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THE ESSENTIAL LIBERALISM OF JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET**

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Abstract: In "The Essential Liberalism of José Ortega y Gasset," the author explores Ortega's philosophy of liberalism, which emphasizes the radical reality of individual life as the basis of freedom and society. Unlike doctrinal liberalism or the liberal traditions of the 19th century, Ortega's concept is rooted in his philosophy of "vital reason," which posits life as a dynamic, self-creating process within historical circumstances. He argues that liberalism should enable personal life to flourish by providing freedom from oppressive state control and fostering a pluralistic society. Ortega critiques mass society, where individuality is often subsumed under collective ideologies, whether totalitarian or democratic. His liberalism prioritizes civil society over state power and champions the moral responsibility of minorities to lead through example, not coercion. While skeptical of the naïve optimism of 19th century liberalism, Ortega insists on preserving its essential principles, as liberalism underpins Europe's historical destiny. He distinguishes democracy from liberalism, cautioning against the tyranny of majority rule without safeguards for individual freedom. In his later works, Ortega stresses the importance of constructing Europe as a supranational entity to overcome nationalist tensions, preserving the pluralistic and free spirit that defines European civilization.

Keywords: Ortega, Liberalism, Politics, Philosophy of Life, Nation, State.

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...es el caso que yo no soy un "viejo liberal"

Ortega

THE DOCTRINE OF HUMAN LIFE AS RADICAL REALITY: THE ROOT OF ORTEGA'S LIBERALISM

In 1937, during the early stages of the most dramatic years of Ortega's life — a drama shared by many Spaniards inside and outside the nation during the war — he wrote *Prologue for the French* in Paris, as his most famous book *The Revolt of the Masses* had not yet been translated into the language of Descartes. In one passage, he asked: "¿Puede hoy un hombre de veinte años formarse un proyecto de vida que tenga figura individual y que,

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por tanto, necesitaría realizarse mediante sus iniciativas independientes, mediante sus esfuerzos particulares?” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 364–365). To reach that goal, such a project would not only depend on his initiatives and efforts but also on the world in which he would try to achieve it, which should not be utterly hostile to his aims and must offer enough freedom for his plans. Observing the landscape of 1930s Europe, led by mass leaders like Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler, to mention the most notable ones, Ortega feared that this young man, along with his entire generation, was doomed to become part of the “mass man,” a human type lacking personal life.

The philosopher’s question to his French readers can only be fully understood by grasping the expression “proyecto de vida,” which has a particular meaning in the philosophy of *vital reason*. For Ortega, the radical reality is “my life”—each person’s life. This life is not a “thing,” but rather a dramatic event precisely because it consists of a self installed in the world, forced to make a life for itself. It finds itself with an “unmade” life and has to be shaped amidst circumstances within the historical life of the society to which it belongs, providing the necessary resources. Each self must discover within itself the form it wants its life to take as it is propelled toward the future, open and indeterminate. In his 1933 course, *En torno a Galileo*, Ortega clarified:

Pues bien, ese programa de vida que cada cual es, es, claro está, obra de su imaginación [...] Todos sabemos muy bien que nos hemos forjado diversos programas de vida entre los cuales oscilamos realizando ahora uno y luego otro. En una de sus dimensiones esenciales la vida humana es, pues, una obra de imaginación (ibid.: Vol. VI, 482).

For the life of young Europeans to make sense, first, they must imagine and desire a personal life; second, their circumstances must grant them a minimum of autonomy; the existing political and economic structure must offer at least minimal equality of opportunities and the state must not oppress its citizens’ lives with its demands.

Freedom occupies a central place in Ortega’s metaphysical vision of *vital reason*, since the radical and ultimate reality to which everything must be referred is our life. For each individual, life consists of “doings” and having to make one’s existence, not just in the grand decisions but in the day-to-day and hour-to-hour moments. Therefore, in the many descriptions of this reality that Ortega offers—“our life”—the components that emphasize freedom as decision-making dominate:

La vida es una operación que se hace hacia adelante. Se vive desde el porvenir, porque vivir consiste inexorablemente en un hacer, en un hacerse la vida de cada cual a sí misma (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. v, 120)¹.

In short, Ortega's theory of human life calls for what Popper termed an "open society." Ortega's liberalism is, therefore, pre-political, embedded in the historical structure of human life rather than being a matter of doctrinal speculation. Human life is, above all, personal life, though it materially depends on the collective dimension that sustains it — society. There is a permanent tension between these two dimensions, which Kant summarized in a phrase Ortega shared: the "la in *sociable sociabilidad* de los hombres" (Kant, Ímaz, 1978: 46–47)². The life plan is personal, but its execution occurs in the social sphere. Plan and execution may not be compatible; when not, that life is condemned to failure. Great artistic or scientific innovations may arise if self-triumphs over circumstances. An individual introduces something into the world that did not exist, but which they needed in their life. For example, Newton "needed" to understand how the universe works, and Marx was required to understand the mechanism of worker exploitation by capital.

Ortega was not a liberal in the doctrinal or practical sense of the Liberal Party of the Restoration, led by Práxedes Sagasta, whom he criticized with particular ferocity.³ Nor did he adhere to the liberal trends dominating Europe, which he dismissively referred to as "Manchesterian," referencing the practical interpretation of liberalism that, starting with Bentham, dominated the British liberal tradition. However, Ortega was not a political theorist, though he was constantly preoccupied with politics. He always approached politics from a very specific problem — such as the issues of contemporary Spain — or a purely theoretical issue related to his *racionvitalismo* (life as radical reality). The hundreds of articles he published in the Spanish press

¹I cite another text to emphasize the relevance that life as a decision has in Ortega's metaphysics: "Vida es preocupación, y lo es no sólo en los momentos difíciles, sino que lo es siempre y en esencia no es más que eso: preocuparse. En cada instante tenemos que *decidir lo que vamos a hacer* en el siguiente, lo que va a ocupar nuestra vida. Es pues ocuparse por anticipado, es pre-ocuparse" (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. VIII, 372. The italics have been added. In the previous paragraph, Ortega acknowledges the inspiration from the definition given in the description of Heideggerian *Dasein* as care, as *Sorge* (ibid.)).

²Towards the end of the text, we will indicate where Ortega cites the famous Kantian judgment.

³For his early political interventions starting in 1907–1908, see Zamora Bonilla, 2022, especially *The Return to Spain after the First Stage in Marburg: A Boiling Pot of Ideas for Politics. An Era of Controversies*, pp. 66 and following.

are examples of the former; of the latter, we have his analyses of the concepts of “nation” or “state,” his theory of minorities and masses, his theory of Europe as a historical entity, or his dialogues with past European liberal doctrines, such as his praise of French doctrinaire liberalism in the prologue to his *Rebelión* or his lecture in Berlin, where he reminded Germans emerging from the Nazi nightmare of their illustrious liberal past, extensively citing Wilhelm von Humboldt.

In summary, Ortega is liberal because this doctrine defends the pluralism of life forms that give space to the initiatives necessary for each specific life — the only reality — to choose its path. He postulates the superiority of civil society over any form of state control, which Ortega called the state. He praises parliamentary mediation as a remedy against “direct action,”⁴ Even when it was already discredited, we find liberal roots in his distinction between democracy and liberalism, highlighting the latter’s insistence on limiting state power and its *ethos*⁵ — conceiving liberalism as a moral system that values personal effort⁶ and kindness,⁷ even above justice.

However, as we will see, given the shifting circumstances of the first half of the 20th century — so rich in wars and revolutions — Ortega had plenty

⁴“La civilización no es otra cosa que el ensayo de reducir la fuerza a *ultima ratio*. Ahora empezamos a ver esto con sobrada claridad, porque la “acción directa” consiste en invertir el orden y proclamar la violencia como *prima ratio*; en rigor, como única razón. Es ella la norma que propone la anulación de toda norma, que suprime todo intermedio entre nuestro propósito y su imposición. Es la *Charta Magna* de la barbarie” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 419). In another place, he considers direct action as an indicator of “political degeneration” (ibid.: Vol. II, 652).

⁵About this characteristic of liberalism as *ethos* see Pedro Cerezo, *De la melancolía liberal al ethos liberal* (Cerezo, 2011: 345) and *Razón vital y liberalismo* (ibid.: 271).

⁶When Ortega examines the distinction between play, an inseparable component of human and even animal life, and sport, a variation of the former, he establishes the difference in that sporting activity presumes free effort, while play is natural due to its spontaneity. The idea of sporting effort gains strength starting from the 1919 essay, *El Quijote en la escuela*. Biology and pedagogy: work does not create culture, an idea consecrated by Hegel and Marx; culture, on the contrary, is the child of sport: “Bien sé que a la hora presente me hallo solo entre mis contemporáneos para afirmar que la forma superior de la existencia humana es el deporte” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. II, 427). Some years after that, *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (1923) softens that initial enthusiasm, precisely separating work from sport: “La necesidad y el deber de cultura imponen a la humanidad la ejecución de ciertas obras. El esfuerzo que se emplea para darles cima es, pues, obligado. Este esfuerzo obligado, impuesto por determinadas finalidades, es el trabajo. [...] Al trabajo se contraponen otro tipo de esfuerzo que no nace de una imposición, sino que es impulso libérrimo y generoso de la potencia vital: es el deporte” (ibid.: Vol. III, 609).

⁷The first meaning that RAE gives to “magnanimidad” says “generous or acting with liberality.”

of occasions and reasons to criticize the theses of political liberalism that dominated the European scene during the second half of the 19th century, such that the unwarranted optimism in human nature and the faith that the future was guaranteed by rational belief in progress caused its crisis, as Ortega had prophesied as early as 1930.

EVOLUTION OF ORTEGA'S LIBERAL IDEAS SINCE 1908: THE SOCIALIST
LIBERALISM OF THE YOUNG ORTEGA

To fully understand Ortega's political philosophy regarding his liberalism, we must begin with the stark contrast between Spain's historical situation during the Restoration and the level of European culture and civilization at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Restoration was a constitutional political system resulting from the political imagination of a liberal *moderado*, Cánovas del Castillo, who put an end to a cycle of civil wars—the *Carlist Wars*, which could be exaggeratedly described as the last religious wars fought on European soil. Cánovas's idea, as summarized by Fusi, was to create “a regime of liberty and concord, a stable system based on a prestigious civil power supported by strong and solid political parties” (Fusi & Palafox, 1997: 153–154). Thus, in 1874, the return of the Bourbon monarchy ended the struggle between conservatives and liberals, giving way to one of the most prolonged periods of social peace in modern Spanish history.⁸ It must be noted that the Crown-tutored bipartisan system, based on the alternation of dominant parties, was not far removed from the parliamentary systems enjoyed by the great European nations, despite the endemic scourge of *caciquismo* (*local political bosses*), which manipulated elections and ensured the agreed-upon alternation of power between the hegemonic parties—the conservatives of Cánovas and the liberals of Sagasta.

However, the intellectual and cultural differences between Spain and Europe were another matter. Spain had not experienced a Protestant Reformation and had barely touched the Enlightenment. Romanticism arrived late, influenced by the second wave of French Romanticism—Hugo and Lamartine. German Romanticism, so tied to the idealist philosophy of Kant's successors—Fichte and Hegel—had almost no presence until

⁸Look at the chapter *La Restauración y el reinado de Alfonso XIII (1874–1931)* from Fusi & Palafox, 1997. Also *España contemporánea (1814–1953)* of Vicens Vives, 2012: 103.

the Generation of '98. Nietzsche wasn't translated into Spanish until the last years of the 19th century.⁹

The early public action of the young Ortega was marked by his polemics with the Generation of '98, particularly with Unamuno and Maeztu. He criticized them for the insufficiency of their literature and "impressionistic critiques" as instruments of reform. What was needed, he argued, was "science," inseparable from the great continental philosophy of Descartes and Leibniz and Ortega's Neo-Kantian mentors. He said this was the essential deficiency: Spain had not experienced philosophical modernity.

Ortega had the privilege of traveling to Germany to study philosophy in 1905 at the young age of 22. There, he immersed himself in the latest and best philosophical currents of the continent. Ignoring positivism, which was already in crisis, he first trained in Neo-Kantianism and later in phenomenology. These biographical details are relevant for one reason: it is crucial to understand that Spanish political institutions were initially subjected to critique from the perspective of advanced European philosophical ideas—including political philosophy.

Despite his education in German thought, Ortega was aware that he should avoid repeating the error committed by Krausism in the previous generation, when a German philosophy was imported and forced to fit Spanish circumstances. Ortega recognized that the only chance to influence his generation of "young people," to whom he consciously addressed his early articles, publications and manifestos, depended on thoroughly understanding his homeland's material and spiritual foundations. Hence, he paid similar attention to the thinker from the previous generation who best understood Spain and Europe: Miguel de Unamuno.¹⁰ He also read the great novelists

⁹See the magnificent study by Sobejano, 2004.

¹⁰In his speech in Bilbao, Unamuno preaches a formula of liberalism that seems decisive to me: "El que las voces liberalismo y libertad tengan una estirpe común lleva a juegos de palabra y al errado concepto de la libertad. La libertad es la conciencia de la ley, y la ley es social. El liberalismo está en dondequiera en crisis, porque lo está aquel concepto manchesteriano de la ley que produjo la escuela clásica de economía política, verdadera esencia del liberalismo, que ha sido hasta ahora anarquista en el fondo" (*El Imparcial*, 11 de septiembre, 1908; Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. 1, 217). The quote is valid as an example of Unamuno's influence on the young Ortega. The criticism of the old liberalism is inspired by the rejection of the economicist approach of English liberalism. Ortega, in the wake of Unamuno, seeks a more spiritual, less utilitarian inspiration for his new liberalism, where the individual, defended as the ultimate root of the human, is in agreement with the social or collective. However, until 1914, as we will see, Ortega did not break with the neo-Kantian program which, like much of the prevailing ideology in the 19th century, deified the social.

and dramatists of the Generation of '98, such as Valle-Inclán, Baroja, and Azorín. He developed a close relationship with Ramiro de Maeztu, a well-informed publicist on European matters and a correspondent in London for a Spanish newspaper who sympathized with the circles of Fabian socialism, which had just emerged.

It is essential to bear in mind this dual movement in the intellectual formation of the young Ortega: from Germany, he drew methods and thinking techniques; from Spain, he drew problems, urgency, and the relevance of questions, that is, the program of his philosophy. This is evident in *Meditations on Quixote*, where he wrote: “Dios mío, ¿qué es España? [...] ¿qué es esta España, este promontorio espiritual de Europa, esta como proa del alma continental?” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. I, 791). Notice how the philosophical question about “Spain” is inseparable from its European connection.

The issue of liberalism, although it originates from the political situation of Restoration of Spain, soon moves into the European context as Europe loses its quality as a “spiritual” (or ideal) model — a process that occurred shortly after the Great War (1914–1918) began, when Ortega realized the consequences the conflict would have for all nations. In some unpublished diary notes he began writing spurred by the outbreak of the war, he noted: “Los periódicos, con sus necedades y sus chuladas, no llevan al corazón de las gentes el estado emocional que pide este enorme hecho histórico que está en estos instantes comenzando [...]. Y, sin embargo, la realidad es que el mundo está fuera de sus goznes y tardará mucho en volver a ellos y no volverá sin formidables convulsiones” (ibid.: Vol. VII, 386).

It is commonplace that Ortega entered public life while still very young, with a program designed from European culture as a solution to Spain's national problems. To correctly interpret what the word “Europe” meant when it flowed from the philosopher's pen is to understand what he aspired to and what he considered inadequate in the critiques and proposals of the literati and reformist politicians of the previous generation. Priority did not lie in comfort and civilization, but in their underlying possibility, namely *modern* philosophy and natural science. Spain had produced Cervantes, Calderón and Lope, but also needed Descartes, Galileo, Locke and Kant. Simplifying a bit, one might say that, until 1914, Ortega's writings established as the foundation and support of all his arguments and proclamations the equation *Europe equals Modernity* understood as Cartesian rationalism, the science of Galileo and Newton, and the politics based on the modern

creation of a centralized state that orders and regulates civil society, which Ortega interchangeably referred to as the people or the nation.¹¹

Influenced by the political environment he encountered in Marburg, dominated by the chair socialism of his Neo-Kantian teachers, the period from 1908 to 1914 was characterized by Ortega's critique of the old liberal doctrine, coinciding with a certain "communitarianism" focused on the "flesh and bone" men (Unamuno), as we have seen. A year after his second trip to Germany (1907), he published an article in a newspaper, *Faro*, which he had founded with his friend Ramiro de Maeztu, titled *The Liberal Reform*, in which he discussed a "new" liberalism, very close to what social democracy was attempting in Germany under the Second Reich¹²:

De los conservadores ha salido ese apotegma peligroso, según el cual sería el liberalismo no más que el ejercicio de la libertad. Digo peligroso porque en tal decir se toma a sabiendas la libertad con un vago sentido popular que nada tiene que ver con lo que significa, para los sabedores de la ética. ¿Qué libertad es ésa a cuya defensa y sustentación quieren los conservadores circunscribir la idea liberal? ¿Qué quieren decir cuando dicen que «la libertad se ha hecho conservadora»? ¿Indican con ello que en los conflictos entre el individuo y el Estado debe llevar aquél la primacía y la decisión? Estos conflictos no tienen sentido dentro del nuevo liberalismo: son precisamente comprobación de los errores originales en la fundamentación positivista, utilitaria, del liberalismo inglés, que ha venido siendo la norma hasta hace poco. A la postre hemos vuelto hacia la sabia opinión platónica, que no reconoce individuos fuera del Estado (*Faro* 23 de febrero 1908; Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. I, 144–145).

A year earlier, he had called on Spanish intellectuals — thinking of his elders of the "Generation of '98" — not to withdraw from "public problems" and to recognize themselves as "Pobligados a renovar la emoción liberal y con ella el liberalismo, bello nombre que ha rodado por Europa y que, por una ironía de la musa gobernadora de la Historia, vino a salir de nuestra oscura tierra" (*ibid.*: Vol. I, 114). He insisted that this liberalism "must be socialism."

The development of these political ideas culminated in 1910 in a conference with the expressive title, *Pedagogía social como programa político*. The audience heard him repeat the Platonic thesis shared by his teachers: namely, that the individual is irrelevant in comparison to the social whole, that

¹¹Later we will clarify the meaning of terms such as "people," "nation," "State" and other related terms.

¹²It is no coincidence that in 1911 he dedicated an article to glossing the life of Ferdinand Lassalle, (1825–1864), entitled precisely *En torno a un héroe moderno* (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. I, 506).

morality must answer to politics, and that pedagogy is the only instrument for social progress:

Para un Estado idealmente socializado lo privado literatino existe, todo es público, popular, laico. La moral misma se hace íntegramente moral pública, moral política: la moral privada no sirve para fundar, sostener, engrandecer y perpetuar ciudades; es una moral estéril y escrupulosa, maniática y subjetiva. La vida privada misma no tiene buen sentido: el hombre es todo él social... (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. II, 100)

And shortly afterward: “El individuo se diviniza en la colectividad.” It is worth noting that the conference *Pedagogía social como programa político* was published in *Personas, obras, cosas* (1916), with a brief prologue in which Ortega acknowledged that he could no longer endorse certain opinions—specifically, those expressed in the previous quote: “me refiero al valor de lo individual y subjetivo. Hoy más que nunca tengo la convicción de haber sido el subjetivismo la enfermedad del siglo XIX.” Here, subjectivism means idealism. From Cohen to Plato’s philosopher-king, there was a single step Ortega was willing to take around 1910 to “save” Spain from its past, though ultimately he did not take it.

During those German years, he naturally became interested in the then-minority Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE), led by Pablo Iglesias.¹³ He gave a few lectures at the *Casa del Pueblo* but soon distanced himself from Spanish socialism, considering it insufficiently “nationalizing” due to its internationalist and revolutionary vocation. In 1913, he published a provocative article declaring himself “socialist” out of “love for the aristocracy.” With this irony, he seemed to bid farewell to collectivist and internationalist ideals.¹⁴ He began to glimpse the importance of personal life, beyond—and above—social life and its political determinations. From then on, his ideals for public affairs focused on rethinking European liberalism, seeking to adjust it to the material reality of Spain and Europe at the time.

¹³An excellent summary of the socialist nuances of Ortega’s early liberalism may be found in Aguilar, 1986. See also Salmerón, 1984: 113 et seq.

¹⁴“El día que los obreros españoles abandonaran las palabras abstractas y reconocieran que padecen, no sólo como proletarios, sino como españoles, harían del partido socialista el partido más fuerte de España. De paso harían España. Esto sería la nacionalización del socialismo; quiero decir, el socialismo concreto frente a un socialismo abstracto que sólo es eficaz cuando se confunde con los confusos movimientos radicales” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. I, 570); “Miscelánea socialista,” *El imparcial*, 1912.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MEDITACIONES
AND THE PROJECT OF VIEJA Y NUEVA POLÍTICA

In 1914, Ortega conceived his first original philosophy and offered his generation a program to overcome the political crisis afflicting the Restoration system. *Meditaciones del Quijote* provided the philosophical foundations of his political intervention, which he articulated in a famous lecture, *Vieja y nueva política*, and in the manifesto he launched a year earlier to present the first political initiatives he undertook throughout his life: the *League for Spanish Political Education*. In both texts, liberalism appeared as part of his proposal for the regeneration of Spanish political and social life, more energetically expressed in the *Prospectus*, where we find one of Ortega's most heartfelt declarations towards liberalism. After linking the "advancement of Spain to liberalism," he clarifies:

Por liberalismo no podemos entender otra cosa sino aquella emoción radical, vivaz siempre en la, historia, que tiende a excluir del Estado toda influencia que no sea meramente humana, y espera siempre, y en todo orden, de nuevas formas sociales, mayor bien que de las pretéritas y heredadas.¹⁵ (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. 1, 740)

Although the classics of English liberalism are not among the philosophers he most frequently cited, Ortega owes to Hobbes the conviction that the individual subject, not the community, is the source of all rights: "The natural right resides in the liberty to do or refrain from doing anything that one can for the preservation of one's own life." The thesis complements this prioritization of the individual over the collective, that the work of a specific man — the work of his hands — is the foundation of all rights, including property (Strauss & Cropsey, 1993: 382). Thus, it prioritizes a "negative" conception of liberty, borrowing the famous distinction of Isaiah Berlin (Berlin, 1974)¹⁶, since liberty in this liberal tradition is understood only as the limits that individual rights impose on the powers of the state, regardless of who exercises it or the legitimacy for doing so.

This version of liberalism, with which Ortega became increasingly comfortable as he distanced himself from politics after his break with the Reformist Party of Melquiades Álvarez in 1915, prioritized the ideals of pluralism and personal freedom. These principles formed the core to which Ortega

¹⁵For a broader study of Ortega's interpretations of his "essential" liberalism, see Lasaga Medina, 2017.

¹⁶La diferencia en 136.

remained faithful throughout his work, although he constantly nuanced the final meaning of those virtues as embodied in the liberal *ethos*. Socialism, as a regulative ideal (not as the concrete policy of a party), never entirely disappeared; one must recognize that collective-social life is as much part of our existence as the most personal aspects, although Ortega always maintained the conviction that the decisive dimension in each individual's life is the one touching their innermost self, however determinant and decisive the historical-social circumstance may be at any given moment. Hence, Ortega periodically repeated his critique of "the social" to condemn the legacy that European culture inherited from the 19th century. In *Meditaciones del Quijote*, he projected an "Ensayo sobre la limitación," claiming that European masses had learned politics "thanks to democracy." Ortega's critique was directed at the "exclusivity" with which politics was practiced, which invaded many other fields of human activity: "Lo otro, la vida individual, quedó relegada, como si fuera cuestión poco seria e intrascendente" (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. 1, 755). Three years later, he revisited this issue more directly in an article titled *Democracia morbosa* (*Sick Democracy*), which I will discuss further below.

The dominance of the social, as we saw in "Pedagogía social...", evaporated, and with it, the Platonic idea of the pure rationality of the Idea. A realistic Platonism would now guide political reform. Let us clarify the paradox: the ideal that seeks to transform reality for the better, based on ideas elaborated by human reason, is inherent in the modernity from which Ortega's philosophy draws. However, this ideal must respect reality; moreover, it must discover the ideal within reality itself. He found this realistic inspiration in Don Quixote—the great, deluded dreamer who ends up not knowing where his efforts lead, but whose idealistic madness rests on the frequent moments of lucidity described by Cervantes. Ortega liked to quote this balanced defense of the ideals of classical liberalism—personal freedom and equality—from Don Quixote: "Considera, hermano Sancho, que nadie es más que otro mientras no haga más que otro" (*ibid.*: Vol. 1, 598).

Ortega draws another lesson from Cervantes' novel. The critique of delusional idealism, which ignores reality's resistance, is already clearly formulated in two metaphysical themes touched upon in *Meditaciones del Quijote*: the idea of limitation, which philosophy and politics had ignored since Romanticism, and the idea that things have a materiality resistant

to any manipulation that man may intend.¹⁷ In an essay titled *Estética en el tranvía* (1915), Ortega ultimately shapes a new theory of the ideal that avoids the “utopianization of the real,” to which modernity had been so inclined since a certain point. He describes, with precise detail, this ideal that respects reality and will remain a guiding principle of Ortega’s political thought and action until the end: “descubre en la realidad misma, en lo que tiene de más imprevisible, en su capacidad de innovación ilimitada, la sublime incubadora de ideales, de normas, de perfecciones” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. II, 181).

The “new politics” drew its momentum from a fierce critique of the “old politics” of the Restoration. The Spanish nation is out of shape, almost a ghost over which the youth must project achievable ideals capable of inspiring enthusiasm for the dream nationalization project. This was the message that Ortega directed to his generation in the theater where he gave that lecture. His pessimistic view of the Spanish nation, afflicted by the worst of evils, particularism — a concept he coined around 1921 when he wrote *España invertebrada* — stems from his years as part of the “teenagers of ’98.”¹⁸ This led him to rethink the nation not as a completed reality but as a project to be constructed. One should recall his emphasis on the idea of nationalization in the 1914 lecture: “Liberalismo y nacionalización propondría yo como lemas a nuestro movimiento. Pero ¡cuánto no habrá que hablar, que escribir, que disputar hasta que estas palabras den a luz todo el inmenso significado de que están encintas!” (ibid.: Vol. I, 736)¹⁹.

¹⁷“La cosa inerte y áspera escupe de sí cuantos “sentidos” queramos darle: está ahí, frente a nosotros, afirmando su muda, terrible materialidad frente a todos los fantasmas. He ahí lo que llamamos realismo: traer las cosas a una distancia, ponerlas bajo una luz, inclinarlas de modo que se acentúe la vertiente de ellas que baja hacia la pura materialidad” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. I, 813). Ortega does not embrace this type of realism, but he will always maintain that any ideal that interprets the self in its search for solutions must be aware of this intimate and ultimate resistance of the materiality of reality.

¹⁸The expression “teenager of ’98” in Cacho Viu and his brilliant analysis of why Ortega gave Azorín the concept “Generation of ’98.” See *Ortega y el espíritu del 98*, specifically *La primigenia generación de 1898* in Cacho Viu, 1997: 126 et seq.

¹⁹One of the meanings not implied in his concept was precisely that of “nationalism.” Ortega foresaw the confusion and that is why he qualified his proposal almost immediately after: “No se entienda, por lo frecuente que ha sido en este mi discurso el uso de la palabra nacional, nada que tenga que ver con el nacionalismo. Nacionalismo supone el deseo de que una nación impere sobre las otras, lo cual su pone, por lo menos, que aquella nación vive” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. I, 737). In *The Rebellion* he will be more radical in his condemnation: “Pero todos estos nacionalismos son callejones sin salida. Inténtese proyectarlos hacia el mañana y se sentirá el tope. Por ahí no se sale a ningún lado. El nacionalismo es siempre un impulso de

As previously mentioned, nationalization means strengthening the social fabric in all areas, from education to the economy; it involves a system of integration informed by “a project of common life.” It is easy to recognize Renan’s definition of a nation here, to which Ortega remained faithful, though with some decisive nuance. Renan’s “daily plebiscite” is transferred by Ortega to the realm of the future and the project: the nation is built around a system of shared illusions. This common life project will be found when the climate of particularism and hatred²⁰ created during the Restoration is overcome. The illness is not with the State or the political sphere but with the nation: “Lo malo es que no es el Estado español quien está enfermo por externos errores de política sólo; que quien está enferma, casi moribunda, es la raza, la sustancia nacional, y que, por tanto, la política no es la solución suficiente del problema nacional porque es éste un problema histórico” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. I, 717). It is not surprising that, in terms of proposals, Ortega insists that the work of the new politics must be directed toward civil society:

Hay que exigir a la máquina Estado mayor, mucho mayor rendimiento de utilidades sociales, pero [...] queda por exigir mucho más a los otros órganos nacionales que no son el Estado, que no es el Gobierno, que es la libre espontaneidad de la sociedad. De modo que nuestra actuación política ha de tener constantemente dos dimensiones: la de hacer eficaz la máquina Estado y la de suscitar, estructurar y aumentar la vida nacional en lo que es independiente del Estado (ibid.: Vol. I, 717–718).

A few lines later, he emphasizes: “...nadie está dispuesto a defender que sea la Nación para el Estado y no el Estado para la Nación, que sea la vida para el orden público y no el orden público para la vida” (ibid.: Vol. I, 718). The vertebration of Spain is to be achieved through work and responsibility, efficiency, and justice; the articulation of its parts should come from recognizing differences and rights within the national whole. In political language, nationalization means what integration means in culture.

dirección opuesta al principio nacionalizador. Es exclusivista, mientras éste es inclusivista. En épocas de consolidación tiene, sin embargo, un valor positivo y es una alta norma. Pero en Europa todo está de sobra consolidado, y el nacionalismo no es más que una manía, el pretexto que se ofrece para eludir el deber de invención y de grandes empresas” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 493).

²⁰“Yo sospecho que, merced a causas desconocidas, la morada íntima de los españoles fue tomada tiempo hace por el odio, que permanece allí artillado, moviendo guerra al mundo. Ahora bien; el odio es un afecto que con duce a la aniquilación de los valores” (ibid.: Vol. I, 748).

This idea of “nationalization” as the creation of social wealth, of shaping society apart from public powers, persisted throughout the period spanning more than 20 years that separated Ortega’s first public interventions from his last ones during the establishment of the Second Republic (1931). This distinction between nation and state and the “metaphysical” superiority of the nation as a vital reality, over the artificial and mechanical nature of the State (an invention of society to resolve its need for command and order) is rooted in the liberalism we have been discussing.

NATION AND STATE

Seven years later, after the League for Spanish Political Education dissolved and the failure of the modernization project of the *New Politics*, the Restoration system could not respond to the two severe crises it faced in 1917 and 1921. Precisely in the context of the latter crisis, Ortega published *España invertebrada* in *El Sol* newspaper. By 1923, the panorama had changed entirely with the emergence of Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship, which had the approval of the Crown and eventually led to a regime change with the proclamation of the Republic in 1931.

From this controversial essay, which recently celebrated its 100th anniversary, I will focus on Ortega’s continued emphasis on the distinction between nation and state and the superior “vital reality” that the nation holds. I will not address the analyses of the crisis of the Spanish nation, which were based on his diagnosis of *particularism*, the ultimate cause of the “disintegration” that the nation suffered. Instead, I will focus on Ortega’s distinction between minorities and masses, a key theme in his political philosophy.²¹

Minority and mass are simultaneously descriptive and normative terms. They do not specify political entities but rather social dynamics and psychological configurations. The epistemological status of these terms was not fully developed in *The Revolt of the Masses*, but in the second part of

²¹ Among the few comprehensive readings that have been made of the sociological, but not political, distinction between minorities and masses, it is worth highlighting that of Domingo Blanco Fernández for its rigor: “Su aristocratismo no lo plantea como una cuestión política ni propiamente sociológica, porque esos órdenes están mediados por el problema metafísico, que es del orden y la jerarquía de lo real. Al hombre superior nadie ha tenido que proclamarle superior, ni lo es porque se haya creído más que los otros, sino porque a buen seguro se ha exigido.” “El aristocratismo en Ortega, *Sistema* n^o 76, enero 1987, p. 84. Pocas líneas después aclara lo que quiere significar con su referencia a lo real: basta recurrir a las necesidades *reales* de una comunidad y a las tareas que exigen para ‘imponer un principio y unos criterios de jerarquía.’ Y eso es lo que significa en última instancia que ‘la sociedad es aristocrática y no puede no serlo’” (Ibid.).

Invertebrate Spain, significantly titled *The Absence of the Best* (*La ausencia de los mejores*). According to Ortega, the fundamental law of society's constitution consists of a dual-directional dynamic between a group that functions as a "minority" and another that operates as the "mass."

From the beginning, Ortega was aware of the danger of being misinterpreted as a defender of hereditary minorities, such as aristocracies of blood or wealth. Therefore, he always insisted on clarifying that minorities are "selectas porque se exigen mucho más a sí mismas" (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. VII, 807). A possible definition of a man of the minority would be "personalidad autónoma que adopta ante la vida una actitud individual y consciente"²². Consequently, the minority is not effective because it controls the instruments of state power but because it creates a "spiritual power" that informs and guides "public opinion." According to Ortega, what is characteristic of Europe and its nations is that society is politically shaped as "public opinion" to such an extent that those who wield power cannot ignore it. However, Ortega maintains that the social efficacy of minorities depends on the adherence of the masses:

Un hombre no es nunca eficaz por sus cualidades individuales, sino por la energía social que la masa ha depositado en él. Sus talentos personales fueron sólo el motivo, ocasión o pretexto para que se condensase en él ese dinamismo social (ibid.: Vol. III, 477).

Likewise, without the minority proposing projects and discovering solutions, the dynamism of the masses becomes chaotic and destructive. Ortega described the mechanism by which the model draws the submissive as a "law of spiritual gravitation," a clear allusion to Newton's law, acknowledging the naturalistic, almost biological, inspiration that pervaded *Invertebrate Spain* and later vanished entirely in *The Revolt*, where the process of European

²²The complete phrase is the following: "Es extraño que de nuestra larga historia no se haya espumado cien veces el rasgo más característico, que es, a la vez, el más evidente y a la mano: la desproporción casi incesante entre el valor de nuestro vulgo y el de nuestras minorías selectas. La personalidad autónoma, que adopta ante la vida una actitud individual y consciente, ha sido rarísima en nuestro país. Aquí lo ha hecho todo el "pueblo," y lo que el "pueblo" no ha podido hacer se ha quedado sin hacer" (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. III, 494–495). Otra descripción en la misma línea y más completa, la que dio en un breve ensayo titulado "Cosmopolitismo" (1924): "A las minorías selectas no las elige nadie. [...] El selecto se selecciona a sí mismo al exigirse más que a los demás. Significa, pues, un privilegio de dolor y de esfuerzo. Selecto es todo el que desde un nivel de perfección y de exigencias aspira a una altitud mayor de exigencias y perfecciones. Es un hombre para quien la vida es entrenamiento, palabra que, como he hecho notar en recientes conferencias, traduce exactamente lo que en griego se decía *ascetismo*" (ibid.: Vol. v, 201).

social crisis is described in specifically historical terms, advocating for an expressly indeterminist philosophy of history.²³

In Ortega's characterization of nations as historical formations of social groups that come together and live "because they have a shared program," we see his diagnosis that societies decay when the masses cease to be receptive to exemplary behavior or the minorities stop being exemplary. It cannot be emphasized enough that the minority-mass dynamic is a real dialectic. What the sociologist or historian must empirically determine is whether it was the masses that first became closed off to exemplary leadership or the minority that corrupted itself in the form of the "demagogue," preferring to flatter the masses rather than propose projects of destiny that imply mediations and sufferings.²⁴

None of this, Ortega asserts, has to do with controlling the state, nor can it be accomplished from within its bureaucratic organs. To conclude, I will reiterate Ortega's persistent stance in favor of civil society and the nation over the state, a position he maintained even after the rise of totalitarian movements in Europe. In his essay *Mirabeau or the Politician*, Ortega writes:

En definitiva, quien vive es la nación. El Estado mismo, que tan fecundamente puede actuar sobre ella, se nutre, a la larga, de sus jugos. La gran política se reduce a situar el cuerpo nacional en forma que pueda *fare da se*. Ya veremos, cuando pase algún tiempo, el resultado de esas soluciones que se proponen lo contrario: suspender toda espontaneidad nacional e intentar *fare dallo Stato*, vivir desde el Estado (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 218).

From this, Ortega concludes that while the state can "contribute to the vitality of its citizens," it can only do so to a minimal extent and, above all, negatively — by not constructing institutions that restrict personal spontaneity. This perspective on the state, which Ortega had maintained since *Old and New Politics*, prefigures his later theory of the "state as skin," a theory he would fully develop when he critiqued the limitations of the liberal doctrine in *On the Roman Empire*.

²³In *Historia como sistema* (1935) Ortega proceeds to critique Western philosophy as essentially naturalistic. Although he does not say so expressly, this critique extends to his approaches to *España invertebrada* y *El tema...* See Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. VI, 62.

²⁴"...la demagogia, fue adoptada hacia 1750 por intelectuales descarriados, ignorantes de sus propios límites y que siendo, por su oficio, los hombres del decir, del logos, han usado de él sin respeto ni precauciones, sin darse cuenta de que la palabra es un sacramento de muy delicada administración" (ibid.: Vol. IV, 351).

THE LIBERAL EUROPE IN CRISIS: SEARCHING FOR THE NEW MAN

The postwar scenario was confusing, particularly given the involvement of non-European actors in resolving the conflict. Any standard contemporary history textbook will describe the decisive intervention of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and his ideals of peace and self-determination for the European peoples, which dismantled the dynasties that had ruled Europe for over three hundred years. Lenin and the Russian Revolution ended the war between Germany and Russia. They reignited the revolutionary pressures of the 19th century, which had seemed dormant amidst the nationalism unleashed by the war. The horror of the war contributed to producing a kind of collective illusion that led many to believe it had been the last war.

In philosophy, there was a growing awareness that the ideas of the 19th century had become obsolete. Before 1914, the sciences had dismantled most of the previous century's doctrines and its most entrenched certainties. The indefinite progress espoused by positivists, the remnants of German idealism, utilitarian moralities, and the romanticism that had degenerated into the decadent symbolism of the *fin de siècle* seemed to belong to a distant past. New philosophical approaches, such as phenomenology and emerging human sciences like ethnology, linguistics, and psychoanalysis, were seeking new orientations that offered the security of natural science without mimicking it and the certainty of knowledge without abstractions or unfounded optimism.

It is no wonder that by the early 1920s, two complementary ideas were spreading: that Europe was going through its most severe crisis since the Renaissance and that this crisis could be a growth crisis, a leap toward something beyond the "bourgeois" world of the classes that had caused the disaster. The liberal system of parliamentary balances and respect for legality had been blown apart. Communism, established by the victorious revolution in Russia, and nationalism seemed to be the new panacea that would end all woes. That was what the masses believed when they chose their leaders and supported their movements.

This was the environment in which Ortega developed his first writings, which were directed more toward Europe than Spain, which had been the primary focus of his sociopolitical analyses. The dividing line is clear: between the second edition of *Invertebrate Spain* and the first edition of *The Theme of Our Time*. There, Ortega says: "Al analizar el estado de disolución a que ha venido la sociedad española, encontramos algunos síntomas e ingredientes que no son exclusivos de nuestro país, sino tendencias generales hoy en todas las naciones europeas" (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. III,

425). A year later, *The Theme of Our Time* was published. The book begins by solemnly declaring that European generations are facing a grave crisis: “El hombre de Occidente padece hoy una radical desorientación” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. III, 607). Yet... “nuestra generación parece obstinada radicalmente en desoír las sugerencias de nuestro común destino” (ibid.: Vol. III, 567). Indeed, it seemed to be an important theme for a crisis, which Ortega, like many other Europeans, felt amid a torrent of artistic novelties—remember those that emerged around 1922²⁵—and political instabilities.

In one of the last chapters of *The Theme of Our Time*, Ortega speaks of the “new man” who is about to arrive—a somewhat unexpected use of a common phrase of the time. However, as we will see, this new man is less inspired by Trotsky or Lenin, who revived the Pauline metaphor in the propaganda of the Third International (1919) and more by Nietzsche, though without the illusion of any forthcoming “superman.” What Ortega believes is approaching is a time when Europe will experience a radical change in sensitivity, one that will emerge with a generation composed of men and women capable of introducing new values and new ways of shaping reality:

En toda perspectiva, cuando se introduce un nuevo término, cambia la jerarquía de los demás. Del mismo modo, en el sistema espontáneo de valoraciones que el hombre nuevo trae consigo, que el hombre nuevo es, ha aparecido un nuevo valor—lo vital,—que por su simple presencia deprime los restantes (ibid.: Vol. III, 610).

What is old is the valuation of abstract culture, of concepts. Ortega announces a new culture of vitality, or, as he clarifies in the book’s central chapter, the irony of Don Juan, which displaces the irony of Socrates. These metaphors point to Ortega’s summary judgment, declaring that the philosophy, ethics, art, and politics of the 19th century have been liquidated and consigned to history.²⁶

In a text published in *The Spectator* III, *Biology and Pedagogy* (1920), Ortega reported on the latest developments in biological sciences and their implications for psychology and pedagogy. In a discreet footnote, Ortega introduces a digression that hints at the theme of the “new man,” as if he were awaiting signs of the emergence of a new aristocracy:

Sólo a modo de media palabra para el buen entendedor, sea dicho lo siguiente: el ineludible triunfo del socialismo (que no es precisamente el «obrerismo») sobre el

²⁵Let us remember that in that year *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot and the *Duino Elegies* by Rainer M. Rilke were published.

²⁶For the philosophical scope of *El tema...*, see my text Lasaga Medina, 2023.

régimen capitalista equivale a arrebatar su predominio al tipo de hombre utilitario que ha imperado las ideas y los sentimientos durante casi dos siglos. Una vez transcurrido el período de turbulencias que todo cambio profundo trae consigo, el poder social pasará de manos del *homo oeconomicus* o utilitario a manos de otro tipo humano antieconómico, inutilitario, esto es, vitalmente lujoso para quien vivir no es ganar, sino, al contrario, regalar (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. II, 427).

This cryptic allusion becomes somewhat clearer — a little clearer — when one cites another note from the same essay a few pages earlier in a section titled *The Paradox of Savagery*. In it, Ortega contrasts life as an organizing, emerging activity with life organized and regulated, which he associates with civilization:

El gran público siente confusamente la impresión de que atraviesa la humanidad una hora de salvajismo. Habitado a oponer esta idea a las de cultura y civilización, no sospecha que dentro de ese salvajismo se está forjando toda una cultura y una civilización superiores. Por lo pronto, en el orden científico existe ya una renovación sólo comparable a la del Renacimiento. La ascensión obrerista que trae en su seno una nueva estructura política es, por lo pronto, una exaltación de lo primitivo social. Tal vez por eso ha llamado Rathenau al movimiento obrero una irrupción vertical de los bárbaros (ibid.: Vol. II, 408).

By connecting these two texts, it becomes clear that Ortega believes in the imminence of the arrival of a human figure, whom he identifies with the primitive man, capable of renewing forms of life and values. He names this new sensitivity emerging alongside socialism: a shift toward the “sporting and festive sense of life.”²⁷

It is logical to think that 19th-century liberalism belongs to the old ways of feeling existence, along with Wagnerian art and realist painting. Ortega declared as much during a tribute to Ramón Gómez de la Serna at his *Pombo Café* gathering in 1922. The new times would not be liberal, though not due to the return of any form of authoritarian government, but quite the opposite. It is the triumph of a new aristocracy of luxurious, sportive, and magnanimous men that will build the new society:

Pero el liberalismo, por su esencia misma, tiene los días contados. No es una actitud definitiva, que se baste a sí propia. Cuando no quede títere tradicional

²⁷“Este viraje en la actitud frente al arte anuncia uno de los rasgos más generales en el nuevo modo de sentir la existencia: lo que he llamado tiempo hace el sentido deportivo y festival de la vida” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. III, 608). José Gaos stressed the importance with which Ortega regarded the theme of “the sporting and festive sense” of life by pointing out that it was the focus of a set of writings, in which he prophesied the shift of European sensibility in that direction. See *La profecía en Ortega* in *Los pasos perdidos...*, 2013: 81 et seq.

con cabeza, el liberalismo no hallará nada de qué liberarnos y se reabsorberá en su nada originaria (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. III, 408).

Ortega incisively criticizes the negative character of the liberal program — the concept of liberty as liberation — that characterizes Enlightenment modernity: a “liberation” from oppression, superstition, and dogmas. In the crisis of the 20th century, the old liberalism showed its inability to offer a life program capable of exciting the newly incorporated citizen masses, who were entering history and public life. Liberalism had exhausted its historical cycle with the fall of the bourgeoisie before socialism. Although I believe Ortega did not accept historical materialism, as it was a theory of history that was excessively deterministic, he did believe that history had an internal structure and logic, as expressed in his theory of generations, outlined in the first chapter of *The Theme of Our Time*. Prophecy has been possible throughout history, and Ortega makes one: a rupture generation comes with a brand-new sensitivity. It manifests itself in art and politics, the most sensitive expressions of culture. In art, the rupture had already occurred. Speaking to the artists gathered at the Pombo café, he refers to “artistic liberalism” and its play of negations, exemplified by Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, or Barbey d’Aurevilly. The artists who listened, imbued with the avant-garde spirit, were the last “liberators” because they had destroyed the “last strongholds of literary tradition”. Ortega reiterates the generational rupture:

Amantes de las jerarquías, de las disciplinas, de las normas, comenzarán a juntar las piedras nobles para erigir una nueva tradición y alzar una futura Bastilla... (ibid.: Vol. III, 408)

The spirit guiding these inspirations was Nietzsche, and the symbol of the Bastille suggests that the historical cycle that began with the French Revolution was coming to an end. And so Ortega hoped it would happen in politics, where he also foresaw the last barricade of liberalism:

La Revolución francesa, desde sus barricadas —la barricada es el alojamiento del liberalismo, — consigue la gran liberación política, nos liberta del antiguo régimen (ibid.).

Ortega could have asked: Where or when did the old liberalism offer a program of “positive freedom,” a future project that, while safeguarding liberal forms, could provide values and affirmations to live by? The negations had not ended with the war; they had found generous inspiration in it.

It was the weakness of the liberal minorities that made revolutions possible. As Ortega notes in his analysis of the Bolshevik revolution:

No se olvide que el bolchevismo triunfó en Rusia sin que fuese necesario disparar más de diez cañonazos y aun éstos superfluamente. Lenin y Trotski no contaban, sin embargo, con la masa. ¿Cómo explicar, pues, el fenómeno? No es cuestión de hipótesis: los hechos hablan. Todo ello se debió a la parálisis en que ante el movimiento de la revolución social cayeron las pseudo aristocracias directoras. Frente a los nuevos problemas — necesidades, ilusiones, deseos — aquellas clases privilegiadas no tuvieron una palabra clara y fecunda que decir (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. VII, 743)²⁸.

The ruling minorities had failed. Russia was not Europe, and Ortega wondered whether this could happen in one of the great European nations.

BOLSHEVISM AND FASCISM

When it did happen in Italy after Mussolini's rise to power in 1922, Ortega saw the issue as a structural social problem. In 1925, he published an essay on Italian fascism, where he repeated the analysis cited earlier regarding the Russian Revolution: it was the weakness of the ruling minority, not the strength of the fascist base, that facilitated Mussolini's ascent to power:

Por ser tan inaudito el hecho del triunfo fascista — que significa el hecho de la «ilegitimidad constituida, establecida» — es por lo que instintivamente nos preguntamos: ¿Cómo las demás fuerzas sociales, que han sido hasta ahora entusiastas de la ley, no logran oponerse a esa victoria del caos jurídico? Y una respuesta se incorpora, espontánea, en nuestra mente: «Por la sencilla razón de que hoy no existen fuerzas sociales importantes que posean vivaz ese entusiasmo» (ibid.: Vol. II, 613).

A few lines later, Ortega identifies the skeptics: “Entonces resultaría que la fuerza de las camisas fascistas consiste más bien en el escepticismo de liberales y demócratas, en su falta de fe en el antiguo ideal” (ibid.).

In my opinion, the triumph of fascism rang alarm bells for Ortega regarding his earlier speculations about the arrival of the “new man” with a “sportive sensitivity.” It is no coincidence that shortly after, Ortega wrote a text that contains, in contrast to his earlier “toast” at Pombo, an implicit

²⁸The text is taken from an unpublished article entitled *Meditación del 1º de mayo* de 1919. It says at the beginning: “Yo sostenía entonces y reitero ahora que el movimiento obrero es, en su última raíz histórica, un proceso creador de nuevas aristocracias y que su triunfo es la condición imprescindible para que la vida humana vuelva a tomar un sesgo ascendente, aristocrático” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. VII, 741). He refers to the text from 1913 that we quoted above. Note that Ortega confirms in this unpublished text two things: the degree of conviction he had in the change of sensibility that he had predicted for Europe, based on the emergence of a new aristocracy, that this had to be a graft of feudal lord on socialist trunk and that Leninist communism was not precisely such an aristocracy.

defense of liberalism. He did so by distinguishing between liberalism and democracy, perhaps because he noticed that the approaching changes were cloaked in the “ism” of radical democratism, which Ortega had already criticized in his 1917 essay *Sick Democracy*.²⁹

This critique resonates with the central argument of *Ideas de los castillos: liberalismo y democracia* (1925). In this essay, Ortega contrasts the ancient idea of liberty—where being free meant living within the city’s laws—with the modern concept of liberty as a personal right that defines a private sphere the public authority cannot invade, since, according to Ortega,

“El poder público tiende siempre y dondequiera a no reconocer límite alguno.” He then adds a judgment about democracy that contains, by contrast, praise for liberalism: “Sería, pues, el más inocente error creer que a fuerza de democracia esquivamos el absolutismo. Todo lo contrario. No hay autocracia más feroz que la difusa e irresponsable del *demos*. Por eso, el que es verdaderamente liberal mira con recelo y cautela sus propios fervores democráticos y, por decirlo así, se limita a sí mismo” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. II, 541–542)³⁰.

In politics, there is a permanent tension between law and liberty, between justice (which should be the ideal of all legislation) and the demand for rights that liberalism promotes. Liberalism’s natural tendency to seek more liberty eventually creates differences, while democracy’s pursuit of legality moves toward equality. We tend to confuse the two, Ortega notes, because, in European history, they have often coexisted: “Liberalism and democracy get confused in our heads,” he remarks, somewhat ironically. He continues: “Democracy and liberalism are two answers to two entirely different political questions. Democracy answers this question: Who should exercise public power? The answer is: the exercise of public power belongs to the collective body of citizens” (ibid.). But are these two simply different or also opposed in their tendencies? If liberalism always seeks more liberty—thus less

²⁹“La democracia, como democracia, es decir, estricta y exclusivamente como norma del derecho político, parece una cosa óptima. Pero la democracia exasperada y fuera de sí, la democracia en religión o en arte, la democracia en el pensamiento y en el gesto, la democracia en el corazón y en la costumbre es el más peligroso morbo que puede padecer una sociedad” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. II, 271).

³⁰Ortega agrees with other liberals, such as Stuart Mill or Tocqueville, who see the threat of the *demos* to freedom. Recently, Giovanni Sartori has echoed this inclination of democracy towards “the tyranny of the majority”: “Los constituyentes de Filadelfia temían que el principio mayoritario funcionara en el Parlamento como una apisonadora, es decir, como un ejercicio absoluto del derecho de mayoría que deviene, precisamente, tiranía de la mayoría” (Sartori, 2009: 45).

legality — and democracy seeks justice, serving the ideal of equality, then perhaps they are inherently at odds.

When we next examine Ortega's reflections in *The Revolt of the Masses*, we should keep in mind that the two terms — liberalism and democracy — described as distinct here, were, in the historical reality Ortega analyzes, a unitary political structure that dominated the major European states from approximately 1848, either as a reality or as an ideal imposed by necessity. The crisis of the parliamentary democratic ideal and its dysfunctionality, as demonstrated by the dictatorships that, following the Italian fascist model, gradually took over countries like Spain, Portugal, Poland, Hungary, and others, is what Ortega examines in his famous book. The liberal political systems that emerged after World War I lacked the consensus of public opinion. By 1930, with the Weimar Republic in freefall, Ortega was able to diagnose the generalized crisis of the liberal system in *The Revolt of the Masses*, where reflections on the failure of European liberalism are as essential as the praise he offers.

Little remained of the dream of the “new man,” a lover of hierarchies and danger, willing to risk his life in constant sportive and creative efforts.³¹ Historical reality had taken a different course, and as Europe approached the harsh decade that would end in the Second World War, Ortega sharpened his senses and foresaw Europe's collapse, driven by the rebellion of the masses and, inseparably, the failure of the minorities.

MINORITIES AND MASSES

The articles that appeared in the Spanish press during 1929 and the early months of 1930, later compiled under the title *The Revolt of the Masses*, reflect the historical processes of European society, culminating in an unprecedented crisis already announced in 1923. Although this crisis had clear social and political manifestations, Ortega identified its philosophical roots and dared to point to a historical moment when certain ideas began to distort the future of the Europeans.³² Ortega attributed the state of

³¹In the many texts devoted to these themes of the ethos of the new man, some of which we have already cited, Ortega is actually describing how he imagines the new ruling minority that would have had among its fundamental tasks the creation of the new culture that would have inspired in turn the new politics that would not be liberal, but perhaps ultra-liberal.

³²The year that Ortega points out as the moment when European intelligence turned towards demagoguery is 1750: “La demagogia esencial del demagogo está dentro de su mente y radica en su irresponsabilidad ante las ideas mismas que maneja y que él no ha creado, sino recibido de los verdaderos creadores. La demagogia es una forma de degeneración intelectual,

mass rebellion to two main causes: liberal education, which emphasized human rights without sufficiently teaching the corresponding duties, and the rapid advances in technology, which dramatically accelerated the possibilities of human life, causing confusion in people's desires, alienating them from nature and tradition, and contributing to the "primitivization" of the average man, who became increasingly unaware of the origin of the technical innovations that were transforming his life. This effect has only grown with each subsequent technological revolution:

El triunfo de las masas y la consiguiente mejora del nivel vital han acontecido en Europa por razones internas, después de dos siglos de educación progresista de las muchedumbres y de un paralelo enriquecimiento económico de la sociedad (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 385).

Ortega did not attribute this enrichment to capitalist production methods, but rather to something more fundamental: technology, born from modern natural science, which produced industrialism, the immediate cause of the increase in wealth and well-being that characterized European society at the end of the 19th century.³³

The success of modern science applied as technology, industrialism, and liberal educational practices all stemmed from the philosophical certainty that the universe follows universal laws, which human reason can discover and manipulate for its benefit. Everything began with the rationalism of Descartes and Galileo. Reason, emboldened by its triumphs over nature, believed it could extrapolate its methods to discover the laws governing society so that the goals of well-being and happiness dreamed of by society could be definitively resolved by "social techniques." Problems such as pain, suffering, poverty, or inequality were considered solvable once and

que como amplio fenómeno de la historia europea aparece en Francia hacia 1750. ¿Por qué entonces? ¿Por qué en Francia? Éste es uno de los puntos neurálgicos del destino occidental y especialmente del destino francés" (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 367). Elsewhere, Ortega solves the riddle. 1750 is the year in which Diderot wrote the draft on which the project of L'Encyclopédie would be based. This project presumed that knowledge was already consolidated and only needed to be disseminated so that everyone could share it. Although he does not say so expressly, I think Ortega suggests that this optimism of reason inspired the French Revolution (See *Prólogo a un diccionario enciclopédico abreviado*, 1939 (ibid.: Vol. V, 633 et seq.)).

³³In *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek agrees with Ortega in seeing the crisis of Europe as an effect of the success of liberalism: "Pudiera incluso decirse que el éxito real del liberalismo fue la causa de su decadencia. Por razón del éxito, ya logrado, el hombre se hizo cada vez más reacio a tolerar los males subsistentes, que ahora se le aparecían, a la vez, como insoportables e innecesarios" (Hayek, 1976: 47).

for all. From Bentham and Rousseau to Hegel, and from Hegel to his disciples—Comte and Marx—this line of “constructivist” thought prevailed. It even influenced British liberalism when John Stuart Mill abandoned the ethical and political inspiration of natural rights and decided to justify liberal positions with Bentham’s utilitarian principles of pleasure and pain. However, it was a historical absurdity to think that the growth of wealth and well-being in Europe could be entrusted to technology without freedom, as shown by the failure of fascism, Nazism, and, later, communism. It was just as absurd to imagine a future without technology as it was to imagine a future of politics without liberty.

Ortega’s conclusions seemed beyond question:

primera, que la democracia liberal fundada en la creación técnica es el tipo superior de vida pública hasta ahora conocido; segunda, que ese tipo de vida no será el mejor imaginable, pero el que imaginemos mejor tendrá que conservar lo esencial de aquellos principios; tercera, que es suicida todo retorno a formas de vida inferiores a la del siglo XIX (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 403).

The changes induced by these transformations in Europeans’ mindsets and moralities led to an almost unlimited confidence in the state’s power. Public opinion was seduced by the utopia of indefinite progress, which could take on a nationalist or socialist guise but always shared the belief that everything could be achieved through the will of a leader or a party who would implement these projects without considering real difficulties.

People began to believe that anything was possible, that the new “sciences” of humanity could change the world according to the wishes of the majority, and if this did not happen, it was because certain organized minorities were preventing it: for the Bolsheviks and anarchists, it was the bourgeoisie; for the German national-socialists, it was the Jews and Bolsheviks. The confusion and demagoguery in the minorities, who turned to the masses with promises that these desires would be fulfilled, changed the political atmosphere to the point where most of the institutions of the past collapsed:

La vieja democracia vivía templada por una abundante dosis de liberalismo y de entusiasmo por la ley. Al servir a estos principios, el individuo se obligaba a sostener en sí mismo una disciplina difícil. Al amparo del principio liberal y de la norma jurídica podían actuar y vivir las minorías. Democracia y ley, convivencia legal, eran sinónimos. Hoy asistimos al triunfo de una hiperdemocracia en que la masa actúa directamente sin ley, por medio de materiales presiones, imponiendo sus aspiraciones y sus gustos (ibid.: Vol. IV, 379–380).

In short, the heirs of the liberal, enlightened bourgeoisie were not liberals, and consequently, with the exception of the United Kingdom, Europe ceased to believe in liberal democracy until 1945:

No se hallará entre todos los [grupos sociales] que representan la época actual uno solo cuya actitud ante la vida no se reduzca a creer que tiene todos los derechos y ninguna obligación. Es indiferente que se enmascare de reaccionario o de revolucionario: por activa o por pasiva, al cabo de unas u otras vueltas, su estado de ánimo consistirá, decisivamente, en ignorar toda obligación y sentirse, sin que él mismo sospeche por qué, sujeto de ilimitados derechos (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 496).

The final diagnosis is not political, but metaphysical. When Ortega writes in the last section of *The Revolt of the Masses* that “Europe has lost its moral,” emphasizing that this is the real issue, the term “moral” can be misleading. He is not speaking of ethics, but of the historical reality that was Europe and the cause of its current crisis. To understand the scope of his diagnosis, we must recall that the rebellious temperament of Europeans has brought forth a new type of human being who does not coincide with the “vertical barbarian” that Ortega had spoken of with some hope but rather with the true “mass man”—a subject who combines the traits of a spoiled child with those of a specialist, who, knowing one thing, believes he knows everything, especially about political science and the functioning of the state. In another work, I have studied the profile of the mass man.³⁴ Here, I will focus only on commenting on those aspects that affect his understanding of freedom, since, paradoxically, it was that way of imagining freedom without resistance, like the dove Kant speaks of (Kant, Ribas, 1988: 46–47), which made him impenetrable to political liberalism. He rejected all forms of mediation, questioning parliamentary systems in favor of the fantasy—so relevant today—of immediate and direct democracy, which Ortega emphasized when he pointed out the mass man’s preference for direct action in politics.

A brief reflection on the phenomenology of whim reveals that, in its vital structure, liberty functions as an abstract absolute; it is absolute because it does not consider others³⁵ and is abstract because it is unaware of the

³⁴For a more extensive study of the profiles of the mass-man, see my book, already cited, *Meditaciones para un siglo*, especially Iv. 4 *Descripción fenomenológica del hombre-masa* (Lasaga Medina, 2022: 178 et seq.).

³⁵“...Llega a creer efectivamente que sólo él existe, y se acostumbra a no contar con los demás, sobre todo a no contar con nadie como superior a él” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 408).

limitations and mediations imposed by circumstances, which always involve balancing opportunities and difficulties. The spoiled child's desires are unlimited, believing everything is permitted. Ortega suggests a connection between the spoiled child and another facet of the mass man — the “rebellious primitive,” the counterpart of the “new man” dreamed of by Ortega in the early 1920s. The primitive is a consequence of technology; the spoiled child is a product of liberal education and its gifts in the form of rights. Neither education nor technology alone would have contributed to the emergence of the mass man; it was their convergence, both arising from the liberal ideas of human nature in the 18th century, that was at the root of Europe's 20th-century crisis.

Does Ortega claim that liberalism is the root of all the problems in European life? The answer is no; the difficulties arose from a certain interpretation of liberalism after it succeeded and permeated European social interactions throughout the 19th century. Its success caused the crisis.³⁶ However, for this very reason, liberalism, having become an unquestionable historical reality, could not be ignored or “surpassed” by the new political structures that emerged from the collapse of the liberal order. This is why Ortega asserts decisively that liberalism had a valid reason to exist, and this reason must be acknowledged: “Europa necesita conservar su esencial liberalismo y ello convierte en anacrónicos tanto al fascismo como al bolchevismo, por diseñar Estados ‘totalitarios’” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 433). Ortega had already criticized fascism in his 1925 essay for relying exclusively on the state as the only source of solutions. He now took communism more seriously because he noticed it was beginning to be admired by certain intellectual minorities precisely for its supposed moral superiority.³⁷ Years before the major propaganda event, the Congress of Writers,³⁸ was held in Paris, Ortega was already aware of the fascination that the Soviet Union's Five-Year Plans could exert on the West:

³⁶Shortly after, in the course *En torno a Galileo* (1933), Ortega concludes that civilizations decline due to internal causes. “Toda crisis humana se origina en que el hombre se ahoga en su propia abundancia.”

³⁷The case of surrealism joining the Communist International was exemplary. The spontaneous rebellion of the “spirit” had to be disciplined in the “scientific” revolutionary project that the Third International proclaimed. See how André Breton recalls his time in the French Communist Party in his *Entrevistas*, called *El surrealismo. Puntos de vista y manifestaciones*, especially Chapter IX. *Una gran duda: ¿Exige la emancipación del espíritu la previa emancipación social del hombre? — Acogida del Partido comunista* (Breton, 1972: 121 et seq.).

³⁸I am referring to a “Congreso internacional para la defensa de la cultura,” celebrated in Paris in June of 1935. Herbert R. Lottman en *La rive gauche. Intelectuales y política en París*,

“Cualquiera que sea el contenido del bolchevismo, representa un ensayo gigante de empresa humana.” And a few lines later: “Con tal de servir a algo que dé un sentido a la vida y huir del propio vacío existencial, no es difícil que el europeo se trague sus objeciones al comunismo, y ya que no por su sustancia, se sienta arrastrado por su gesto moral” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 494–495). The only future program that Ortega believed was viable for Europeans was the construction of Europe as “a great national state” (ibid.).

Note that Ortega doubted whether Europeans could continue to be “politically free.” He stated as much when he insisted that he was “not an old liberal,” but he willingly acknowledged that liberalism was inscribed in Europe’s destiny because it had set a “level of the times.” Thus, he concluded with the last clear evidence that “in the last century [liberalism] was substantially correct.” Given his frequent critiques of its philosophy, art, and politics, it must have been difficult for him to admit the correctness of anything from the 19th century. Still, here he acknowledged an undeniable success: it had built a historical reality, prevailing over all the historical forms of the past, over all the “ancient regimes,” to create a superior form of coexistence. The mention of destiny is significant. For Ortega, the historical reality is for moderns what nature was for the Greeks and God for medieval philosophy — an absolute reality, a horizon of determinations, a source of legality, something that cannot be ignored. It is the other side of freedom, so the only way for modern Europeans to be free is to accept their destiny bravely and, in the case of public life, their liberal destiny.³⁹ This is why Ortega reiterates the idea, as we cited earlier, that liberalism’s

...actúa lo mismo en el comunista europeo que en el fascista... como en el católico... Todos “saben” que más allá de las justas críticas con que se combaten las manifestaciones del liberalismo queda la irrevocable verdad de éste, una verdad que no es teórica, científica, intelectual, sino de un orden radicalmente distinto y más decisivo que todo eso — a saber, una verdad de destino (ibid.: Vol. IV, 439).

It will not surprise the reader that seven years later, despite the disasters already plaguing Europe, after the fall of the Weimar Republic and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Ortega wrote in his *Prologue for Frenchmen* the most impassioned defense of liberalism ever made in the

1935–1950: “ningún otro acontecimiento tuvo tanta importancia simbólica para los escritores comprometidos de los años treinta” (Lottman, 1985: 100). See also Winock, 2010: 353 et seq.

³⁹He then specifies: “Pero el destino — lo que vitalmente se tiene que ser o no se tiene que ser — no se discute, sino que se acepta o no” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 438).

20th century. It was an unexpected defense, not something he intended to write, nor did he consider it appropriate in the context of the Spanish Civil War. In that text, he valued the work of the doctrinaires⁴⁰ within the context of revolutionary tensions in France around 1848. Once again, he distanced himself from the French Revolution, whose egalitarian tendency he contrasted with the English Revolution of 1688. Above all, he left this declaration of the profound significance of liberalism in European history:

La forma que en política ha representado la más alta voluntad de convivencia es la democracia liberal. Ella lleva al extremo la resolución de contar con el prójimo [...] El liberalismo — conviene recordar hoy esto (1937) — es la suprema generosidad: es el derecho que la mayoría otorga a las minorías y es, por tanto, el más noble grito que ha sonado en el planeta. Proclama la decisión de convivir con el enemigo, más aún, con el enemigo débil (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 420)⁴¹.

In the second part of *The Revolt of the Masses*, Ortega reflects on possible ways out of the crisis. After diagnosing that Europe has “lost its morals” (in the sense that its history always involved living through the enthusiasm of some collective project), he suggests that the solution to the crisis lies in creating Europe as a supranational political reality. Ortega revisits ideas he had previously developed about the nation’s superiority over the state in the purest liberal sense: the state is an artifact, a technique for resolving problems of coexistence, whereas only the nation — civil society — belongs to the vital reality of a community. Ortega praises the historical reality of the nation as the foundation of European civilization but argues that it has now become too narrow for the expanding economic life. This mismatch, Ortega believes, is the root cause of the nationalist tensions proliferating among the peoples of Europe. He anticipates the post-World War II diagnosis: Europe must construct itself as a political supranational unity.

But before reaching that point, we must review Ortega’s final reflection on liberalism, using the interpretive tools of historical reason.

⁴⁰He mentions Roger-Collard and above all Guizot. He does not mention Tocqueville, whom he had not yet read. The most extensive text dedicated to him by Ortega, *Tocqueville y su tiempo* (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. x, 362 et seq.) remained unpublished. It is a series of notes written for a prologue to some works by the French political philosopher. See editors’ note OC, *ibid.*: Vol. x, 501.

⁴¹In his monograph *Liberalism*, John Gray, disciple and author of a study on Isaiah Berlin, cites these words as the motto that precedes the chapter *El liberalismo y el futuro* (Gray, 1992: 138). They are also cited by Aron, 1987-1988. It appeared translated in ABC Literario, divided into two parts, February 6 and 13, 1988, and in the section *Classics on Ortega* in *Revista de Estudios Orteguianos* (Aron, 2006).

THE LIBERTY OF MODERNS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In a letter to his translator and friend, Helene Weyl, written from Buenos Aires on December 2, 1940, Ortega mentioned his recent publications, *A Prologue for Frenchmen* and *An Epilogue for the English*, which he had written to accompany new editions of *The Revolt of the Masses*. He confided to Weyl that these were “the only things I have written in my life under abnormal conditions,” referring to the Spanish Civil War, which had driven him to Paris in the summer of 1936. What is most interesting is what Ortega tells Weyl: when he picked up the pen, he had not intended to write “the only defense of liberalism I have ever made in my life, which, of course, I consider true in what it says, but which is partial in the sense that it is not my complete view — not now, nor ever — of liberalism” (Märtens, ed., 2008: 239).

Ortega’s qualifications of liberalism began in 1914, and after the war ended in the early 1920s, he observed its decline throughout the continent. Despite this, he did not hesitate to acknowledge the unconditional value of liberal policies, recognizing that they had made possible the originality of a civilization based on personal freedoms — the same freedoms he had used in his youth to measure the historical backwardness of Spanish society. In addressing his French readers, Ortega pointed out that the Jacobinism of the French Revolution had not done much to advance the liberal cause.

In addressing the English, he drew attention to their naïve pacifism. However, he also praised at length the lesson they had given to a convulsed Europe by celebrating the coronation of their new king⁴². Today, this *Epilogue* is more frequently cited and studied than *The Prologue for Frenchmen* for at least two reasons: first, it is one of the rare exceptions that can be mentioned to dispel the notion of Ortega’s “silence” about the Spanish Civil War; second, and more importantly from a theoretical perspective, it contains something akin to a prophecy about Europe’s future after the tempest subsides — a prophecy that offers a judgment on liberalism in relation to the “totalitarianism” then dominating much of Europe.

The prophecy was bold, to say the least, since the Second World War had not yet begun in earnest. Since that war ended in Yalta, the spirit

⁴²“Por eso el pueblo inglés, con deliberado propósito, ha dado ahora inusitada solemnidad al rito de la coronación. Frente a la turbulencia actual del continente ha querido afirmar las normas permanentes que regulan su vida. Nos ha dado una lección más” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 370). I clarify that this praise is in the “Prologue for the French,” whose revolutionary tradition is precisely the opposite of the “continuity” that the English had so plastically practiced in modern centuries.

of Ortega's prophecy is mostly relevant only in its final endorsement of liberalism. Indeed, the recovery would have to be collective based on the premise that Europe's sickness was total, not confined to individual nations. Ortega foresaw:

Por lo pronto, vendrá una *articulación de Europa* en dos formas distintas de vida pública: la forma de un nuevo liberalismo y la forma que, con un nombre impropio, se suele llamar «totalitaria». Los pueblos menores adoptarán figuras de transición e intermeditarias. Esto salvará a Europa. Una vez más resultará patente que toda forma de vida ha menester de su antagonista. El «totalitarismo» salvará al «liberalismo», destiñendo sobre él, depurándolo, y gracias a ello veremos pronto a un nuevo liberalismo templar los regímenes autoritarios. Este equilibrio puramente mecánico y provisional permitirá una nueva etapa de mínimo reposo, imprescindible para que vuelva a brotar, en el fondo del bosque que tienen las almas, el hontanar de una nueva fe. Ésta es el auténtico poder de creación histórica, pero no mana en medio de la alteración, sino en el recato del ensimismamiento (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 527–528).

This prediction is risky and, at least in part, incorrect, not least because it could not account for the new political structure that would emerge from the end of World War II—the division of Europe, and within it, Germany, into “Western” and “Eastern.”⁴³ The unstated premise of Ortega's prediction was that Europe would retain its structure of “sovereign” nations and its “public opinion.” The important takeaway is that, as Ortega later emphasized in various European forums, Europe could be saved if it found the formula to recreate itself as a supranational political entity.⁴⁴

⁴³However, just before the quoted paragraph, a question concerning whether it was possible to be a “Europa oriental disociada hasta la raíz de una Europa occidental” is asked. Ortega answers categorically “nada de esto se ofrece en el horizonte” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. IV, 527).

⁴⁴There is an expression, “El totalitarismo salvará al liberalismo” that has been interpreted as a justification by Ortega of what he here calls “totalitarianism,” a term that he does not define, but given the date of its use it is more than likely that he used it in the sense that Italian fascism gave it and not yet as the unprecedented form of government, distinct from military dictatorships, that would later be described by authors such as Hannah Arendt in her well-known *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1951) or the Spanish sociologist Juan José Linz in *Regímenes totalitarios y autoritarios* (Linz, 2010). A recent critical reading of this passage in *La lucidez confrontada* by J. Brioso and J. M. Díaz interprets it in relation to the Spanish Civil War. The text is cited and commented on twice in *La guerra civil. Valoraciones...*, 103 and in *Esperar lo inesperado...*, 168. A somewhat simplistic interpretation that reads the paragraph in question not in the context of the European situation on the brink of war, but in relation to the Spanish civil conflict, is found in Antonio Elorza, *La razón y la sombra. Una lectura política de Ortega y Gasset*. Elorza begins by reproaching Ortega for condemning

Where Ortega engaged deeply in analyzing the limitations of modern liberalism was his essay *On the Roman Empire* (1940), which appeared in the Argentine newspaper *La Nación* in June of that year, the same year as the previously mentioned letter to Weyl. This means that Ortega had already published—though not yet in book form—his analyses comparing the freedom of the ancients (the Romans of the Republic) with the freedom of moderns in the Enlightenment. We now understand what Ortega meant when he told his friend and translator that when he wrote his defense of liberalism, he believed it sincerely, but it was not all that he believed. He was reserving the criticisms he would express in *On the Roman Empire*, where he subjected modern liberalism's theory of human liberty to the scrutiny of historical reason, comparing it with the understanding of liberty held by the Romans through the ideas of Cicero.

According to Cicero, the two institutions that stabilized the Roman Republic were *Concordia* (*harmony*) and *Libertas* (*freedom*). The first consists of society sharing a system of beliefs.⁴⁵ Its political meaning lies in that shared beliefs provide the consensus necessary for a society to agree on the fundamental issue: who should rule? What form should the state's institutions take? The opposite of *Concordia* is the conviction held by only a segment of society, leading to division. “La concordia sustantiva, cimiento último de toda sociedad estable, presupone que en la colectividad hay una creencia firme y común [...] sobre quién debe mandar” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. VI, 92). Politics, therefore, depends on pre-political or even non-political agreements, such as religious beliefs, the origin of the community (the myth of the city's foundation), and the relationship with nature—in short, the overall worldview. This is why Ortega devotes several pages to discussing the theme of “los auspicios o religión y negligencia” (ibid.: VI, 94 et seq.), to show that institutions such as the Roman requirement for priests to scrutinize the entrails or flight of birds before the authorities made decisions, while seemingly irrational, concealed the secret of Rome's political stability. When the auspices were subjected to rational critique by the Romans, the stability of the Republic was affected. Despite his

“the union with the communists” and summarises Ortega's dark prophecy by arguing that he advocates a “European articulation of liberals and fascists” (Elorza, 1984: 244).

⁴⁵In *Historia como sistema* (1935), Ortega theorizes that the historical structure of human life has its basis in the system of beliefs in force at each historical moment. But such a system may be in crisis and may not be shared in a unified manner by the entire social body. The canonical text for the problem of beliefs in the structure of historical reason is *Ideas y creencias* (1941).

rationalism, even Cicero was uncertain about the benefits of the auspices, though he had an obscure awareness of their importance.⁴⁶

The second topic Ortega addresses at length is the difference between *Libertas*, as understood by Cicero, and the liberty of the moderns. Ortega begins his argument by noting that Western civilization has exhibited, in contrast to the East, a distinguishing characteristic: “el hecho normal de la historia europea frente a la de Oriente ha sido la vida como libertad” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. VI, 101). Roman *Libertas*, or life as freedom, is, in the final analysis — and only in a political sense, Ortega clarifies — “toda aquella que los hombre viven dentro de sus instituciones preferidas, sean estas las que sean” (ibid.: Vol. VI, 102). Just as the Greeks cannot separate personal freedom from the freedom of the *polis*, the Romans of Cicero’s time experienced freedom within the institutions they had created. This means that ancient liberty resided in *Concordia* as a necessary condition. Suppose we add that the Greeks and Romans did not possess the modern sense of intimacy or subjectivity as the site of personal freedom except in very rare cases. In that case, we must conclude that Ortega’s comparison was between different realities.

The key concept in this part of the essay is “life as freedom,” a term Ortega does not fully clarify, which might be misleading in its apparent transparency. If life as freedom means a society living in *Concordia under institutions agreed upon by all — not by a majority — such a way of life means the same as life in Concordia*. If such a unified, harmonious society ever existed, it was in some premodern utopia, since modernity establishes itself as a structure that articulates two dimensions of human life — the individual and the collective — that are not only distinct, but also in “real opposition.” Ortega does not theorize this explicitly, but it is implicit in the conclusions of this text, in his sociology (*Man and People*), and in his early critiques of liberalism’s naïveté in failing to confront “rebellious masses.”

⁴⁶Cicero wrote a book criticizing the belief in auspices, arguing with his brother Quintus Tullius Cicero, who did believe in them. The rationalist asks himself: “¿Qué debemos creer de los que buscan el conocimiento de lo venidero en las entrañas de las víctimas, en el vuelo y canto de las aves, presagios, oráculos y sueños?” (Cicero, 1985: 69). Later, speaking of “fate,” he says to his brother: “Deja para las viejas esa palabra tan supersticiosa” (ibid.: 70). Finally, he concedes that “la institución de los augures, fundada al principio en la creencia de la adivinación, se conservó después por razones políticas” (ibid.: 87). Ortega thus sees confirmed the thesis that a rationalist culture of ideas ends up dissolving the ground of beliefs that makes the harmony of a society possible.

“Life as freedom” is foreign to modern political philosophy, let alone its practices, because doubt and criticism, which are at the root of modernity, as well as the destruction of religious unity, bring faction revolution as a violent rupture of the established order, and civil war as possibilities that cannot be ruled out into the horizon of coexistence. We can now better understand why Ortega considers the modern understanding of freedom and the desire to exchange “la magna idea de la vida como libertad por unas cuantas libertades en plural, muy determinadas, que exorbitaba más allá de toda dimensión histórica, convirtiéndolas en entidades teológicas” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. VI, 102). The moderns sacralized the secondary — the liberties — and, in doing so, fragmented the essence of freedom that Greece and Rome had conceived as life itself being freedom.

La libertad europea ha cargado siempre la mano en poner límites al poder público e impedir que invada totalmente la esfera individual de la persona. La libertad romana, en cambio, se preocupa más de asegurar que no mande una persona individual, sino la ley hecha en común por los ciudadanos (ibid.: Vol. VI, 113).

At the time, Ortega ignored the American Revolution and Tocqueville’s interpretation of democracy in America.⁴⁷ Had he been familiar with the political tradition of the “founders,” their aspirations and concerns when designing the Constitution, he might have found a third option to the exclusionary dilemma he posed between life as freedom and the fragmented liberties of modernity. The American Constitution enshrines “liberal” freedom in its Bill of Rights, which sits at the constitutional core and is a mechanism to prevent tyranny in its separation of powers. However, as Hannah Arendt showed in her interpretation of the American Constitution,⁴⁸ its authors were aware that the Constitution needed to possess the character of a founding — analogous to the mythical founding of cities in Greece and

⁴⁷Although Ortega belatedly addresses Tocqueville, it is possible to speculate that he did not read *Democracy in America* in detail, although he mentions his idea of democracy. He did not pay attention to the political experience of the American revolution because he never thought that it could teach old Europe anything. See the article by J.L. Villacañas in which he interprets that Ortega refused to “appreciate Tocqueville’s American experience”. There he notes that “the United States had achieved the synthesis of liberalism and democracy through its active community life, its plurality of power centers, its federalism, its virtue, and its involvement in common life” (Villacañas, 2011: 750).

⁴⁸I am referring above all to *On the Revolution*, although it is a recurring theme in his work. “La Constitución americana vino posteriormente a consolidar el poder de la Revolución, y puesto que el propósito de la revolución era la libertad, la tarea consistió en lo que Bracton ha llamado *Constitutio Libertatis*, la fundación de la libertad”.

Rome—in order to turn it into a shared belief among the entire social body. When Arendt emphasizes that the American Constitution enshrines freedom in the heart of modernity, she could have used the expression “life as freedom” because the American Constitution was, and perhaps still is, the closest thing to a “State as skin” that modernity has produced.

In the last part of his essay, Ortega introduces another concept: “life as adaptation,” in contrast to “life as freedom.” Each one defines how a society resolved its relationship with the state at a given moment in history: state as skin and State as orthopedics.

El hombre no es libre para eludir la coacción permanente de la colectividad sobre su persona que designamos con el inexpressivo nombre de “Estado”, pero ciertos pueblos, en ciertas épocas, han dado libremente a esa coacción la figura institucional que preferían—*han adaptado el Estado a sus preferencias vitales*, le han impuesto el gálibo que les proponía su albedrío. Eso y no otra cosa es “vida como libertad” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. VI, 117).

Ortega is careful not to offer specific examples. One might find some, but not many. Historically, it has been rare for societies to be able to choose the precise form of the State that would make the community happy:

En tiempos tales, lejos de fluir la vida humana a sabor por cauces institucionales forjados a su medida y *con su anuencia* [...], se vuelve todo lo contrario: *pura adaptación de cada existencia individual al molde férreo del Estado*, un molde de que nadie es responsable y que nadie ha preferido, sino que adviene irresistible como un terremoto. Esto y no otra cosa es «vida como adaptación» (ibid.).

The first form corresponds to the “State as skin” and the second to the “State as orthopedics.” Behind the second metaphor, it is easy to see the intuition of modern totalitarian States, which, in their extreme form, aspire to absorb all social spontaneity within the rigid ordinances of the State.

Ortega examines the European present from the perspective of 1940, at a time when this “State-orthopedics,” which demanded that personal life adapt to its blind impositions, ruled almost all of Europe. The final tone of this essay, perhaps imbalanced due to the circumstances, suggests that Ortega is describing the end of a cycle in European political life and taking note of its errors. We are reading the obituary of liberalism, which, according to him, no one had written before.

The liberalism that would emerge with the victory of the Allies in a devastated Europe is different, perhaps with more “skilled belligerence” against the enemies of freedom, inspired by a liberal tradition different from that of the French Revolution. It is undeniable that Europe in the second half

of the 20th century rescued parliamentary democracies based on three historical events: the victory of the Allies over the Axis powers (May-August 1945), the threat of Soviet Stalinism over Western Europe, and the negative example of fascism, especially National Socialism and the horrors of the Final Solution, which became known through the Nuremberg Trials. This combination of factors, along with the protection of American democracy, made it possible for the great European nations to begin constructing what we now know as the European Union, thereby confirming the central intuition of *The Revolt of the Masses*.

THE EUROPEAN CIVIL WAR AND THE FATE OF LIBERALISM

The preservation of security, rather than guarantees of freedoms, is what legitimizes the power of the State. Security first, then civil liberties. This seems to be Ortega's bitter conclusion in *On the Roman Empire*. The fundamental criticism of modern liberalism is based on the accusation that it has not delved deeply into the disteleology of the social, into a conception of the human condition that would be closer to reclaiming the myth of original sin than to the Enlightenment view of man as a benevolent animal. In other words, Ortega believes that low passions lie irrepressibly within social order:

La sociedad, conste, es tan constitutivamente el lugar de la sociabilidad como el lugar de la más atroz insociabilidad, y no es en ella menos normal que la beneficencia, la criminalidad. Lo más a que ha podido llegarse es a que las potencias mayores del crimen queden transitoriamente sojuzgadas, contenidas, a decir verdad, sólo ocultas en el subsuelo del cuerpo social, prontas siempre a irrumpir una vez más *de profundis* (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. VI, 103).

From this premise, the only possible conclusion is that the primary function of the State is to impose the law by coercing free men when they violate it. If human coexistence is described as a kind of "permanent tragedy," only a "conservative" thesis on the State can be expected: "so-called societies are impossible without the exercise of command, without the energy of the State," as we already know. Ortega adds: this exercise implies: "la violencia y otras cosas peores, largas de enumerar, 'toda participación en el mando es radicalmente degradante' — como dice Auguste Comte" (ibid.: Vol. VI, 104).

Ortega often returned to these issues, developing them in the aforementioned sociology course *Man and People*—taught, as we know, in Buenos Aires around the time *On the Roman Empire* was published—in Franco's Madrid in 1946. In the lectures he gave in various parts of Europe, such as

the famous Berlin lecture in 1949. In unpublished papers in preparation for the sociology course, he planned to write a chapter on the State, which he never completed — one wonders whether this was due to accidental reasons or because he chose not to.⁴⁹ Among the unused notes, we read: “El Estado es, pues..., último recurso al que la sociedad recurre cuando está en peligro la sociedad — [...] Porque es último recurso, ultima ratio. No se olvide esta esencia ortopédica del Estado. El Estado existe porque y en la medida en que la sociedad no existe” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. x, 325).

I do not believe that new and different ideas emerge in Ortega’s texts from the 1950s beyond those already presented. Ortega revisits passages from *The Revolt of the Masses* to show that his predictions have largely come true.⁵⁰ He knows that the construction of Europe is now possible and contributes to this through his lectures. He describes European history as a unified landscape since the Renaissance, a historical space structured on two levels: one of a European culture that predates its division into nations and one of nations formed from their own identities. Therefore, Europe is not only a political project for the future, but also a cultural reality from the past, one that is characterized by a continuous pursuit of the ideal of “life as freedom,” although it was never fully realized: “The permanent core of Europe is pluralism and freedom”, he wrote in the much-quoted *Prologue for the French*. This maxim could serve as a conclusion regarding Ortega’s liberalism. However, it is worth noting that this core never belonged to the collective social dimension of human life, but rather to its historical background and the lifestyle of many European men and women.

It was not exactly “totalitarianism bleeding into liberalism” that redirected old Europe, but rather (Anglo-Saxon) liberalism resisting the totalitarianism of Soviet Stalinism and its imperialist project. The decision of capitalist

⁴⁹In these same unpublished works we find a cruder description of human unsociability in which the myth of “original sin” is expressly mentioned: “ya en el siglo XIII, Federico II Barbarroja, una de las más geniales figuras del pasado europeo, en su *Liber Augustalis*, deriva el Estado del pecado original, es decir, del primigenio crimen o inobservancia de una ley natural-sobrenatural — en suma, lo deriva de la originaria y constitutiva delincuencia del hombre. El Estado, según él, es engendrado por la *necessitas*. Esto me recuerda que Kant, en su breve ensayo *Ideas para una historia universal en sentido cosmopolita*, nos habla de la “insociable sociabilidad” del hombre” (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: Vol. x, 324). Los editores señalan que el texto pertenece a un “Final desechado” (ibid.: Vol. x, 323).

⁵⁰Note that he stopped using the terms “minority-mass” very soon after publishing his book. He preferred the pair “individual-people” for the sociology course that was to systematize the collective, social dimension of human life, of which we know the two courses, the one he gave in Buenos Aires (1940) and in Madrid (1946), conceived as the second part of *La rebelión*.

Western Europe to defend itself made it possible for Europe to experience a period of social balance and prosperity, allowing for the reconstruction of new liberal societies. Today, the perception is that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, far from confirming Fukuyama's prediction (Fukuyama, 1989), has ushered in a period of insecurity and political crisis, swinging between citizens' attraction to populisms of both left and right, entrenched in a radicalization/denial of democracy that echoes the factionalism that Europe experienced in the 1930s. Today, Europe boasts a supranational political structure firmly rooted in liberal principles and a higher level of well-being than in the past. These two factors ease — though perhaps not indefinitely — the civil tensions within our democratic societies.

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ЭССЕНЦИАЛЬНЫЙ ЛИБЕРАЛИЗМ ХОСЕ ОРТЕГИ-И-ГАССЕТА

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Аннотация: В статье «Эссенциальный либерализм Хосе Ортеги-и-Гассета» рассматривается философия либерализма Ортеги, которая основывается на его концепции «радикальной реальности» индивидуальной жизни как основы свободы и общества. В отличие от доктринального либерализма XIX века, либерализм Ортеги коренится в его философии «рациональности жизни», где жизнь понимается как динамический процесс самозидания в исторических обстоятельствах. Ортега утверждает, что либерализм должен создавать условия для развития личности, обеспечивая свободу от угнетающего контроля государства и поддерживая плюралистическое общество. Ортега критикует массовое общество, где индивидуальность часто растворяется в коллективных идеологиях, будь то тоталитаризм или демократизм. Его либерализм ставит гражданское общество выше государственной власти и подчеркивает моральную ответственность меньшинств за лидерство через пример, а не принуждение. Несмотря на скептицизм к наивному оптимизму либерализма XIX века, Ортега настаивает на сохранении его принципов, так как либерализм лежит в основе исторической судьбы Европы. Он различает демократию и либерализм, предостерегая от тирании большинства без гарантий индивидуальной свободы. В поздних работах Ортега подчеркивает важность создания наднациональной Европы для преодоления националистических конфликтов, сохранив дух свободы и плюрализма, определяющий европейскую цивилизацию.

Ключевые слова: Ортега, либерализм, политика, философия жизни, нация, государство.

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