

Archduke Joseph II, “Political Daydreams” [*Rêveries politiques*] (1763)

Abstract

Originally written in French, the following is an early confidential essay by the future Emperor Joseph II (ruled in co-regency with his mother Maria Theresa, 1765-80, and as emperor alone, 1780-90). He expresses his robust “absolutist” conception of state power, especially above and against the interests of the “great” or magnate aristocracy. Yet he also advocates negotiations with the elite-dominated provincial estates and monarchical rule through a structured bureaucracy and ministerial cabinet.

Source

The two fundamental principles according to which one should act are unlimited power [in order] for the state to be able to do everything good, and the means to support this state without foreign help. To accomplish both of these goals, I would advocate:

1. Demoting and reducing the wealth of the “great ones” [i.e. the magnate aristocracy], because I do not find it very useful that there are small kings and rich subjects who live in prosperity, without worrying about what will become of the state. I see it as an axiom that every person in his capacity as a subject of the state, which supports and protects him and guarantees his rights, owes his service through the tasks that the state, whose spokesman is the ruler, holds him capable of, not according to his own convenience or pleasure. However, because people are no longer made for the offices, one must fit the people to them. That smacks of despotism, but without the aforementioned absolute power to do everything, one is hindered by regulations, statutes, and oaths, which the territories think are for their own protection, but which, viewed rationally, only work to their disadvantage — without this unlimited power it is neither possible for a state to be fortunate, nor for a ruler to accomplish anything great. I consider it a principle that the steering of the giant machine by a single head, even a mediocre one, is better than ten excellent ones, if they all must reach an agreement about every action. God save me from violating the oaths that I have sworn, but I believe that one must try to convince the territories and make them understand the extent to which a limited monarchy, as I suggest, would be useful to them. Therefore, I would propose to make an agreement with the territories, in that I would ask them for ten years for unconstrained power, to do everything for their benefit without seeking their consent. To accomplish this would demand great effort, but I think that the moment is favorable at this hour, and experience will show them the benefit. Many individuals will be unhappy about it, but the majority of the nation is to be given preference over this group.

As soon as I have accomplished this, I will attack the feudal lords. I will impose on them the double land tax [*Dominikalsteuer*], along with taxes that have already been suggested in the finance system. I am in favor of them all, because they burden the lords as they do the subjects, and because one can always grant the latter tax reductions. In contrast to this [tax] relief, the subjects must tolerate the quartering of troops, because I believe that troops should remain outside of the barracks, for the advantage of the military as well as for use, which means a profit for the lords, and also for the promotion of the military spirit that all of this imparts to the entire nation.

Because I reduce the revenues of the nobles, I can neither demand nor expect to have a splendid court — but what use is this, anyway? Inner strength, laws, strict attention to the law, orderly finances, a respectable military, blooming commerce, an esteemed ruler — all of that characterizes one of the most

significant courts in Europe better than banquets, feast days, sumptuous fabric, diamonds, gilded halls, dishes of gold, sleigh rides, etc. It follows that the one cannot be without the other, and I will no longer require this pageantry of my subjects, no richly set tables, no costly clothing made outside of the country — at most, local embroidery. I will require nothing that could cause the least expense, because to do so would be a folly and an injustice, because one would take away their revenues.

Through the following suggested reduction of the wealth and earnings of the “great,” one will find that the people perform their duties with greater assiduousness; everyone would try to enter the service and therefore put forth greater effort. The young people who know that they will have adequate property at their disposal for their entire lifetimes, meaning that they don’t need to serve the state, are of no use at all; they aspire to do nothing, spend insane sums, make debts, which, because they do not repay them, ruin the poor and the craftsmen who pay taxes. However, if one knew that the only means for living in prosperity was the attainment of an office, namely through one’s own industriousness and through actual performance alone, without consideration to recommendations, relatives, and not even the merits of forefathers, because one rewarded the father who served the state well — nothing were more just — but this reward should not burden the state with ne’er-do-wells who have nothing of their fathers but their names. Base everything on individual merit! If this rule were followed without exception, what geniuses would appear, [ones] who are hidden at this hour, either from laziness or because they have been suppressed by the great ones. Everyone would make an effort, because, knowing this, he would have had the goal, since birth, of gaining the possibility of living in prosperity, which he could only accomplish with a salary from his ruler.

I would employ few people, but the selection would be exceedingly rigorous. After their probationary year, their salaries would rise every five years. Once they left the service, they would go back to their initial salary, but certainly not the lazy, negligent, or incompetent ones; they could expect nothing more. Malicious errors would be punished with the utmost severity, even without regard to birthright, because I do not see how it is just that a person who possesses old papers of nobility and is a rogue goes unpunished, while in the same case another, who does not have such scraps of paper, would be immediately hanged.

In order for a nobleman to serve the state, and in a most mediocre way at that, one must pay him in gold; for a president to make his name available, without even working in the office himself, and to sit there three times a week for three hours, in order to allow his secretary to write, one must pay him ten or twelve thousand Gulden. If he didn’t need any expensive robes, if his wife and his daughters required no diamonds, and if he didn’t require six horses, then he could easily be content with four thousand. For a councilor to serve the state, to let his scribe write while he walks in the park (Prater) and goes to comedies and beer gardens, he requires six thousand, or at least four thousand. On his own, the president whose salary was reduced would downgrade all the others himself, for those who now do the work are the poorest, the chancellors who only receive four or five hundred. As soon as the state paid them better, they would feel entitled to idleness themselves.

Through my plan, which would greatly reduce the number of documents and at the same time simplify the machine considerably, I can certainly cut the expenses of each department by half, in that I would remove the incompetent as well as the lazy. I believe that to lead this machine one head making decisions is sufficient, though advised by a committee like the privy council [*Staatsrat*]. The procedure that I intend to suggest is, as far as I know, unique: instead of separating the issues from each other, one must combine them.

I am convinced that in the entire monarchy there are only two organs that are well organized: the war council [*Kriegsrat*], as it currently exists, and the superior court of justice. Regarding their responsibilities, I would free both from all reports to the privy council. A ruler must trust in the judiciary, after he has selected capable subjects for it. Regarding the military, the generals understand more than

we do, and one has seen unequivocal evidence of their righteousness and ability.

I believe that one chancellery is sufficient for each territory, if it makes an effort. If it does not make an effort, then one should restructure it. Regarding the finances, I must admit that the mass of big words, which one does not understand, but whose effects have produced no positive result, has not convinced me of the good state of our policies. I would like to assume that the regiment of accountants, whose infallibility is not proven and whom one must reverentially believe, would be much weakened by a financial department in which the other three are combined. One chief, one head, but an excellent one and granted all authority, would better bring affairs in order than this entire complicated mechanism, which is based on book learning and its application and only shows its vanity. I am no great expert in financial matters, but fewer words and greater results would impress me. I would lead the machine with four divisions (including all the territories except Hungary). The finances of Italy and the Netherlands, I am convinced, cannot be administered by only one head doing the work, and by one single minister, who, being too busy, only touches on the matters once a month, and the ruler would be less informed about them than about the government of France. I believe that a chancellery would not be too much for the political affairs of these two lands.

For foreign affairs, above all for secrecy, I believe it is better to allow one intelligent head, upon whose righteousness one can rely, to act, as long as there is a combined conference like this.

For Hungary, the chancellery is to be retained, but even the reports from Italy and the Netherlands would go to the privy council. I assume that one must work to make this land [Hungary] happy, before one can reasonably demand something additional. [...]

One says that the commerce of Hungary affects the territories of Austria negatively, but if Hungary delivers taxes like these for the next while, which I do not doubt, then we would have found our Peru; to accomplish this goal one may not demand an increase [in taxes] at the first Imperial Diet, because the little that one would gain would hinder the domestic disposition through the embitterment of feelings. By gaining a million, one would lose the chance to make six or seven [million] in profit over several years.

The upper nobility must be kept down either through honors or through fear. The lower nobility should be supported against the upper nobility and won over through the granting of any offices that are controlled by the ruler. One should defend the subjects against the tyrannical rule of the nobles, in that everyone should be given the right to sell their foodstuffs without difficulties. Thus one would easily reach my goal. [...]

2. To get the state in working order immediately, I would suggest dealing a great blow to the most useless elements of the polity, namely those who live from their capital. I would announce that from now on no one would pay a higher interest rate than three percent, without exception for any accounts or any debtors, because the state is not in the position to continue to pile debts upon debts. [...]

Private citizens will invest their money in commerce and in agriculture in order to profit from the greater return from their capital. [...]

Through these measures, the monarchy would find itself in a splendid situation, some individuals and above all the powerful would suffer under them, but the very bad state of affairs demands drastic measures. I still view these measures as the simplest way to accomplish the great goal of supporting the monarchy in the present and maintaining it in the future. I cannot believe that one would be found guilty of having committed misconduct by God or man in following these principles and intentions, but these are only preliminary ideas, and only the fundamental principles that one should have in mind in all matters. Now is the right moment. Everyone expects to be charged, credit is beginning to disappear, and no one will complain, or not very much, about these taxes that I suggest, because one recognizes their

sense and the hope that they give.

To demotion of the great ones, which I find most useful and most necessary, is an objective that one should hardly admit to having, but an objective that one must always have in mind in all his dealings. Even the privy council must know nothing of this, the decisions made by the ruler must come from this. [...]

Reward the good, dismiss the incompetent, punish the bad — I believe that with this concept the state would be happy and respected in the present as well as in the future. Once the decision is made, then one must hold fast to all points against all opposition, because if one part is excluded, then the entirety is flawed.

Source of the original French text: Derek Beales: *Joseph II's "Rêveries"*, in *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs*, vol. 33, Vienna/Horn: 1980, pp. 155–60.

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