

The Voice of Conservatism: Metternich of Austria

In a time when Ludwig van Beethoven composed his Ninth Symphony, when William Wordsworth wrote beautiful poems about nature, and when Delacroix painted canvases with vivid color, a prince by the name of Klemens von Metternich was establishing a political doctrine known as “conservatism.” One must understand that the beginnings of conservatism are not very similar to “conservatism” as we know it today. This conservatism advocated a strong-handed government upon human rights, hindering equality, and controlling the economy. Begun by Edmund Burke in the 1790’s, Metternich was able to put conservatism into action. He was the foreign minister of the Austrian Empire and headed the Congress of Vienna when it met from September 1814, to June 1815. After Napoleon Bonaparte’s defeat, those he attacked desired to reestablish order in Europe. Great Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia met in Vienna, Austria to try and prevent any further revolutions from occurring (Kissinger). Revolutions were awful for their people, and social and political order needed to be reestablished. Metternich was a strong-willed and persuasive leader and convinced the attending leaders that returning to the “Old Regimes” of monarchy and strong central government would be the best route. This stance made him a reactionary, “one who wishes to return to previous conditions” (Diem). One returned, he advocated a form of conservatism he hoped would thwart any revolution in Europe. However, his efforts were no match for the enlightenment and the ideologies of liberalism and nationalism.

We see in his memoirs that Metternich was in favor of a form of empire. For governments to remain free, Metternich said, “they must join their ranks and take their stand on a line of correct, unambiguous, and frankly announced principles” (Metternich, Memoirs). His

idea of empire might be more related to something we would refer to today as a confederation, a loosely formed conglomeration of countries that could work together to depose revolution.. So, in 1815, Great Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria formed the Concert of Europe to do just that.

Metternich also felt that the old regimes of monarchs and aristocrats were ordained by God and had a duty to rule the people according to strict laws. His main principle in the Congress of Vienna was legitimacy. Legitimacy simply means that these monarchs were the only legitimate rulers, and the illegitimacy of the French Revolution should not be tolerated. Thus, following the Congress of Vienna, monarchs once exiled or imprisoned were reinstated in France, Italy, Holland, and Spain (Diem).

One of his most restricting precepts to gain the desired political autonomy was complete censorship of the press. He contended that freedom of the press could destroy governments and hinder social order. It did this by riling up the commoners, telling “lies” about the government, thus often encouraging revolt. Ordinary commoners must not challenge the status quo with their ideas.

The status quo was also maintained another way. Metternich believed that it was the duty of every country to come together to stop a revolution wherever and whenever it might strike. This idea was known as “intervention.” Austria, Russia, Prussia, and France used their confederation to execute this military intervention. After intervention, conservative monarchs were placed in those countries. Together, the social order in Europe seemed to be moving more toward Metternich and his conservatism. However, the ideologies of the French Revolution and Industrial Revolution would soon challenge them both.

One of the main opponents of conservatism was, of course, liberalism. The antithesis of conservatism, liberalism wished to free individuals from the bonds of government as much as

possible. Civil liberties were protected, such as the liberty of the press, one which Metternich felt was dangerous for the state. Mercantilism would be replaced by *laissez-faire*, the invisible hand of supply and demand that could control the economy without government intervention.

Derived once again from the French Revolution, nationalism was the second ideology that hindered Metternich and his efforts. Nationalism brought many of those people with common traditions and institutions to the idea that they should have certain autonomy. It was quite the opposition to Metternich's longing for confederations and multinational empires. Nations such as the Magyars and other Germanic peoples eventually fell from the Austrian Empire, forming their own nation-states. It would seem that by the mid-1800's Metternich and conservatism would not survive. The revolutions that ensued would give heed to that notion.

The revolution in 1830 in Paris, France was the result of a ruler who gave too much credence to Metternich's reactionary policy. As an absolutist monarch, Charles X (r.1824-1830), oppressed a nation that would not tolerate such, and soon revolted. Charles X was driven out and more liberal actions were being enacted, such as fewer restrictions upon suffrage. In 1848, another revolution in France destroyed any form of conservatism that may have still survived, particularly by allowing all male suffrage. In Metternich's Austrian Empire, in the same year, revolution struck, mainly because of bad economic conditions but also because of rising nationalist thought. Metternich was forced to flee the country with his family. Although he returned three years later, conservatism was irreparably damaged, and Metternich never retook office. He died in Vienna in 1858.

Metternich's scope in Europe during 1814-1848 was so apparent that historians often refer to this period as "The Age of Metternich" (May). He was known by many in Europe at this time as "the coachman of Europe" because of the influence he had upon their governments. He

was a leader that held to immutability and was realistic enough to see his upcoming destruction. However, his voice of conservatism would not be silenced, and the result was a true battle of ideologies that strengthened the beliefs we hold true today.

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