



A Review of Rahe's "Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift"

In his latest book, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift*, Paul Rahe examines the roots of what he calls a "popular malaise" that has become pronounced in the West during the 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Rahe, a professor of history and political science at Hillsdale College, thus presents his readers with what are essentially two works in one: (1) An insightful examination of the thoughts of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Tocqueville as pertains to the dangers of democracy; and (2) reflections on the present slide toward "soft despotism" that is apparent throughout the West, in general, and the United States, in particular.

The three primary "players" in Rahe's drama frame the three books of *Soft Despotism*: Book One ("The Modern Republic Examined") examines the thought of Montesquieu, Book Two ("The Modern Republic Revisited") that of Rousseau, and Book Three ("The Democratic Republic Considered") turns to Tocqueville. Rahe's scholarly prose is quite dense and presumes a degree of familiarity with all three political philosophers; the author intends his readers to encounter the primary sources and understand them in their context and thus demands a critical reading that will challenge those who have acclimatized their readings habits to books by "conservative" radio talk-show hosts or television commentators.

Reviewing Rahe's book, one is struck by the fact that the political philosophers under examination understood the fragility of a republican polity that preserves liberty. Rahe's is not an account of neoconesque swaggering confidence in "democracy"; rather, he records the measured judgment of men who have weighed the various theories of political order and familiarized themselves with the weaknesses apparent in each. Thus, summarizing the thought of Montesquieu, Rahe notes,

Moreover, Montesquieu nowhere suggests that political liberty is the object pursued by democracies and aristocracies. Indeed, he contends that these republics "are not in their nature free states" (2.11.4). And he warns that it is a mistake to look for liberty "in democracies" where "the people seem pretty much to do what they wish" since to do so would be to "confound the power of the people with the liberty of the people" (2.11.2), for "political liberty does not at all consist in doing what one wants" (2.11.3). It is, in any case, "not to be found except" in what he calls "moderate governments" — and not always there. Political liberty, he observes, "is not present except where there is no abuse of power, and it is an eternal experience that every man who has power is drawn to abuse it; he proceeds until he finds limits."

Turning to the Jacobin *philosophe*, in Rahe's assessment, Rousseau's appropriation of key concepts borrowed from Montesquieu, and pressed into service of his assault on his own society, was a critical event in the course of human thought: "Jean-Jacques Rousseau constructed his system within the



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framework of Montesquieu's political science.... He unearthed and displayed to startling effect certain quite serious defects in commercial society that Montesquieu had clearly wished to indicate but without highlighting them or conferring on them undue stress." Thus, in ever "commercial society" since the time of Rousseau, this critique has found voice.

Every radical movement of both left and right, from Jacobinism at the time of the French Revolution through communism and fascism in the twentieth century to the anti-globalization movement, the environmental movement, and the Islamist jihad characteristic of our own time, has wittingly or unwittingly taken as its starting point one or another variation on the powerful critique of bourgeois society first suggested in the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, first fully fleshed out in the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Men*, and then summarized again and again in Rousseau's subsequent works; and every such movement has served up as a remedy a program inspired in one fashion or another by the vision of revolutionary transformation and integral community that Rousseau intimated in those works and projected most fully in the *Discourse on Political Economy* and *The Social Contract*.

In the assessment of this reviewer, Rahe's analysis is most penetrating when he turns to Alexis de Tocqueville. Reading *Soft Despotism*, one perceives that Rahe clearly views Tocqueville as the more beneficial interpreter of Montesquieu, and one whose insights are of greatest benefit to the current crisis. And it is in his analysis of Tocqueville that the details of Rahe's assessment are drawn in increasingly sharp detail:

Human beings are subject, Tocqueville remarks, to "two passions to one another inimical [enemies]: they feel the need to be guided and the yearning to remain free." This can quite easily be observed in young children, as he undoubtedly knew. They will to be looked after, coddled, cosseted, and catered to, and with no less passion they wish to do everything themselves — and between these "contrary instincts," they oscillate in a fashion hard to predict.

Thus, Tocqueville maintains, "equality, which renders men independent of one another, causes them to contract the habit and taste for following none but their own wills with regards to activities particularly their own." But the danger of our present age is enunciated in the contrary impulse; thus Rahe maintains,

On the other hand, he adds, this same equality gives rise to a second, no less powerful impulse, one which "conducts men by a path longer, more secret, but more certain — in the direction of servitude." The first impulse men can hardly fail to notice; by the second, they "allow themselves to be swept along without see[ing] it" at all (II.iv.1). In Tocqueville's estimation, soft despotism really is democracy's drift.

Rahe affords to this drift the cheeky title, "the French disease" — the rise of soft despotism is exemplified by the present state of affairs in the chambers of French bureaucracy, the details of which Rahe recites at length. But the end point to which all of this analysis is driven is to set the stage to understand the American crisis that has been building for the past several decades. Although, "There is in the United States no *noblesse de l'État*," nevertheless, "The citizen-legislator disappeared long ago. We are now ruled by women and men who make a profession of politics, and reelection is all too often their overriding concern." In a pattern that Rahe traces to Woodrow Wilson, the author observes that in the manner in which judges have treated the U.S. Constitution, "they have twisted the original document beyond recognition, and time and again they have substituted their will in a fashion utterly transparent for that of legislators who are generally accountable to the voters." The power of envy now



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trumps law, and “envy also explains the democratic propensity to impose punitive taxation.” Given the concerns which motivate his work, Rahe’s naked contempt for the current administration is plainly evident and understandable:

Like the younger Roosevelt, our new leader poses as a secular Messiah; his minions believe, as did the progressives of an earlier time, that there has recently come into the world “some new element which makes it necessary for us to undo the work of emancipation” achieved by our forebears and “to retrace the steps men have taken to limit the power of rulers”; and in the ranks of our compatriots they will find many prepared to sacrifice self-reliance and personal independence for a promise of security which no government can keep. The hour is, indeed, late.

There are grave weaknesses in evidence in Rahe’s conclusion: His support for a broader role of the U.S. military as, functionally, the world’s policeman, and his acquiescence to the existence of such a fundamentally flawed institution as the Federal Reserve are distracting, since such views detract from broader course of action advocated by the work as a whole. Still, these points do not detract from the quality of the work as a whole to such a degree as to negate its merits. Rahe has written a work of profound importance for those who are concerned for the future of the American Republic, and the freedoms which our citizens have long enjoyed. As Rahe concludes his work,

But tyrannical ambition and servile temptation will always be with us, as they are most emphatically now. The choice is, nonetheless, ours. We can be what once we were, or we can settle for a gradual, gentle descent into servitude. It is high time that we reclaim what is, after all, our legacy as Americans, for the genuine self-government that we once enjoyed in plenitude is a possession wholly consonant with our dignity as human beings and with our rights as women and men. Let our motto be, as once it was, “Don’t tread on me!” And let our virtue be individual responsibility.

Paul A. Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy’s Drift — Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009) 400 pages, \$38.00



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