

Adolph Freiherr von Knigge, “The New State” (1792)

Abstract

In the following article, Adolf von Knigge (1752–96), a prolific Enlightenment publicist, ridicules those who had opposed the American revolt, fearing it would unleash populist anarchy. Instead, as Knigge argues, it produced an orderly and prosperous liberal utopia.

Source

Part One

Who can correctly judge great world events?

Great world events can be judged most correctly only by posterity; only it is able to assess, with cool blood, the testimonies of contemporaries, all of which, without exception, are more or less partisan, and to explain the causes, effects, and consequences, one by means of the other.

Only he who is not related, in even the remotest way, to the actors can consider himself an impartial judge, and with events that influence the entire body politic, that can never be the case as long as we ourselves are still members of a body politic.

Let no one object that time erases the small incidents that often act more as driving forces than the great, public events! Who does not know the false anecdotes carried by the news of the day? It is precisely these that are only gradually corrected, explained, and the truly characteristic remains. But it goes without saying that I am speaking here of an age in which culture and philosophy are not dormant. Who will deny that we are now judging more accurately the age of Louis XIV than those who, during his reign, elevated him to the heavens out of human fear, flattery, or false enthusiasm, or perhaps denied him any kind of greatness and virtue out of revenge and envy? Who would consider reliable a general history of the Reformation that was written in the sixteenth or seventeenth century?

The painting must first be examined from a vantage point where one can see it in its entirety, without being distracted by the shimmering of individual colors, by the interest in various groups, by the small details. But our individual situations, likes or dislikes of our own and foreign constitutions, our own and foreign systems, our own or foreign nations and persons, who are either supporters or detractors, critics or praisers of those objects, shape us as long as we live in the midst of the throng. Small, imperceptible connections make us biased in favor of living persons and contemporary things. One of these considerations works secretly even on the experienced thinker, who deems himself quite cold and impartial, be it only a patriotic or educational bias, a preconceived opinion about those who advocate the cause, or the like.

As unworthy as it is of a philosopher to appreciate the worth of an enterprise not on the basis of the inner goodness of the purpose and the means, but on the basis of the fortune or misfortune of success, in some cases, when we speak of political upheavals, it does seem necessary to shape one’s judgment not merely with moral and scientific principles, but to leave it to time to argue the case for the practical utility brought about by the change, for the consistency in the means applied, and for the possibility of a lasting implementation. In that case, of course, the results are often quite different from our reasoning. When America sought to assert against what is improperly called the motherland the sacred, undeniable authority of man to cancel contracts that are vague or have been violated by one side, to decline foreign

protection if one can protect oneself, and to enjoy in one's own way the fruits of one's hard work, it was not only moralists and legal scholars who railed against the ingratitude of the colonies; the state prophets also predicted that these people, misled by selfish evil-doers and instigators, not animated by a single spirit, divided among themselves by disagreement, without a disciplined army, without law, without allies, without money, without credit, would accomplish little and would soon be brought back to obedience. The journal and book writers at the time, especially the sentimental ensign Anburey, whose description of North America was translated by Geheimrath Forster, shuddered at the account of the abominations by which the misguided Americans rendered themselves unworthy of all pity and were transforming their poor land for centuries into a wasteland. He, and along with him not only many another ensign, but also many a general and man of importance, described the armies of these vagabonds as gangs of robbers who hardly deserved to be routed by regular troops.

And who would have believed that people without shoes and socks, who sometimes simply ran away when they should have retreated in good order, who did not know what deploying, drawing through and the like meant, and whose leaders were common fellows, without birth or standing, would defeat, capture, and chase from the land our colorful men adorned with gold and silver, who, under the leadership of lords, counts, and noblemen, knew how to do everything in time? The papers and private letters were full of the conflict and division prevailing among the members of the Congress, of the separation and subjection of individual provinces under Britain's scepter, of general anarchy, murder, and robbery. And how do things now stand with these rebels, after barely the sixth part of a human lifetime has passed since then? No longer a trace of shortage, disorder, and ferment! The newly created state stands here in full dignity, respected and feared by all peoples of the world, after it bravely won its freedom and created an honorable peace for itself – A wondrous political phenomenon! People born in different parts of the world now forged into a nation. Provinces, each of which had made special laws for itself, united into a great body politic, without a single common head, without nobility, without a prevailing religion, growing day by day in the highest prosperity and flowering that only freedom, peace, good civil regulation, trade, the sciences, and the arts can guarantee, in brotherly alliance with their former guardians, a model that other peoples seek to emulate! How happily many a prince who back then spoke of the American rebels with the utmost disdain would now, with great condescension and gratitude, accept from the American nation a small governorship for one of his princelings, if only that nation would realize what a prince's son is good for! How happily a writer who back then sharpened his quill against the Congress would now compose a hymn of praise for the united provinces, if it would earn him an annuity!

It is rare, then, that the contemporary generation judges the great world events of its time correctly; at the very least, let no one venture to do so who has not often made the attempt – with a philosophical eye and without a spirit of system, impartially (to the extent that is possible) – to ponder general matters of politics, the advantages and disadvantages of various state constitutions, and, through the lens of history, the causes of the glory and downfall of older empires and peoples. Let not the man venture upon this work to whom the small local circumstances are foreign, who knows the spirit, the mood, the degree of culture of the nation under discussion only from books! Let not the book scholar venture upon this work who until then has dealt more with dead than with living human beings, and who gazes only from the window of his warm study upon the mighty storms of life, which can arouse passions of every kind, and their terrible consequences, but who has never been a directly participating witness, and who has never observed the first and often very small causes that gave rise to them? Finally, let not the traveler venture upon this task who crosses the land with postal horses, and who draws the stuff for his general judgments from conversations with adherents of this party or that, whom he meets during his brief stay in the cities.

After these presuppositions, no one will suspect that I want to deny these principles in my reflections about the French Revolution, or that I consider myself called upon to render a verdict about it and about

the advantages and shortcomings of the new constitution. On the contrary, my intention is to show how little we are still able to see clearly in this great event, to warn against hasty judgments, untimely fear, and blind zeal, and, finally, to call attention to the general principles from which we must proceed if we wish to say something meaningful about the overthrow of the French state and its likely consequences.

Source: Adolph Freyherr von Knigge, *Josephs von Wurmbrand, Kaiserlich abyssinischen Ex-Ministers, jezzigen Notarii caesarii publici in der Reichsstadt Bopfingen, politisches Glaubensbekenntniß, mit Hinsicht auf die französische Revolution und deren Folgen*. Frankfurth, Leipzig, 1792; Reprinted in Adolph Freyherr Knigge, *Josephs von Wurmbrand, Kaiserlich abyssinischen Ex-Ministers, jezzigen Notarii caesarii publici in der Reichsstadt Bopfingen, politisches Glaubensbekenntniß, mit Hinsicht auf die französische Revolution und deren Folgen*, edited by Gerhard Steiner. Frankfurt am Main: Sammlung Insel, 1968.

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