

# The Despotic Imperative: From *Hiero* to *The Circle*

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**Abstract** The article thematizes the actuality of despotism through a double reading of Xenophon's *Hiero* and Dave Eggers's *The Circle*. A key text on despotism, *Hiero* is interesting to reconsider in a contemporary context because of its explicit focus on the economic element in the nexus of despotism, economy and voluntary servitude. Discussion this, the article turns to *The Circle*, a dystopic novel from 2013, which elaborates on how the attempt at creating a transparent society results in the perversion of democracy to the point where a despotism fuelled by economization and voluntary servitude becomes immediately evident. Notwithstanding the significant differences between the two understandings of despotism that proliferate in *Hiero* and *The Circle*, their shared focus on the nexus of despotism, economy and voluntary servitude testifies to an interesting case of convergence in divergence. Offering an account of this continuity, the article reflects upon the nexus of despotism, economy and voluntary servitude itself, arguing, to end with, that it should be re-thought in a new way today. The concept of use is suggested as a key concept in this context.

**Keywords** Despotism; use; economy; voluntary servitude; freedom

Despite its past centrality as a significant concept of political thought, today “despotism” seems to have become a redundant concept that designates an exceptional, archaic form of government. Paradoxically, however, nothing is easier today, in an increasingly economized and securitized world, to come across the despotic imperative which blurs the distinction between law and unlaw. Thus, populations seem to have grown a habitual obedience to the dictates of the market and the state authorities. Ours is a world that can live with “strong” leaders some of whom aspire to ruling a country as if it were a corporation, some to life-time dictatorship, some to both. While they act like one, though, none of them perceive themselves as despots.

But how did we come to this point? And what is wrong with the despotic imperative? Insofar as history is a theater, in which virtual ideas return to the actual, reiterating, repeating the ghosts of the past, in order to produce difference, “despotism” must be treated as an idea, which cannot be reduced to its actual, historical forms. Despotism is a generic idea, which expresses itself

differently in different times and spaces; a virtual, metaphysical problem that cannot fully actualize itself in concrete situations. Therefore, it is necessary to see its contemporary permutations, its endless resurrections, even when it appears as its opposite. In this sense, the actuality of despotism is grounded in the problem of repetition. Hence in this article I juxtapose the ancient and the modern accounts of despotism, Xenophon's *Hiero* and Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, and reveal the (dis)continuities between them.

Originally, a despot is defined as a person who lives and rules without regard for the society. "So that," as Machiavelli puts it in the *Discourses*, "he alone, and not his country, profits from his acquisitions". Machiavelli adds: "And whoever should want to confirm this opinion with infinite other arguments, let him read Xenophon's treatise which he wrote on *Tyranny*" (1999: II. 2). This advice of Machiavelli is of course a good reason to start a discussion of despotism with Xenophon's treatise *Hiero*. Xenophon offers here an intriguing critique of despotism through a fictional Socratic dialogue between a despot, Hiero, and a poet-philosopher, Simonides, illuminating both the despotic logic and endeavoring to articulating remedies for it. My main reason to turn to *Hiero*, though, is Xenophon's explicit focus on economy in his treatment of the nexus of despotism, economy and voluntary servitude, and thus his implicit transgression of the Greek separation between politics and economy more visibly than, for instance, Plato and Aristotle. As such, Xenophon's *Hiero* is a key text on despotism, many aspects of which are interesting to rethink in a contemporary context. In this article I want to do this in a specific way, by re-vitalizing the nexus of despotism, economy and voluntary servitude, and asking whether thinking in terms of this nexus is still useful today.

The phenomenon of despotism has mutated extensively since Xenophon's time. To thematize this, I turn to a contemporary fiction, *The Circle*, Dave Eggers's dystopic novel from 2013, which elaborates on the despotic tendency inherent to the contemporary society. Set in California in the near future, the novel's protagonist, Mae, works at the Circle, "the most influential company in the world" (Eggers 2013: 1). Having already bought up companies such as Google, Facebook and Twitter, the Circle is a highly innovative and popular web company. One of its achievements is to combine all individual interactions into a single online identity called TruYou. As the use of TruYou spreads, the company starts to accumulate more and more information about online social interactions, personal communications and business data. But the Circle, being a "democratic" (401) company, decides that "all knowledge must be democratically accessible" (302). However, the attempt at creating an absolutely transparent society results in the perversion of democracy to the point where a despotism fuelled by

economization and voluntary servitude becomes immediately evident. As such, the society depicted in *The Circle*, a society in which metric power, algorithmic governmentality and virtual money constitute the new game in town, is reminiscent of what Deleuze (1995) has diagnosed as control society. Today, Deleuze was arguing, factories tend to be replaced with businesses, politics by continuous opinion polling, and critique by continuous digital assessment. Turning marketing into a dispositif to remodel the whole society, control society realizes a “real subsumption” of labour under capital, corresponding to a total commodity fetishism (Hardt 1998: 35). Importantly, however, in control societies “older means of control, borrowed from the old sovereign societies” also come back (Deleuze 1995: 182). The high-tech servitude, which *The Circle* skilfully describes by pushing the economic element to the foreground, is especially interesting in this regard.

Notwithstanding the significant differences between the two understandings of despotism that proliferate in *Hiero* and *The Circle*, then, their shared focus on the nexus of despotism, economy and voluntary servitude testifies to an interesting case of convergence in divergence. Offering an account of this continuity in both works, I also aim at reflecting upon the nexus of despotism, economy and voluntary servitude itself, arguing, to end with, that it should be rethought in a new way today.

## ***Hiero***

*Hiero* is initiated by a question on happiness, on which the Athenian political philosophy sought to found itself. Apparently assuming the desirability of being a despot, Simonides asks Hiero whether the despot is happier than the multitude which he rules (Xenophon 2013: 1.2). “It is not so, Simonides,” Hiero answers:

To fear a crowd, and yet fear solitude, to fear to go unguarded, and yet fear the very men who guard you, to recoil from attendants unarmed and yet dislike to see them armed – surely that is a cruel predicament! (6.4)

Most things considered worthy in daily life have a dubious quality for the despot. The praise he receives, for instance, always comes in the form of flattery and it does so from subjects who are not free (1.15). Even more importantly, since almost everything is easily available to him, Hiero complains about “a feeling of repletion” (1.19). At one point Simonides wonders whether this feeling of Hiero, repletion, applies to erotic pleasures as well. According to Hiero,

the despot is worse off on that front, too, for he “can never feel sure that he is loved”, that his lover’s acts of compliance are prompted by affection rather than fear (1.37). To illustrate his point, Hiero describes his relation to Dailochus, one of his lovers:

... what I long to get, I very strongly desire to get by his goodwill, and with his consent; but I think I could sooner desire to do myself an injury than to take it from him by force (1.34). For to take from an enemy against his will is, I think, the greatest of all pleasures, but favours from a loved one are very pleasant, I fancy, only when he consents. (1.35)

Hiero complains further that he cannot expect affective reciprocity from his fellow citizens, either, for the simple reason that he is never at peace with them. Besides, since he can sustain his relations with his lovers and his subjects only through force, Hiero can never trust them (2.11). Which excludes him from friendship or love which is a “blessing” for ordinary people (3.5). Against this background, Hiero concludes that the despot is necessarily less happy than his subjects. But then why Hiero, or other despots, never attempt to get rid of their power voluntarily, if despotism is as dreadful as Hiero’s verdict suggests? Hiero replies:

this is the crowning misery of despotic power, that it cannot even be got rid of. For how could any despot ever find means to repay in full all whom he has robbed, or himself serve all the terms of imprisonment that he has inflicted? Or how could he forfeit a life for every man whom he has put to death? (7.12).

The rest of *Hiero* is dominated by Simonides’ monologue-like advice to Hiero with a view to reforming despotism. In this, characteristically of Xenophon, Simonides does not indulge in a moral condemnation of Hiero or his despotic rule. Instead, he suggests to him that only through defending the common good he can secure himself. Only in this way he can secure what he really wants, the affection of his subjects and their willing obedience (11.8, 11.12). Simonides’s advice culminates with the following crucial theme:

Account the fatherland your estate, the citizens your comrades, friends your own children, your sons possessions dear as life. And try to surpass all these in deeds of kindness. For if you out-do your friends in kindness, it is certain that your enemies will not be able to resist you. And if you do all these things, rest assured that you will be possessed of the fairest and most blessed possession in the world; for none will be jealous of your happiness. (11.14)

During Simonides’s advice Hiero remains silent. We are thus not sure whether he is convinced. The question is whether we are, for the dialogue between wisdom and power, between the poet

and the despot, invites several questions. First of all, can we trust Hiero? And how about Simonides – is his attempt at reforming despotism, at reconciling the despot and the society, realistic and viable? Most importantly, what are the implications of “accounting the fatherland your estate”, of ruling the *polis*, the society, as if it were an *oikos*, a household?

Hiero’s rhetoric ceases to be convincing on several accounts. As Leo Strauss (1963: 45-8) observed, he blames despotism mostly on the grounds that the despot is disadvantaged compared to the private citizen, especially in relation to homosexual love, failing to mention other pleasures related to power. Such omissions cast doubt on Hiero’s judgment that despotism is bad even for the despot. Further, Hiero is an interested party in the conversation and it is in his interest to conceal what he is and to pretend being one he is not, that is, to dissimulate and to simulate, which are two defining characteristics of the despot (see Canetti 1962: 370). Thus we can suggest that in the dialogue Hiero approaches Simonides, and us, in the guise of a discussant, but possibly with a concealed agenda. Such concealment requires, as Canetti observed, a mask (Canetti 1962: 377). Hiero therefore avoids discussing the most central theme regarding despotism, its “self-aggrandizing nature”, diverting our attention to greater or smaller pleasure quotients of private or public individuals (Higgins 1977: 63). Ironically, however, by staging a strong indictment of despotism in this way, by letting Hiero condemn himself, Xenophon also intimates the limited validity of that indictment” (Strauss 1963: 48).

Another deception pertains to Hiero’s statements about his longing for the consent and friendship of his subjects. His longing might be genuine but this does not mean that consent and friendship are more appealing to Hiero than what he describes as “the greatest of all pleasures,” that is, “to take from an enemy against his will,” or capturing (see Newell 1988: 118 and Rasmussen 2009: 42). Power is basically an apparatus of capture; it “only reigns over what it is capable of internalizing” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 360). To use a metaphor from Kafka, it is like “a cage” that goes “in search of a bird” (Kafka 2015: 16). Thus, even the earliest written creation myth, the Enuma Elish, contains scenes of capturing. The fourth tablet, for instance, describes a king/God, Marduk, fighting with a “net” in order to take his enemies “captive.”<sup>1</sup> The desire for capturing, “to keep free men slaves” (Xenophon 2013: 1.34), is what Hiero cannot let go.

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<sup>1</sup> (Enuma Elish, Tablet IV: 41-44; <http://www.crystalinks.com/enumaelish.html>)

## Perversion and Economy

The ancient Athenian thought related the concept of despotism to perversion, distortion and corruption. Plato, for instance, defines despotism as a perverted form of democracy. When, with a populist gesture, democracy sweeps the principles of good government away, it passes into tyranny (Plato 2003: VIII 562a). The people see the monster they have created at one point, but this is always a sign that it is too late (VIII 569b). For Aristotle, too, despotism is a perversion, the perversion of kingship (Aristotle 1995: III 1279b4). It is a form of rule exercised over “unwilling subjects” (IV: 1295a). Thus it can only be sustained through blatant terror or reform, through “making it more like kingship” so that the reformed despot can “act, or at any rate, appear to act, in the role of a good player of the part of king” (Aristotle 1995: V 1314a29). Playing the king, the despot must become a vanishing mediator on the way to kingship as “true” government.

Xenophon, too, understands despotism as distinct from kingship. In contrast to Plato and Aristotle, however, he does not immediately condemn it as a perverted, illegitimate regime. He recognizes its unhealthy aspects, but assumes “the possibility of improving tyranny outside traditional notions of moral and political virtue” (Rasmussen 2009: 34). Thus Simonides seeks to reform tyranny as tyranny, without transforming it into another, better political regime. His focus is on Hiero’s own concerns rather than forcing him, as Aristotle does, to play the king. As such, however, Simonides’ reformed despotism does not call for a rule over unwilling subjects. Rather, it emphasizes the significance of willing subjects. What is missing in it is not consent but the rule of law (Strauss 1963: 68). In Simonides’s benevolent despotism, the subjects can be better off, even happier, but not free or equal. The focus, at any rate, is on economy. Reformed Hiero is an economist.

Aristotle makes an effort in *Politics* to differentiate between economy and the *chērematistikē*, between the “natural” form of acquisition, which consists in attaining “true wealth”, property or goods that are necessary for the life of the household or the state, on the one hand, and the “unnatural” form of acquisition, which consists in selfish profit gain, on the other (Aristotle 1995: 23, 326). As Marx articulates it, the logic in the first case operates in the form of C-M-C: Commodity is sold for Money in order to buy another Commodity (1976: 252). In the second, “unnatural” case, however, one is solely concerned with money. Now money becomes both the beginning and the end of the process of exchange: M-C-M. “The movement of capital is therefore limitless” (252). The problem is that, despite the differentiation, there *is* an overlap

between the two forms, between “economy” and the “chrematistic” principle. As Aristotle admits, the two modes are “not identical yet ... not far removed” (Aristotle 1995: 24). It is as if what is “unnatural”, the accumulation of money-capital ad infinitum, is always already at the heart of “natural” economy, and has a potential to become its ultimate aim. As such, Aristotle’s discussion serves as *locus classicus* both for a generic concept of capital and for its moral-ethical critique (Albertsen 2012: 12).

The problem is equally unsettled in Xenophon. In the beginning of *Oeconomicus*, the question is whether economy is an art that serves the common good. In the end, though, we are left with an economy reduced to pure chrematistics unlimited by any wisdom. Hence the economist, Ischomachos, who buys “inactive land” only to improve it with a view selling for profit (Xenophon 1998: XX. 26). An emerging question is therefore: can this metamorphosis of “economy” into “chrematistics” be kept under check by an adherence to moral philosophy? When Marx praises Xenophon’s treatment of division of labor for being more detailed than Plato’s, he also mentions in passing Xenophon’s “characteristic bourgeois instinct” (Marx 1976: 488) which tends to transform economy into chrematistics. To be sure, one might suggest that the Socratic Xenophon’s instincts “were controlled by his admiration for Socrates” (Strauss 1998: 203). But there is no guarantee that this virtue is transferable to economics, that economists such as Ischomachos can follow Socrates in prioritizing philosophy over economy.

We have so far two perversions, of economy into chrematistics and of kingship into despotism. But what if despotism is not really an extreme perversion but rather the truth of kingship? And what if chrematistics is not merely an “unnatural” deviation from an economy based on “natural” use-value production but the truth of economy as such? To entertain these ideas, let us now turn to the relationship between the despot and the slave.

## **The despot and the slave**

In its origin, in ancient Athens, the rule of the despot, *oeconomicus*, designated a specific power relation that takes place in the *oikos*, in the domestic sphere, where the despot governs his children, his wife, and his slaves. “Political” power, in contrast, was seen as something that pertains to the *polis*, as a relationship between free men concerning the common good. Especially the presence of the slave in the *oikos* means, on this account, that *oeconomicus* cannot be political. But who is the slave, and what is his function in relation to the distinction

between the *polis* and the *oikos*? As is well known, the ancient Greeks defined the human as an actual form, as “political animal,” excluding from the *polis* those not considered worthy of human-political life. The slave is someone who is banned from politics. Aristotle justifies the logic of this abandonment with reference to an interesting concept, the “use of the body” (Agamben 2015: 5; see also Aristotle 1995: 1254b.17–20). Just as the soul makes use of the body as an instrument, the master uses the (body of the) slave as an instrument, as an extension of his own body. In this way the idea of slavery brings with it a constitutive division within the human between a body reduced to others’ instrumental use and another, properly “human” one (Agamben 2015: 9). As such, the slave is not so much defined by ownership or property relations but by the lack of autonomy: the slave is one that exists for another, and for another’s instrumental use (11).

Following this logic, the despot can be defined as the one who reduces a multitude of others to the position of an instrument, who captures others’ power of acting (*potentia*) and turns it into a “power over” (*potestas*) by mobilizing them in line with his own desire (Lordon 2014: 3-4). But how is the use of potential (power of acting) is captured? To understand this, we must dwell on what “use” meant to the ancient Athenians in more detail.

In contrast to the modern understanding of the term as utilization of an object by a subject, the term in Greek points toward an intermediary zone in which the subject is affected by the action. In order to use something, one must be affected by it, constitute oneself as one making use of it. Thus, in use, human being and the world are in a relationship of “reciprocal immanence” (Agamben 2015: 30). The Aristotelian definition of use, however, introduces a differentiation. It divides “use” into *dynamis* and *energeia*, potential and act, while the pivotal focus of the distinction shifts onto the passage from potential to act, a passage secured by habit (50). But does potential always automatically pass into act? One can of course have the habit in an inoperative state, without it producing any effects. But since for Aristotle the *ergon* (the proper function) of a human being is to act, the habit (of a potential) cannot be inoperative (Agamben 2013: 96).

The problem here is that “use” really precedes the division of potential and act. Being-in-use is distinct from, irreducible to being-in-act, and it does not take for granted a potential that automatically passes into the act or is put into work (Agamben 2015: 58). A piano player, for instance, is not merely the master of the potential to play the piano but constitutes herself as making use of herself as well as the piano insofar as she plays and knows habitually how to play. “Use, as habit, is a form-of-life and not the knowledge or faculty of a subject” (62). Use



in this sense is not a virtue of a *hexis* (in Greek) or *habitus* (in Latin) that converts potential into *praxis* but something ontologically given, an inoperative praxis that can only emerge through a de-activation of the potential-act apparatus which posits the primacy of act over potential (81). It is a principle that precludes the disappearance of potential into the act (93). To express this principle, Agamben turns to Spinoza:

Contemplation is the paradigm of use. Like use, contemplation does not have a subject, because in it the contemplator is completely lost and dissolved; like use, contemplation does not have an object, because in the work it contemplates only its (own) potential. Life, which contemplates in the work its (own) potential of acting or making, is rendered inoperative in all its works and lives only in use-of-itself, lives only (its) livability. (63)

Herein we also approach the main conflict between philosophy and economy. Is economy an art, which Socrates, the poor philosopher of Athens, can possess? Since management is related to knowledge, and since Socrates is a knowledgeable philosopher, he would be the “best economist” (Strauss 1998: 113). However, insofar as economy is identified as the increase of wealth, the richest person, not Socrates, would be the best economist. Thus, in *Oeconomicus*, Xenophon’s Socrates describes himself as a chatterer, an “idle talker” who “measures the air” (Xenophon 1998: XI. 3). He habitually lives in use-of-himself as philosopher.

Slavery, in this context, expresses the capture of “use” by power, the transformation of the human into an “instrument-human” (Agamben 2015: 78). At the same time, however, the slave is an “animal-human;” while the instrument-human allows for the capture of living bodies into economic apparatuses, the animal-human allows for the opening up of a political space. “The strategy is always the same: something is divided, excluded, and pushed to the bottom, and precisely through this exclusion, it is included as *archè* and foundation” (263). The simultaneous exclusion and inclusion of the bare life of the slave is the foundation of politics. Which is also to say that “bare life” does not pre-exist the *polis* but rather is produced, assumes its form, through the very distinction between natural life and political life, between *zoē* and *bios* (263).

Consequently, one can say that there are not two “arts” than can be neatly distinguished from one another, one despotic and one kingly, but rather two interchangeable languages to describe the same network of power, in which despotic power and kingly power both repel and attract each other. In this sense, the figure of the slave compels one to reformulate the relationship between the king and the despot, between the *polis* and the *oikos*. Through the slave, the

despotic relation surfaces as the hidden kernel of all Greek politics, the primary referent of which is instrumentalized bare life.

## ***The Circle***

Let us, at this point, fast forward 2400 years to discuss *The Circle*. The novel opens with Mae's arrival at the Circle's massive, spectacular campus. The everyday life on campus is busy. Yet, the Circle is not only a business but also a "spiritual state, and dramatis personae, intended to represent America" (Attwood 2013). The three top executives of the Circle, called the "Three Wise Men," are central in this respect. One is Ty, Tyler Alexander Gospodinov, the visionary behind TruYou. The other Wise Man is Eamon Bailey, the caring public face of the Circle "loved" by all employees (Eggers 2013: 24). Tom Stenton, the third, is the Circle's "world-striding CEO and self-described *Capitalist Prime*" with "flat, unreadable eyes" (23). Further, to Mae's surprise, there are regular "plankton-inspection" times for the creative wannabes "hoping the big whale ... will find them tasty enough to eat" (27). So the Circle, the "big whale" or the Leviathan, is populated by shark-like characters on the one hand and the "plankton" outsiders volunteering to be captured on the other. In between there are the "Gang of the Forty," the most important executives of the company who are "privy to its most secret plans and data," (14) and the thousands of co-workers, one of which is Mae.

The Circle's stated mission is familiar: "Communication. Understanding. Clarity" (47). One of its projects in this spirit is the production of small cameras called *SeeChange*, which can be placed everywhere. Bailey presents them with an emphasis on their democratising function. "Tyrants can no longer hide" (67). If transparency will lead to "peace of mind" (68), the Circle must become "all-seeing, all-knowing" (70). The Circle's another, similar product is *Childtrack*, an apps that enables parents and authorities tracking children all the time through a chip in their ankle. Another apps can search everything one has ever posted on the net and collate and break down this information. "We don't delete at the Circle" (204). But the Circle's most important project is one that seeks to "improve" democracy by making it possible for politicians to "go transparent" by allowing them to upload all their conversations, meetings, and every part of their day to be broadcast on their Circle page. Within weeks, thousands of elected politicians "go clear." As non-transparent politicians turn into pariahs, the Circle itself goes transparent. A thousand *SeeChange* cameras are installed on campus so that its campus life can be watched by outsiders. Significantly, however, due to potential "problems they might

pose for the protection of intellectual property,” many sensitive spaces remain without access to the cameras (242).

Mae quickly conforms to the habits, opinions and expectations of the Circle. The book renders visible the distance between the old and the new Mae through a contrast to her family and, especially, Mae’s ex-boyfriend, Mercer. “Lumpy” and with a “giant shapeless form” (126), Mercer is nothing to compare to the Circlers. More annoying still are his critical views on technology. He likens the Circle to “some cult taking over the world” (258). Mae’s desire to exorcise Mercer from her life leads her, after a fight with Mercer, to stealing a kayak to shake off the memory of Mercer. It is late at night and the beach is empty, so she thinks that her law-breaking episode will go unnoticed. But when she goes to work the morning after, she discovers that, thanks to a *SeeChange* camera located on the beach, the Circle knows all about it. She finds herself in a one-to-one meeting with Bailey. She is afraid of losing her job. But Bailey has another agenda. “Finally, finally, we can be good. In a world where bad choices are no longer an option, we have no choice but to be good. Can you imagine?” (290). Mae is relieved. Bailey continues: “We will finally realize our potential” (292).

Immediately after this meeting, Bailey arranges a presentation for the Circlers, where he announces that Mae is going fully transparent. From now on she will wear a video camera on her all the time, and all her life, in the tiniest detail (except in bed and in the bathroom), will be recorded in full and aired just in time. On the screen behind Mae it reads: Secrets are Lies. Sharing is Caring. Privacy is Theft.

Transformed into a video camera, Mae becomes the Circle’s public face. She works to give the viewers a glimpse of the daily life at the Circle. She has millions of watchers and has no doubts that she is helping to create a more transparent, perfect democracy. There are, though, others who are sceptical. One of them is Kalden, a guy with whom Mae has an episodic affair in her early days in the Circle. Kalden is critical of the Circle, thinking that its monopoly of power is a step toward “tyranny,” and warns Mae of the “completion.” Mae does not listen. She does not know what completion is either. She finds it out, though, when Bailey explains in a seminar that the Circle’s work toward transparency can actually lead to “a fully accountable government” (383). Which requires that all citizens go transparent. “So why not require every voting-age citizen to have a Circle account?” (388). After all, there are many things that are mandatory in contemporary democracies. People pay taxes, contribute to social security schemes, serve in juries, and so on. If, similarly, a TruYou account can be made

mandatory to pay taxes or to receive governmental services, “then we can take the temperature of everyone at any time” (391). This will also be “nearly cost-free” (392).

In order to get closer to “completion,” the Circle launches a new system, *SoulSearch*, which enables searching crowds to find criminals. Mae presents it to the Circlers and her 14 million watchers. First she selects an arbitrary fugitive criminal and distributes her photo through the Circle’s media. This results in her arrest in 10 minutes. Somebody among the audience yells “Let’s do another!” (452). Stenton suggests that she tries a regular civilian this time. “Okay,” she says. “Our second target today is not a fugitive from justice, but you might say he’s a fugitive from, well, friendship” (452). Acknowledging the laughter, she goes on: “This is Mercer Medeiros. I haven’t seen him in a few months, and would love to see him again” (452). Mercer is located driving somewhere in less than 10 minutes. But he is not interested in “communication.” Mae talks to Mercer through the Circle’s drone:

“Mercer!” she said, in mock-authoritative voice. “Mercer, stop the car and surrender. You’re surrounded.” Then she thought of something that made her smile again. “You’re surrounded ...” she said, lowering her voice, and then, in a chirpy alto, “by friends!” As she’d known they would, a burst of laughter and cheers thundered through the auditorium. (459)

The audience is cheering, comments piling up, some stating that this is “the greatest viewing experience of their lives.” But Mercer is not stopping the car. Mae sees in his face “something like serenity” just before he commits suicide by speeding his car toward a concrete barrier (460-461).

In the end of the book, which follows up this spectacle of suicide, Mae realizes that Kalden is really Ty. Ty explains to her that he goes around with another name for he works to prevent the “fucking shark that eats the world” (480). Ty thinks that politics is still possible. He suggests to her that they try to slow down the monster. “Slow what down? The company you created?” Ty answers that he was after a “more civil,” “more elegant” web. He didn’t imagine mandatory circle membership, a world in which “all government and all life was channelled through one network” (480). His idea is perverted into “a totalitarian nightmare” with no possibility of opting out (480). He admits that he discovered this when it was too late. “And then it was just too fast, and there was enough money to make any dumb idea real” (481).

Mae is not convinced. Ty appeals to Mae’s intuition, asking her to imagine a world in which the Circle has devoured all competitors, can control all information. “Under the guise of having

every voice heard, you create mob rule, a filterless society where secrets are crimes” (483). Bailey genuinely believes that life will be better if information becomes common. But when such “infocommunist” is paired with “ruthless capitalistic ambition,” the utopia is “monetized” (484). “And that’s so bad?” Mae asks. Equal access to information and services means, to her, “equality;” besides, the Circle is the promise of a world with no crime, murder, rape or kidnapping. “But who wants to be watched all the time?” “I do. I want to be seen. I want proof I existed” (484). Then, still unconvinced, Mae asks: “So what exactly do you want from me?” (485).

Ty hands Mae a political statement, which, under the heading of “The Rights of Humans in a Digital Age,” attacks the Circle for measuring and quantifying the value of every human action with “catastrophic” consequences, and asserts the “right to anonymity,” claiming that everybody should have “the right to disappear” (485). He is hoping that if Mae reads this to the Circle’s watchers, the information he leaks could convince anyone, “no matter how blind,” that it is necessary to “dismantle” the circle. “And then what?” “Then,” replies Ty, “you and I go somewhere.” He says they can “vanish,” they can “hike” or “bike” somewhere in Tibet or the Mongolian steppe, or “sail...” (485).

Mae pictured all this. She pictured the Circle being taken apart, sold off amid scandal, thirteen thousand people out of jobs, the campus overtaken, broken up, turned into a college or mall or something worse. And finally she pictured life on a boat with this man, sailing the world, untethered, but when she tried to, she saw, instead, the couple on the barge she’d met months ago on the bay. Out there, alone, living under a tarp, drinking wine from paper cups, naming seals, reminiscing about island fires. (486)

At that point, “so close to apocalypse,” Mae can see everything “clearly:” what if she trusted Ty and acted accordingly? What if there were somebody else in her place, somebody without her “integrity” (489)? Mae’s willingly slavish devotion to the Circle’s worldview, which she calls “loyalty,” results in the loss of all hopes of avoiding the beginning of the end, the “completion” of the circle, and we end up in a dystopian world:

a world where everyone could know each other truly and wholly, without secrets, without shame and without the need for permission to see or to know, without the selfish hoarding of life—any corner of it, any moment of it. All of that would be, so soon, replaced by a new and glorious openness, a world of perpetual light. Completion was imminent, and it would bring peace, and it would bring unity, and all that messiness of humanity until

now, all those uncertainties that accompanied the world before the Circle, would be only a memory. (491)

## **Despotism as anti-despotism**

The despotic imperative can catch one on the flight, at the moment when one thinks one has escaped it. To quote from *The Usual Suspects*, “the greatest trick the devil has ever pulled is to convince the world he did not exist.” Thus today we are confronted not only with compulsory but also voluntary despotisms, which signify not compulsion but, as is the case with *The Circle*, a new dream of community or belonging. As such, *The Circle* encapsulates the predicament of politics in the contemporary trans-political society: a world of reversals and emptying out, a simulacrum, in which McDonald’s can engage in anti-obesity campaigns, the war against terror claims to bring “democracy”, dictators accuse their adversaries of being Fascists, private companies can take public responsibility... In this world, despotism, too, must appear as its opposite. Thus *The Circle*’s world is one in which “tyrants can no longer hide”.

Already in the 1980s Baudrillard was asking: “Why does the World Trade Center have *two* towers” (Baudrillard 1988: 43)? The twin towers of the WTC were perfect parallelepipeds whose smooth surfaces merely mirrored each other, confirming the irrelevance of distinction and opposition in the “end” of history. Cancelling out difference, upon which politics is based, the WTC was a symbol of transpolitics: an obscene system in which dialectical polarity no longer exists, a simulacrum, where acts disappear without consequences in indifferent signs and images (Baudrillard 1994: 16, 32). As a consequence, in transpolitics, we are not only deprived of the real – ours is not merely a “post-truth” age – but also of the fiction. Thus Mae, who stands for the spontaneous ideology of the Circle, can no longer imagine the possibility of seeing things differently. The “completed” Circle is the end of history, what is left of a society when you take away the possibility of critique. In it, happiness is consumerism, politics conformism. The most crucial aspect of the Circle is that it takes itself for granted as democracy, declaring itself to be a final form. This accord with what exists paradoxically restores the mythic-despotic power in the form of a new, “democratic” taboo. Thus what appears to be “freedom” to the Circlers is really voluntary servitude. Tellingly in this regard, Mercer, the novel’s miscreant, is the only person who can look beyond what exists.

The political order envisaged in *The Circle* is to create obedient subjects. Since individuals are governed by passions as well as reason, the Circle must control and, when necessary, repress

human passions through fear. Hence the necessity of the spectacle of fear, of “crime,” “murder,” “rape” or “kidnapping” and “tyranny.” Fear legitimizes the authority of the Circle, which has security as its *raison d’être*. To be sure, “people” submit their information to the Circle voluntarily, but at the moment they have transferred the information, their freedom disappears. As such, without the “people,” the Circle’s societal condition is really emptied out of democratic politics. This, however, does not suggest that “people” can retreat into the private. While the *polis* is privatized, the *oikos* is politicized. While fear de-politicizes the society, subjecting it to an economic logic, the private sphere is politicized to the point that “privacy” becomes “theft.”

However, just as the sovereign must stand outside of the law so as to master it, the Circle exempts itself from the imperative of transparency when it is convenient (“intellectual property”). The Circle’s power is grounded not only in founding the law, by re-defining citizenship with reference to “mandatory” Circle accounts, but also in suspending the law. The Circle becomes a sovereign because it can decide on an exception, suspend the law which it imposes on others. The “force” of the Circle, its despotic kernel, consists in this capacity to exempt itself from its own order.

What is the difference between Hiero’s despotism and the Circle’s? While for the Ancients nature is a given, taken for granted context for action, for the moderns, starting with Machiavelli and Hobbes, it becomes something to be formed (Newell 2013: 435). Thus, like Machiavelli’s Prince or Hobbes’s Leviathan, the Circle no longer positions itself within a transcendent nature. On the contrary, it is bent on imposing its own (transcendent) will or reason on an immanent nature (“Finally, finally, we can be good”). Accordingly, despotism, too, turns into something that can be extinguished. The paradox, however, is that while reacting antagonistically to what it perceives to be “tyranny,” the Circle re-affirmatively outbids itself, appropriating despotism while rejecting it. Consequently, the attempt at democratization and despotism contaminate and overlap with each other. The Circle’s zeal for imperviousness leads to its loss of immunity.

The Circle’s is a paradoxical despotism designed to save us from despotism. If it appears as an invisible, managerial mechanism, this is only because politics in the Circle is reduced to a means to serve an end: security and economic well-being. Whether this end is achieved democratically or despotically matters only secondarily. Ultimately, therefore, next to its condemnation of “tyranny,” the Circle can easily suspend democracy through forced participation in the spectacle, denying people the right *not* to participate in its network. And

so, although condemned, despotism returns in an informational-technological variant and is assimilated into the Circle's spectacle-democracy.

What is remarkable, though, is the similarity between the Circle's rule and Simonides' reformed despotism designed for Hiero: in both *Hiero* and *The Circle*, the wise claim to know more about ruling than the rulers, making an attempt to teach the rulers how they can enroll the people into their rule, making their own desire theirs, and winning their willing obedience. But unlike Xenophon, who lets Simonides, a shrewd poet, advise the despot, thus keeping Socrates or philosophy at a distance from this role, the Circle's neo-liberal wise men conflate the role of the philosopher, the economist and the ruler. The consequence is that Simonides's concern with economy is let loose in a "democratic" context. What is new in the Circle is, in other words, capitalism as a system, as something that cannot be subordinated to the state. As Foucault has shown, liberal political economy traditionally sought to separate the political and economic spheres (Foucault 2008: 283). Neo-liberalism, in contrast, seeks to extend the powers of economy into political and social contexts. Neo-liberalism involves an "economisation," the extension of the economic logic into domains which have hitherto been considered to be non-economic (219; see also Brown 2015). In this sense the Circle's is a fully economised social order inhabited by subjects who consider themselves as their own capital.

The political consequence of economization is to stifle politics by turning societies into hostages to a pre-empted future, into "societies of control" (Deleuze 1995: 181). And importantly, this process involves morality, the creation of a "soul": "We are taught businesses have souls, which is surely the most terrifying news in the world" (181). Hence one of the intriguing comments Mae receives after her spectacular success with turning herself into a camera:

You connected it all. You found a way to save all the souls. This is what we were doing in the church—we tried to get them all. How to save them all? This has been the work of missionaries for millennia. [...] There can be one morality, one set of rules. Imagine! (Eggers 2013: 395)

For the same reason, Mercer likens the Circle to a "cult taking over the world" (258). The Circle's is an ideology that desires to become a new religion, to create a perfect community, through a sacrificial logic (sacrificing privacy, freedom, democracy...). Therefore, also, it attracts many for "the offering to obscure gods of an object of sacrifice is something to which few subjects can resist succumbing, as if under some monstrous spell" (Lacan 1994: 275).



However, while the Circle functions as an “obscure” religion, there is a fundamental difference between the Circle and religion. Religious belief involves uncertainty, “fear and trembling,” without which the believers would be reduced to puppets in a mechanical universe (Kierkegaard 1962: 7, 111). The ideology of the Circle, in contrast, is certain that it has direct access to the knowledge of the good and its paradigmatic subject, e.g. Mae, perceives herself as its willing instrument. In this sense, the key to understand the libidinal economy of the Circle is enjoyment, or more specifically, the Sadistic enjoyment derived from “doing one’s duty”, from the self-instrumentalization in relation to a superego figure (see Žižek 2001: 112).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, what frightens Mae more than anything else is, as it transpires in the end of the book, is the free “use” of the world and herself, the image of a world in which she does not have to realize her potentials. Thus, when she pictures herself as contemplating the world, without being (ab)used by the Circle, she is repelled by this scene “so close to apocalypse.” This contrast between use/contemplation and abuse/instrumentalization, depicted vividly in the book, also encapsulates the contrast between freedom and despotism. (It is telling, along the same lines, that in the film version this final dialogue is removed; instead, in the film Mae turns the Circle’s weapon against itself and tricks Bailey and Stenton themselves into going transparent, which, curiously, justifies the ideology of transparency while, at the same time, turning the critique of the spectacle into a spectacle.)

As a mode of measuring “opinion”, the Circle’s obsession with data, its assumption that data is value-free, is symptomatic for contemporary politics in which combinations of data function as a “grid” that frames, and thus delimits, political perceptions (Deleuze 2006: 144). There is in this sense a link between the Circle-style algorithmic governmentality and repression. The constant measuring of opinion is a highly depoliticized practice that tends to reduce politics to affects. Consequently, as the old political distinctions (such as the one between the Left and the Right) disappears into a dialectic of affects, primarily of fears, the logic of the democracy starts to resemble that of the single party system (Badiou 2008: 28). Consensus turns into an invariant of politics, and most significant issues cease to create scissions, taking “democracy” and the market merely as an unquestionable, naturalized background. Indeed, in this sense “Stalinism” might be “the future of parliamentary democracy” (29).

At this point we also arrive at the central tension the book stages. In the Circle, information is said to be socialized but it becomes the property of the Circle. All information, captured by the Circle, thus functions as an instrument of domination, or, as a dispositive. This is why it is “blasphemous” (Eggers 2013: 410) not to allow one’s information to be “shared.” In this sense,

the socialization the Circle initiates has a meaning only in relation to individual-private property. What is unimaginable to the Circle is information as something common to all. In this respect, it might be illuminating to consider the Circle in terms of network. It is often argued that in the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007) the activity of the mediator in establishing and extending networks is becoming “a value in itself”, irrespective of the specific goal or substantial character of the mediated entities (107). “In a connectionist world, a natural preoccupation of human beings is the desire to *connect* with others, to *make contact*, so as not to remain *isolated*” (111). But is a networked world another Circle? To be sure, connectionism can always be used in the networks in an opportunistic way. This opportunism, however, is not justified in the new spirit of capitalism: one should be acting in search of the “common good”, that is, in order to engage with others, inspire confidence, be tolerant, respect differences and pass information to others, so that everyone in a network can increase their “employability” (115). In this sense the new capitalism has an ethical scheme of evaluation. In networks everything “belongs” to everything else, “everything may be allied to everything else”, but “nothing can be reduced to anything else, nothing can be deduced from anything else” (Latour 1988: 163). That is, networking is, ideally, an “irreductionist” affair which cannot be thought of in functionalistic, systemic terms. As such it is antithetical to the logic of the Circle.

There is, however, a potential link. Networks can always be abused, a networker can always reduce others in a network to a commodity. Insofar as the pursuit of profit remains the fundamental horizon of networks, that is, insofar as the distinction between “disinterested” sharing in the interest of the “common good” and the strategic-instrumentalist utilization of network relations is blurred, the intermediaries start to behave as if they have “a property right over the person of the one whom he puts in contact with a third party, who anticipates an advantage from this liaison” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007: 456). As if, in other words, “privacy is theft.” And such networking coincides with exploitation in its strongest, biopolitical sense, which involves the instrumentalization of human beings (see 364, 365). Herein lies the ultimate similarity between Hiero’s world and the Circle. The risk of networking is falling back upon biopolitics, and since this risk is an inbuilt, structural risk, the world of networks is always prone to become a despotic world.

Thus in the Circle we confront two inter-linked processes. On the one hand, we have economy, which demands the re-modeling of the whole society according to the principles of marketing. And on the other hand we have subjects expected to continuously re-format their souls and to

glorify the cult religiously. Religion, Feuerbach had said, takes over the best qualities of humans and allocates them to God, affirming in God what is negated in man (1989: 27). Hence the paradox of religious alienation: the more God is glorified, the more human life is depreciated and devalued. And so, the bigger the Circle gets, the smaller the “people” become. Just as religion captures what is profane and sacralizes it, The Circle captures the commons and commodifies them for display in the spectacle. It is significant, therefore, that Debord describes the spectacle as “the material construction of the religious illusion” (1983: 20). In the Circle, to exist is to be seen. The spectacle is a promise of immortality. But while for Debord capitalism is the engine of the spectacle, with Agamben (2011) one can claim that the originary link is not only between capitalism and the spectacle but rather, and more generally, between theology and economy. A theological genealogy shows that the Greek term *oikonomia*, which signifies the despotic management of the household, attained a special function in the Trinitarian Christianity: God, even though he is One, also designates a celestial design, the “divine plan of salvation” (Agamben 2011: 20). As such, *oikonomia* is the concept that links together the absent God and his earthly overseer. This means that the economy (the praxis which is to be followed to reach the goal of salvation) has no foundation in ontology (in creation). However, praxis (the Son) must be related to ontology (God); God and his government of the world must be brought together. Hence the significance of the concept of “free will,” which, Nietzsche insisted, was “fabricated” to make humanity “accountable” to a transcendent God (1969: 53). Through this concept, Christianity has sought to reconcile a transcendent God which is inoperative in relation to the existing world, and a savior/redeemer as the ruler of the world. In this sense, Christian theology is not only political but also economic-managerial from the start (Agamben 2011: 66).

Along the same lines, the fabrication of consent or the spectacle is the point at which political and economic theology, politics and economy, intersect. Predictably, therefore, the glorification of the Circle parallels the glorification of God. Just as religion demands the infinite increase (subjective glorification of God) of what cannot be increased (objective glory of God), the Circle demands infinite accumulation (ratings, subjective glorification of the Circle) of what is beyond human agency (objective glory of the Circle as a spectacle). Paradoxically, in both cases, “glorification is ... what produces glory” (Agamben 2011: 216, 227). In both cases the paradox is a cover for the fact that the centre of the machine is empty, that what is at stake is human life, which is inoperative, contemplating, that is, without a utilitarian purpose (245-6).

## Instead of Conclusion: Neo-despotism?

Despotism is said in many ways; it has many faces. So is the use of it. The classical literature, as is exemplified by *Hiero* here, understands despotism through its triangulation with economy and consent. In a counter-classical approach, which is forced by the reading of *The Circle*, the focus seems to shift to another, emerging triangulation: neo-despotism, use and dissent. The two triangulations are not identical, but they are allied. Precisely because they do not overlap completely, they produce differences. Thus, the reading of *The Circle* casts the classical tradition in a new light, allowing us to revitalize it by putting it into a different use.

In both *Hiero* and *The Circle*, though, there are common themes. In both, it is fear, the fear of dissent, that gives rise to the security imperative. My contention is that the imperative of security is what needs to be thought as neo-despotism today. Today, as before, the security imperative of the despot is synonymous with the security of the despot. In both *Hiero* and *The Circle*, therefore, one can hear the echo of Louis the XIV's iconic maxims: "I am the state" and "Without me, civil war." Security has to secure itself against potential immanent threats before securing anything. Civil war, or dissent in broader terms, is the foundation of security. Leviathan, or Behemoth: this is the blackmail of the despot who promises to save us from other despots.

In both *Hiero* and *The Circle*, people are willing to submit to the will of the despot, accepting both of the despotic maxims, while freedom turns into a burden. In this sense, there is a contradiction between freedom, which is tied to use, and voluntary servitude, which promises a freedom born of the fear of dissent. Nevertheless, what is new in *The Circle* is that voluntary servitude defines itself as freedom, just as the neo-despotism of the Circle misrecognizes itself, sees itself as the reincarnation of the will of the people, all the while what it is is despotism. Hiero knew that he was a despot. Thus in *Hiero* there is no shame attached to being a despot; what interests Xenophon is Hiero's paradoxes. The Circle, in contrast, misrecognizes itself as a democratic structure, while "tyranny" is externalized and projected onto other times and spaces. But misrecognition itself is a perversion. Seeing oneself as the incarnation of the people is where the abuse of power, a function of misrecognition, begins.

Along the same lines, today consent emerges as an apparatus of abuse. Just as the ancient slave-instrument incarnated the abuse of use, the manufacturing of free will, the mechanism of voluntary servitude, is animated here by technology. Automata, after all, is what happens when

you achieve voluntary servitude. Voluntary servitude, in this sense, is a function of the system of counting, of a despotic account, regardless of whether it is implemented by an individual despot or a technical system of automated counting.

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