. At other times, Newell downplays the Bolshevism of the Bolsheviks and instead grants disproportionate influence to the "god-destroyers" of the nineteenth century. Again, Newell is right to call attention to this long-neglected influence on communism in Russia. But his treatment has the effect of downplaying the real culprit behind the crimes of communism, namely, Karl Marx's teaching that terror, torture, and tyranny can positively transform the human condition and bring about the end of history. Finally, those familiar with texts of classical Greek philosophy and history may find Newell's presentation of ancient tyranny uneven. Achilles's longing for glory, for instance, may well be tyrannical, but can a man perhaps best known for his *withdrawal* from political action truly embody the soul of the tyrant? And they will want Newell to address more completely than he does the political psychology behind democratic imperialism, a political psychology whose enduring concern for justice and desire to control the world will surely hit home with some of his modern readers.

Despite these shortcomings, Newell's work deserves a wide audience for its attack on the conceit of modern political and social science that tyranny is a barbaric relic effectively replaced, or soon to be replaced, by the halcyon days of liberal humanitarianism. Of course, Newell's work will not change the world; it will, he acknowledges, remain "what it was before" (4). But if we learn from Newell's book, then we will see the world "differently, without the distorting lens of the modern social sciences and their inability to grasp tyranny as a permanent alternative. . . . It's the same world but our understanding of it will change considerably" (14). According to Newell, this "will involve teaching our young that real and aspiring tyrants exist, just as they always have, and that it is important to learn what motivates them" (14). Such a lesson may disturb and unsettle those who would like to believe that the successes of the modern liberal project have discredited tyranny as a political alternative, that progress and the spread of human rights have consigned it to the "ash heap of history," and that we no longer need to take tyranny seriously. But it is precisely such unsettling experiences that initiate the political education which so many of democracy's contemporary defenders most need.