

José Ortega y Gasset

(* 1883 Madrid - † 1955 Madrid)

After the end of the dictatorial rule of Primo de Rivera in 1930 philosopher José Ortega y Gasset almost naturally became a member of the Constitutional Assembly in Spain, where he tried to help to establish a liberal Republic. Having studied in Spain and Germany and having travelled extensively throughout Latin America, Ortega y Gasset was already one of the foremost intellectuals in Spain. Somewhat of a cultural pessimist, he saw that the social conditions for the development of a mature liberal democracy were rather lacking in his native country. In 1929 he published his greatest work "La Rebelion de las Massas" (The Revolt of the Masses). Influenced by the German idealists he did not only see irrationalism as a danger to a decent society, but also an exaggerated type of dogmatic rationalism, that defined humans as totally autonomous from historical and cultural factors. The result of this type of rationalism was a belief in political planning and equalisation. This, he argued, would in the end destroy the very basis of a liberal society – the tolerant and cultivated individual. The individual was about to be dominated and suppressed by mediocre, homogenous and ideologically misled masses. This view reflects much of the critique launched by 19th century liberals like Mill or Tocqueville against extreme democracy. Ortega y Gasset found their fears confirmed by the advent of totalitarian mass movements from communism to nazism in his own days. True liberals, he maintained, would never advocate a pure majoritarian democracy, because they stood for minority rights and individualism. Full of disappointment he wrote: "Liberalism – it is well to recall this



today – is the supreme form of generosity; it is the right which the majority concedes to minorities and hence it is the noblest cry that has ever resounded in this planet. It announces the determination to share existence with the enemy; more than that, with an enemy that is weak. It was incredible that the human species should have arrived at so noble an attitude, so paradoxical, so refined, so acrobatic, so antinatural. Hence, it is not to be wondered at that this same humanity should soon appear anxious to get rid of it. It is a discipline too difficult and complex to take firm root on earth."

When the republic failed and was overthrown by General Franco in 1936, Ortega y Gasset had already fled abroad (first to France, afterwards to Argentina and Portugal) only to return to Spain shortly before his death.

Literature:

There are numerous editions in various languages of Ortega y Gasset's "La Rebelion de las Massas" available in affordable editions!

John T. Graham: *The Social Thought of Ortega Y Gasset: A Systematic Synthesis in Postmodernism and Interdisciplinarity*, Univ. of Missouri Press 2001

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