

Frenchmen in America
France-America: crossover views on freedoms

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FRENCH INSTITUTE - SAINT-LOUIS CENTRE
Rome
Wednesday, May 30, 2018

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First of all, I would like to thank the Institut français, Centre Saint-Louis, and the Acton Institute for their welcome and for inviting me to present this reading in Rome. Thank you for allowing us to reflect on these themes of intellectual relations between France and America, which make it possible to evoke thinkers, one of whom, Frederic Bastiat, is buried a few metres from here. When Jacques Maritain founded the Centre Saint-Louis in 1945, when he was French ambassador to the Holy See, it was to conduct intellectual exchanges that the moral and ethical foundations of society were laid. Tonight we are pursuing this idea of the philosopher friend of Paul VI. He had this idea after spending several years at the American Academy during the Second World War. This war was the result of the lies of socialist and atheist ideologies, National Socialism and Communism, which had no consideration for human freedoms and fundamental rights. We are here tonight to continue Jacques Maritain's project to carry the burning torch of freedom through an alliance of French and American Catholic intellectuals whose objective is to foster a common pursuit of man's freedom and development in accordance with God's divine order.

Before I begin, let me tell you a few words about my own travels to the United States when I was a student, because it was there that I discovered two great French intellectuals from two different periods. I would like to mention this evening, in my response to the intervention of Dr. Gregg¹, Alexis de Tocqueville, who lived only 54 years, between 1805 and 1859, and René Girard, who died recently, in 2015, at the age of 92. It was while browsing the history shelves of a Harvard bookstore that I first discovered Tocqueville. Then it was while travelling to San Francisco that I learned about the works of René Girard, who was a professor at Stanford, and whom I later met in Paris. But let's start by talking about the influence of Alexis de Tocqueville.

Tocqueville and the newness of democracy

Until the 18th century, people travelled to America to observe the world before. It was the land of the good savage and the original man. Europeans travelled to America to trace back to the roots of humanity. This is the meaning of Father Prévost's book, *Manon Lescaut*, and the

¹ Dr. Samuel Gregg, Director of Studies at the Acton Institute, made the first intervention of the evening.

journey made by Chateaubriand to America, an uncle from Tocqueville. From Tocqueville's journey to America and his observations, things are reversed: we go to the United States to understand the future and to see in the New World what Europe will experience next. It is here that Tocqueville understands the importance of democracy as a social system and as an inescapable political movement from which Europe cannot escape. He understands that the road of freedom leads to equality, but that the road of equality leads to servitude. Freedom is based on respect for natural law, which is used to establish positive law, as defined in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*: "It is the pleasure of being able to speak, act, breathe without constraint, under the sole government of God and the laws². "Tocqueville perceives, with human freedom, the opportunities brought by democracy, but also its potential dangers: that of a materialism that makes lose all the meaning of an intellectual life and the establishment of a new despotism, stronger than the previous one, in which man voluntarily submits himself to the tyrant. As Tocqueville writes in *Democracy in America* "I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who turn restlessly upon themselves to procure small and vulgar pleasures for which they fill their souls³. "The much desired democracy can therefore lead to a new form of dictatorship, and to intellectual and moral regression. He writes as follows: "Democracy without enlightenment and freedom could bring the human race back to barbarism⁴. "While many thinkers believe that Christianity is a brake on freedom and democracy, Tocqueville perceives from the outset that the Christian faith is the only chance of democracy's survival. It is Christianity, with our God-given freedom, that has brought equality and democracy to human society. And it is the Christian faith alone which, by giving a transcendental and spiritual opening to man, can prevent him from sinking into the errors of democratic materialism. Tocqueville thus thinks, in *Democracy in America*: "I doubt that man can ever support both complete religious independence and complete political freedom: and I am inclined to think that, if he does not have faith, he must serve, and, if he is free, that he must believe. What to do with a people who are masters of themselves if they are not subject to God?⁵" This analysis deserves to be meditated and deepened, because many French people are still convinced that the Christian faith is a problem and that secularism is the solution to this problem. We will come back to this in conclusion.

Frédéric Bastiat: praise of harmony

The other essential French author I would like to mention this evening is Frédéric Bastiat. It has almost disappeared from textbooks and economic analysis. This is understandable from an author who has never ceased to fight against the State's monopoly in education and to denounce the collusion between public schools and socialism. What Bastiat has brought is an understanding of the real mechanisms of the economy. As a businessman, politician and writer, he was able to combine these three personal experiences to produce a powerful and accessible work on what political economy really is. He demonstrated the fundamental role of private property, a natural right that is at the root of the development of societies. He exposed the falsity

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancient Regime and the Revolution*, III, 3.

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Chapter on the New Despotism.

⁴ *Ibid*, 1 DA, II, 5.

⁵ *Ibid*, 2 DA, I, 4.

of gratuitousness, the myth of the impartiality of the state, the dangers of *crony capitalism*. He is the thinker of harmony and spontaneous order that allows a society to regulate itself and develop. We are here at the origins of Friedrich Hayek's "catallaxis". Largely unknown in France, it was nevertheless an author who influenced Cardinal Joachim Pecci, the future Leo XIII, at the end of the 19th century. Writing while he was a cardinal, the future Leo XIII quoted him in one of his pastoral letters: "A famous French economist[Frederic Bastiat] described as a painting the multiple benefits that man finds in society and it is a wonder worth admiring⁷". The continuation of this pastoral letter of Cardinal Pecci shows a full intellectual communion between the thinking of the Prelate and that of the economist. In *Rerum novarum* (1891), the pages that Leo XIII devotes to private property are very close to the ideas developed by Frederic Bastiat. It would be essential to be able to search Pope Pecci's archives to establish how Bastiat influenced *Rerum novarum*'s thinking, which would bring the encyclical back to its true liberal⁸ sources.

Bastiat has long lived outside the Church, while questioning the meaning of God and faith. He returned to Christ at the end of his life, acknowledging that there was everything he had sought throughout his writings. Like Tocqueville, Bastiat reminds us that God cannot be dissociated from human freedom: "[...] Freedom, which is an act of faith in God and his work⁹". "A work of God that is at the origin of his main writing *Economic Harmonies*, in which Bastiat writes: "There is a dominant thought in this book; it hovers over all its pages, it invigorates all its lines. This thought is the one that opens the Christian symbol: I believe in God.¹⁰ »

This may be the essential distinction between contemporary French and American thought. The French are still convinced today that faith is an obstacle to freedom and that a free man is a man without God. In the United States, it is normal for faith and freedom to go hand in hand. This thought, the natural relationship between a free life and a life turned towards God, which the French perceive as typically American, is on the contrary very French, since it was present since the beginning of the 19th century in Tocqueville and Bastiat in particular. It was another Frenchman who, from the United States, demonstrated the unbreakable link between Christian faith and freedom: René Girard. We will now turn to his work and his contribution to America.

René Girard, at the roots of Christian anthropology

In the 20th century, the United States became the refuge of non-communist French people who wanted to be able to study without any problems and escape the pressure of the state. The French university has been completely gangrened by atheist and communist intellectuals, whether Stalinist, Trotskyist or Maoist. This is still the case today. As a young student, René

⁶ Catalonia: the process by which a natural order is born from an apparent disorder of the many exchanges between people, producing a complex system as in the case of the market economy.

⁷ Mgr Joachim Pecci, *L'Église et la civilisation*, Pastoral letters addressed in 1877 and 1878 to the diocesans of Perugia, in *Le Pape Léon XIII*, p. 44, 1878.

⁸ Many questions remain, including how Bishop Pecci learned about Frédéric Bastiat's texts. Has he read the *Journal of Economists*? Did he know him during Bastiat's stay in Rome? Or during Pecci's trip to France? All these are essential questions to understand the intellectual sources of the Church's social doctrine.

⁹ Frédéric Bastiat, IV, p. 393.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, VI, p. 588.

Girard went to the United States for a few months to study. He stayed there all his life, becoming a teacher at Stanford, where he died. This explains its high profile in the United States and its low media presence in France. René Girard is a prophet who has understood the essence of Christianity and what distinguishes this faith from the religions of other continents. He revealed the fundamental role of human sacrifice in the construction of peoples, the place of myth in history, the central role of the scapegoat and the revolution brought by Christ and Christianity in the transformation of human civilization. With Christ, the person rises up against the crowd and wins, in a counter-cultural battle, when everyone thought he had been defeated. This emergence of the person as the centrality of history is at the origin of the Christian revolution, which adds to this Greek philosophy and Roman law in its vision of man based on faith. It is the anthropological demonstration of the link between freedom and faith. His reflection on the scapegoat and sacrifice also makes it possible to replace socialism in its rightful place as an archaic religion, without supernatural meaning, but materialistic. For him, atheistic materialist socialism lives on human sacrifice, that is, the tragic destruction of human lives, as is the case with the genocide of non-compliant citizens, which is not an accident of history, but rather a necessity to achieve its own political or economic objectives. The welfare state, in which we have lived in France since 1945, is based on the principle of human sacrifice. Its anthropological foundations are based on the idea that man belongs to the State, which therefore has the legitimacy to take the desired part of his salary from him. In exchange, he feeds him by giving him a small part of the amount collected. The welfare state is contrary to the very nature of man because it denies his freedom and responsibility. It is based on lies, theft and coercion, which reach new heights in the monopolies of education and social insurance.

For the Church: accepting freedom

As early as the 1840s, Tocqueville was convinced that the United States could be the future of Catholicism. While the Catholic faith is still in a very small minority, he thinks that Protestants will convert there and that the former Anglican colonies will become a flagship country of Catholicism: "If Catholicism finally managed to escape the political hatreds it has created, I have no doubt that this same spirit of the century, which seems so contrary to it, would not suddenly become very favourable to it, and that it would suddenly make great achievements"¹¹. "A prediction that for a long time seemed wrong, but which is now confirmed by the evolution of Catholicism in the United States. It is the main church in the country, because of its unity, and leading politicians and intellectuals are now Romans. The Church's abandonment of its socialist mental structure as a basis for reflection on its social doctrine, for a mental structure more in line with freedoms, the free market, Catalonia, would allow it to win the hearts of the middle classes, often rejected by the Third World accents of its clergy. This would be a return to the very essence of Bishop Pecci's first intuitions.

¹¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, Volume 2, Chapter VI, "Du progrès du catholicisme aux États-Unis. »

For France and the United States: ending political religion

France and the United States join forces in their so-called political religion: secularism on the one hand, Americanism on the other. Both represent identical dangers since both replace divine hope with political hope. This is what a famous French politician, a socialist radical and father of the Republic and the state school, Ferdinand Buisson¹², called "the secular faith". The French¹³ Republic has sought to replace the Christian faith by becoming a new religion. This is the meaning of secularism "à la française" that many foreigners find difficult to understand. It is materialistic and progressive Anglicanism or Josephism, as the Emperor of Austria Joseph II (1765-1790) tried to do with his drastic policies of enlightened state. The President of the Republic plays the role of a pontiff of the new religion and orders the republican liturgy. This idea born of the French Revolution, and later fought by Tocqueville and Bastiat, is supported by the war that is being waged in order to spread its values and ideas and convert the world into it. It is the great victory of idealism led by the wars of the French Revolution and those of Napoleon¹. This is reflected in the colonization project defended by Jules Ferry and Ferdinand Buisson, with for them the ardent need for the higher races to civilize what they call the lower¹⁴ races.

The same idea is carried in Americanism; this desire to be the hyperpower¹⁵ that brings democracy to the whole world. Oscillating between isolationism and interventionism, the United States opted for the latter based on President Wilson and his fourteen points from the First World War, developed for peace negotiations. This claim to spread democracy and to believe other peoples and countries similar to ours leads to an endless and increasingly violent war. This is the rise to extremes demonstrated by René Girard, taking up the theses of Carl von Clausewitz¹⁶, this Prussian general and theorist of modern warfare.

The expedition of the United States to Afghanistan (2001) on the one hand and Iraq (2003) on the other showed the limits of idealism that seeks to convert others by force and weapons. It is more through cultural power (as Tocqueville says), that Joseph Nye has taken up under the concept of *soft power*¹⁷, that a state imposes its strength and power. It is a power that is based on freedom and free exchange. Hence the Liberals' fierce opposition to colonization¹⁸, long before the great colonization movement of the 1880s began. Beyond the city, the Liberals' thinking also includes the world. *Opus justitiae pax*, peace is the work of justice¹⁹, as Isaiah's book

¹² French republican politician (1841-1932) who worked for the nationalization of the school and for the spread of secularism in France.

¹³ A distinction must be made between the republic as a political regime and the republic as a political theology. The confusion between the two served to establish a secularism hostile to Catholicism. Through his Rally policy, Leo XIII sought to dissociate the two to stifle secularism from the republican faith. See *In the midst of solicitude* (1892). Leo XIII wanted Catholics to take over the political field of the new regime in order to prevent the development of the republic as a political theology.

¹⁴ Jules Ferry, Speech to the House on July 28, 1885.

¹⁵ The expression is from Hubert Védrine, former French Minister of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁶ René Girard, *Completing Clausewitz*, 2007.

¹⁷ Joseph Nye, *The future of power*, 2011.

¹⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Letters on Algeria*, 1837. Frédéric Bastiat, Speech to the Chamber of Deputies.

¹⁹ Isaiah 32:17, the motto of Pope Pius XII.

says and recalls the motto of Pope Pius XII. This justice is based on respect for private property and natural rights, which includes the right of peoples to self-determination and not to the forced imposition of an external regime. In the concert of nations today and in a world peace that is still fragile, the analysis of the Liberals, from Tocqueville, Bastiat and Girard, is to explain that the peace of the city, the *polis*, is the condition for peace on earth, the *orbit*.