

*The Unknown Donoso Cortés*¹

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When one attempts to place Donoso Cortés in the history of 19th century political thought, one must begin with an apology and many reservations. Here one is dealing with a man whose name is hardly recognized outside of Spain, and evokes political misunderstandings even in that country, because it has become largely a party symbol. In a sense, Donoso was a convert, at least insofar as he began as a liberal teacher of constitutional law and ended as the theoretical herald of conservative dictatorship, which with great prophetic gestures he proclaimed to a liberal century. All the antipathies that are tied to the word dictatorship and that make even the most objective observer suspicious of dictatorship had to coalesce against Donoso Cortés. The Latin maxim "*rumor dictatoris injucundus bonis*" [rumor of dictatorship is unpleasant to the virtuous] can be rightly applied to Donoso and to anyone who attempts to treat him impartially.

I would like to speak in complete impartiality about this remarkable man, to the extent that it is possible within the bounds of a short discussion and is allowable by someone who is not a Spaniard. Thus, no attempt will be made to deal with his political theories and opinions in their entirety, but only to explain his failure. Obviously, it would be easy simply to assert that Donoso had no noteworthy or lasting effect, that today he remains unknown to a broader European public and should be forgotten. This would not only be convenient and simple, it would also be foolish and unjust to leave such an important thinker in the oblivion into which he has fallen.

Actually, the neglect of Donoso is a strange and in no way a simple

1. "Der unbekannte Donoso Cortés," in *Donoso Cortés in gesamteuropäischer Interpretation* (Cologne: Greven Verlag, 1950), pp. 67-79. Translated by Mark Grzeskowiak.

phenomenon. During his lifetime, his political and literary success was extraordinarily great all over Europe, particularly between 1849 and 1853. Some of his speeches and writings fascinated the entire continent of Europe, and many witnesses attested to his resonance. In Protestant Germany, the proof of this can be found in comments by Frederick William Joseph Schelling, Leopold von Ranke, and Frederick William IV, all of whom considered the Spaniard to be unusual and great. To this general popularity can be added the many attempts to disseminate his writings. There have been translations in German, French, and Italian, and there have also been numerous attempts to collect selections from his writings and speeches in special volumes. If, despite all this, it is still impossible to presume knowledge of Donoso outside of Spain, then the various reasons to explain his lack of success and the absence of a broader effect can be thought of as interesting problems in and of themselves.

In the first place, reasons can be found in the literary and stylistic characteristics of Donoso's writings. Many of his arguments are couched in the linguistic and literary style of earlier, strongly rhetorical centuries, and oscillate between antitheses similar to those of Jacques Bénigne Bossuet or Joseph de Maistre, which were no longer in favor in an age of romanticism. The constant *fortissimo* of strong words — hideous, bloody, dreadful, frightful, and powerful — tends to wear thin; it becomes tiring and misses the point. Barbey d'Aureville immediately recognized and criticized this rhetorical weakness, and Eugenio d'Ors is correct when he speaks of the baroque procession of strong images. To this problem of style can be added the theological character of Donoso's main work, i.e., his essays on Catholicism, liberalism, and socialism,² which, unfortunately, are the most disseminated and translated of his writings. All of the magnificent and enthralling passages in this work are obscured by tedious theological expositions. Here Donoso appears as a sort of theological layman, which cannot be said of his speeches or letters, and still less of the man. He proffers comprehensive dogmatic arguments, and thereby places himself in a precarious position, because every professional theologian is his better and can put him in his place. In fact, this happened to the great diplomat in the worst of ways. A French theologian, Abbé Gaudel, who cannot even be compared to Donoso, was able to point out a number of dogmatic misinterpretations and errors in his writings. The theoretician of dictatorship and

2. [Ed.] See Juan Donoso Cortés, *Essay on Catholicism, Liberalism and Socialism Considered in their Fundamental Aspects*, including a sketch of his life and works by G. E. de Castro, tr. by Madeleine Vinton Goddard (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co, 1862).

decisionism, who had taken a stand against the ultimate and most extreme enemy — atheistic socialism — suddenly found himself in a thicket of unforeseeable controversies. These removed Donoso from his own camp and undermined the ground of the remarkable apodictic quality of his rhetorical style. The theology that he proposed as the only solid foundation for political theories contained more possible disputations and distinctions than he could admit to. The role of a theological layman proved to be incompatible with the role of the theoretician of political dictatorship.

Reasons for his unpopularity and failure can also be found in the content of his meditations. The misanthropy contained in some of his writings is too powerful and too deep to be romantically interesting or attractive, as was the case with some 19th century pessimists. Donoso's pessimism is sincere and frightful, and in the last years of his life appears to have been close to madness. The old Goya scarcely painted more hideous and gruesome scenes. For Donoso, man is a disgusting and laughable creature, completely destroyed by his own sins and prone to error. Indeed, if God had not redeemed man, the latter would have been more despicable than the reptile that one crushes underfoot. For Donoso, world history is a ship that reels forward, piloted by a crew of drunken sailors, who dance and howl until God decides to sink the ship so that silence can rule the sea once again. All of this is too horrible to make a 19th century author such as Donoso agreeable and popular. Moreover, it is presented as dogma and as system, rather than as an occasional romantic-pessimistic impression. The political views, which in his letters are presented with such unrestrained animation, appear in his essays in a systematic framework. He appears to his progenitors to be both a systematic politician and even a doctrinaire political thinker, a man who has already something unsympathetic about him before he steps forward with such destructive pessimism and misanthropy. In the 19th century, dictatorship would be accepted by the people only if it appeared in the name of optimism, just as war would be accepted only if fought against an enemy, and slavery would be combatted only in the name of freedom.

Bismarck's emotional reaction to Donoso, as it suddenly appears at one point in his *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, can be explained, I believe, by the singular impression that such a combination of Catholic theology and political system can arouse in a Protestant. After 1870 war, Bismarck was convinced that Austria and France might find common ground in their Catholicism, and thereby forge a closer alliance, and might also have drawn Bavaria into a coalition. Bismarck feared a Catholic system

of foreign policy. The possibility of such a system appears to have been a dominant theme in Queen Eugenia's political thought, and it led to fantastic plans, all of which were aimed at uniting all the Catholic powers: France, Austria, Bavaria, the Rhinelands, Spain, and Latin America.

The mere thought of such a powerful Catholic network of foreign powers must have been disturbing and worrisome to Bismarck. In my opinion, an important root of the German *Kulturkampf*³ lay in such fears, albeit one not yet well enough recognized. Bismarck knew of Donoso from the revolutionary years of 1848-49, and, as a conservative Prussian, he was acquainted with Donoso's friend in Berlin, the Russian envoy Peter von Meyendorff. Bismarck also knew of Queen Eugenia and the background of the plan to turn Mexico into a kingdom under a Hapsburg archduke. In particular, he knew how deeply these politicians were convinced that Protestant and Catholic Germany must form two separate states. In this case, Bismarck was rightly concerned about a dangerous enemy of German national unity, just as the idea of a unified Germany appeared to be dangerous and unnatural to Donoso and his friends — an unacceptable folly for Germany and Europe.

Donoso's theoretical views must have brought this Spanish Catholic dislike and mistrust from many quarters. The fact that, when it came to everyday politics, he was in no sense an apocalyptic dreamer or visionary, but rather an exceptionally clear and practical diplomat did not help him. It was only one more reason for his lack of success. If one compares Donoso's political theory with his diplomatic praxis, the result is an incompatible combination of eschatological prophet and ambitious professional diplomat. Eugenio d'Ors has coined an unsurpassed expression for this: *calido retorico, frio politico* [noble rhetoric; witless politics]. Faced with such a situation, theory and praxis must mutually disavow each other. The ideological theses constantly invited comparisons with known facts, and although they were established with an enormous momentum, they were easy to see through. Today, it is not difficult to recognize this, and all too easily to feel above it.

With respect to his battle against atheistic socialism, Donoso opposed Proudhon most of all. He considered this anarchistic socialist to be a devil and an emissary from hell. We can see now that Donoso's battle against

3. [Ed.] The *Kulturkampf* (literally, cultural struggle) was initiated when Bismarck passed laws in 1871-72 aimed at allowing the state to veto the clergy. These laws were in response to the Vatican Council or *Vaticanum* (1869-70), which raised the papacy to the status of an absolute monarchy.

Proudhon was fought on the wrong front, that the actual leader and arch-heretic of atheistic socialism was Karl Marx. Marx is the real cleric of economic thought, whereas, in retrospect, Proudhon appears to be more of a moralist, who stands fully in the Latin tradition, and whose intellectual energy stems from a moral indignation against the capitalist destruction of the family. The strongest and most intensive criticism of parliamentary democracy and liberalism can be traced to Proudhon. A direct line leads from him to Georges Sorel and to fascism, to the *stato corporativo* [corporate state], and finally to the Soviet system — the present enemy of today's parliamentary democracy. But, in the first years after 1848, Proudhon was at the center of all theoretical discussions regarding socialism, whereas for a long time Karl Marx was unknown in France apart from socialist circles. Today, we can see what Donoso could not see in his theological battle against Proudhon — that he was, in a way, polemicizing against an ally and perhaps even a kinsman, someone who had fought alongside him in his battle against the combination of liberalism and democracy. Donoso did so out of a moral severity that justifiably caused him to be called a “Roman.”

The inner contradiction of Donoso's own political situation was stronger and more noticeable than this easily explained false front. Donoso's great theoretical significance for the history of counterrevolutionary theory lies in his abandonment of legitimacy, and his decision to propose a theory of dictatorship in place of a political philosophy of restoration. His antitheses reached the stage of a final battle between atheism and Christianity, between an unbelieving socialism and the remnants of a Christian-European social order. It is at this point in his writings that Donoso becomes apocalyptic and eschatological. But, in concrete reality, he pursued (as “*frio politico*”) a political program that one could not imagine even in terms of the magnificent aspects of the Last Judgment. What Donoso actually did was nothing more than support the state coup of Napoleon III. Whatever one thinks of the domestic and foreign policy of this nephew of the great Napoleon, and his attempt to establish a Caesaristic and Bonapartist restoration, it is impossible to support it ideologically with apocalyptic ideas, even if one approves of the coup for particular reasons, and believes it to have been something positive. Here, the discrepancy between pathos and reality is far too great. In reality, Napoleon III's coup resulted from a typical political problem in 19th century Europe, namely, the relation between the executive and the legislature — the struggle between a strong executive and a weak parliament that could not govern, did not wish to

govern, or allow anyone else to govern. Napoleon III, Bismarck, and Mussolini each solved this question of an executive who is capable of governing in a different way, but their solutions did not require any eschatology. The true, omnipresent and necessary eschatology could be endangered only when combined with this type of political affairs.

The different reasons for Donoso's lack of success could easily give the impression that Donoso was his own worst enemy, and that the oblivion into which he fell is justified. This is not the case. Admittedly, a feigned apology would be pointless, and it is useless to respond to the disparagement and disdain of this important man with polemical overstatement. To a large degree, his literary style is now largely antiquated, his methods have been surpassed, and his arguments have been relativized and repudiated by historical developments. And yet, there remains enough brilliant insights and intuitions to consider him to be one of the greatest political thinkers of the 19th century. A man who foresaw in 1848 that the coming socialist revolution would not break out in London, but in St. Petersburg, and who already in 1848 also recognized that the decisive event of the next generation would be the combination of socialism and Slavic nationalism, is a political thinker of unusual ability, i.e., someone in whom the ideal motives of men could be recognized in their ultimate political consequences in a combined historical construct, and who deserves to be heard, even if he loses himself in theology and a style now antiquated. To this can be added the fact that he formulated all the decisive positions in the history of the critique of modern parliamentary democracy.

In particular, Donoso recognized the essence of the problematic of bourgeois discussion in that he defined the bourgeoisie as a "discussing class," and made great efforts to oppose a state based on discussion with one based on decision. That remains a great theoretical and political accomplishment. Above all, Donoso has the singular significance of having recognized the central concept of every great politics — the distinction between friend and enemy — in a time dominated by the relativistic disintegration of political concepts and antitheses, and by ideological deceit. He clung to this concept through all the disingenuous and deceptive blurring of political distinctions, and tried to determine the great historical distinction between friend and enemy in everyday politics. Donoso's views were shaped by his Spanish Catholic heritage and his distress with the evolving capitalist Europe. Moreover, his ideas were not affected by any personal lust for power or any cruelty, but rather reflected his true humanity, which made him such an endearing person.

This philosopher of radical dictatorship said that he did not have the toughness to be a dictator — a testament for, not against his theory, because it proves that Donoso's ideas of struggle and decision were not derived from the personal malice of a misanthrope, but rather from his observation of political matters and the actual political situation. On the personal level, Donoso was a liberal in the best sense; in fact, he was a better, more essential liberal than were some of his humanitarian-moralizing enemies. After all, the actual home of all liberal qualities is the individual-personal sphere, not ideas of politics and the state. The time has come to recognize this unusual and sympathetic man in his purity and greatness as an important figure in the European history of ideas, to cease to dwell on his deficiencies and the inadequacies of his presentations, and to recognize the exceptional phenomenon of a singular political intuition rooted in secular horizons.

