

## Why Napoleon still matters

### There isn't a simple clash between democracy and autocracy



'Napoleon Bonaparte as First Consul', an 1803 painting by Antoine-Jean Gros © Universal History Archive/Getty Images

**Janan Ganesh SEPTEMBER 15 2023**

Stick to sci-fi, mate. Or do a Thelma & Louise sequel. Leave Napoleon Bonaparte to an auteur.

Such was my graceless grumble when I saw that Ridley Scott had likened the writer of the Civil Code, the great decimaliser and school-builder, to Hitler and Stalin. Napoleon did "a lot of bad shit", as Scott told Empire magazine, that apt title, ahead of his biopic. But there aren't Nazi-scale crimes on his record. And Uncle Joe doesn't have a hand in legal systems from Louisiana to the Indian Ocean.

Having calmed down, I can see Scott isn't alone in his moral black-and-whiteness. Because Britain and much of the "Anglosphere" entered the liberal age with relative smoothness, people there can forget how hard-won it was elsewhere. There is a particular blind spot for the notion of the necessary autocrat: the leader who centralises to reform.

You needn't accept that Napoleon himself was one of these (he reinstated slavery, after all) to recognise the general type. Peter the Great of Russia: absolute monarch, but also westerniser. Frederick the Great of Prussia: annexer of lands, but also meritocrat and science enthusiast. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore stand out as top-down modernisers from more recent times.

Japan's Meiji Restoration, one of the sharpest national turnarounds on record, is harder to pin on one leader. But again we have that mix of authoritarian means and enlightened ends: mass education, industrial development, a standardised language. You can hoard power to spread it around.

Last year, Joe Biden framed the modern world as a "battle between democracies and autocracies". It is a good thing that he has desisted. First, lots of countries are hard to place on the axis. (Where is Thailand at any given time?) Second, the west hasn't the clout to confront all autocracies. What it can do is counter aggressors, such as Russia. In other words, what a state does, not what it is, must be the test.

But the larger problem with the tyranny versus freedom theme is exposed by the story of Napoleon. What if a nation has to use the first mode of government to arrive at the second? The writer-strategist Edward Luttwak once recalled a childhood quarrel with his father on the Bonaparte question. “Great Britain was already on its way to liberty and did not need Napoleon,” was the parental view, “but Europe did, and Britain took him away.”

That underrates the UK’s legitimate anxieties. Even his fans must grant that invading the Iberian peninsula was going to put the cat among the pigeons. Still, the core dilemma of liberalism — how to achieve it in the first instance, if not through diktat? — is well put.

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The life I sometimes bang the drum for in this column — that of rational, commercial, urban modernity — isn’t naturally occurring. Where it exists, it was often the result of central coercion and the squashing of older customs, whether feudal or ecclesiastical. It is fine to be all Burkean about it and tell people to let history take its genteel course. But the Anglo-American experience isn’t universal. Some polities don’t get to evolve while large bodies of water screen them from external threats. Even the US had Lincoln, who didn’t always ask nicely.

I won’t push this trope of the enlightened absolutist too far. It was the argument for Vladimir Putin in western capitals at the turn of the millennium. (His useful idiots were making it more recently than that.) And, benign dictatorship being something lots of educated men think they have in them after the fourth drink, I can’t be seen to be offering the UK two benevolent terms of Janan the Great.

It is just that the Napoleonic dilemma never goes away. Look around. Is there a world in which Saudi Arabia would be making domestic liberal reforms or diplomatic overtures other than under a high-handed ruler? And how do we weigh that against the macabre stuff?

Scott is a good enough artist to give us a more textured portrait of Napoleon than the silly trailer and early interviews suggest. But there is a reason, beyond cost, this subject foiled even Kubrick. The monster-liberator is such an awkward concept, and for Anglosphere audiences more than most. Those who were early to modernity can be hopeless at giving directions to the place.

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