

# A NOTE ON MONTESQUIEU AND MARX

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IN 1748, Charles Louis de Secondat, better known to posterity as the Baron de Montesquieu, completed and published his magnum opus, *The Spirit of Laws*. Exactly a century later, Karl Marx, in conjunction with Friederich Engels, released to a continent on the verge of revolution *The Communist Manifesto*. The dates and publications have more than an academic interest for anyone concerned about the development of political thought, for unquestionably few works written within the last several hundred years have so profoundly affected the course of practical politics as have these two. They are as fountain heads from which streams of very diverse character have flowed to touch the life of mankind in all aspects the world around. Much could very easily and very properly be written about both Montesquieu and Marx; yet the life-story of each can be quickly given in brief outline.

Charles Louis de Secondat was born 18 January, 1689, at La Brede near Bordeaux, France, the son of Jacques de Secondat, himself the second son of the Baron de Montesquieu, and Francoise de Penel, heiress to the estate on which her son was born. On his mother's death when he was seven, Charles Louis inherited and at once assumed the title, Baron de la Brede. Both his parents belonged to the ancient aristocracy of France and resolved to rear their son in its traditions. Private tutors took care of his education until he was eleven; then came eleven years at the school of the Oratorian Brethren at Juilly, France. After this three years were devoted to the study of law and admission, in 1714, to the grade of counsellor. The following year the young nobleman entered upon a marriage that began purely as a business transaction but later developed into a cordial and enduring friendship. The year after his marriage, his father's elder brother, who held the title Baron de Montesquieu and was president of the parliament of Bordeaux, died leaving his nephew of twenty-seven years, his title, his fortune and his office—all on the condition that he took the name of Montesquieu. He did, and settled down to twelve years of boring judicial duties. His real interests were society and literature. Finally in 1728, Montesquieu sold his office and moved to Paris. Immediately, however, he set out on

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travels that took him to Austria, Hungary, Italy, Germany and England, always carefully observing customs and institutions wherever he went. During his stay of a year and a half in England he came to admire English country life, so that on his return to France he settled at La Brede and lived the rest of his life there as nearly as he could after the fashion of an English country squire.

Montesquieu now devoted himself solely to the study of literature and writing. Already he had established his name as a literary man by three major works and several of lesser importance. Then, in 1748, he completed his masterpiece, which eclipsed all he had hitherto produced. He died suddenly, 10 February, 1755, and was buried in the church of St. Sulpice.

Far more troubled and tempestuous was the life-story of Karl Marx that began at Treves, Germany, 5 May, 1818. Marx's parents were Jewish, both descended from a long line of rabbis; his father was a well-to-do lawyer. Both parents repudiated Judaism and became Christians when their son was six years old. For Karl the experience ultimately became a deep intellectual and emotional rebirth. He not only ceased to be a Jew in religion but became bitterly anti-Semitic; later his strictures on his own race and the English capitalistic system vied with each other in their bitterness. A brilliant youth, young Marx entered the University of Bonn in 1835 and the next year transferred to the University of Berlin. The influence of Hegel, now dead five years, still pervaded the famous institution of learning, so that Marx's change from the study of jurisprudence to that of history and philosophy introduced him to the teachings of the man whose dialectical method he was to follow as closely as he repudiated its content of idealism. By 1841 Marx had earned a Ph.D. at the University of Jena. Now contemplating marriage, and interested in university teaching as a career, he sought to find a position through the intervention of friends. A change of ministry at that time dashed his hopes, and in a mood of bitter disappointment he turned to journalism.

Marx's first journalistic ventures were scarcely successful. His growing radicalism showed itself in biting articles on economics, which he himself saw to be deficient in an understanding of the problems with which they dealt. An offer of the joint-editorship of *The Franco-German Yearbook* at Paris persuaded him to take up residence in that centre of socialistic thought. The *Yearbook* soon went bankrupt, and Marx, now married, faced poverty in a strange city. Fortunately for him, he met

Friederich Engels, the son of a wealthy German manufacturer with mills on the continent and in England. The friendship between the two men became one of the most remarkable in history. Marx provided the theories, Engels the organizing ability, much ghost writing for his better known companion, and a lion's share of the funds for their enterprises.

Marx grew more openly radical in his pronouncements and soon became dangerously involved in the political ferment sweeping Europe. Late in 1847, he and Engels were commissioned to prepare a manifesto for the Communist League at Brussels. The work was completed and sent by secret messenger to a printer in London, February, 1848. A few years later, refused residence in Germany and France, under suspicion in Belgium, Marx went to England, where he lived until his death in 1883. Here he found the asylum he could find nowhere else, carried out his endless and exhausting researches, produced the works that have become the sacred books of proletarian socialism throughout the world, and more frequently than not was forced to live off the bourgeois gold he so thoroughly denounced.

An examination of the economic, political and social conditions existing in and just prior to 1748 and 1848 would reveal many likenesses. From this it might be inferred that similar circumstances would have conditioned each man's study of current problems so that a closer measure of agreement would have marked their conclusions. Nothing could be further from the truth. In their study of the past, their diagnosis of the contemporary scene, their program for the future, and their philosophy of history, Montesquieu and Marx were poles apart. Could it have been otherwise? Actually, they had almost nothing in common. Montesquieu was a child of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment with its aroused intellectual curiosity and large promises of reform, Marx was a product of a politically disturbed and destructively sceptical nineteenth century milieu that toppled thrones and age-old notions of government with the same recklessness; Montesquieu always had more than sufficient for daily needs, Marx was in need most of the time, often to the point of desperation; Montesquieu, the urbane, well-poised nobleman, enjoyed the companionship of his fellowmen and made friends easily, Marx, cynical, suspicious, inordinately self-centred, readily incurred the displeasure of others and never forgot a slight, real or imagined; Montesquieu, happily married, enjoyed domestic quiet, Marx's home life—chiefly because of his own disposition—was marred by strife

and later darkened by tragedy; Montesquieu was deeply religious, Marx had neither faith himself nor cherished it in others; Montesquieu readily acknowledged the greatness of God and the littleness of man, making them twin pillars in his political thought, Marx had no deity other than inexorable economic laws and obliterated man in the cruel struggle of class with class.

It is far more difficult to describe precisely the content of *The Spirit of Laws* than of *The Communist Manifesto*. Indeed, Montesquieu's masterpiece defies brief analysis or summary—one of the best available occupies fourteen pages of fair size. The work engaged the author's attention for twenty years. Little wonder that as he corrected the last proofs, he confessed that the task had nearly killed him; he lived but eight years afterward and wrote little more. The work comprises thirty-one books each divided into chapters, some not more than a few sentences in length, others many pages. Montesquieu states his thesis in the opening sentence of Book I: "Laws in their most general signification are the necessary relations arising from the nature of things". The affirmation was revolutionary; it differed radically from the definitions of law that went back to the days of Plato: law was not the dictate of reason, Montesquieu concluded, neither was it essentially the command of a superior; rather quite independently of any law man may formulate, there is a body of principles in operation that determine the reason for and the content of legislation itself. All laws have certain relations with one another; further, they must always be considered in relation to their origin, the purpose of the legislator and the occasions to which they apply. The sum total of these considerations constitutes what the author means by "the spirit of laws".

Montesquieu's finding of the essential spirit of laws within the nexus of the social situation with all its conditioning influences—economics, geography, politics, climate—marked the point of departure for his own consideration of such practical, and intensely personal, problems as the ideal form of government with a workable division of powers and a proper system of checks (he held the English system was the most admirable in all Europe); the purpose of taxation; the nature of civil and political liberty; the absolute lack of defence for the institution of slavery; the relation of laws to morals and social customs; the relation of the state to religion; and necessary reforms of criminal law.

Naturally, Montesquieu was misunderstood by many, misquoted by others in support of positions he never held, and rejected by still others. It could scarcely have been otherwise in a work so vast and seminal in its character. On the other hand, the ideas contained in *The Spirit of Laws* soon won a place for themselves in the thought of every thinker of liberal bent. They inspired alike the revolutionary and the reformer, they found practical expression in those proclamations that set forth the inviolable rights of man, and contributed, along with the works of those who shared the spirit of Montesquieu, to the revolt against political tyranny, which came to a climax in 1848. Voltaire had no love for Montesquieu, who in turn had not counted Voltaire among his friends; yet no one has more correctly appraised the place of Montesquieu and his great work in modern history than did Voltaire when he wrote: "The human family had lost its title deeds—Montesquieu found them and restored them to their owner."

In contrast with *The Spirit of Laws*, *The Communist Manifesto* was a slender piece of writing—in the Modern Library edition it consists of forty pages only, including the Preface. Its appearance in the tense political atmosphere of early 1848 was like the proverbial pouring of oil on flames. Engels, its joint author, acknowledged that its "fundamental proposition which formed its nucleus belonged to Marx." From this "fundamental proposition" stem all other tenets of the Communist's creed; to-day, as in 1848, it is basic to all ideologies of the far left, namely, "that in every historical epoch the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch." Thus, in one grand sweep all forms of social organization, politics included and everything encompassed by "intellectual history"—religion, art and science are reduced to economics. Likewise economic determinism underlies and accounts for the endless succession of class struggles that have characterized "the history of all hitherto existing society," and that can be brought to an end only when the proletariat has "emancipated society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class-distinction and class-struggles" and established its own dictatorship. In the development of their thesis, Marx and Engels left no doubt about their antipathy towards all milder forms of socialism, the institutions of private property and the family, and the power that the

possession of wealth brought to the bourgeoisie. Equally fervent were they in their declaration of the intention of "communists everywhere to support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things". And why not? For the authors boldly assert: "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win."

A world to win! Those who espoused the teachings of the *Manifesto* in 1848 made that their avowed aim. Marx himself greatly enlarged upon its "fundamental proposition" in his later voluminous works. Many since his day have attempted to interpret his teachings for the benefit of the faithful and those whom they would enlist in their ranks. To-day, unless one greatly misconstrues their own statements, world revolution—the winning of the world—remains the ultimate goal of those who embrace the teachings of the *Manifesto*.

These most inadequate comments on two men who through their writings helped to determine the course of history scarcely do more than emphasize the present day importance of two of the most significant political treatises ever written. It may be sheer folly to hope that 1948 has produced a third work of equal importance, able to command the almost apostolic fervor of the *Manifesto* with the liberating spirit of the *Laws* in a measure sufficient to lead troubled humanity appreciably nearer the age-old goal of enduring peace with liberty and security for all men. Yet, one does hope, folly or not.

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