

Abstract The sixteenth century French humanist writer Etienne de La Boétie has not often been considered in literature on republican political thought, despite his famous essay, *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*, displaying a number of clear republican tropes and themes, being largely concerned with the problem of arbitrary power embodied the figure of the tyrant. Yet, I argue that the real significance of La Boétie's text is in his radical concept of voluntary servitude and the way it adds a new dimension to the neo-republican theory of liberty as non-domination. The problem of self-domination or wilful obedience to authority is a form of ideological domination that Pettit's understanding of arbitrary power relationships between agents does not adequately account for. Furthermore, La Boétie shows that freedom is an ontological condition and is realised not – or not entirely - through the rule of law as the guarantee against arbitrariness, as neo-republicans advocate, but rather through acts of self-emancipation and civil disobedience. Here I understand La Boétie's thinking in terms of a certain anarcho-republicanism in which the promotion of freedom depends not so much on institutions, as Pettit suggests, but rather on autonomous relations of friendship, love and solidarity between individuals.

La Boétie and Republican Liberty: Voluntary Servitude and Non-Domination

'The plain fact is that to be subject of a master who always has the power to be wicked, and who can therefore never be relied upon to be good, is an extreme misfortune...' (La Boétie 1988: 37)¹

In his essay on friendship, 'De l'amitié', devoted to his late friend Etienne de La Boétie, Michel de Montaigne refers to La Boétie's famous work, 'Discours de la Servitude Volontaire' ('Discourse on Voluntary Servitude') as a discourse written 'in honour of liberty against tyrants'. (1877: XXVII) In this text, La Boétie outlines a theory of tyranny, domination and freedom that, I suggest, reflects many of the themes of republican political thought, despite his general absence in the scholarship on that tradition.

This paper explores the importance that La Boétie's consideration of tyranny has specifically for the modern neo-republican understanding of freedom as non-domination. Here, domination is defined by Quentin Skinner and, especially, by Philip Pettit, in terms of the *arbitrary* power relationships that produce a condition of dependency, insecurity and a consequent loss of freedom. While showing that La Boétie shares this concern with arbitrariness, particularly in relation to the experience of living under the tyrant's rule, I will argue that his key concept of voluntary servitude or wilful obedience deepens and problematises the neo-republican account of domination. By showing how our submission to the arbitrary rule of another might

be voluntary rather than coerced, La Boétie adds a new and hitherto neglected dimension to this understanding of power. He highlights the limits of the neo-republican model of domination, opening up a troubling set of questions about why people willingly abandon their own freedom and voluntarily submit to relationships of power and authority in the first place. La Boétie's notion of voluntary servitude reveals a phenomenon of power that the neo-republican model does not account for – a desire for one's own domination that allows power relations to take hold and to be sustained. La Boétie sees this as a perverted desire, a form of psychic sickness or moral weakness – a view that has clear parallels with earlier republican concerns about moral corruption and the loss of civic virtue, but which has been largely neglected in modern neo-republican theory.

My claim in this paper is that La Boétie's radical notion of voluntary servitude presents a significant challenge to the neo-republican model of freedom as non-domination or the absence of arbitrary rule. Firstly, if the power of the tyrant or master is really based on the voluntary consent of the subject, then this means that power is a specular illusion sustained by continual obedience. Secondly, the phenomenon of voluntary servitude shows that freedom is never entirely absent, even in relationships of domination. Rather, it is the permanent ontological condition of the subject, needing only to be acknowledged within oneself and thus activated. This means that, contra Pettit, one is essentially free even if one is subject to arbitrary interference. So, for La Boétie, the answer to domination lies not, or not entirely, in the existence of institutions that protect the individual from arbitrary power – as Pettit advocates - but rather in the negative gesture of refusing power and withdrawing one's obedience to it. In contrast to the neo-republican insistence that liberty can only be come about in a 'free state' governed by laws, La Boétie places greater emphasis

on acts of civil disobedience and self-emancipation. His notion of freedom, so far from being dependent on the patterning of institutions, is closer to a form of de-instituting power that disturbs the foundations of political authority.

This argument proceeds in four stages. First, I introduce La Boétie's theory of voluntary servitude, showing how the rule of the tyrant is actually dependent on the self-abandonment and self-domination of those who obey him. Secondly, I demonstrate La Boétie's relevance and importance to the republican tradition - particularly to its concern about arbitrary rule - through a consideration of his description of the experience of courtiers living under the tyrant's capricious will. In the third section, I show how, despite their shared concerns about arbitrariness, La Boétie's problematic of voluntary servitude both unsettles and extends the neo-republican model of freedom, revealing some of the limitations in Pettit's account of dominating power relationships. Here I contrast Pettit's emphasis on institutional safeguards against arbitrariness with La Boétie's emphasis on self-emancipation and civil disobedience. The final section develops an alternative 'anarcho-republican' theory of freedom, drawing on La Boétie's theme of friendship. Central here is an anarchist 'civic virtue' - based on relations of solidarity and love between autonomous individuals - which, I argue, is a better safeguard against the threat of domination than the reliance on institutions and laws.

The *Discours*

Étienne de La Boétie was a poet and writer in the humanist tradition, a translator of Plutarch and Xenophon, and a member of the Parlement of Bordeaux. His most famous work, *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*, was written around 1549 when he was a law student at the University of Orleans (see Bonnefon 1892). Since then the

text has had a complex and ambiguous history (see Gontabert 1983), being clandestinely circulated by Huguenots and monarchomachs who used it for propagandistic purposes in their struggle against the French crown. It has been seen as call to resistance against unjust tyrannical rule, and it had a significant impact on the tradition of political dissent and civil disobedience (see Bleiker 2000),² being also influential amongst libertarians and anarchists. Indeed, the text itself was written against the background of popular revolts against the French king Henry II in protest against the imposition of the *gabelle* or salt tax. While Montaigne (1877: XXVII) condemned the radical political ends to which La Boétie's *Discours* was being posthumously applied, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that this was indeed a revolutionary work in which political power is subjected to a devastating critique.

The text begins with a radical reversal of Ulysses' exhortation to his mutinous soldiers, that there is no good in having several masters and that it is more convenient to simply obey one. To this La Boétie (1988: 37) responds:

If Ulysses had said nothing simply said 'Having several lords is no good thing', then he could have said nothing better. He ought to have gone on to show why domination by several people cannot be a good thing: the reason is that if you call anyone 'master', even if it is only one man, he will become harsh and unreasonable simply because he has been given that title.

For La Boétie, in other words, obedience to any master, one or many, is an evil to be avoided. The remedy to the inconvenience of obeying several masters is not to obey just one, as Ulysses urges, but to obey none at all. Central to the text, then, is a critique of obedience to any kind of absolute political authority, whether to the will of a tyrant or a hereditary monarch; the distinction between them is essentially collapsed.

Any kind of submission to the master, no matter how benign, is likely to result in an abuse of power. Of particular concern to La Boétie is the relationship of tyranny – the arbitrary rule of the one over the many.³ The problem identified by La Boétie is when the many, whose natural condition is one of freedom and plurality, come under the power and influence of the One and are absorbed into an artificial totality in which their liberty is alienated and the natural bonds of companionship and solidarity are destroyed.

Yet the strident anti-authoritarian political message of La Boétie's text is complicated by the phenomenon of voluntary servitude, which constitutes the central theme of his work. The true problem of political domination does not lie in the figure of the tyrant, who is only a single individual, but rather in the voluntary submission of those who obey him. The power of the tyrant over his people is no more than the power they bestow upon him. So, in asking the seemingly simple question - why people obey even when it is patently against their interests to do so - La Boétie encounters one of the fundamental enigmas of political authority:

My sole aim on this occasion is to discover how it can happen that a vast number of individuals, of towns, cities and nations can allow one man to tyrannise them, a man who has no more power except the power they themselves give him, who could do them no harm were they not willing to suffer harm, and who could never wrong them were they not more ready to endure it than to stand in his way. It is a grievous matter – and yet so commonplace that our sorrow is greater and our surprise the less – to see a million men in abject servitude, their necks bound to the yoke, and in that state not because they have had to yield to some greater force but, it seems, because

they have been mesmerised by the mere name of a single man, a man they ought neither to fear (for he is just one man) nor love (as he is inhuman and barbaric towards them). (1988: 38)

The main point here is that our obedience to the tyrant, who lords it over us, is not coerced but freely given. We willingly submit to his authority and allow him to abuse us, voluntarily abandoning our own freedom. Therefore, the power the tyrant wields over us is only the power we freely endow him with. According to La Boétie, this phenomenon cannot be explained by cowardice, which, while condemnable, would be in some ways understandable. However, in the situation La Boétie describes, the people outnumber the lonely figure of the tyrant to such an extent that cowardice simply cannot explain their submission. They could easily overpower him if they chose, but do not do so. Instead, they immolate their own freedom and choose to live as slaves: ‘It is the people who enslave themselves, who cut their own throats, who, faced with a choice between servitude and freedom, abandon their own liberty and accept the yoke, who consent to being harmed – or rather, seek to be harmed’. (La Boétie 1988: 41) Something other than cowardice must be at work here – a strange psychological mechanism, a moral sickness or vice that La Boétie is confounded by and struggles to name: ‘What words can describe this vice, this misfortune (or rather vice and misfortune!) whereby the obedience of an infinite number of people degenerates into servitude...’ (39) The *Discours* thus overturns standard notions of consent that claim that it is natural and rational to obey authority; for La Boétie, voluntary consent is a genuine mystery, a puzzle to be solved, and an evil to be remedied.

La Boétie and republicanism

As I shall go on to argue, La Boétie's diagnosis of the problem of voluntary servitude adds a new dimension to the republican concern about domination, arbitrary rule and dependency. Although La Boétie's text has generally been overlooked in the scholarship on republicanism,⁴ it contains themes that align it closely with the republican and civic humanist tradition (see Podoksik 2003: 83-95). There are the usual references to the classical republican tropes of free city states, Athens, Sparta, and Rome, and even to Plato's ideal republic. The classical figures of tyrants and tyrannicides populate the essay: tyrants such as Caesar, Nero and Tiberius are denounced for their cruelty and depravity, while tyrannicides like Brutus and Cassius are praised for their courage and virtue. La Boétie invokes notions of a manly and patriotic civic virtue in contrast to the corruption and moral degeneracy of the tyrant. The natural and healthy disposition toward freedom, brotherly equality and friendship is contrasted with the artificiality of tyranny and political domination. The tyrant is depicted as lustful yet impotent, brutal and cruel yet cowardly and effeminate; 'a solitary weakling, and usually the most cowardly and effeminate in the land, who is unaccustomed to the dust of battle and has hardly even eyes set on the sand of the jousting arena, and who has no authority to issue orders to men since he is but the abject slave of some pitiful little woman!' (39)

Yet, the real target of La Boétie's critique is not the tyrant himself, who is simply the effect of those who obey and serve him (he is not a 'Hercules' or a 'Samson' but a 'single man'), but rather the abandonment of liberty that makes the relationship of tyranny possible. La Boétie simply cannot understand why people would choose to exchange their freedom, to which they have a natural disposition, for the unnatural condition of servitude and obedience, in which their property and their very lives are put at risk. While the tyrant is a vile figure, real culpability for tyranny lies with those

who blindly obey him, who are stupefied by and enthralled to him, and who serve him in the hope of winning privileges and favors. Of particular interest here are the courtiers who surround the tyrant, who enjoy a certain status and privileges and yet who have no freedom and live in constant insecurity and fear. Their fawning and flattery are designed to anticipate the whims of their master. La Boétie describes this condition:

But the courtiers of the tyrant ingratiate themselves with him and beg favours of him, and the tyrant, seeing this requires them not just to do what he says but to think the way he wants them to and, often, to anticipate his desires. It is not enough that these people obey him, they must also please him in every way, they must endure hardship, torment themselves and drive themselves to the grave in carrying out his business; his pleasure must be their pleasure, his tastes must be theirs, they must distort and cast off their natural disposition, they must hang on his every words, his tone of voice, his gestures, his expression; their every faculty must be alert to catch his wishes and to discern his thoughts. (66)

Such is the unhappy existence of those who make a devil's bargain with the tyrant; in agreeing to serve him, and in sacrificing freedom and independence for the promise of favours and rewards, they live a life of insecurity and anxiety. This is the fate of all those who enter into the artificial and corrupted atmosphere of the tyrant.

Voluntary servitude and non-domination

La Boétie's account of the loss of freedom that comes with living according to the arbitrary whims of another has a striking resonance with the neo-republican theory of

liberty as non-domination. According to this theory, what diminishes or negates liberty is not so much interference or constraint, as proponents of negative liberty would suggest, but rather the relationship of domination defined by a condition of dependency and insecurity. While someone subjected to domination - a slave or a servant for instance - might not be directly interfered with by her master, she nevertheless lives under an arbitrary relation of power and dependency in which she has no *security* of liberty. In other words, there is no guarantee that the master, who previously had shown forbearance, might suddenly start to interfere with the actions of those under his power. The slave is thus entirely at the mercy of the whims of her master, and it is this uncertainty and insecurity – the fact that she is under an unequal and arbitrary relationship of power – rather than the actuality of interference or coercion itself, which renders her unfree. Therefore, to be free on the republican account is to have security of liberty, and this only comes with a measure of independence. Freedom means being able to enjoy a certain level of equality and to have guarantees and safeguards against arbitrary power, safeguards usually provided by the rule of law.

Quentin Skinner's (1998) historical reconstruction of the neo-Roman tradition traces the emergence and development of this particular conception of liberty from ancient Roman legal thought, through to the idea of *libertas* in the Italian Renaissance, to the republican impulse of Machiavelli's *Discorsi*, and later to defenders of the idea of the republican commonwealth in England during and after the Civil War. Central to this was the republican idea of the free state and the claim that one could only be free if one lived under a set of fixed laws and institutional arrangements, such as a constitution and separated powers, which worked for the public good and were designed to safeguard against the threat of arbitrary rule. By contrast, to live under a

system that allows governments to exercise discretionary or prerogative power was to live as a slave. Therefore, what really threatened liberty for the republican – and this marks the difference from negative libertarians like Hobbes – is not law and legal interference as such but, on the contrary, the very absence of the rule of law (see Viroli 2002: 47).

The advantage of living under a stable and regular system of rules and institutions, as opposed to the arbitrary will of a master, is that one gains a greater sense of certainty, security and therefore of independence. According to Philip Pettit, this form of freedom means not having to live in a state of dependency and not having to engage in strategic behaviors designed to anticipate the whims of one's master. By contrast,

to suffer the reality or expectation of arbitrary interference is not only to have to endure a high level of uncertainty. It is also to have to keep a weather eye on the powerful, anticipating what they will expect of you and trying to please them, or anticipating where they will be and trying to stay out of their way; it is to have strategic deference and anticipation forced upon you at every point. You can never sail on, unconcerned, in the pursuit of your own affairs; you have to navigate an area that is mined on all sides with dangers (Pettit 1997: 86).

We are reminded of La Boétie's description of courtiers who have to tiptoe around the tyrant, ever fearful of incurring his disfavor, constantly on their guard and always having to wear a mask and conceal their true feelings. For La Boétie, as well as for proponents of republican liberty, the experience of domination that comes with living under arbitrary rule is the very antithesis of freedom.

However, despite this shared concern with arbitrary power, I would argue that La

Boétie's concept of voluntary servitude profoundly disturbs the neo-republican model of freedom and domination. La Boétie's contention that one's domination can be actively willed, and that the tyrant's power is freely consented to, opens up a new and troubling set of questions about the relationship between freedom and domination. Indeed, if dominating power relationships are based on free consent, then the very line between freedom and unfreedom becomes blurred and ambiguous. What does the idea that living under tyrannical rule might be a matter of choice, rather than coercion, do to the republican understanding of domination? Can the republican notion of freedom as non-domination accommodate the possibility that freedom might, in some instances, be freely abandoned? While neo-republican theory pays attention to the psychological effects of living under arbitrary power – the anxiety, uncertainty, the need to dissimulate, conceal and be constantly on one's guard – what is generally lacking in this account is the subjective mechanism – what we might call a passionate attachment to domination - that leads to that abandonment of freedom in the first place.

One of the problems with Pettit's theory is that in seeing domination largely in terms of top-down inter-subjective relationships between agents – exemplified by the master-servant relationship – it simply cannot account for the multiplicity of forms that domination can take in modern societies. It cannot adequately explain domination as an effect of more abstract and anonymous social processes and structures, such as the functioning of the capitalist market, or the domination associated with the shaping of consciousness and the habits of obedience to authority that come with the disciplining power of social institutions (see Haugaard and Pettit 2017: 25-39).

Drawing on Max Weber's account of the way that modern 'rational' forms of authority depend on a recognition of 'legitimacy', Michael J. Thompson points to this

other dimension of domination:

it means that there is some degree of obedient acceptance of domination that becomes a routinized, habitual character of modern society... In this respect, domination requires not an arbitrary exercise of power as Pettit suggests, but, rather, the opposite: a defined set of behaviours which are ingrained within the agent through a process of 'routinization' [*Veralltäglichung*] wherein the subjective orientations of individuals make up a constitutive part of the presence of domination (Thompson 2013: 285).

Yet, this is exactly the dimension of domination one encounters in La Boétie's conception of voluntary servitude. Indeed, one of his chief explanations for this phenomenon is that, although freedom is our natural condition, we can become so habituated into servitude that we eventually forget our original predisposition and come to assume that obedience is natural to us: 'Men born under the yoke and educated in slavery will look no further; they are content to live in the condition in which they were born, with no other possessions and entitlements, and to assume that this condition is one that nature ordains.' (49) Therefore, domination and the loss of freedom come about through the habit of obeying and the internalisation of discipline, such that what was hitherto unnatural to us now seems natural and legitimate.

Consent and obedience to authority are also sustained, according to La Boétie, through certain ritualistic displays and spectacles that have the power to charm and seduce us:

Theatres, games, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, tableaux and other such drugs were the bait that lured ancient nations into servitude, they

were the price at which freedom was sold, they were the instruments of tyranny; they were the methods, the procedures, the allurements which ancient tyrants could use to put their people to sleep, to place them under the yoke. Thus, these foolish people, finding these pastimes enjoyable, taken in by the idle pleasures that met their gaze, became accustomed to slavery...(58).

La Boétie here is pointing to a kind of ideological domination which, while it might be different to Weber's understanding of the functioning of modern rational authority – it would be more like his notion of 'charismatic authority' – is still very much at work in contemporary societies, in the form of the seductions of consumerism, advertising, social media fetishism, and entertainment, media, sporting and political spectacles, which today have the power to charm, enthrall and pacify us just like the 'bread and circuses' of the ancients.

Lastly, La Boétie seeks to explain voluntary servitude in terms of a certain network of dependencies surrounding the tyrant. As La Boétie shows, the true power of the tyrant lies not in coercion – not in his sentries and guards with their halberds – but rather in a complex ecosystem of relations: those immediately surrounding the tyrant, his advisers and counsellors, who have his ear and are complicit in his crimes; these in turn maintain a network of dependents and lackeys; and below them are hundreds and thousands of others, each with his own little place within this great pyramid of power. Thus, the power of the tyrant is really based on an interlocking system of relations of fear and dependency that includes many thousands of people, who are all complicit in their own domination. As La Boétie says: 'After that, you have a great crowd of other people, and anyone who unravels this thread will see that it is not just six thousand who are connected to the tyrant, but hundreds of thousands, millions. And the tyrant

makes use of this cord.' (64) Tyranny is thus sustained by a complex web of interlocking interests.

The point is that these various forms of domination identified by La Boétie - learnt habits of obedience, the ideological manufacturing of consent, and complex social structures comprising chains of interlocking and mutually sustaining dependencies and interests - are not adequately addressed in Pettit's account, where the focus is on relations and interactions between specific agents (see Pettit 52).

Thompson, in his critique of the limitations of Pettit's account of domination, attempts to develop an alternative and more complex model combining three different dimensions of domination: *coercion*, which he believes Pettit's notion is largely confined to; *authority*, in which domination depends on the recognition of power's legitimacy by those who are subjected to it; and *extraction*, which refers to practices of economic exploitation and the ability of one to extract use and benefit from another (Thompson 289). My claim here is that we must add to this a *fourth* dimension, one that underpins all the others – and this is the dimension of voluntary servitude itself. The truly radical implication of La Boétie's theory is that no power relationship, no matter how dominating, coercive or seemingly one-sided, is possible without our voluntary acquiescence and consent. We must ask the basic question: how is it possible for the capitalist to exploit the worker, or for the individual to be either coerced, lulled, inured or seduced into obedience without the subject's consent? In other words, we can add to these other forms of domination the most enigmatic one of all – self-domination; the abrogation of our own freedom and our willing subordination to power. While Thompson points to the way that domination might be the effect of 'imbalances in social and political power, not the cause of them' (280) –

La Boétie takes us even further down this road of enquiry and forces us to ask a more difficult question: might it not be the case that these imbalances in social and political power are themselves an effect of our abandonment of our own freedom and our desire to be dominated? Might not all power relations ultimately be based on free consent, rather than coercion? Yet, one of the mysteries of voluntary servitude is that, as La Boétie shows, obedience is not a passive or static condition but, on the contrary, relies on an active and ongoing giving of consent, a constant repetition of behaviors of obedience. There is, at the heart of domination, a strange frenzy of obedience and a passionate and energetic embrace of one's own subjugation: 'the more that tyrants pillage, the more they exact and extort, the more they ruin and destroy, the more you give them, the more you subject yourself to them – so much the stronger they become...' (42).

However, this insight produces an even more startling conclusion: power is an illusion. Even as power seems to bear down upon the subject, either in the form of direct coercion or, as concerns us more here, in one's awareness of its arbitrary nature, La Boétie reminds us that this domination is only made possible insofar as we consent to it. Indeed, power is actually constituted by our voluntary servitude. La Boétie says of the tyrant:

Where did he get those eyes which spy on you, if you did not give him them?
Would he have all those hands to strike you with, if he did not get them from you? Those feet which trample upon your cities, where did he get them if they are not your own? What power has he over you, if it is not the power you give him? (43)

It is as if the entire body politic of the tyrant is a specular illusion made up of wills

and capacities of individuals who, captivated by the image of the One, are absorbed into an imaginary totality that they at the same time constitute. While the image here of the collective body of the tyrant might seem Hobbesian, it is also deeply ambiguous in the way it disturbs, rather than affirms, the foundations of political authority. The radical insight of La Boétie's analysis is that power does not really exist – or rather that its existence really depends on the power of those subjected to it - and is therefore simply the alienating and illusory effect of their abandonment of their own power over themselves.

This realisation introduces a very real instability into model of domination central to neo-republican thought, in which it is assumed that domination is a fixed, hierarchical relationship between master and servant, and that the master in this situation enjoys a real power over his servant. However, La Boétie shows that this relationship is actually very fragile and can be overturned through the withdrawal of consent: 'I am not asking you to push him out of your way, to topple him; just stop propping him up and, like a great colossus whose plinth has been taken from under him, he will crumble and be shattered under his own weight.' (44).

While this no doubt raises many practical questions about the collective organisation of dissent – questions that La Boétie is keenly aware of, as indicated by his analysis of the trenchancy with which habits of obedience take hold and the ease with which freedom is forgotten⁵ – the emphasis here is on a kind of self-emancipation, which is the ontological condition for any external act of resistance.

The emancipation of the self

What becomes clear from La Boétie's theory of voluntary servitude is that domination

is primarily a relationship one has with oneself, rather than with an external master. If, in other words, the tyrant's power really lies in the power of those who obey him, then domination is to be explained in terms of an abandonment of one's will to be free and an abrogation of one's own power over oneself. Here La Boétie reflects a concern central to an older republican tradition – shared, for instance, by thinkers like Spinoza⁶ and Machiavelli⁷ – about the way that people can lose their desire for freedom; something that was understood as a form of corruption, degeneracy and the loss of virtue. Yet, as La Boétie shows, freedom lost can be regained by the renewal of one's will to be free. Freedom from domination is essentially a matter of willing to be free, and of recognising that one had the power all along but just didn't know it: 'But you can deliver yourselves if you make an effort – not an effort to deliver yourselves, but an effort to want to do so!' (44) The distinction between – or rather the prioritisation of – the effort to will and the effort to act is important here. The seemingly immutable and one-sided relationship of mastery is created and sustained by our recognition of the master; to free ourselves from this relationship we must will our own freedom, which means turning our gaze away from the master, whereupon his power is exposed as an empty gesture. The story of voluntary servitude is really a story of our will to be free: how we once desired and enjoyed freedom, how we subsequently lost the will to be free, and how we might regain it. The ending of the relationship of domination is the withdrawal of voluntary servitude.

La Boétie's understanding of freedom as an act of will departs from that of the neo-republicans in two key respects. First, for La Boétie, freedom is understood as the ontological condition of the subject, a permanent potentiality that exists in all situations, even in relationships of domination; whereas from the neo-republican perspective freedom is something that depends on external conditions, that is, on the

existence of institutions that safeguard against arbitrary power. Secondly, and relatedly, the realisation of freedom is a matter of *self*-emancipation: not so much, or not only, being emancipated from the external condition of tyranny but, rather, emancipating oneself from one's own voluntary obedience, from one's listlessness, lack of moral energy or, as we have seen, from that active and frenzied state of abandonment and forgetfulness that also makes one complicit in one's own subjugation.

This is very different from the neo-republican insistence that freedom is a matter of having the right kinds of institutions to protect the individual from arbitrary power. Republican liberty, as we have seen, is premised on the idea of the 'free state' – in other words, a polity governed by a set of constitutional arrangements designed to ward off prerogative power. Indeed, Pettit sees non-domination in terms of a certain form of non-arbitrary power or constitutional authority intended to prevent other parties' arbitrary interference. Although this constitutional authority might interfere with other parties, even on a regular basis, this does not amount to domination, according to Pettit, because it does so in such a way that 'tracks their interests' – in other words, interference from this form of authority is non-dominating because it works in the common good (1997: 68). Indeed, ensuring non-domination, for neo-republicans, might involve a very extensive degree of state interference in the lives of individuals. As Pettit puts it, republicanism is a theory of government, and it involves a project of building modern institutions of government (130).

So, for neo-republicans, freedom depends on the structuring of institutions, while for La Boétie freedom might be said to be the ontological condition of the individual and it proceeds from acts of self-emancipation. Indeed, we might understand La Boétie's

conception of freedom as a form of *de-instituting* action, which neither destroys existing institutions nor creates new ones in their place, but rather suspends their effects altogether by withdrawing consent and legitimacy from them. Indeed, Raffaele Laudani situates La Boétie within a modern genealogy of disobedience in which political action always takes extra-institutional forms, because the real threat to liberty, as far as La Boétie is concerned, ‘lurks in the logic of unitary command implied in the institution.’ (Laudani 2013: 36) The problem, for La Boétie, in placing our trust in institutions as guardians of freedom is that, however benignly intentioned, they contain a tyrannising impulse, a command structure that inevitably tends towards domination. Freedom is expressed not primarily in terms of constructing and cooperating with institutions that ‘track our interests’, but with the negative gesture of refusal. As John Holloway (2010: 17) puts it, with specific reference to La Boétie, ‘The break begins with Refusal, with No.’ La Boétie’s republicanism is primarily a republicanism of civil disobedience rather than a republicanism of institutions.

Anarcho-republicanism

If indeed La Boétie’s republican theory of freedom as non-domination is not reliant on institutions but on the withdrawal of consent and acts of self-emancipation, then it is no doubt a strange form of republicanism – one that differs sharply from more commonplace interpretations and has a more anarchistic orientation.⁸ While La Boétie makes rhetorical references throughout his *Discours* to classic republican polities and institutions, and while Montaigne reflected on his friend’s admiration for the Venetian constitution⁹ it is clear that the defence of institutions – even republican ones – is not La Boétie’s real aim. Here my reading of La Boétie differs sharply from that of Marta García-Alonso (2013), who offers a ‘constitutionalist’ interpretation of La Boétie, and

argues that his relevance to the republican conception of liberty as non-domination lies in his defence of the institution of parliament. While La Boétie was indeed a member of the Parlement of Bordeaux and defended its autonomy, there is little evidence in the *Discours* itself that institutions of this kind play any significant role in safeguarding or promoting liberty. Indeed, La Boétie's anti-monarchist ethos in the *Discours* seems to directly contradict Alonso's claim that 'The Discourse can also be read as a legal plea in defence of the traditional view: the Parliament should play a crucial role in the politics of the Kingdom, supporting a monarchy with limited powers'. (17) It is suggested here that hints of this traditionalist defence of monarchy may have been toned down as a result of the editing of the text immediately following the French Revolution. However, I do not find this claim at all plausible. The general tenor of the *Discours* is one of unmistakable opposition to the rule of the One, whether a tyrant or even a monarch whose rule is inherited rather than seized by force of arms. Indeed, La Boétie shows how tyranny can emerge through the circumstance of hereditary rule: 'Those who are born kings are commonly little better [than tyrants]; being born and brought up in the womb of tyranny, they imbibe a tyrant's nature with their mother's milk.' (47) Even democratically elected kings are not immune from this tyrannical temptation: 'Elected monarchs treat the people like bulls to be tamed...' (48). Furthermore, we recall, as mentioned at the start, La Boétie's fundamental disagreement with Ulysses' claim about the advantages of being governed by one individual. There is little to suggest, then, that La Boétie put much store in a monarchy, even one with constitutionally limited powers – there was always the risk that even the most benign monarch could exceed the traditional limits of his authority and become tyrannical. Indeed, it is this suspicion of the rule of the one and its potential for arbitrariness that places La Boétie much more squarely in the

republican camp than, as it is claimed by Alonso (17), any supposed defence of constitutional monarchy. While I do not deny that La Boétie sees a place for institutions in the defence of freedom, and is concerned with civic forms – hence his references to Roman republican law and the Spartan constitution, for instance – I would argue that the real direction of his thinking goes beyond institutions and laws towards the individual’s self-emancipation and rediscovery of her own freedom, as well as towards the fostering of autonomous relations of equality, solidarity and companionship.

If La Boétie’s republican ethos does not lie primarily in the defence of institutions, how then should it be interpreted? Here we must consider La Boétie’s importance to the anarchist tradition of political thought. The *Discours* has long been considered an early anarchist text.¹⁰ The claim that all political power really rests on voluntary servitude – while it might give rise to a certain pessimism¹¹ – has always been understood by anarchists in an emancipatory sense, as a call to resistance against authority and to the withdrawal of consent.¹² This idea had a big influence particularly on the non-violent tradition of civil disobedience within anarchism, appealing to thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau, Benjamin R. Tucker, and Leo Tolstoy.¹³ The anarchist anthropologist, Pierre Clastres (1994: 93-104) who studied ‘primitive’ stateless societies in the Amazon, took as central La Boétie’s thesis that the natural desire for freedom gave way to an unnatural desire for authority and the division between oppressor and oppressed. Later postanarchist theory has also drawn on La Boétie’s thinking in its emphasis on the fluidity and reversibility of power relations and the ever-present possibilities of freedom (see Newman 2016).

My claim here is that La Boétie’s thinking might be understood in terms of a certain

anarcho-republicanism, in which domination is countered not through laws which, while important to some degree in upholding liberty (we must remember after all that La Boétie was a law student and a legislator) do not in themselves provide sufficient protection against tyranny, nor serve as the impetus for the initial act of resistance to power that is the well-spring of freedom. While La Boétie praises the Spartan constitution and the lawgiver Lycurgus, and while he condemns Caesar for destroying the laws of the Roman republic, he also claims that tyrants can come to power through constitutional and democratic means (47); and that the system of patronage surrounding the tyrant means the crimes of his lackeys and dependents are immune from legal accountability ('they exempt themselves from the laws and get out of trouble thanks to the protection of those above them') (64). While, like many republican thinkers of an earlier tradition, there is a complex interplay in La Boétie between civic forms and internalised domination, there is nevertheless a sense in which his understanding of freedom is not something that can be adequately expressed or enshrined in law and exceeds institutional form; it is, rather, forged through an alternative patterning of relations between autonomous individuals (see also Abensour 2011: 329-348). Unlike the neo-republican veneration of the rule of law, La Boétie's focus is on showing how freedom might emerge 'organically' through a renewal of the natural bonds of companionship between individuals. Laws, while important, do not have the same force as love and solidarity.

It might seem paradoxical, at first glance, to speak of anarcho-republicanism, given that republicanism is typically associated with a certain form of state (the 'free state') and anarchism usually implies the rejection of state authority in whatever form. However, anarchism shares the republican concern about the inequalities of power that exist at all levels of society: between capitalists and workers; between men and

women; between adults and children, and so on, seeing these as relationships of domination or potential domination that must be contested and overcome. In seeking to identify and contest unequal power relationships that leave people vulnerable to the arbitrary will of others, anarchism has some common ground with republicanism (see also Kinna and Prichard). Yet, an anarchist republicanism would radically disagree with neo-republican theory in its reliance on state institutions to prevent arbitrary power relationships, drawing attention to the way that state interference itself, even if constitutionally regulated, produces its own multiple forms of domination – from the surveillance and overregulation of the lives of its citizens to intense forms of legal punishment and coercion. Would we not say, for instance, that the prisoner who has been punished according to the letter of the law, undergoes in his or her incarceration a most extreme form of domination?¹⁴ So it is not only arbitrary authority that threatens liberty, but the smooth, regular application of even democratically decided laws.

In contrast to this form of republicanism, the nineteenth century anarchist Mikhail Bakunin affirmed an alternative socialist kind. While the ‘political republican’ exalts the state and its laws, invoking a ‘republic of citizens’, the socialist republican affirms a ‘republic of men’. This really touches on the key difference between anarchist republicanism and the more familiar republicanism of institutions and laws. Anarchist republicanism, or anarcho-republicanism as I prefer to call it, is a form of republicanism without a state – a republicanism that affirms people in their common humanity and sees their freedom as existing beyond the state, in free federations and communes, for instance; whereas political republicanism needs, indeed, sacralises, the state and sees people only as citizens of the state. According to Bakunin: ‘Liberty, to a political republican, is an empty word, it is the liberty of a willing slave, a devoted

victim of the State. Being always ready to sacrifice his own liberty, he will willingly sacrifice the liberty of others.’ (Bakunin 1971: 118-119) While republicanism (or in Bakunin’s terminology ‘political republicanism’) opposes itself to slavery, in seeing the state and its laws as the only way to avert this condition, it neglects the domination that comes with the state. Freedom is only possible, according to Bakunin and the anarchist tradition, once the state has been abolished.

La Boétie fits into this model of anarcho-republicanism, but not so much in the sense of promoting – as Bakunin did - any sort of violent revolution against state power. Rather, La Boétie presents an alternative vision to political domination and voluntary servitude, one based on relations of friendship, equality, and solidarity. La Boétie’s *Discours* compares two different ways of living. One is the corrupted and artificial condition of voluntary servitude, in which the natural desire for freedom is abandoned and sacrificed to the tyrant. We enter the tyrant’s pyramid of relations, and seek out for ourselves a place in the hierarchy of power, henceforth condemned to a life of dependency, uncertainty and fear typified by the courtier; or one becomes like the masses of others who serve and obey the tyrant very much to their own disadvantage. There is, however, another way of life, one more natural to us, in which individuals relate to each other freely and recognise one another as equals. Instead of the artificial bonds of servitude, fear and mistrust, or the state of enthrallment to the figure of the One, people come together on the basis of comradeship, brotherly love and mutual regard. Indeed, where there is the mutual recognition of equality there is no possibility of slavery: ‘And nobody can imagine that nature has placed anyone in a position of servitude since she has made each of us the companion of all others.’ (La Boétie 1988: 45) This is very similar to the inter-subjective experience of equality and mutual regard that characterises the condition of non-domination for republicans. This

goes, as Pettit says, ‘with being able to look the other in the eye, confident in the shared knowledge that it is not by their leave that you pursue your innocent, non-interfering choices... You are a somebody in relation to them, not a nobody.’ (1998: 71)

The ethical and political challenge of La Boétie’s thesis, then, is to foster a different patterning of individuals, one that is much closer to their natural predisposition. For the anarchist thinker, Gustav Landauer, who was profoundly influenced by La Boétie and who translated the *Discours* into German, this meant a withdrawal from existing social relations and the creation of alternative ways of relating to one another: ‘The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; i.e., by people relating to one another differently.’ (Landauer 2010: 213-214) We can see reflected here La Boétie’s idea that political power falls apart when people turn their eyes away from the One, by whom they had hitherto been enchanted, and towards one another. The radical insight La Boétie gives us is that political power is not a thing, that it has no real substance, but is simply a series of relationships that can be transformed and reconstituted in different directions, from domination to freedom.

Central here is the possibility of love and friendship, which for La Boétie is the real ethical (and political) counterpoint to tyranny. What is truly characteristic of the tyrant is that he has no friends, only servants and accomplices who are bound to him through fear and self-interest: ‘There is no doubt that the tyrant is never loved, and loves nobody... Where there is cruelty, treachery and injustice there can be no friendship.’ (69) The loneliness and isolation of the tyrant mirrors the loneliness and isolation of those who serve him. By contrast, as La Boétie says, ‘Friendship is a

sacred word, it is a holy thing, and it exists only between good people, and is kindled only by mutual esteem... What gives you confidence that you can rely on a friend is the knowledge you have of his integrity...' (69).

Friendship, therefore, is the very opposite of domination: it relies upon mutual regard and trust. Unlike the master, whose arbitrariness creates uncertainty and insecurity, one finds in the friend qualities that allow him to be trusted. The relationship between friends is a relationship between equals. While of course we should not be blind to the gender and class distinctions that would seem to be implicit in these homosocial bonds of male friendship, we can nevertheless say that La Boétie gives us a glimpse into another way of life, an anarchist way of life, in which love and friendship take the place of domination and submission, and in which the bonds between individuals are formed freely and autonomously. La Boétie's republic is a republic of friends rather than a republic of laws and institutions.

Conclusion

While La Boétie's anarcho-republicanism departs from more standard conceptions in its emphasis on autonomous relations between individuals who recover their desire to be free, rather than on the presence of laws and institutions, I have argued that his thinking is nevertheless driven by the same concern with the problem of arbitrary power that characterises these approaches. At the same time, La Boétie's central concept of voluntary servitude reveals many of the limitations of the neo-republican model of domination as an unequal and hierarchical relationship between agents. Not only does voluntary servitude show that domination can take different forms – particularly the ideological domination present in learnt habits of obedience and rituals of authority – but, more radically, it points to the most troubling dimension at

the basis of all power relationships: the problem of self-domination. The active desire for one's own servitude, and the voluntary relinquishment of freedom, is simply not considered within the neo-republican model.

Furthermore, in bringing to light the radical instability of all power relations, I have shown how La Boétie's theory of voluntary servitude goes beyond the neo-republican model of freedom: freedom should be understood as an ontological condition of the subject, rather than as something dependent on external conditions. This leads to an alternative conception of republican ethics – or what one might call civic virtue – in which freedom is experienced primarily through acts of self-emancipation, refusal and civil disobedience, rather than through adherence to public institutions. My contention therefore is that La Boétie's notion of voluntary servitude, in pointing to the undecidability of freedom and domination, expands the republican category of liberty and opens up the possibility of a new kind of ethical and political space constituted by freely formed relations of solidarity and friendship.

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¹ I rely on the English translation of *Discours de La Servitude Volontaire, ou Contr'Un* by Malcom Smith, based on his edition of the French version of the text originally published in *Textes Litteraires Francais* series in 1987.

² This picture of La Boétie is complicated by the fact that ten years after he wrote the *Discours*, he wrote a text that seemed to reach very different political conclusions. Written against the backdrop of the Wars of Religion, and as a pragmatic solution to the problem of religious conflict, *Memoires sur la pacification des troubles* (see La Boétie 1983) argues, on the one hand, for religious freedom, and even the right of the individual to follow the dictates of his own conscience rather than the religious edicts of the king – and here there is some consistency with his earlier radical work; and, on the other hand, *against* religious tolerance and, in particular, against public displays of religious difference. Religious dissent is seen as a source of instability and division within a kingdom. There is a question about the relationship between the two texts, one that explicitly affirms dissent, the other that counsels against it. Some suggest that there is a continuity between these two seemingly different faces of La Boétie (see Podoksik 2003: 83-95), whereas I would insist on their radical opposition. Whether this can be put down to La Boétie's later role as parliamentarian and a servant of the king, or the difference between a youthful exuberance and a later more conservative outlook, or even to the controversy that the two texts may not have been authored by the same person, are questions I leave aside here. My concern is only with the *Discours* itself and what I see as being the radical implications and emancipatory thrust of his theory of voluntary servitude.

³ The text was unofficially published and circulated under the title *le Contr'Un* (the *Anti-One*, or *Anti-Dictator*).

⁴ There are some recent exceptions. See Sparling (2013: 483-509); and Terrel (2013: 55-60).

⁵ For instance, Sébastien Charles argues that La Boétie's text actually expresses a profound distrust of the people, who are considered unreliable, ignorant, easily duped and prone to the seductions of tyranny because they profit by it: 'le peuple étant toujours prêt à suivre les mauvais exemples ainsi que les fauteurs de trouble' (see Charles 1992: 278). It is therefore, Charles argues, anachronistic in the extreme to see La Boétie as any sort of democrat on the side of the people. While I do not see La Boétie as a democrat – indeed he makes clear the way that tyranny can emerge through democracy – and while I do not seek to downplay the reservations he at times expresses about the political capacities of the people, I would nevertheless insist that the general tenor of the *Discours* is emancipatory rather conservative; there is an ethico-political challenge to work oneself out of the trap of voluntary servitude and to rediscover one's will to be free.

⁶ Spinoza commented on the fact that people, under the spell of the tyrant, 'will fight for their servitude as if they were fighting for their own deliverance, and will not think it humiliating but supremely glorious to spill their blood and sacrifice their lives for the glorification of a single man.' (2007: 16)

⁷ Even though Machiavelli believed that one of the two humours of the city was the desire of the people to not be dominated, he was nevertheless keenly aware of the difficulties people had in preserving their liberty and, indeed, how they could become accustomed to servitude: 'And such difficulty is reasonable; because that people is nothing else other than a brute animal, which (although by nature ferocious and wild) has always been brought up in prison and servitude, (and) which later being left by chance free in a field, (and) not being accustomed to (obtain) food or not knowing

where to find shelter for refuge, becomes prey to the first one who seeks to enchain it again.’ (Discourses Book I, Ch16.) This is very similar to La Boétie’s description of how our natural desire for freedom is lost as we become habituated into obedience – although rather than being like wild animals, men are like animals who have been tamed and domesticated (see 46).

⁸ Ephraim Podoksik (2003: 90) argues that La Boétie’s belief that liberty is our natural condition leads to an apolitical indifference to institutional arrangements that has clear anarchistic orientations. Curiously, however, Podoksik reads this anti-institutionalism as a form of conservatism and quietism - a ‘private anarchism’ (95) - that at times counsels obedience to authority, thus explaining, it is claimed, La Boétie’s later position in favour of the suppression of religious dissent in the *Memoires*. In my view this is a somewhat perverse reading that goes against the grain of La Boétie’s earlier text.

⁹ In any case, La Boétie himself lamented the loss of the desire for liberty that characterised Venetian society under the rule of the Great Doge, harkening back instead to an earlier republican era in Venice in which freedom was more highly prized.

¹⁰ La Boétie appears, for instance, in Peter Marshall’s comprehensive survey of anarchism (see 2008: 109-122). At the same time, this anarchist interpretation of La Boétie is very much contested (see Shaefer 1998: 1-30).

¹¹ For instance, Nannerl O. Keohane (1977: 119-130) argues that: ‘La Boétie’s premises are anarchistic. He opposes all forms of institutionalised authority, official domination among men. His conclusion, however, is not that of an anarchist at all. This is a profoundly pessimistic work in which the intricacies of the psychology of authority and customary obedience are made so clear that no practical alternatives are

proposed, and no counsels for revolutionary action can reasonably be given.’ (127) I have argued, however, that La Boétie’s solution to the problem of tyranny and political authority lies not in revolutionary action as such – least of all that led by a vanguard – but rather in changing the relationship one has with oneself and overcoming one’s own condition of voluntary obedience; in other words in the cessation of giving oneself to another, whereupon political authority loses its foundation. While this might seem a rather impractical, indeed abstract, answer to the problem of domination, it can be regarded as the first and necessary step taken in any political project of freedom. In this sense, I would dispute Nannerl’s claim that La Boétie’s conclusions are pessimistic. On the contrary, in pointing to the fragility and vulnerability of power relationships and the ever-present possibilities of freedom, his conclusions are rather optimistic: ‘Resolve to be slaves no more, and you are free.’ (44)

¹² For an alternative, emancipatory reading of La Boétie, see Abensour (2011: 329-348).

¹³ Leo Tolstoy attributes to La Boétie the discovery that people are kept in subjection, not through coercion, but through a lie or illusion that they are complicit in; and furthermore the idea that those who are suppressed today can dispel this lie and free themselves by ‘abstaining from taking part in the violence that is only possible through their co-operation.’ (1948: 45)

¹⁴ Pettit says: ‘The parliament and the police officer, then, the judge or the prison warder, may practice non-dominating interference, provided... that a suitably constraining, constitutional arrangement works effectively.’ (65)