

# Excerpt from Prince Clemens von Metternich's Political Creed (1820)

## Abstract

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In the following excerpt from his political creed, [Prince Clemens von Metternich](#) expands upon the argument made in [his letter to Friedrich Gentz](#) of June 17, 1819. Above all, Metternich blamed middle-class intellectuals for revolutionary upheaval, believing that the common people were more willing to accept autocratic rule. This text was taken from a posthumous collection of Metternich's political writings. The edition was published by his son. Both Metternich's political texts and his memoirs were written in French.

## Source

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Do other remedies against this evil [*Übel*] exist and what might they be?

We consider it a fundamental truth that for every evil there is a remedy and that knowledge of the true nature of the one must lead to the discovery of the other. In any case, there are few men who pause to examine in depth the evil which they are proposing to combat. There is hardly anyone who is not subject to the influence of passions or constrained by prejudices and there are many whom evil leads astray in an even more dangerous way because of its flattering and often brilliant exterior. We hear talk of conforming to a system; this idea, constantly false but tireless, audacious, unstoppable, satisfies those men whom it imbues (since they inhabit and govern a world which they themselves have created), but it is all the more dangerous for those who live in the real world, so different from that created by conformity to a system.

There is another class of men who can conceive only of the external form of an evil, who confuse its incidental manifestations with the fundamental object and who, instead of directing their efforts towards the source of the evil, are content to fight against a few transitory symptoms.

It is our duty to strive to avoid each of these pitfalls.

The evil exists, and the evil is immense. With regard to its basic cause, perpetually active everywhere and at all times, we do not think we can define it better than we have already done in making use of the word "presumption," that inseparable companion of half-knowledge, that motive for a boundless ambition which is easy to satisfy in times of trouble and upheaval.

It is principally the middle classes of society who have been infected by this moral gangrene and it is only amongst them that are found the true, prime movers of this theory.

There is no way that it can ever take hold amongst the great mass of the people, who would not be able to accept it. This class, the genuine people, has of necessity to devote itself to labour which is too continual and too positive to allow it to throw its weight behind a vague cause born of abstract theories and ambition. The people know that the best thing for them is to be able to count on tomorrow, for it is not until tomorrow that they will be paid for the toil and the cares of the previous day. The laws that guarantee a reasonable protection for the prime asset—which is the safety of individuals and their families and of property—are in their essence simple. The people fear change, which harms industry and brings in its wake a constant stream of new burdens for them.

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Men from the upper classes of society who throw themselves into the tide of revolution are either those who disguise their ambition or perverse, lost souls in the widest meaning of these words. This being so, their revolutionary career is normally short! They are the first victims of political reform and the role of the small number of them who survive is generally that of sycophants despised by their inferiors, upstarts to the great offices of state.

France, Germany, Italy and Spain today offer a host of living examples of what we have just said.

We do not believe that there is in France today any reason to fear fresh upheavals with a directly revolutionary aim, unless it should be through palace revolutions and revolutions in the highest reaches of government, bearing in mind the pronounced aversion of the people for anything which might upset the calm which they are enjoying after so much suffering and so many disasters.

In Germany, as in Spain and Italy, all the people want is peace and rest.

In these four countries, the classes where agitation is marked are those of the wealthy, of genuine cosmopolitans who make sure of their own profits no matter what happens, of civil servants, of men of letters and of the legal profession, and amongst individuals who are responsible for public education.

To these intermediate classes is also attached that of men whose ambition goes under false colours, whose number amongst the lower orders is inconsiderable although it is more sizeable in the upper ranks of society.

Besides, there is hardly any era which does not offer a rallying cry particular to factions.

Since the year 1815 this cry has been that of constitution. But let no-one be mistaken, this word is open to a broad range of interpretations and would be only imperfectly understood if one supposed that factions living under different regimes attached the same meaning to it indiscriminately. Such is not the case.

In absolute monarchies the word acquires the meaning of “national representation.” In those countries which have only recently acquired a representative regime, it goes by the name of development and guarantees charters and basic laws.

In the one state where national representation is of long standing, its aim is reform.

But wherever it is found, it means change and trouble.

To paraphrase, what it means in absolute monarchies is that “others must be more than your equals, your wealth must pass into other hands and your ambitions, satisfied for centuries, must give way to our ambitions, impatient and hitherto repressed.”

In those states which have acquired a new form of regime it means that “those ambitions satisfied yesterday must give way to those of tomorrow—and tomorrow has come.”

And finally, in England, the only country in the third category, the rallying cry, which is that of reform, combines these two meanings.

Europe thus presents itself to the impartial observer under an aspect which is both deplorable and bizarre.

Everywhere we find that the people, whose sole wish is for the maintenance of peace and quiet, faithful to God and their princes, remain unmoved by the attractive offers and temptations repeatedly put before them by members of factions who proclaim themselves their friends and who wish to involve them in a

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movement which the people do not want!

[We find] governments lacking in confidence, frightened, intimidated, and in disarray because of the clamour of that intermediate class of society which, interposed between the kings whose sceptres it breaks and the people whose voice it usurps, has seized control of all avenues of approach to the throne, that class so often disowned by the people in whose name it purports to speak and yet too often listened to, flattered and feared by those who with one word could push it back into the abyss.

We see this intermediate class give itself, with blind fury and with a relentless determination, which is far more a proof of its own fears than a revelation of confidence in the success of its undertaking, to any means it thinks fit in order to assuage its thirst for power; it applies itself to persuading kings that their rights are limited to sitting on a throne while the right to govern and to attack the centuries-old heritage of all that is sacred and positive with regard to man, in sum, to deny the values of the past and to declare themselves masters of creation of the future, is reserved to their class. We see [the members of] this class assuming every type of mask, uniting or splitting into factions as the need arises, helping each other in the day of danger and tearing each other apart the day after each new conquest. This is the class which has seized the press, which controls it and uses it with the sole object of extolling impiety and disobedience to the laws of religion and of state and which has so far forgotten itself as to advocate murder as a duty for those whose will is strong.

It was one of these prime movers in Germany who gave as a definition of public opinion: "The will of a man strong in the spirit of the party," a maxim which is too often put into practice and which is too little acknowledged by those men who have both the right and the duty to save society from its own mistakes and weaknesses and from crimes committed by adherents to factions who claim to be acting in society's interests.

The evil is clear; the means adopted by the disruptive faction are so reprehensible in principle and so criminal in their application, the overall danger they present is so great, even to the faction itself, that what men of narrow vision, whose heads and hearts are broken by circumstances stronger than their own calculation and courage, see as the end of society could in fact become the first step towards a better order of things. [But] these weak men will be right unless men stronger than themselves come forward, stiffen the ranks and make sure of victory.

We are convinced that society can no longer be saved without strong and vigorous determination on the part of governments which have freedom both of thought and action.

We are equally convinced that it can be saved if these governments take a stand for truth, if they rid themselves of any illusions, if they stiffen their ranks and align themselves with the right principles, placed beyond any ambiguity and strongly supported and proclaimed.

By so conducting themselves, monarchs will be fulfilling the most important of those duties imposed upon them by him who, in entrusting power to them, has laid upon them the responsibility of maintaining justice and the rights of each and every one, of avoiding the paths of wrongdoing and of walking steadfastly in the way of truth. Placed beyond the sphere of those passions which are shaking society, they are the ones principally called upon during moments of crisis to strip false appearance away from reality and by showing themselves for what they are—fathers invested with all the authority that pertains as of right to heads of families—to prove that in times of mourning they know how to be just, wise, and therefore strong and that they will not abandon the people whom it is their duty to govern to the interplay of factions, to wrongdoing and to its consequences, which will inevitably lead to the downfall of society. The very moment when we are entrusting our thoughts to this sheet is one of those moments of crisis: it is a profound crisis and it will be decided according to what we choose or do not choose to do.

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There is a rule of conduct common to individuals and to states, which has been acquired through the experience of centuries and of daily life and which teaches us that “reform ought not to be considered in the midst of passionate agitation; wisdom dictates that at such moments one should do no more than maintain the status quo.”

Let monarchs adopt this principle vigorously, let all their resolutions bear its mark. Let their actions, their measures and even their words proclaim it and prove before the world their determination; they will find allies everywhere. By establishing the principle of stability governments in no way exclude the development of what is for the good, since stability does not mean immobility. But it is up to those who are charged with the heavy task of governing to increase the well-being of the people! It is up to governments to control the means of achieving this, depending on need and the times. It is not by means of concessions, which the factions mean to impose on the legitimate power but which they have neither the right to demand nor the faculty of containing within just limits, that wise reforms can be achieved! Let everything possible be done for the good—such is our most ardent wish—but do not let what is not for the good be confused with what is, and let what is genuinely for the good only be undertaken by those who legally unite the due authority and the means of action. Such ought also to be the sincere wish of the people, who have learnt only too well and to their cost how to judge the real worth of certain words and the real nature of a certain type of flattery.

Respect for the status quo; freedom for all governments to care for the well-being of their own people; a league between all governments against factions in all states; contempt for those words devoid of sense which have become the rallying cry of the adherents of factions; respect for the progressive development of institutions through legal means; a refusal on the part of all monarchs to aid or assist those with a political agenda operating under some assumed mask: this is fortunately the way the great monarchs are thinking. If they put these thoughts into effect the world can be saved; if they do not do so, then it will be lost.

Union between monarchs is the fundamental basis of the policy to follow in order to save today’s society from total ruin.

And what is the particular end towards which this policy must be directed? The more important this question is, the more necessary it is to resolve it. A principle means a great deal, but it only acquires real value when it is put into practice.

The prime sources of the evil which is overwhelming the world have already been recalled in a work with no pretensions to be anything other than a draft. The progressive causes of this evil are there indicated: although it is defined by the word “presumption” as it relates to the individual, we believe that this word can be similarly applied to society as a whole to designate the evil which exists because of the vague nature of ideas which is the inevitable result of their being spread too widely. Let us see what it is that is tormenting society today.

Everything which up to the present has been considered immutable with regard to its fundamental principles is being attacked and overturned.

As far as religion is concerned, judgement and examination are to replace faith, while Christian morality is to replace the law of Christ as it has been interpreted by Christian authorities.

This is the undertaking to which, in the Catholic church, the Jansenists and a whole host of isolated sectarians who desire religion without the church have committed themselves with fanatical passion; amongst the Protestant sects, it is the Methodists, themselves subdivided into almost as many sects as there are members, together with the enlightened promoters of bible societies and the Unitarians—in other words, those who promote the fusion of the Lutherans and the Calvinists into one evangelical

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community.

The common aim of these men, no matter which religion they ostensibly profess, is nothing less than the overthrow of authority. Occupying the moral high ground, they wish to liberate men's souls just as those amongst the political revolutionaries who are not wholly given up to the pursuit of personal ambition wish to liberate men's bodies.

Although those same elements of destruction which are today convulsing society have existed throughout the centuries—for each age has seen the birth of immoral and ambitious men, of hypocrites, of hotheads, of deceivers and of reformers—our century, however, solely because of the lack of control of the press, possesses to a greater degree than preceding eras means of contact, of persuasion and of achieving agreement which are far more powerful, simple to implement and ideally suited to act upon all different classes of men.

We are by no means the only ones to ask ourselves if society can exist together with liberty of the press, a scourge unknown anywhere in the world before the last half of the seventeenth century and restricted until the end of the eighteenth century, with a very few exceptions, to England alone, that part of Europe separated from the continent by the sea as well as by its language and by its own distinctive customs.

The foremost principle that must be followed by monarchs who are united in their determination just as they are in the uniformity of their wishes and of their judgement, must be that of opposing the stability of [existing] political institutions to the disorderly movement which has seized control of men's minds, the immutability of fundamental principles to the mania for reinterpreting them and respect for the laws currently in force to their overthrow.

The hostile faction is split into two very distinct parties: one is that of the levellers and the other that of the doctrinaires.

United in times of upheaval, these men split in times of inaction. It is up to governments to recognise and to identify them for what they really are.

There are men amongst the class of the levellers possessed of powerful will and determination. The doctrinaires are never to be found in their ranks. Although the former are more to be feared in times of action, the latter present greater dangers in those times of deceptive calm which, as is the case with physical storms, precede storms in the social order. Forever wedded to abstract ideas which can never be applied to real needs and are generally in contradiction with those very needs, it is men of this class who ceaselessly stir up the people by their imaginary or feigned fears and destabilize governments to force them to abandon the right course. The world wishes to be governed by deeds and according to justice, not with fine words and theories: the prime need of society is to be maintained through strong authority (any authority without real force is not worth the name) and not to govern itself. If we add up the number of conflicts in which parties in mixed governments engage and the number of complaints, well-founded in law, to which the aberration of power in a Christian state can give rise, such a comparison is not likely to turn out to the advantage of doctrines. The first and the most important matter for the vast majority of any nation is the immutability of the law and its uninterrupted implementation and not by any means its change. Let governments then govern, let them maintain the basic fundamentals of their institutions, old as well as new, because if throughout the ages it has been dangerous to tamper with these things, then it cannot be helpful to do so today, when turbulence is widespread.

Let them state clearly before their people this determination and let them demonstrate it through their deeds. Let them reduce to silence those doctrinaires within the boundaries of their states and let them make plain their contempt for those from outside. Let them not through their demeanour or through

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their actions give rise to the suspicion of being in favour of or indifferent to error; let them not allow it to be thought that experience may have lost all its rights to make way for trial procedures which are at the very least risky. Let them be clear and precise in all that they say and let them not seek to win over through concessions parties whose only aim is the destruction of all power that does not belong to them, parties who cannot be won over by concessions which will always embolden them in their pretensions to power.

In these turbulent times let them be more circumspect than ever in their progress towards genuine improvements and not be dictated to by the needs of the moment, so that what is done for the good will not turn against them, something which occurs whenever a governmental measure appears to have been inspired by fear.

Let them not therefore confuse concessions made to parties with the good that they will do for their people, by modifying according to acknowledged need a particular branch of their administration which might call for such a measure.

Let them devote unwavering attention to the financial condition of their country, so that by reducing charges levied on the public they can allow all their people to enjoy the benefits of a genuine and not an illusory peace.

Let them be just yet strong, benevolent yet strict.

Let them uphold religious principle in all its purity and not suffer attacks on religious dogma or allow morality to be interpreted in line with the social contract or the vision of simple sectarians.

Let them suppress secret societies, that gangrene of society.

And finally, let the great monarchs join in ever closer union and prove to the world that the existence of such a union can only be beneficial, since it guarantees political peace in Europe and is strong solely for the maintenance of calm at a time when it is the target of so many attacks, while the principles which it professes are as paternal and protective for good men as they are threatening for those who disturb the public peace.

Governments of the second rank will see in such a union a sheet anchor for their own salvation and will hasten to associate themselves as well. The people will regain confidence and take heart, and the establishment of the deepest and most beneficial peace known throughout all history will become effective, for this peace, which in the first instance will affect all those states which are still upstanding, will also exert decisive influence over the outcome in those states threatened with imminent subversion and may even be instrumental in setting back on their feet those which have already experienced the scourge of revolution.

Any great state which is determined to survive the current turbulence still has an excellent chance of salvation.

A strong union between states according to the principles which we have just laid out will render turbulence itself in vain.

Source of the original French text: Clemens Wentzel Lothar von Metternich, *Aus Metternich's nachgelassenen Papieren*, vol. 3, edited by Richard von Metternich-Winneburg. Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1880–84, pp. 410–20.

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