The Great Political Theories

Volume 2

A Comprehensive Selection of the Crucial Ideas in Political Philosophy from the French Revolution to Modern Times

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Contents

ety, that it acts by a contrary impulse, and brings the latter the closer together. All that part of its organization which it had committed to its Government, devolves again upon itself, and acts through its medium. When men, as well from natural instinct as from reciprocal benefits, have habituated themselves to social and civilised life, there is always enough of its principles in practice to carry them through any changes they may find necessary or convenient to make in their Government. In short, man is so naturally a creature of society that it is almost impossible to put him out of it.

Formal Government makes but a small part of civilised life; and when even the best that human wisdom can devise is established, it is a thing more in name and idea than in fact. It is to the great and fundamental principles of society and civilisation—to the common usage universally consented to, and mutually and reciprocally maintained—to the unceasing circulation of interest, which, passing through its million channels, invigorates the whole mass of civilised man—it is to these things, infinitely more than to anything which even the best instituted Government can perform, that the safety and prosperity of the individual and of the whole depends.

The more perfect civilisation is, the less occasion has it for Government, because the more it does regulate its own affairs, and govern itself; but so contrary is the practice of old Governments to the reason of the case, that the expences of them increase in the proportion they ought to diminish. It is but few general laws that civilised life requires, and those of such common usefulness, that whether they are enforced by the forms of government or not, the effect will be nearly the same. If we consider what the principles are that first condense men into society, and what the motives that regulate their mutual intercourse afterwards, we shall find, by the time we arrive at what is called Government, that nearly the whole of the business is performed by the natural operation of the parts upon each other.

DE MAISTRE

Considérations sur la France, Étude sur la Souveraineté, Du Pape; and *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*

The French Revolution

We are attached to the Supreme Being by a supple chain which restrains without enslaving us. What is most admirable

in the universal order of things is the action of free men under the divine hand. Freely enslaved, they act at the same time voluntarily and by necessity: they do what they want, but without upsetting general plans. Each person occupies the center of a sphere of activity, whose diameter varies according to the eternal geometrician, who knows how to extend, restrict, stop or direct the will without altering its nature. . . .

If one imagines a watch the springs of which continually vary in strength, weight, dimension, form and position, and which, however, will invariably always show the time, one will get some idea of the action of free men relatively to the plans of the Creator.

In the political and moral world, as in the physical, there is a common order and there are exceptions to that order. Commonly we see a series of effects produced by the same causes, but at certain times we see actions suspended, causes paralysed and new effects produced. The miracle is, in effect, produced by a divine or superhuman cause which suspends or contradicts an ordinary cause. . . . The French Revolution, and all that is happening in Europe at this moment, is as marvellous in its way as the instantaneous fructification of a tree in January, yet men, instead of admiring, look elsewhere or talk nonsense. In the time of revolutions the chain which ties man contracts abruptly, his action diminishes and his means deceive him. . . .

What distinguishes the French Revolution and what makes it a unique event in history is that it is radically bad. No element of good relieves the eye of the observer: it is the highest degree of corruption known; it is pure impurity. In what page of history will one find as many vices acting at one time in the same theatre? What a frightful assemblage of baseness and cruelty! What profound immorality! What forgetting of all modesty. . . . There was a certain inexplicable deliriousness, a blind impetuosity, a scandalous scorn of all that is respectable among men, an atrocity of a new kind that joked about its crimes. Above all, an impudent prostitution of reasoning of all the words made to express the ideas of justice and virtue.

And now, see how crime serves as basis for all this republican scaffolding. The word "citizen" has been substituted for the old forms of politeness. . . . It is from this bloody filth that a durable government will arise? . . . Barbarian ignorance has presided, no doubt, over numerous political régimes: but wise barbarism, systematic atrocity, calculated corruption, and, above all, irreligion have never produced anything. Greenness leads to maturity, rottenness leads to nothing. . . .

The government of republican France is thought strong because it is violent, but force differs from violence as much as from feebleness, and the astonishing manner in which it operates at this time only furnishes the proof that it cannot long endure. The French nation does not want this government: it suffers it, it remains subject, perhaps because it cannot help it, or because it fears something worse. The republic rests only on these two factors, which have nothing real about them. One can say that it rests entirely on two negatives. . . . One feels, in all that the friends of the republic say on the stability of government, not the conviction of reason, but the dream of desire.

(Extracts from *Considérations sur la France*, chapters 1 and 4.)

Absolute Power

Every kind of sovereignty is absolute in nature. . . . However one organizes institutions, there will always be, in the last analysis, an absolute power which can do harm with impunity, which will therefore be despotic, and against which there is no bulwark other than insurrection.

Everywhere where powers are divided, the stuggles among the different powers can be considered as the deliberations of a single sovereign whose reason balances the pros and cons. But as soon as the decision is made, the effect is the same . . . and the will of any sovereign is always invincible.

No matter how one defines and places sovereignty, always it is one, inviolable and absolute. . . . The sovereign cannot be judged, for that would imply another sovereign over it. The law by which anyone is judged will be made by a sovereign or by another; the latter would mean a law made by a sovereign against itself or a sovereign below the sovereign, both of which are inadmissible. It is always necessary to remind men of history which is the first or really the only teacher in politics. To say that man is born for liberty, is to utter nonsense.

History is experimental politics, that it is to say, the only good. As in physics, a hundred volumes of speculative theories disappear before a single experiment, so in political science, no system can be admitted if it is not the more or less probable corollary of well-established facts. If one asks what is the most natural government in the world, history replies, "It is monarchy." . . .

Democracy had a brilliant moment—the glory of Athens—and it paid dearly for it. One would, however, make a bad

mistake if, comparing moment with moment, one pretended to establish the superiority of democracy over monarchy. It would mean neglecting the consideration of duration which is a necessary element of this kind of estimate. In general, all democratic governments are only passing meteors, whose brilliance excludes duration.

In reality, all governments are monarchies which differ only that they are for life, temporary, hereditary or elective, individual or collegiate. . . . All government is aristocratic, composed more or less of ruling figures. In democracy, that aristocracy is composed of as many persons as the nature of things allowed. Monarchy, or aristocracy, which is inevitable in all governments, is dominated by a single person who is at the pinnacle of the pyramid, and unquestionably, it forms the most natural government for man. But of all monarchies the most strict, the most despotic, the most intolerable, is the monarchical people.

(Extract from *Étude sur la Souveraineté.*)

The Dangers of Individual Reason

Human reason in individuals is useless, not only for creation, but also for the conservation of all religious or political association, because it only produces disputes. Man, to behave, has no need of problems, but of beliefs. His cradle must be surrounded by dogmas, and when his reason awakes, it is necessary that he find all his opinions made. . . . There is nothing so important for him as prejudice. . . . Prejudice does not mean false ideas, but only . . . opinions adopted before examination. Now this kind of opinion is the greatest need of man, the true elements of his happiness, and the palladium of empires. Without it, there can be neither cult, morals, nor government. It is necessary that there be a religion of the state as there is a politics of the state: or rather, that religious and political dogmas, mixed and blended, together form a rather strong universal or national reason in order to repress the aberrations of individual reason which is . . . the mortal enemy of all associations because it produces only divergent opinions.

All known peoples have been happy and powerful to the degree they have most faithfully obeyed that national reason which is nothing but the annihilation of individual dogmas and the absolute and general reign of national dogmas, of useful prejudices. If each man relies on his individual reason for his religious beliefs, the result will be anarchy of belief or the annihilation of religious sovereignty. Similarly, if each

person examines the principles of government, the result will be civil anarchy or the annihilation of political sovereignty. Government is a true religion: it has its dogmas, its mysteries, its ministers. To annihilate it or to submit it to the discussion of all individuals, is the same thing. It sees only by national reason . . . by political faith, which is a symbol. The first need of men is that his budding reason be curbed under this double yoke, that it annihilate itself, that it lose itself in national reason in order to change its individual existence into a communal one.

(Extract from *Étude sur la Souveraineté.*)

Papal Power

Infallibility in the spiritual order and sovereignty in the temporal order are two perfectly synonymous words. Both express that high power which dominates all, from which all others derive, which governs and is not governed, which judges and is not judged.

To say the Church is infallible is not to ask any particular privilege for it. We ask only that it enjoy the common right possessed by all sovereignties, to act as if it were infallible, for all government is absolute. From the moment that it can be resisted on the pretext of error or injustice, it no longer exists. . . . The Church must be governed as all other associations, otherwise there will no longer be aggregation, harmony, unity. This government is therefore, by its nature, infallible, absolute. . . .

The monarchical form once established, infallibility is no more than a necessary consequence of supremacy, or rather, it is the same thing under two different names. . . . It is indeed absolutely the same thing in practice not to be subject to error as not to be able to be accused of it. . . . All judgment, properly so-called, is and must be held as just in all human association, under all imaginable forms of government. Every true statesman will understand me when I say that it is not a question of knowing if the Supreme Pontiff *is*, but that he *must be* infallible. . . .

There is no sovereignty more justifiable in Europe than that of the Sovereign Pontiff. It is like divine law, *justificata in semetipsa*. . . .

How could the Church have been able to control the monarchy if the monarchy itself had not been prepared, softened, sweetened by the Popes? What could each prelate, what could even each particular Church do against its master? Nothing. What was necessary was not a human, physical, material

power . . . but a spiritual and moral power which reigned only through opinion: such as was the power of the Popes. No right and pure spirit would refuse to recognize the action of Providence which showed to all Europeans the sovereign Pontiff as the source of European sovereignty. The same authority, acting everywhere, obliterated national differences as much as the thing was possible. . . . Providence had confided to the Popes the education of European sovereignty . . . every action of the Popes against monarchs turned to the profit of sovereignty. Never acting otherwise than as divine delegates, even in struggling against monarchs, they did not cease to warn the subject that he could not act against his masters. Immortal benefactors of the human race, they fought at the same time for the divine character of sovereignty and for the legitimate liberty of men. The people, uninterested in any kind of resistance, could neither become full of pride nor emancipate, and the sovereigns, bowing only to divine power, conserved all their dignity. . . . The kings abdicate the power of judging by themselves, and the people in return, declare kings infallible and inviolable. Such is the fundamental law of European monarchy, and it is the work of the Popes: unheard of marvel, contrary to the nature of natural man, contrary to all historical facts, which no one in ancient times dreamed as being possible. . . . The Christian peoples who have never felt, or never felt enough the hand of the Supreme Pontiff, will never have this monarchy. . . . In order to be admitted to the European banquet, in order to be made worthy of this admirable sceptre which has never been given except to those nations that are prepared, . . . all routes are false except that which has conducted us. . . . All European nations withdrawing from the influence of the Holy Seat will be carried inevitably to servitude or to revolt.

(Extracts from *Du Pape*, Book I, chapter 1; Book II, chapter 6; Book III, chapter 4.)

The Executioner and the Soldier

There is in man, in spite of his immense degradation, an element of love that he bears for his fellow man: compassion is as natural as respiration. By what inconceivable magic is he always ready, at the first sound of the drum, to divest himself of this sacred character, to go off without resistance, often even with a certain cheerfulness . . . to cut to pieces on the battlefield his brother who has never offended him and who on his part similarly advances to make him submit if he can. . . .

One can say, glory explains everything. But first, glory is only for the leaders: secondly, this is to move the difficulty back, because I ask from where precisely comes the extraordinary glory attached to war. I have often had a vision. I imagine that an intelligent person, a stranger to our globe, comes here for some sufficient reason and converses with someone on the order of the world. Among the curious things that one relates to him is that corruption and vice require that man, in certain circumstances, die by the hand of fellow man: that this right of killing without crime is confided, among us, only to the executioner and the soldier. "The one kills the guilty, convicted and condemned, and his executions are happily so rare that one of these ministers of death suffices in a province. As for the soldiers, there are never enough of them. They must kill without limit, and always honest men. Of these two professional killers, the soldier and the executioner, one is very honored and always has been among all the nations of the world; the other is equally generally regarded as infamous. Which of these men would be the one who was honored?"

Certainly the travelling genius would not hesitate a moment: he would bestow all praise on the executioner. . . . He would say, "He is a subtle being . . . he is the cornerstone of society . . . take away the executioner and all order disappears with him. Besides, what greatness of soul, what noble disinterestedness one must suppose in the man who devotes himself to such respectable functions. . . . Public opinion surrounds him with all honor of which he has need, and to which he is entitled. As for the soldier, he is . . . a minister of cruelty and injustice. . . . How many individual injustices, horrors and useless atrocities does he commit?"

How this genius would be wrong! Indeed the soldier and the executioner occupy the two extremes of the social ladder, but in the opposite sense of this beautiful theory. There is no one so noble as the first, no one so abject as the second. . . .

A somber signal is given; an abject minister of justice comes to knock on the door and to notify the executioner that he is needed. He departs; he arrives at a public square, crowded with a mob, cramped and throbbing. He is handed a poisoner, a murderer or a blasphemer; he seizes him and stretches him on a horizontal cross; he raises his arm. There is a horrible silence, and one hears only the cracking of bones and the howls of the victim. The executioner detaches him; he carries him to the wheel. The broken limbs are entwined in the spokes; the head hangs; the hair stands on end and the mouth, open like a furnace, speaks only a few bloody words calling for death. The executioner has finished; his heart

beats, but it is for joy. He applauds himself; he says in his heart: "Nobody is better at the wheel than I." He descends, he holds out his blood-stained hand and the Law throws him, from afar, a few pieces of gold which he carries away through a double line of men turning away in horror. He sits down to eat; he gets into bed and he sleeps. . . .

And yet, all grandeur, all power, all subordination, rest on the executioner: he is the horror and the tie of the human association. Take away this incomprehensible agent and at that moment, order will give way to chaos, thrones will fall and society will disappear.

(Extracts from *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg,* 1st and 7th Entretiens.)