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# *The Origin of Modern Society*

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An understandable but perhaps ideologically inspired notion holds back some scholars from making a genuine analysis of the origin of modern society. The basic assumption in such cases is that an almost sudden, earthquake-like, initiative, a quasi-conspiracy, had led, at one point of the Middle Ages, to a kind of palace-revolution inside the “old order,” guarded by the church and the classical tradition. It is further assumed that soon afterwards a cascade of subversive thought overcame the cracking old order, provoking half-clandestine theories of man and state, from the Fraticelli to Et. La Boetie and the Reformers, until the “new order” was imposed and “modernity” began. The usual heroes (or villains) of the revolutionary change are Machiavelli, Hobbes and Descartes, three men who proposed, so the argument runs, a new anthropology and a new political science.

This thesis is attractive. My intention is not to question it, but merely to *complete* it, at its beginning and at its end, so as to widen the approach to the evolution of society and the state.

At the origin, there was the seven-century (from Constantine to the Roman-German emperors) unresolved problem: Who is head of the *christiana respublica*? Answers were provided by the popes and their theologians or by the emperor’s legal experts inclined to argue in favor of the Roman-imperial structure from Augustus to Justinian. The conflict in theory and practice between the spiritual and the temporal powers seemed never-ending. Opposition on this central issue was tolerated in the name of some balance of power, and it is sufficient if we take up the thread at the end of the eleventh century, with the Gregorian (Pope Gregory VII) reform. Indeed this

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pope's *Dictatus* intended to put an end to the quarrel after centuries of attempts on both sides to rule Christendom and to the ensuing anarchy. Significantly, the *Dictatus* contained such expressions as the Church being the *caput*, the *cardo*, the *fons*, the *fundamentum* and the *mater*: no doubt was left that the pope who imposed "Canossa" on the emperor reigned in the name of Christ, and that his strong successors for about 250 years (from Innocent III to Boniface VIII) would practice the same policy vis-à-vis the various kings of nations too. For example, St. Bernard, an authoritative figure standing in the way of both philosophical and political turmoil (against Abelard, weak popes, and the apostolic sects), spoke of a "united *regnum et sacerdotium*" and of the "populus christianus" being the body of Christ.

Populi meant nobility, not masses.

Gregory's reform was a tremendous architectural achievement, since the preceding centuries had seen the feudal principle penetrate into the administration of ecclesiastical matters and jurisdiction.<sup>1</sup> Yet, just as the *Dictatus* was a reaction to the previous mundane claims, it became inevitable that the post-Gregorian times would question the new Christian order: the place of secular power, the point of gravity of decision-making, the royal vs. ecclesiastical courts, eventually the role of the laity in a justly elaborated Christian order. It took more than two centuries for lay criticism to penetrate the existing feudal, imperial, and ecclesiastical structure, during which all the protagonists took temporary advantage of the adversary's weaknesses. The conflict was *not* at the origin between nobility and democracy; the latter term was unknown as a political factor: the "laity" was *not* the equivalent of our modern masses or electorate; it denoted exclusively the princes and the lords as opposed to emperor and king. As late as 1216, the expression *in nomine populi* meant the patriciate and the senate. Even in Luther's reformation the Scriptures were emphasized less as a return to pristine religious purity than as a counterweight to the excessive power of ecclesiastical regulations judged to have been super-added by Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> Before the end of the eleventh century central, royal or imperial, authority yielded in practice to marauding feudal lords, hardly distinguishable from highway bandits. The church, too, suffered from these conditions; local bishops did not behave much better. Concubinage and simony were general ills. The Gregorian reform meant to remedy both clerical and secular abuses, and a little later the crusades were to assign a new objective to the turbulent feudal energy. The departing lords left their property under the administration of the clergy.

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Thus we must be careful not to give medieval terminology modern meanings, although we should also appreciate the dividing line between the two epochs, medieval and ours. In this light, the achievement of Marsilius of Padua becomes very clear, although Alan Gewirth, Marsilius's American commentator, seems too impatient when he insists that the *Defensor Pacis*, the Paduan's lifework, is a kind of "preamble" to the Preamble of the American constitution. Gewirth is nearer the true meaning of the *Defensor* when he finds in it a counter-thrust to excessive spiritual power, not, however, in favor of an anachronistic democracy, but in favor of the temporal; in the context of the times, this was the imperial power. As E. Ruffini-Avondo writes, "Marsilius solves decisively the central question of the Middle Ages: the duality of power. . . . Marsilius subordinates church to state, and abolishes the difference between layman and clergy."<sup>2</sup> Felice Battaglia goes one step further, crediting him with initiating the subsequent evolution: "Marsilius anticipated the future, and it is no exaggeration to say that the great protestant reformation begins with him."<sup>3</sup>

*Marsilius  
subordinated  
church to civil  
power.*

What is essential in Marsilius's oeuvre? It is that civil society cannot function under a double government, as it were; it needs one authority above it, namely not one claiming divine guidance but issuing from human-made legislation. Logic leads then to the further thesis that the church too (and members of the clergy, the pope included) is subject to civil government as an integral part of the state. The duality of power, taught by Christ, is liquidated; the road is open to the analysis of the proper function of the state, rid of ecclesiastical interference.

The full answer to Gregory VII was given by Machiavelli. The author of the *Prince* and the *Discorsi* was not a disciple of Marsilius, although they seem like collaborators in retrospect. For one thing, the Florentine did not share the Paduan's naive belief that civil government can function without religion occupying a very important place. He would not have agreed with Jefferson either about the "wall of separation" between state and church. What mattered for Machiavelli was not religious truth but that men (citizens) act under the impact of religious conviction. Two things follow: that individual ambition should be controlled by laws, and that laws must possess a divine sanction. In sum, where there is religion the state is

<sup>2</sup> Georges de Lagarde, *La naissance de l'esprit laïque*, vol. III, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

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able to protect itself through armed might; it is a viable state. Without religion, there is no civic and military discipline (*Discorsi*, Bk. I, ch. 12).

*Machiavelli set the stage for civil religion.* For Machiavelli, then, the Christian state is a contradiction, yet the state needs religion in order to function. After Machiavelli, almost every politologue had recourse to a self-constructed religion whose outstanding features were, however, borrowed from Christianity, except precisely the duality of transcendence and immanence. This was true of the seventeenth-century so-called “Libertines” (materialists of Lucretian persuasion), of the eighteenth-century “Utopians,” and of Saint-Simon, Comte, Bentham and Marx. Some even published “catechisms” or equivalent manifestoes. The Humanist Manifestoes in America adopted a similar line.

We should not forget that the concept of the state was relentlessly changing—away from the Gregorian ideal and toward a lay state with its civil religion. The underlying anthropology indicated a citizenry free in its economic transactions, but ideologically controlled by some kind of mundane catechism. Again Machiavelli: We must rid the community (*civitas*, principality, *polis*) of the Christian norms which paralyze those aspiring to a *gloria mundana*, a reputation for great deeds, and formulate the imperatives of an empirical government in view of the need to preserve power.

*Moral authority replaced by social contract.* On the essential issue there is agreement: man is not primarily a battlefield of good and evil, with divine grace and natural law showing the way out of the fundamental predicament. Nor is political society inscribed in man’s moral and intellectual nature, as Aristotle and St. Thomas taught. Man is a creature of *desires* (today we speak of “drives” or “pulsions”), and since these desires are the products of social and economic motives, good government is situated at the crossroads of individual desires. The focus of politics shifts from moral authority to the social contract.

The anthropology on which the new political society was to rest is present in Hobbes, Descartes, and Spinoza. The overall picture is the following: Man is a materially composite being (the soul too is only matter), and the only concern of the state is the exterior man, the one whose desires determine his actions, since even God’s kingdom will be terrestrial (Hobbes). The issue then is how to regulate, coordinate the dynamics of desires, how to eliminate their confrontational character. Descartes’s treatise on the *Passions of the Soul* shows the way: since the passions perturb reason, emotions must be

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separated from thought, although, Descartes adds, when the passions are tamed, some of their excesses may be tolerated.

This is Spinoza's position too. Existence (*vis existendi*) in the form of desire is the purest power manifested in Nature, whether in the individual or in the state. These desires ceaselessly clash.<sup>4</sup> Their violence creates insecurity ("*homo homini lupus*" for Hobbes) which can diminish in two ways: by the curbing of passions which submit to reason—this being the more arduous and uncertain way, best available to the philosophic mind; and by the endowment of the state with sufficient authority—this being for the masses of men. It is a sign of the times that it does not occur to Hobbes and Spinoza to recommend religion as a way of disciplining the passions (we shall see how Mandeville treated this question), since they see in religion one of the strongest, because irrational and objectless, passions. The quenching of passions is supposed to bring about the eclipse of religion too, which then retreats to the private sphere. On the other hand, the submission of individual passions to the authority of the state is also risky because, facing the individual's drives and aggressiveness, the state too has drives and ambitions. This in itself explains why government should be *one*, not shared by state and church, each with its ambition.<sup>5</sup>

*Transcendent religion, equated with passions, confined to private sphere.*

The political solution for both Hobbes and Spinoza lies in the neutralization of passions: their rational transformation with the help not so much of curbs put on Nature's inclinations (which would be a return to the Decalogue) as through the opening up of a *private sphere* for the citizens' transactions: buying, selling, contracts, free choice of residence, overseas trade, the education of children. This is the terrain where laws promulgated by the state and the citizens' free activities meet, without any major confrontations. But let us be careful: both philosophers insist on the absolute character of

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<sup>4</sup> The new, Copernican cosmology strongly influenced contemporary thought. In the place of an orderly cosmos, that of Aristotle and Ptolemy, the new cosmos knew only astral objects filling the silent universe ("the stony silence of infinite space frightens me," wrote Pascal, Spinoza's contemporary) where unaccounted-for clashes occurred and anarchy reigned, at least before Newton proposed his gravitational hypothesis.

<sup>5</sup> The argument, however, cuts both ways, and our own times have illustrated both. It seems to be good logic to argue for a single authority in the state; yet if the state is empowered also with moral guidance, it tends to become a theocracy and a totalitarian structure. This would argue for two authorities: in the western tradition, state and church.

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state power with regard to the law (the sovereign is “God’s prophet,” writes Hobbes), and while the state must respect the “human essence” in the citizen (Spinoza), it has an absolute freedom of action vis-à-vis other states (Spinoza). No *christiana respublica* here!

These are echoes of Marsilius, but increasingly radicalized in the direction of absolutism. The Hobbesian and Spinozist state has no track with virtue: first, because the sovereign is the only legislator (Hobbes), second, because its only task is the elimination of discord through unquestionably valid rules (Spinoza). To demand a moral stance of the state is to deny its autonomy; after all, just as the universe is the only substance in Spinoza’s philosophy, so are the state and civil society sovereign in politics.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of the seventeenth century, the Marsilian program stood completed. This program had not been intended to start a revolution, nor was it in any sense conspiratorial. It responded to two challenges. One was the “imperial” challenge to the papacy, the rejection of spiritual supremacy over the temporal power, and at any rate of the dual nature of authority. The imperial legists and juridical experts kept referring to Rome where no clergy had interfered with the political power, and where Caesar, when all is said, did not abuse power more than his predecessors, the Senate. The other challenge was contemporary to the thinkers we have mentioned. All three men were witnesses to the stupendous growth of trade, overseas ventures, voyages of discovery, bold merchants, powerful bankers, the development of towns, markets, industry such as textile, shipbuilding, and mining. It comes as no surprise that they understood the causes and factors motivating civil society and appreciated the latter’s aspiration to become equal with the so-far dominant institutions, state and church. They were not transitional figures like the humanists Petrarca, Erasmus, and Thomas More, nor were they radical critics like Ulrich von Hutten, Calvin or the freethinking Libertines. They were philosophers searching for the preservation of civil peace (*defensor pacis*) and the common good: concretely, the restoration of the (Roman imperial) Golden Age un-

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<sup>6</sup> Let us ask ourselves why Spinoza’s chief philosophical work was titled *Ethics*. The reason seems to be, as indicated in another work of his, *Treatise on Political Authority*, that for Spinoza ethics means those of the state which are thus independent from religious morality. The non-dual nature of Being is again and again emphasized.

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der the Antonines—a new social pact where public and private would coexist and the “Establishment” would admit the new worldview which was knocking at the gates.

Let us risk advancing the opinion that the post-Marsilian turmoil as far as theory was concerned was caused by philosophical rather than by political minds.<sup>7</sup> The philosophers—Hobbes, Gassendi, Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche—wished to place the political issue on firm new epistemological foundations with speculative statements as the pedestal and with metaphysical underpinnings. Spinoza derived political authority from pantheism (“*Deus sive Natura*”); and, although through a different itinerary, Hobbes lifted his monarch to the rank of a “*Deus mortalis*.” (Machiavelli, accustomed to the vision of clashing city-states, at least did not endow his Prince with superhuman, metaphysical powers.) In short, by the end of the seventeenth century, the status of civil societies contained elements of a future total(itarian) power. The Cartesian calculus reduced man and state to a mechanism; Hobbes and Spinoza suggested the latter’s inexorable determinism. “Ideal government” was soon a *conditio sine qua non* of political discourse.

As we have found, the issue underlying modern society was the disciplining of passions so that rational action may follow. This was supposed to be brought about, among other things, by curbing the power and influence of religion. The latter came to be considered as an eminently irrational impulse, fed by fear and superstition. Since thus Christianity was shown (citing the religious wars, persecutions, intolerance) to exacerbate the passions and to stand in the way of an active, organized, and purposeful civil society, the solution had to be the creation of a public area from which religion would be excluded as a public manifestation. Religion would be *privatized*, its public role taken over by economic transactions. Trade and the contracts that regulate it would be guaranteed by reason and its agency, the monarch. He would also be the guarantor of the minimum religion that is both official and public. The ensuing deistic climate was a philosophical way of expressing public opinion;

*Religion privatized; its public role replaced by the economic impulse.*

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the term “political” increasingly meant “seeker of compromise” between antagonistic positions, for example in religious wars. “Philosopher” meant, on the other hand, a follower of Democritus and Epicurus—no longer of Aristotle, the philosopher for the Arabs and late-medieval Christians. By the eighteenth century the label came to denote a *deist*, an enlightened free-thinker, a radical critic of institutions.

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concretely, it meant the acknowledgment of Christianity's failure to discipline the passions through the instrumentality of the distinction of good and evil.

Here Mandeville emerged on the stage, one of the most influential, and hitherto neglected, thinkers. The problem that preoccupied his bolder contemporaries was to demonstrate that what the Decalogue and the teaching of Christ call evil always attracts human beings, in spite of the divine and ecclesiastical sanctions. But if one can prove that evil is at least *socially useful*, a great step would be made toward enlisting it among the tolerable vices. When Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* was published (1714), publicity for it ran in this way: "Man's faults . . . may be profitable for civil society, so that these faults may take the place of virtues." And the publisher added: "*Lux e tenebris.*"

*Usefulness  
displaced  
moral conduct  
as basis of  
social  
harmony.*

Indeed, an important obstacle was cleared for the new, no longer Christian, ethics and for the legitimation of civil—that is, modern—society. Moral conduct on the Socratic and Christian pattern was considered still valid but was placed on an unattainable, ideal level; usefulness ("the greatest amount of good for the largest number of people"—Bentham) became acknowledged as a source of moral conduct, a more immediate link with the good than are sacraments, repentance, and preachings. And what were the useful actions if not the transactions sacralized by civil society, where wages for the needy are extracted from the greed of the rich, and the daily bread for the workman from the impertinent display of the wealthy man's luxury? Mandeville's advice was to condemn vices but with the necessary prudence because, after all, they form a good part of society's livelihood. The vices are spelled out: ambition, avarice, indolence, prodigality, greed, impudence, ostentatious luxury. In practice, a rich man's mistress who spends his money on futilities may be a "morally" reprehensible person, but her expenditures contribute to public wealth; they are, if not virtuous, certainly useful. And usefulness was enthroned as the new social norm.

From Marsilius to Mandeville (four centuries ) Western man elaborated new frameworks for his norms of conduct and concepts of good and evil. At the focus there stood the Christian concept of morals, found to be wanting not *in se* but because it had proved unenforceable. At first, it was thought that, as the Reformation and its simplified guidance trimmed the excesses of the Roman church

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(sacraments, veneration of saints, confession, indulgences, cult of Mary), it would restore a primitive salutary conduct, a kind of ancestral honesty, for example, among Puritans, Quakers, and others. But each successive reform—of the just-reformed church—demonstrated painfully the emergence of a new church with its own abuses, ecclesiastical structure, and hierarchy. After a while, secularization became the ultimate radical solution. It meant the lifting of morally neutral behavior—lay morality as practiced not under the pressure of divine sanction but of the mechanism of the market and natural sympathy—to the level of the accepted norm. Adam Smith was Mandeville’s logical successor.

We said before that these developments are in no sense due to ideological in-fighting, conspiracies by the Illuminati, the scheming of Freemasons. Such phenomena were present, but their importance was marginal. The central evolution was the work of men steeped in Epicurean-Lucretian materialism, which found expression through a new concept of man. (Lucretius, a philosophical best-seller at the Renaissance, remained very influential.) For Mandeville, physiology became the explanatory principle of the passions,<sup>8</sup> and in the ceaseless quest of Spinoza and Hobbes the main obstacle to social peace was also the configuration of material particles.

*Changing worldview, not conspiracies, led to secularization.*

Yet, all these men took the unwarranted leap toward the elaboration of a rational ethics over one dominated by passions. The enterprise led them to the creation of a neutral public area, evolving into a full-fledged civil society. Hobbes’s and Mandeville’s conclusions are practically identical: a public religion and an area of concrete transactions. The first is a matter of official appearances, a necessary luxury—a feature underlined by the tolerance of a splendid and immoral royal court; the second is a place for enterprises, mostly exchanges of property and merchandise. This demanded civic space and therein a liberal morality, fashioned by the *modus operandi* of economic movements: property value, risk of investment, and above all the dictates of trade.

It is not hard to recognize the general lines of our own civil society, and its moral portrait.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Mandeville, the phases of society’s evolution are: fear of beasts, fear of the human enemy, and the use of writing in order to proclaim the law. But the “first men” did not speak, they communicated by sign-language.