ORTEGA Y GASSET REDISCOVERED

ROBERT McCLINTOCK

When Ortega y Gasset died in 1955, controversy invaded staid obituary pages. Few agreed where the philosopher stood in history. *The New York Times* praised him as a great humanist, a man who had helped create the Spanish Republic, but whose hopes for a free, democratic Spain had been destroyed by history. The Spanish Ambassador subsequently complained that the *Times* had cast Ortega as a liberal, when, he claimed, Ortega had consistently backed the Franco regime, recognizing it as a necessary antidote to the mob rule of Republicans. A former member of the Republican parliament, Victoria Kent, countered by recalling Ortega's important part in toppling the monarchy in 1931 and his leadership in drafting the Constitution of the Second Republic. Ortega's peace with Franco, Kent suggested, had been correct but not cordial, an expedient entered into by an elderly, ailing thinker to end 10 years of wandering exile.

In Spain, Ortega's obituaries were carefully censored so that the aspects of his work compatible with Falangism were emphasized. Officials of the regime were conspicuous at his funeral, and stories circulated that in his declining days he had returned to the Church. Students and intellectuals, however—some thousand of them—gathered elsewhere to hold an unofficial memorial. They remembered Ortega for his refusal to reassume official teaching posts, seeing that as a sign of his real commitment: an unwillingness to subordinate rational intelligence to authoritarian power. Revering Ortega as the man who would have been their teacher in a free society, they read excerpts from his writings, especially from a speech Ortega had made to students in 1930, a speech that opens the American version of *Mission of the University*, but that has long been absent from the Spanish edition.

At Ortega's death, these differing perceptions of his commitments were possible largely because most of his writings were unavailable. During the first third of the century, Ortega had won note as a philosophical essayist, a journalist, and a politician; beginning in his twenties he had forcefully urged the fundamental reorganization of Spanish society and had opposed every act of *lèse-humanité*. But in 1932 he had withdrawn from politics and journalism to devote himself to a more fundamental, philosophical appraisal of European values. Embarked on a long-term enterprise, he no longer rushed into print; instead he held on to the manuscripts that recorded his speculations, leaving it to his family and followers to publish them after his death. Thus, when he died in 1955, the extent and importance of this philosophical work was not known outside a small circle of intimates, and even his early political writings had become inaccessible due to the censorship after the Civil War. For example, the 1932 edition of his *Obras* had included two books on Spanish politics, *On the Nation's Dignity* and *The Rectification of the Republic*. Neither appeared in editions published after the Civil War. And, although for 20 years Ortega had been a leading political columnist for *El Sol*, a powerful Madrid paper that was a casualty of the Civil War, hundreds of his articles for it and other newspapers were no

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longer available. As long as this record of what Ortega thought about Spanish politics was out of circulation, his political views had to be extracted primarily from either memory or *The Revolt of the Masses,* two sources that can easily mislead.

In the United States the most familiar distortion of Ortega's views is the belief that he was a conservative elitist, passionately opposed to popular democracy and welfare economics. This misconception originated when *The Revolt of the Masses* became a best seller in 1932, in the depths of the Depression. In that context, the book seemed very reactionary. Conservative reviewers hailed Ortega's criticism of the state as "the greatest danger," overlooking the fact that he did not criticize the welfare state for intervening in society to promote equality, but the fascistic state for intervening to uphold "law and order." Liberal reviewers condemned the book as an anti-democratic attack on the people, on the "masses," ignoring the fact that Ortega explicitly identified the financier, not the worker, as the typical mass man. The book appeared at the wrong time in English, and most Americans who read it knew nothing about its author. As a result, the stereotype of Ortega as a conservative, elitist anti-democrat has become widely established, or so it seems, judging from views expressed over the years by commentators as diverse as Ralph Adams Cram, Sydney Hook, Daniel Bell, Dwight MacDonald, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Michael Harrington.

When *The Revolt of the Masses* first appeared in the United States, Ralph Adams Cram hailed it in the *Atlantic Monthly* as a conservative corrective to Rousseau's *Contrat social* and Marx's *Das Kapital.* But Cram also expressed an important perplexity, for, he said, "it seemed measurably inconsistent that one who courageously proclaims himself an aristocrat by conviction and a dissentient from the works of democracy should be a supporter of the present Republican regime in Spain and a member of the democratic Cortes." Cram dismissed this apparent inconsistency, not by questioning his own characterization of Ortega's convictions, but, in effect, by dismissing without evidence the sincerity of Ortega's participation in democratic, Republican politics. Unfortunately, no one else pursued the matter, and with the unavailability of his other works after the Civil War the stereotype of a reactionary Ortega persisted relatively unchallenged.

Times have changed a bit in Spain. Works that have long been out of circulation are beginning to reappear, among them two stout volumes, the *Escritos políticos* of Ortega y Gasset (thanks to Paulino Garragori and the publishers Revista de Occidente). These contain well over 200 political speeches and essays written between 1907 and 1933. The *Escritos políticos* show that Ortega was a political journalist worthy of comparison with Walter Lippmann or Raymond Aron, and the contents of the volumes also challenge any belief that Ortega was a conservative anti-democrat.

On economic questions they show him frequently speaking out for socialist solutions, assigning to the state a central economic role: it should, he contended in 1931, mandate five-year economic plans like those pioneered in the Soviet Union and impose a land reform that, without pauperizing the rich, would nevertheless bring about a basic redistribution of wealth in Spain. Cram might have been quite disconcerted had he heard Ortega proclaim in the Constituent Assembly that "whatever may be the distance between me and the totality of this theory [Marxism], my agreements with it are much more than enough to enable us to walk together for a long time." Ortega's positive attitude toward the worker was consistently upheld through the 25 years covered by the *Escritos políticos,* and it is put well in a major speech on the eve of the founding of the Republic: "Whatever are the political differences that exist, or that can exist tomorrow in our public life, it is necessary that none commit the stupidity of not knowing that, for 60 years, the most energetic force in universal history has been the magnificent upward movement of the working classes."

On political questions, Ortega all along called for the democratization of Spanish politics, seeking the transformation of the monarchy into a figurehead, as in England. In 1930, when the Spanish king proved recalcitrant, Ortega joined the Republican effort to destroy the monarchy, coining its slogan, *Delenda est monarchia!* Over and over again in his political commentaries, Ortega reiterated his basic belief that granting regional autonomy in regional affairs was an essential constitutional reform, one that could make democratic procedures effective in Spain. To Ortega, the supposed anti-democrat, twentieth-century government had to be democratic, and he upheld this position both before and after writing *The Revolt of the Masses.*

> The contemporary state requires a constant and all-embracing collaboration from all its citizens, and it does this not by reason of political justice, but of ineluctable necessity. The problems of the present state are of such quantity and such variety that they require the continuous concern of all its members. By this necessity, which the conditions of modern life inexorably impose, the state and the nation have to be fused into a unity: this fusion is called democracy. This means that democracy has ceased to be a theory and a political credo for which some agitate, and that it has converted itself into the inevitable anatomy of the present epoch; it is not only that in the present there are democrats, but that democracy is the present.

But Ortega's *Escritos políticos* are important not simply because they will correct mistaken interpretations of *The Revolt of the Masses*. Over the years, Ortega took up an extensive range of particular issues, so much so that a point-by-point account of his political essays would make an excellent history of Spain from 1898 to 1936. Throughout the many particulars that he advanced, there ran a basic, steady commitment, a central concern. The old ideological conflicts inherited from the nineteenth century, the very conflicts that *The Revolt of the Masses* had seemed to fan, were not that important to him. Both inclination and experience made him concentrate on other, more contemporary problems.

To be "nothing modern, but very twentieth century," was Ortega's goal. Historic accident helped him fulfill that goal in his political writings, for although in particular they were addressed to Spaniards about Spain in the early twentieth century, they are in substance addressed to the citizen of any Western nation who finds himself living through the trauma of rejecting an imperial heritage. Ortega's thought, especially his political thought, very much grew out of what he called his "circumstance," the historic situation in which he lived and worked. One can too easily dismiss those circumstances as peripheral to recent Western history: economically, socially, and politically, Ortega's Spain certainly was "nothing modern." Nevertheless, in one tragic, important sense, Spain has been "very twentieth century": of the once "great powers," Spain first discovered its impotence and experienced the divisions that can shatter a nation when its traditional world mission suddenly disappears. Because Ortega's political thought was, from beginning to end, addressed primarily to these phenomena, it has a general significance that far transcends his parochial Spanish circumstances and may be of special interest to Americans today.

In one short, decisive war in 1898, Spain lost what remained of her American and Pacific colonies. Whatever the Spanish-American war represents for the United States, in a larger, Western perspective it clearly marks a decisive point in the ongoing process of decolonization. To be sure, it was not the first time that a European power had lost a colony. But it was the first time, and not the last, that the loss of colonies or the costs of the struggle to hold them became the central issue in the internal politics of a European power. In this sense, Spain was "very twentieth century."

Defeat in 1898 had a deep, lasting effect on domestic Spanish public affairs. A profound rift opened within the politically active parts of the population. The defeat destroyed Spain's pretensions to inclusion among the world powers; and as Spain's mission in world politics collapsed, so did the rationale for the established allocation of power and prestige among competing groups within Spain. The military, the monarchy, wealthy landowners, and a conservative Church were shown to have been living on illusions; their national function was fundamentally called into question. New claimants to power—progressive entrepreneurs, organized labor, intellectuals—stopped looking on the given order as established, fixed; sensing its weaknesses, they made a call for radical change. The war of 1898 induced a great gulf between those who wanted to preserve the national priorities that had been set during Spain's long imperial era and those who wanted to change those priorities to take account of Spain's real condition. This gulf has not yet been bridged.

Ortega's political thought was a sustained effort to solve the national crisis that developed with the collapse of Spain's imperial mission. Although a child of the old order, having been born into an upper middle-class Madrid family, he became a leading spokesman for those who sought to renovate Spain, replacing outworn forms with vital, new institutions. As his *Escritos políticos* indicate, Ortega's renovative effort had two sides: a sharp shift of resources away from the army, the Church, and the well-to-do into education, social welfare, and economic development, as well as a fundamental, national effort to reconstitute Spanish public life, an effort based on a recognition that several important groups no longer recognized the established authorities as legitimate.

In the *Escritos políticos* the call for new priorities was so basic that it was often taken for granted. Ortega coined and made current the contrast between "the old and the new politics," and he had much to say about the constituents and the mission of the new politics, viewing it as a collaboration of labor, the intellectuals, and the young, all working for national regeneration. But Ortega's essential contribution does not lie in matters of doctrine. Rather, his originality was in the second side of his effort, in his understanding that the problem of legitimacy was at the heart of the matter and in his realization that any lasting solution to the question of priorities could be based only on a prior consensus about the sources of authority.

A striking feature of Ortega's collected political writings is the frequency that a topical subject led him to the reconsideration of principle rather than policy. From 1907, when he started writing political commentaries, onwards, he most often discussed the means and ends that should control the basic transformation of the body politic and all its institutions. This quality makes his political essays appear very

radical, in the basic sense of the word; continually, Ortega went to the source, the root, asking what implications various developments had, not for their immediate effects on practical policy, but for their ultimate effects on Spain's potential for constitutional reform.

The compilers of the *Escritos políticos* have introduced the volumes with Ortega's description of himself as someone who spoke "with the faint voice of a political pedagogue"; the phrase is a most apt introduction, for his standard measure of men and events was the degree to which they imparted political principles that could lead to the reorganization of Spanish government and society. He put it thus in 1914: "our first duty is to foment the organization of a minority charged with the political education of the people. It is of no use to push Spain toward any appreciable improvement unless the workers in the city, the peasants in the fields, and the middle class in the county seat and the capital have not learned on the one hand how to impose the rough will of their genuine desires upon authority, and on the other how to desire a clear, concrete, and dignified future."

From the immediate, practical point of view, Ortega's type of political commentary is at best a nuisance and at worst a danger. One greatly complicates the work of practical politicians by continually attacking the legitimacy of their authority, always calling for the complete reorganization of government. Yet, in its context, the radicalness of Ortega's political commentary was a sign of his essential reasonableness and moderation. The title of one essay strikes his constant theme: "Neither Revolution Nor Repression." Spain was in a crisis such that the center could not hold merely by muddling through as if all were normal.

As Ortega saw it, the organized pressure groups in the country were split by the collapse of Spain's imperial tradition into the ultra-advanced and the ultra-conservative. Since the showdown between these groups could lead only to disaster, the sound alternative was a cooperative effort by all groups to reconstitute Spain, to discover a new mission and a new superstructure of institutions, so that implacable conflicts might be transcended. All Ortega's political thought revolved around this basic idea: when existing conflicts become irreconcilable within the established political framework, the rational, intelligent, prudent course is not simply to pick a side, ready to fight to the bitter end, but to try to redesign the political framework so that the existing conflicts can once again become reconcilable.

"The State," he told voters while campaigning in Léon in 1931, "is an immense machine that a national collaboration constitutes in order to serve the public life, and the process for inventing a machine is this: first, one decides what are the objects that one wishes to obtain with it, and then one molds the parts and the mechanism into the form that best conduces to these objects." The goal Ortega most wanted to reach was the creation of a framework within which Spaniards could disagree without feeling compelled to seek the destruction of their opponents. "We aspire to institute a state that will be for all Spaniards. We wish to erect a great, comodious house, where there will be room for all."

When conflicts become too sharply drawn, the center cannot hold by casting about desperately for a consensus within the established system. The center holds by looking ahead and seeking to draw all into cooperating in the creation of new goals, new procedures, a whole new system. A context of implacable conflict, induced by the demise of imperial Spain, made Ortega's radical search for new political principles, ones that might win a new legitimacy and bridge old conflicts, more prudent than it would at first appear. Now Americans are hard upon a trauma in national ideals similar to the one that Spaniards experienced during the opening decades of this century. To be sure, there are vast differences in national might between the Spain of 1898 and the United States of 1970. But despite its status as a superpower, America's hegemony throughout the world is coming under ever more effective challenges, and hence the costs of maintaining that hegemony are rising rapidly. As in Ortega's Spain, the domestic cost of sustaining foreign involvements is becoming a fundamentally divisive issue in American politics. The deepening division within the United States does not stem from disagreement about the factual situation, namely that American power to act as world policeman is rapidly diminishing; the division results from a much more fundamental disagreement about what value to attach to that condition. Some see the eclipse of American preponderance as a disaster that bodes international chaos and national decline; they are inclined at all costs to preserve the governmental policies and priorities established during the era in which the United States wielded effective world power. Others see the same developments as a great opportunity that may lead to supranational advances and to national renewal; they are predisposed to cut back sharply on war related expenditures and to promote those pertaining to humanitarian and cultural possibilities. It seems probable that, as in Spain, the United States government will continue to reflect these divisions among the people and that frustrations will continue to build, leading ever closer to the dilemma of revolution or repression. Indeed, events may make Ortega's style of criticism "very twentieth century" for us.

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