

## **Oriental despotism and the political monsters of**

### **Michel Foucault's *Les anormaux***

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#### **Abstract**

On 29 January 1975 Foucault spoke of two political monsters in revolutionary France: one of them incestuous (the king), the other cannibalistic (the crowd). The figure of the despot constitutes a norm of political conduct, if we understand the 'normal' as constituted in its relation to its spectral, abnormal 'others'. In 1959 Foucault's tutor Louis Althusser had suggested that the 'oriental despot' was a spectre [*épouvantail*] constitutive of western political thought. Foucault's lecture, on the other hand, discussed how the despot and the rebellious people became political monsters during the French Revolution. This paper considers the oversight of Foucault's work relative to Asia and extends his account of political monstrosity through an analysis of how James Mill articulated his political theory in *The history of British India* (1858) around the thesis that 'the fear of insurrection' constitutes the necessary impetus for the movement from 'semi-barbarous' to 'civilised' society.

Michel Foucault devoted much of his lecture of 29 January 1975 to discussing what he called ‘the first political monster’: the despot. For those of us studying the history of European discourses on Asia the word ‘despot’ is intimately associated with the word ‘oriental’ and, very often, with the writings of Montesquieu and James Mill. Does this lecture contain some special treasure, some uniquely Foucauldian account of the history of the uses of ‘oriental despotism’ within European histories of Asia and modern political thought?

The potential uses of Foucault’s lecture on political monsters are difficult to assess here, but from previous discussions of Foucault’s ‘Eurocentrism’ we might anticipate some likely inadequacies of it as an account of *oriental* despotism. As Edward Said notes, ‘the imperial experience is quite irrelevant’ for Foucault; we should also note, however, Said’s claim that this ‘theoretical oversight’ is the norm in the academic discipline of intellectual history (Said 1993, p. 47).

This lecture might be said to confirm Said’s reading of Foucault, as even the closest reading of it fails to discover even a single reference to Asia. Indeed, from Foucault’s account, you might almost believe that the ‘despot’ emerged *ex nihilo* within Jacobin pamphlets condemning Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, while, similarly, another political monster – ‘the rebellious people’ – seems to have emerged in aristocratic reactions to the September massacres of 1792 (Foucault 2003, pp. 98–99). Furthermore, while Foucault refers to the ‘reactivation’ and ‘revival’ of ‘ancient themes’ in this discourse of the ‘despot’ he never discusses the ‘oriental’ in relation to that discourse, despite the fact that even the most cursory glance at the eighteenth-century discourse on ‘despotism’ discovers that Foucault’s political monster first appeared in literature on the East, and prominent writers such as Montesquieu were deploying the monstrous figure of the ‘oriental despot’ as early as 1721, drawing upon travel accounts from the sixteenth century and a tradition in political philosophy extending back as far as Aristotle (Rubiés 2005; Grosrichard 1998). In this light, Foucault’s suggestion that the themes of revolutionary and reactionary discourses on political monsters in late eighteenth-century France ‘reactivate ancient themes’ seems to entail an especially symptomatic ‘oversight’ relative to the conjuncture immediately preceding it. This oversight should not, however, lead us to consider Foucault’s conceptual apparatus as necessarily inadequate for such an analysis, or to attribute this to a ‘state of mind’ or ‘intention’ on Foucault’s part; it is quite possible, on the contrary, to see this as symptomatic

of Foucault's positioning within his own conjuncture, and the seeming 'irrelevance' of such issues to his audience, as a recent essay by Amit S Rai (2004) demonstrates the potential for applying Foucault's concept of monstrosity to oriental despotism.

However, as Louis Althusser reminds us, 'there is no such thing as an innocent reading' (1970, p. 14). With this in mind, you might ask: Where's the 'crime' in Foucault's omission of the 'oriental' in his discussion of the despot? Given that Foucault was Althusser's student in the late 1950s he was especially unlikely to have been unaware of the latter's discussion of oriental despotism in *Montesquieu* (1959), where Althusser argued that 'despotism' is a grotesque caricature intended 'to edify by its very horribleness':

No doubt 'despotism' is a caricature ... But a cause has to be judged by its effects. Once we see the respective situations of the *great* and the *people* in despotism, we will realize the dangers against which it was meant to be a forewarning. (1972, pp. 83–84)

While we see each of these characters replicated in Foucault's account, or at least the despot and the (rebellious) people, in the conjuncture that Foucault is discussing – the time of the French Revolution – the interest of the 'great' was suddenly identified with that of the king against the people. As Althusser notes, the discourse of oriental despotism – *at least in its pejorative sense* – was the preserve of the aristocratic faction led by Fénelon and Montesquieu in early- to mid-eighteenth century France (1972, pp. 82–83), when an alliance of the king and the people was prominent among aristocratic anxieties. Furthermore, while Montesquieu's pejorative usage eventually prevailed, in the second half of that century it broke away from its aristocratic moorings and soon, as Melvin Richter has noted, 'every group involved in French oppositional politics ... applied it to any and all alleged abuses in every domain' (2007, p. 17).

Notably, there is no sense of 'despotism' as a form of government in Foucault's work: he discusses the 'despot' as a criminal, as an object of revolutionary justice, without any discussion of how that 'monster' emerged in *aristocratic* criticisms of an absolute monarchy that they feared would reduce *all* to slaves, even *the great* (Althusser 1972, pp. 96–106). This raises questions of reading and overdetermination: how were the writers of the later

eighteenth century reading the work of Montesquieu, and how might it have been always-already read for them?

While Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette became monstrous ‘despots’ in France, in Britain the discourse of oriental despotism was being renovated for new purposes with regard to its Indian context. The Governor-General of Bengal, Warren Hastings, was the subject of an impeachment trial in the British Parliament (led by Edmund Burke, commencing in February 1788) precisely on the charge of having ruled as a despot, even though his entire administration had proceeded on the basis of a shared notion that despotism was the only form of government suited to the Indian people (on the trial of Warren Hastings see Suleri 1992). The charges against Hastings should be read in the context of the orientalist attempt to restore the ‘ancient constitution’ of India and thereby reverse the ‘degeneration’ of India under Muslim rule, a discourse that drew upon the work of ‘philosophical historians’ such as William Robertson, who modified Montesquieu’s account of ‘oriental despotism’ following writers in *Asiatick researches* (Rendall 1982; Phillipson 1997; Carnall 1997). In his 1818 *History of British India*, however, James Mill combined empiricism and utilitarianism to intervene in this discourse on India to undermine orientalist claims that caste (read: aristocratic privilege) protected the people against despotism in ancient India. Crucial to Mill’s intervention was his notion of a ‘sinister interest’ of the king and aristocracy in combining to exploit the ‘productive classes’, and his depiction of the interests of members of the latter classes as identical with that of the community as a whole (see also Mill 1992).

Mill argued that despotism was a ‘semi-barbarous’ form of government that exists in all nations in their formative stages, rather than an impossible regime imaginable only in exotic Asia. In Mill’s work despotism represents the origins of government in a time when desire and the imagination are unrestrained by knowledge and discipline (see Majeed 1992). Drawing a line of demarcation between Hindu and Muslim forms, Mill argued that the latter is superior to the former in almost every respect (Mill 1858, pp. 338–369), a notion that derives from his epistemology and politics:

As all our knowledge is built upon experience, the recordation of the past for the guidance of the future is one of the effects in which the utility of writing principally consists. Of this most important branch of literature the Hindus were entirely destitute. Among the Mohammedans of India, the art of

composing history has been carried to greater perfection than in any other part of Asia. (Mill 1858, p. 369)

However, while knowledge provides the *means* for improvement it is the fear of insurrection that provides the *impetus*, and here Mill argued that it is the character of *the people*, rather than the sovereign, that is decisive with regard to the improvement of government, through its tendency to affect the dread of insurrection (McInerney 2009). Mill argued the ‘dread of insurrection’ was ‘reduced to its lowest terms ... among a people [i.e. the Hindus] whose apathy and patience under suffering exceeded those of any other specimen of the human race.’ On the other hand, ‘The spirit, and excitability, and courage of the Mohammedan portion of the Indian population, undoubtedly furnished, as far as it went, an additional motive to good government on the part of the sovereigns of Hindustan’ (Mill 1858, p 347). Rather than being evidence of the ‘civilisation’ of the Hindus, as the orientalist suggest, Mill interprets their ‘mildness’ and ‘gentleness’ as ‘apathy’ and ‘patience under suffering’ and thus as evidence of the ‘theocratic’ character of the Hindu government, in an intervention that metaphorically prefigures his critiques of British government, jurisprudence, education and prison discipline in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Mill’s explanation of the ‘unimproved’ character of the Hindu form of oriental despotism served not just as a critique of Hindu practices, but also of British practices both in India and in Europe, just as Montesquieu’s account functioned to edify the king of the relationship between despotism and the multitude. Foucault’s genealogy of the despot and the criminal led him to focus on a brief moment when it became possible for the people to destroy the king, but Foucault’s reluctance to engage with the materiality of that discourse – its overdetermination by a century of debate on a monstrous regime, ‘oriental despotism’ – meant that he missed certain aspects of his other political monster, the people, and its implication in the changing anxieties of the king and aristocracy. Furthermore, and finally, he ignored the continuing relevance of ‘oriental despotism’ after the French Revolution, when it became a recurring theme of political debate in Britain, with the Hindus and the Muslims coming to represent two grotesque but opposed faces of the people – on one side effeminate and apathetic in the extreme, on the other hyper-masculine and excitable – that seem to both require education (or rather, *individualisation*) under the watchful eye of Dickensian ‘Gradgrinds’ such as James Mill.

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