

## The French Dissidents: Pascal, Montesquieu, Tocqueville

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I ended my previous lecture mentioning Tocqueville, who happens to be more quoted and admired in America than in France. I remember that when I went to College in France, one of my professors dismissed Tocqueville as an ambitious aristocrat who just plagiarized Montesquieu and whose books weren't worth reading.

Then again, Montesquieu himself is less popular in France than what you may think. For the French, the fact that Montesquieu wrote that England had the best political system in Europe was unforgivable. The French Enlightenment philosophers thought Montesquieu was too much of a relativist. Only Diderot came to his funeral.

There is another French philosopher who's been dismissed by the French Enlightenment, and that is Blaise Pascal. Voltaire couldn't understand why Pascal, a great scientific mind, spent the rest of his life writing about faith and religion. What a waste, Voltaire thought. Even today, Pascal is often derided in French intellectual circles as a "bigot" a word which is more derogatory in French than in English.

I mean, none of them were reburied at the Panthéon. The Panthéon is France's secular mausoleum in Paris. It was originally built as a Church, but the French Revolution turned it into a mausoleum for France's greatest men.

Voltaire, Rousseau and Condorcet are buried there, but not Pascal, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville. Why? Because Voltaire, Rousseau and Condorcet represent the radical French Enlightenment.

I've already described Voltaire and Rousseau in my previous lecture, so let me say a few words about Condorcet.

He was a mathematician who believed in applying mathematics to the social sciences. He believed in a rationalist reconstruction of society.

Condorcet's essay *Esquisse d'un tableau historique de l'esprit humain* (*Sketch of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit*) outlines the features of a future rational society entirely shaped by scientific knowledge.

More specifically, Condorcet makes two important points in his essay: 1) that the progress of the natural sciences must be followed by progress in the moral and political sciences; 2) that social evils are the result of ignorance and error rather than a consequence of human nature.

Condorcet, in other words, was a typical French thinker. Like Rousseau, he was the intellectual inheritor of René Descartes and the precursor of Auguste Comte.

Indeed, if I had to select three of France's most representative and influential thinkers in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, I would list René Descartes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Auguste Comte.

As I explained before, Descartes can reasonably be considered the intellectual father of radical Enlightenment. As for Rousseau, he was probably the most influential thinker of the French Revolution. But when it comes to the nineteenth century, I believe that one of the most influential French thinkers was Auguste Comte.

The name "Auguste Comte" is not so famous today, and yet Comte was one of the most influential thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was especially influential over Karl Marx. Marx's theory of "Scientific socialism" and of the three phases of History (the aristocratic, the bourgeois, and the proletarian) were inspired by Auguste Comte.

Comte wanted to re-organize society “scientifically” and he claimed that society went through three historical stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific.

According to Comte, the “Theological stage” preceded the Enlightenment. In that stage, man blindly believed in whatever he was taught by his ancestors. He believed in a supernatural power.

By the "Metaphysical" stage, Comte meant the post-French Revolution. This stage was one of investigation, because people started reasoning and questioning, although they had no solid evidence for their conclusions. The stage of investigation was the beginning of a world that questioned authority and religion.

The “Scientific stage,” is the final one, a period in which Science is able to answer all questions and solve all problems.

Comte invented the word “sociology” and he considered this new discipline to be the ultimate science. Thanks to sociology, scientists were going to be able to design the perfect society.

Many of Karl Marx’s ideas were taken from Auguste Comte, and therefore the influence of Marxism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is indirectly the influence of Comte himself.

Now, when you think about it, Descartes, Rousseau and Comte are considered great philosophers, but in truth their philosophies had devastating effects.

By putting man at the center of the universe and by declaring reason the source of morality, Descartes can be seen as the origin of political theories that degenerated into the subjugation of man by man.

Rousseau, for his part, laid the ground for popular dictatorship (well before Marx spoke about the “dictatorship of the proletariat”).

In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau claims that there is no need for democracy and for elections since in a rational and educated society everybody will agree on what's the right policy.

This is what he calls "la volonté générale" (the General Will). And what about those who don't agree and don't identify with the "General Will?" No problem, says Rousseau. We'll "educate" them until they realize that they're wrong.

Now this is exactly what Robespierre, one of Rousseau's greatest admirers, did during the reign of Terror. Except that Robespierre couldn't be bothered with "educating" people who didn't agree with what he thought was, or should be, the "general will." He just called them traitors and guillotined them.

As for Comte, his so-called "Science of Society" was mimicked in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Communism and Nazism. Whoever stood in the way of the new and perfect society had to be eliminated. Comte's influence went as far as Brazil itself.

Brazil's flag has a motto on it that says "Ordem e Progresso" which means, "Order and Progress." This motto is inspired from Comte principle of positivism: "Love as a principle and order as the basis: Progress as the goal." There is even a "Positivist Temple" in Porto Alegre to practice Auguste Comte's "Religion of Humanity."

Now, Descartes, Rousseau and Comte had three contemporaries who strongly disagreed with their views and who provided an alternative philosophy. They did not produce revolutions, they were not buried in the Panthéon, and they did not inspire the design of national flags.

These three philosophers, whom I call "the French Dissidents" are Blaise Pascal, Charles Louis de Secondat (known as Montesquieu), and Alexis de Tocqueville.

Pascal was Descartes' contemporary and strongly disagreed with him. Pascal was one of the greatest scientists of all times.

In 1642, at the age of 16, he started some pioneering work on calculating machines. After three years of effort and fifty prototypes, he invented the first mechanical calculator.

Pascal was an important mathematician, helping create two major new areas of research.

He wrote a significant treatise on the subject of projective geometry at the age of 16, and later corresponded with Pierre de Fermat on probability theory, strongly influencing the development of modern economics. In 1646 he refuted Aristotle's followers who, like Descartes himself, claimed that nature abhors a vacuum.

But Pascal's disagreement with Descartes was not only about vacuum. It was mostly about reason and about God.

Pascal's worldview was deeply religious in the sense that he thought reason couldn't answer everything and that he strongly believed that God, not reason, was the source of morals and of the rules of human conduct.

Pascal thought that Descartes' true and ultimate purpose was to get rid of God. This is what Pascal wrote in his *Pensées*, the philosophical treatise that was interrupted by his death:

**"I cannot forgive Descartes. What he really wanted, in his whole philosophy, was to get rid of God. In a way, Descartes gave God a flick in order to put the world in motion. But after that, of course, he didn't need God anymore."**

What Pascal is saying is that Descartes' God has nothing to do with faith. It's a principle that is needed to make sense of a philosophical system. But for Pascal, God cannot be justified by reason. On the contrary: faith is the answer to the limits of reason.

After Pascal had his strong religious vision on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 1654, he wrote a note which he always kept in his jacket. In it, it says: **“God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the scientists.”** Clearly, Pascal’s God is the God of the Bible, not of Aristotle.

Pascal’s main focus was neither law nor political science, but his worldview has political and legal implications –just as Descartes’ radical rationalism transformed the politics of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The bottom line is that Pascal was a political conservative. He thought men were too evil and too complicated to be ruled by rational laws and man-made models. In sharp contrast with Enlightenment philosophers, he thought that some degree of unquestioned acceptance of tradition and authority was necessary for society to function.

This is what Pascal writes about tradition, for example: **“Montaigne is wrong: tradition must be respected just because it is tradition, not because it is reasonable or fair.”**

But Pascal goes further. He says that on the one hand people only obey the law if they think the law is fair, but that on the other hand that you can always argue that a law is unfair. Therefore, Pascal says, don't try to rationalize the law. Just make sure everyone obeys it. If you start questioning the law or tradition, you open the gates of instability and hell.

So what about all the time and effort invested by brilliant minds to design and write good laws since the Greek philosophers? Well, Pascal says. They shouldn't be taken seriously. This is what he writes:

**“One always pictures Plato and Aristotle as pedantic and wearing long gowns. They were honest folks who liked to laugh with their friends, like everyone else. And when they wrote about Laws and Politics, they did it as a joke. This was the**

least serious and the least philosophical part of their lives. The most philosophical part was to live simply and quietly. If they wrote about politics, it is because they thought they could manage a madhouse. And if they pretended to talk about this seriously, it is precisely because they knew that the madmen they were talking to thought of themselves as kings and emperors. All they were trying to do was to mitigate their madness.”

But besides his derogatory attitude toward Plato and Aristotle, Pascal thought that human laws could not be universal. This is an important point that makes him a dissident just like Montesquieu. But before I talk about Montesquieu, one more thing about Pascal.

Pascal thought that different cultures have different interpretations of justice, and therefore that no law could be universally just. Here is what he writes: **“Legal rulings also depend on how far you are from the North Pole; a meridian can make the difference between truth and falsehood. *Vérité en deça des Pyrénées, erreur au-delà*: What is true on one side of the Pyrénées [the natural mountainous border between France and Spain] is wrong on the other side.”**

This idea that laws are not universal was anathema to the French Enlightenment, but certainly not to Montesquieu.

The French Enlightenment was universalistic. This is why it spoke about “Les Droits de l’Homme” (“The Rights of Man”). Now, the very concept of human rights was derided by French philosopher Joseph de Maistre in 1796: **“I’ve seen in my life Frenchmen, Italians and Russians. I even know, thanks to Montesquieu, that there are Persians. As for “Man” I hereby declare that I have never met him. And if he exists, he’s been hiding from me.”**

De Maistre was referring to Montesquieu’s book *Les Lettre persanes (The Persian Letters)*. This book is about cultural relativism, an idea that Montesquieu developed further in *De L’esprit des lois (Spirit of the Laws)*.

In *De l’Esprit des Lois* Montesquieu claims that different cultures need different laws, and that cultures are influenced by climate.

This idea was an anathema to the French Enlightenment. Montesquieu was an aristocrat who admired the British political system. He thought that freedom would flourish in a constitutional monarchy and would be threatened in a republic.

Montesquieu was not looking for a perfect system but for balance. In that sense, he was a true liberal. The same way that liberal economists try to prevent the concentration of economic power, Montesquieu wanted to prevent the concentration of political power: **“Pour qu’on ne puisse pas abuser du pouvoir il faut que, par la disposition des choses, le pouvoir arrête le pouvoir”** (“In order to prevent the abuse of power, one must make sure that power neutralizes power”).

It is precisely because Montesquieu was an aristocrat, a relativist and an empiricist that I consider him a dissident of the French Enlightenment.

I mean, it is no coincidence if Keynes called Montesquieu the greatest French economist. Obviously, Montesquieu was no economist, and that was Keynes' obnoxious way of saying what he thought about French economists.

Like Montesquieu, Tocqueville was a classical liberal and an aristocrat. He was critical of the French Enlightenment's abstract ideas. He was a contemporary of Auguste Comte. Like him, he was born a few years after the French Revolution, and like him he tried to figure out the best way to achieve stability and freedom after decades of revolutions and counter-revolutions.

But while Comte thought that science would produce a perfect society, Tocqueville thought that society was forever imperfect, that the greatest achievement of Modernity was freedom, and that this achievement was not guaranteed.

Tocqueville was well aware of the inner contradiction of the official motto adopted by the French Republic.

Liberty and equality could be, and often are, conflicting ideals. By trying to impose equality, the State threatens personal freedoms.

He foresaw that popular governments could be as despotic, indeed more despotic, than monarchies. The 20<sup>th</sup> century proved him right.

Precisely when most French thinkers were tilting toward socialism and social engineering, Tocqueville warned that this intellectual tendency was paving the road to Serfdom, to use Hayek's expression. Tocqueville put freedom before equality, and that of course made him a French dissident as well.

Tocqueville wrote this very un-French sentence in *Democracy in America*:

**“There is in the human heart this depraved taste for equality, which entails the weak to lower the powerful to his level, and which reduces men to prefer equality in serfdom to inequality in freedom.”**

Clearly, in a choice between liberty and equality, Tocqueville preferred the former.

According to Tocqueville the greatest threat to freedom is the obsession with equality, which has the dangerous potential of turning into tyranny. Tocqueville warned of what Marx advocated: the dictatorship of the proletariat.

But Tocqueville also warned of another danger: that of men willing to give-up freedom only for the sake of their material well-being. The 20<sup>th</sup> century proved him right on that too.

In French, the word État (“state”) is spelled with a capital “E” and the French word for “welfare state” is “L’État providence.” Now, providence has a religious meaning. And, indeed, the French have this quasi-religious deference for “the State” –something that deeply troubled Tocqueville, because he realized that this veneration of the state constituted a threat to freedom.

And so Tocqueville suggested the restoration of community life such as it existed before the French Revolution, in order to protect individuals from the power of the state. Again, this idea was anathema in France. The French call the pre-Revolution era “L’Ancien régime” and refer to it as some kind of pre-history. But Tocqueville claimed that the French Revolution destroyed a community life that does exist in the United States and that constitutes a pillar of individual freedom.

Now you have to understand that Tocqueville has been mostly ignored and dismissed in France, especially because Marxism dominated French intellectual life after the Second World War. For the French, Tocqueville committed a double-crime: he had something good to say about America, and he valued personal freedom more than the French state.

And this is why I call him a French dissident, just like Pascal and Montesquieu.

Pascal was a dissident because he dismissed René Descartes, the father of French rationalism. Pascal thought that reason alone could not explain everything and

could not be relied on exclusively for society to function. He was a French dissident because he wanted to preserve Christianity.

Montesquieu was a dissident because he didn't share the French Enlightenment's belief in the inner goodness of human nature. Precisely because he was wary of human nature, Montesquieu developed a whole system of checks and balances in order to avoid the abuse of power. As a cultural relativist he did not share the universalistic version of human rights promoted by the French Revolution. He was a French dissident because he admired England's political system.

Tocqueville was a dissident because he rightly understood the inner contradiction between liberty and equality and because his preference was clearly for the former. He warned about the tendency of the French state to rule the lives of its citizens in the name of rationality and equality, and he warned about the totalitarian tendencies of equalitarian ideologies. He was a French dissident because he thought his country could and should learn a great deal from America.

Clearly, Pascal, Montesquieu and Tocqueville are the intellectual antithesis of Descartes, Rousseau, and Comte. They've been less influential, but in my opinion they were far more insightful, and we still have a lot to learn from them.