

John Keane: Nadia, I'd like to have a brief chat with you about the concept of despotism. It's an old term that has actually fallen out of fashion in political thinking in recent decades.

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, exactly.

John Keane: There was a period when it flourished, could you say something about the genealogy of this term, how do you understand the roots of this term and its meanings?

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, so the roots are Greek and despotis is the master of slaves, which means the owners and the rulers of slaves. It is thus not a political category, it is a category defining a relation of authority outside of the polis, Aristotle puts it in the oikos and the oikos is not the place of the polis of course, where the citizens are free and equal and they make laws. In the polis, there is a hierarchy of authority, many hierarchies of authority. Among them, despotis.

John Keane: The despotis is the head of the oikos, of the household

Nadia Urbinati: In relation to the slaves, not to the wife, or the children. So it is: non-political; it defines the relational structure of inequality; and of even possession somehow. But it is not political.

John Keane: And it's a relationship of benevolence?

Nadia Urbinati: Well, it's a utilitarian benevolence, because for the master it's good that his slave is okay, because he produces more, he operates well, he doesn't rebel. So the master wants the slave to be okay in order to not rebel, to be functional as a machine, as a tool, it's a tool and a relationship.

John Keane: Later, the term is revived and introduced to a number of European languages, is it not, during Medieval Christendom. And it comes to refer to the East, the category comes to have an Orientalist connotation.

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, exactly. The first to do so, it was Aristotle himself, because he said that despotism is not a form of political life that belongs to the West. It belongs to Persia, that is those who are on the Asian side. They don't know, he says, they don't know politics because they only know how to obey 'one'. We are instead political and when we lose politics with tyranny we know what it means to lose freedom with tyranny. So tyranny is different from despotism because it is a violation of a legitimate government. Whereas despotism is a form of non-political government purely, quasi a very animal kind because it's a relation between you and your dog, you and your subalterns. So in the eighteenth century this comes back, thanks to Montesquieu, who changed this conception a little bit and he adapts it even to the West for the first time. When he criticises monarchy without intermediary bodies or absolute monarchy he opens the floor to the possibility that the West too can become an object of an exercise of despotism

John Keane: That is the whole point of the *Lettres Persanes*, of the *Persian Letters*, where there is a visit of Easterners to Europe and where those Easterners make observations about Europe that highlights that Europe actually has a lot of Eastern qualities, that monarchy is despotic.

Nadia Urbinati: Exactly. So, one: it's possible then to have despotism in the West, this is new and he defines despotism also in relation to another important passion: fear. He says that despotic form of domination which, in *L'Esprit de Lois*, he locates in the East, that people individually speaking, they are scared, like a slave relation.

John Keane: That's because he also conceives despotism as a reckless quality. There is one point in which he says, he says despotism is like the natives of Louisiana. They see a tree with fruit and they cut down the tree. But in your work on John Stuart Mill, your first book in English, you show a lot of interest in the category of despotism through the eyes of Mill. Mill understood the category differently, didn't he?

Nadia Urbinati: Exactly. He gives something important, Mill, perhaps also through his experience in the East India Company, we don't know, I personally think that there is a correlation between ..

John Keane: Well, his father wrote a multi-volume history of India..

Nadia Urbinati: Exactly. So Mill uses despotism in relation to a potential degeneration of representative government in the West and he does so in relation to the emergence and expansion of civil society, of market society because he thinks that this market society needs to have a lot of regulations to work. It cannot work 'naturally'. Regulations in institutions of bureaucracy to give them some services, infrastructure, conditions for existing and becoming prosperous. Thus it is a shrinking of politics, an expansion of administration, today we would say 'governance', which the society itself requires. So, thus, he says, the risk of the moderns is to have, once again, the expansion of the non-political and the shrinking of the political. For this reason, for him, representative government was very good because it was the expression of politics, because it used eloquence, rhetoric, speech, persuasion, all these kind of characteristics that belong to politics..

John Keane: So for Mill, despotism takes on the meaning of a relationship of power that expunges, that annihilates the issue of responsibility, of accountability of that relationship of power to others.

Nadia Urbinati: It takes...it does it in this way. Today we would say 'functions': it connects responsibility to the specific function we have to explicate. Whereas in politics, the accountability, the responsibility is in relation to the exercise of political rights indifferently, without any specific goal or a specific function. So despotism is like in the bureaucracy: it is an articulation of different roles in relation to the goal to be achieved and thus each has different responsibilities and a different degree. So you need hierarchy, in the political realm, as citizens, there is no such thing, there is equality in distribution of responsibility, the person we vote for, they are responsible, totally responsible, indeed the next time, we don't vote for them if we don't like them. This is not possible in the administration in which there are rules that keep you inside of its structure.

John Keane: He also used the term despotism to describe and analyse the relationship between labour and capital, between men and women.

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, in the classical sense he says that is what we have had forever, the relationship with labour, in the relationship between men and women, yes, but we have something new here, that is the growth of new forms of despotism inside of a capitalistic macro society. It is a system of hyper-regulation.

John Keane: And is it not also that Mill's treatment of the term, invoking and utilisation of the term, brings to the surface the problem of voluntary servitude. That it is a form of power that is a domination, that those who are ruled in that power relationship, accept that relationship.

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, he calls, he invents a name to call despotism in modern market-based societies, pedantocracy. Pedantocracy is a Latin name that means do 'pedissequum'—what you have to do without discussion, without disputation, this is your job, you have to do it, don't discuss. So suppose that your life is spent 10,12,15 hours a day operating inside of this domain, of doing your job without discussion. Clearly you live half of your life, the most part of your everyday life, in a situation of despotic relationship.

John Keane: Do you think, today, this category remains useful? Or does it belong to that arsenal of categories that are now antiquated, they belong to a treasure chest from the past? Or does it have a living relevance?

Nadia Urbinati: As Mill did, as Montesquieu did with despotism, they recover it and they adapt it to their own time, perhaps today too we can do the same because there are situations in which we can adapt it in a way that is creative or useful or expressive. Think about governance. So this large domain within corporations, inside of even political relations, inside city organisations and so on and so forth. Well there are forms in which politics should be out, partisanship should be out and definition of responsibility should be clear and prior defined and then you have ...yes, I would say that you can adapt it to express this large domain of non-political management kind of activities.

John Keane: And it has something, quite a lot to do with democracy. Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill's colleague, associate, contemporary, warned that democracies could nurture despotism.

Nadia Urbinati: Yes.

John Keane: Does this point remain relevant?

Nadia Urbinati: In Weber himself, there was the following: since democracy implies equality of consideration and opportunity and treatment, it's much better to have a system of bureaucracy in which bureaucrats operate according to norms that they don't decide and they treat people blindly equally instead of treating them according to partisan distinctions even the majority can be in this case, less safe than a bureaucratic treatment so Weber would say like Tocqueville that democracy expands the domain of non-political relations that's despotic. It's possible.

John Keane: Nadia, thank you very much, grazie mille.