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Juan Donoso Cortés (1809-1853)

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# Letter of October 24, 1851 “*Las Clases Discutidoras*”<sup>1</sup>

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## Translator’s Introduction

### *A. Biographical Sketch*

Aside from Novalis’ characterization of the world as an ‘endless novel,’ nothing could repulse the counterrevolutionary theorists more than Schlegel’s claim that it was an ‘endless conversation.’ This is evidenced by Schmitt’s appropriation of Donoso’s term *las clases discutidoras*, which refers to the middle classes (Schmitt’s bourgeois romantics) who discuss or deliberate politics without taking political action. The term is used by Donoso for the first and last time in his letter of October 24, 1851.

Trained as a lawyer, his notebooks reveal an interest in Rousseau, Machiavelli, Locke, Voltaire, Madame de Staël, Montaigne, Montesquieu, Chateaubriand, and Byron. The era of his maturity was marked by a struggle for the Spanish crown between the *Carlistas* and *Cristinos*, who supported Queen Maria Cristina in accordance with ancient Spanish law on succession. Donoso wrote a legal memorandum supporting the latter, and was rewarded with a post in the “Gracia y Justicia de Indias” department in the Secretariat of State. He was later

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<sup>1</sup> For the original Spanish text, see Juan Donoso Cortés, *Obras de don Juan Donoso Cortés, Marqués de Valdegamas, vol. V* (Madrid: Imprenta de Tejedor, 1855), 302-308. The *Obras* have been Google-digitized and can be accessed via the following link: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044049852585&view=2up&seq=302&size=150> (Accessed November 3, 2019). Donoso’s works are in public domain. For more information, see here: [https://www.hathitrust.org/access\\_use#pd-google](https://www.hathitrust.org/access_use#pd-google) (Accessed November 3, 2019).

given a post in the Queen's cabinet and was elected a deputy in the Spanish parliament, the Cortes.<sup>2</sup>

When revolt seemed imminent, Queen Maria Cristina resigned the regency and fled in exile to France in July, 1840. Donoso joined her as secretary. Like Schmitt, he had the ear (and, it is suggested, the pen) of those in authority.<sup>3</sup> When the Queen's daughter Isabel was granted majority status at the age of thirteen in response to Donoso's urging, Donoso became the now-Queen Isabel II's private secretary. He was later made, at the age of thirty-seven, a *grandee* of Spain with the aristocratic titles of Vizconde del Valle and Marqués de Valdegamas.<sup>4</sup>

Although his early years were spent as a liberal, the events of February 1848 in France, followed by similar revolutions in Vienna, Hungary, and Italy and domestic revolts in Madrid, Valencia, Barcelona, and Seville, caused his "final, decisive turn" to counterrevolution and the Right.<sup>5</sup> Prior to serving as Spanish ambassador to Berlin, he responded to revolutionary events in his home country and gave his "Speech on Dictatorship" on January 4, 1849. The speech made him famous throughout Europe, and Pope Pius IX implemented his ideas in his efforts to re-establish Papal authoritarian infallibility in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Except for his *Ensayo*, the vast majority of his writings are *ad hoc* written or spoken responses to immediate political situations and crises.<sup>7</sup>

After having resigned his seat in the Cortes, he became, on March 2, 1851, Spanish Ambassador to the French Republic and confidante to President Louis Napoleon III.<sup>8</sup> Prevented from running for a second term by the Revolutionary constitution of 1848, Napoleon III engaged in an *auto-coup* in December 1851. In 1852 he was named Emperor of the Second Empire. By the time Donoso wrote the letter (*carta*) that follows this introduction, he and his works were still widely known in France and beyond. It is included in editions of his complete works under the category "Political Letters Concerning the Situation in France, 1851-1852."<sup>9</sup>

### B. Donoso, Schmitt, and Las Clases Discutidoras

Donoso's name typically resurfaces as an influence on Schmitt, and most frequently as the source of the phrase "*una clase discutidora*." Their shared predilection for England's unwritten constitution dovetails neatly into their equally strong distaste for bourgeois discussion. While the germ of this distaste can be found in de Maistre, it is through Donoso that we find the origin of Schmitt's critical stance towards "*una clase discutidora*" in the final chapter of his *Political Theology*, entitled "The Counterrevolutionary Theory of the State."<sup>10</sup> Although Schmitt gestures towards the romantic indecision of the *Mittelstand* in his earlier *Political Romanticism*,<sup>11</sup> it is in his work on political theology that he links bourgeois indecision with political inactivity and passivity. Schmitt (again taking his inspiration from Donoso) metonymically uses the characteristic liberal bourgeois tendency to talk endlessly about political issues to stand for

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<sup>2</sup> See, generally, Robert A. Herrera, *Donoso Cortés: Cassandra of the Age* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 12-23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>9</sup> See Juan Donoso Cortés, *Obras de Don Juan Donoso Cortés*, Vol. II (Madrid: Casa Editorial de San Francisco de Sales, 1904), 502-508.

<sup>10</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 59-63.

<sup>11</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

the class as a whole, who, wanting to evade the decision, “shifts all political activity onto the plane of conversation in the press and in parliament,”<sup>12</sup> and end up being unfit to compete in the *agon* of politics. Donoso and Schmitt unite in a striking critique of liberal bourgeois values that renders the middle class *politically* impotent due to their commitment to *socially* determined values such as freedom of speech and the press.

Although Schmitt’s appropriation of the term and his acknowledgement to Donoso for its origin is well-known, Schmitt does not provide a specific authoritative citation for its two appearances in *Political Theology*. Specifically, Schmitt writes that “he (Donoso) straightforwardly defined the bourgeoisie as a “discussing class,” *una clase discutidora*,”<sup>13</sup> and that his “definition of the bourgeoisie as a *clase discutidora* and his decision that its religion resides in freedom of speech and of the press” are examples of Donoso’s work in the “good dogmatic tradition of theology.”<sup>14</sup> The term, as it were, is difficult to locate in Donoso’s *oeuvre*, and almost all citations to it occur as references within Schmitt quotations without any reference to its provenance.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in the original journal article, the original German language version of *Political Theology*, and in the chapter’s appearance in his collected works on Donoso, Schmitt misspells the Spanish word *clase* as “clasa”: “Die Bourgeoisie definiert er geradezu als eine “diskutierende Klasse,” *una clasa discutidora*,” and “Die Definition der Bourgeoisie als einer “clasa discutidora” und die Erkenntnis, daß ihre Religion in Rede- und Preßfreiheit liegt, sind Beispiele dafür.”<sup>16</sup>

Engaged in a similar search for the genesis of this term, José María Rodríguez García<sup>17</sup> suggests that Schmitt adapts two Donosian sources into the phrase. The first source mentions *raza disputadoras* (feuding nations),<sup>18</sup> and the second, “pueblos...*puramente discutidores*” which Rodríguez García translates as “peoples single-mindedly devoted to arguing.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, the phrase never appears in Donoso’s work. However, its plural iteration, “*las clases discutidoras*,” appears once and only once (a *bapaxlegomenon*) in his letter of October 24, 1851. This remarkable letter, sent as a diplomatic missive while he was serving the Spanish crown in

<sup>12</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 59.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> This is typical of many commentators. For example, Gary Ulman writes, “Donoso also opposed the liberal bourgeoisie, which he defined as a “discussing class”” but fails to provide a citation to the term in any of Donoso’s work. Gary Ulman, “Carl Schmitt and Donoso Cortés,” *Telos* 125 (2002): 69-79, 70.

<sup>16</sup> The final chapter of *Political Theology* was published previously in a journal, and it was republished in Schmitt’s collection of his works on Donoso, *Donoso Cortés in gesamteuropäischer Interpretation: Vier Aufsätze* (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 2009 [1950]). The phrase also appears in the essay “Der Unbekannte Donoso Cortés” in the same collection. What appears to be the earliest appearance of the term in Schmitt’s writings occurs in his diary entry of July 1, 1992, where he writes “Wir brachten seine Frau zur Lese[gesellschaft], dann tranken wir 2 Flaschen Piesporter in der Bürgergesellschaft, er erzählte nur erst Personalien, dann über den Engländer, die *clasa discutidora*, dan Angelsächsische Reich als das Reich des Antichristen.” (footnote omitted). Carl Schmitt, *Der Schatten Gottes: Introspektionen, Tagebücher und Briefe 1921 bis 1924*, Herausgegeben von Gerd Giesler, Ernst Hüsmert und Wolfgang H. Spindler (Berlin, Duncker & Humboldt, 2014), 108. The syntax, grammar, and misspelling of the phrase are uniform throughout every iteration.

<sup>17</sup> José María Rodríguez García, “The Regime of Translation in Miguel Antonio Caro’s Columbia,” *Diacritics* 34/ 3-4 (2004): 143-175, 166 n44.

<sup>18</sup> Rodríguez García locates this phrase in Donoso’s “Carta al director de la Revue des deux mondes” (15 de noviembre de 1852). Rodríguez García, “The Regime of Translation in Miguel Antonio Caro’s Columbia,” 166 n44.

<sup>19</sup> Rodríguez García locates this phrase in the Donoso’s “Carta al director del “Heraldo” (30 de abril de 1852).” See Rodríguez García, “The Regime of Translation in Miguel Antonio Caro’s Columbia,” 166 n44.

Paris, describes how Napoleon III—stuck between the 1848 constitution's prohibition against his election and his impending coup that will crown him emperor—must gain the support of the liberal bourgeoisie middle class if he is to maintain his rule over France. Although Schmitt does not mention this specific letter in *Political Theology*, he notes that "The letters about actual political questions"—here, the political question concerns the seat of power in post-revolutionary France—"revealed a sober attitude, often frightening and without any sort of illusion or any touch of the quixotic(.)"<sup>20</sup> Translated here in its first complete English language publication,<sup>21</sup> it is a masterwork of practical counterrevolutionary political science. The letter as a whole is important not only because it finally gives the phrase its proper home, but because it shows how Donoso could use his dogmatic political theory to explain how the rough classes (*las clases rudas*) won out against the argumentative classes, possibly due to the fact that the rough classes "have never willingly obeyed anyone but a dictator or an absolute king," while *las clases discutidores* supported a constitutional government. This liberal middle class will "permit the decision to be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion"<sup>22</sup> unless they take action and support Napoleon III who, Donoso points out, must have their support as well if he is to be victorious in his upcoming *auto-coup*.

M. Blake Wilson  
Department of Criminal Justice  
California State University, Stanislaus  
United States of America

## LETTER FROM JUAN DONOSO CORTÉS TO MADRID, OCTOBER 24, 1851<sup>23</sup>

Paris October 24, 1851

My dear sir: Today I propose to give you a complete idea, or at least as complete as I possibly can, of the state of public affairs in France resulting from the new attitude recently taken by the President of the Republic. The rough and difficult road that has just begun, which leads either to glory or damnation, depends on the steps taken and the skill or the energy used in overcoming obstacles and in avoiding the pitfalls. At the present time, neither France nor Europe knows what they should expect or what they should fear from the new politics adopted by the President of the Republic; or rather, France and Europe are profoundly ignorant of what is best for them, to the point of putting their fears where they should put their hopes, and their hopes where they should put their fears.

After it was learned that the recent resignation by the Ministers had been accepted, and that the abrogation of the law of May 31 had been resolved,

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<sup>20</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 62.

<sup>21</sup> Parts of the letter were translated into English and published in John T. Graham, *Donoso Cortés: Utopian Romanticist and Political Realist* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), 200-201.

<sup>22</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Donoso's paragraph breaks have been retained and a few of the longer paragraphs have been shorted. His archaic use of colons have occasionally been replaced by commas or the creation of new sentences. There are no footnotes or endnotes in the original; all notes here are the work of the translator.

there arose among all the men of order<sup>24</sup> a mournful cry, in the form of a moan, that France's terms had spread throughout Europe. The German governments show their shock and they perceive themselves as if calamitous events were about to occur. The English Cabinet is just as stunned; and without knowing what is convenient for it, it is circumspect and it waits. The truth is that, for themselves as well as for strangers, the men of order are generally suspicious that the President's policy is revolutionary. But my attempt to write to you, which does not consist only of expressing my opinions, but also of expressing the agendas, so that weighing the one and the other you can see where the balance is inclined, obliges me to show you the foundations of those opinions of the men of order, which are contrary to my own.

The party of order says: "The President is lost, because he rejects our support without counting on that of the republicans; the President loses France, because he returns to entrust his destinies to the popular masses. The restriction of universal suffrage has been the great conquest of the party of order: suffrage without restriction is anarchy without limits, and a permanent revolution. The whole of France is going to fall into the democratic abyss."

So says the great party of order, who does not even know what order is, and who is neither a party nor great. I think you will be persuaded of all of this if you have the patience to read this letter to the end.

What is called here the great party of order is composed of people who hate their opponents less than their brothers and friends: on several occasions I have spoken to you at length of their ungodly rivalries and their deep divisions. I will not deal with this matter further. Allow me, however, to observe that a party that burns in discord can serve to extinguish the democratic flames, and that all of the party is burning. Leaving aside, however, that which divides the party, and speaking only of that which brings them together, I will say that constitutional monarchy, more or less conservative, more or less revolutionary, is what this party desires. The party of order supports constitutional monarchy, and it does not conceive order except in the form of that kind of monarchy. However, constitutional monarchy, by the confession of all its supporters, is impossible from every point in France under the current circumstances: it is clear that, in the absence of the condition for its existence, order is completely impossible.

This consideration alone would be enough to put the party out of the game. The political parties contract with their homeland under the most strenuous obligation to propose remedies for the present evils, and the austere duty of demonstrating, first, that their remedies are possible, and second, being that they are possible, they are also acceptable. I know well that the party of order, in the absence of the monarchy, presently calls for order; but the present will soon be the past, and the future is surely revolution if the present does not change. Three million proletarians, excluded from the polls and against the spirit and even the letter of the Constitution, are sworn to arm themselves and make war upon the polls: they themselves say it, the great party of order does not ignore it, and

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<sup>24</sup> A coalition of conservative parliamentarians; also the *party of order*.

Europe knows it as well. May is tomorrow, and French society does not live until May.

Meanwhile, while the closest union would scarcely be enough for the conservative forces of French society, I do not mean to win on that tremendous day, but only to balance the victory. All is disunity and bewilderment and anarchy in the great party of order. Each fraction, and there are a thousand fractions, goes in search of a candidate who makes Prince Joinville<sup>25</sup> more expensive; who seeks refuge in the sword of General Changarnier; and who, finding no better one at hand, takes the ridiculous candidate Larochejaqueline to serve as escort to both the royal candidate and the warrior candidate.

My friend, if there has ever been a situation in the world that makes dictatorship necessary, then that situation is French society under the current circumstances. The President has understood it that way: considering where society is going, what it wants is a dictatorship that saves it. However, the conditions of the dictatorship are, as you know, different from the conditions of the monarchy: the king receives the authority of his father, and the father of the dictator is the people. Calling a dictator revolutionary and anarchistic because he seeks his strength in the popular regions is an unworthy, extravagant, and absurd thing to take into account. The public authority—call it dictatorship, call it monarchy—always receives its strength from another; when that other is not superior in power, then that other is the whole world. Revolution and anarchy are sharing power with the world and want to provide government to everyone: however, there is neither revolution nor anarchy in inviting everybody to elect the one who, once elected, will command everyone. I have reason to affirm that the latter is what the President of the Republic proposes.

If it is easy to find out who is on the side of reason, it is not equally easy to guess who will be the victor. My particular opinion on this point is, as you already know, that time favors the goals of the revolution, and time is curtailing the hopes of the President. I will not dare to say whether the President's time has passed, or if it has not yet happened: in my opinion, the President has made a grave mistake in not taking power and dissolving the Assembly by a *coup d'état*, and in not summoning the people to the polls. In general, the people refuse the power that is asked of them, and confirm the power that is taken from them. What I know is that for France there is no salvation but in dictatorship. In France there is no possible dictatorship, and no less durable dictatorship, if it does not come from the people and if it does not rely on the people. And finally, all power, dictatorial or royal, that seeks its point of support only in the well-off classes is a lost power.

The natural limits of a letter do not allow me to enter into this arduous matter. I will content myself with saying that the last revolution is finished and the last victory won by the ignorant classes against the literate classes, by the lower classes against the middle classes, by the men of action against the men of the speeches, by the classes that need to obey against those who have the urge to command, by the rough classes against the argumentative classes (*las clases discutidoras*).<sup>26</sup> The government of the vanquished classes is

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<sup>25</sup> *Orléanist* son of King Louis Philippe (1830-1848) and opponent of Napoleon III.

<sup>26</sup> *Discutidora* may also mean 'prone to discuss' or 'fond of disputing.'

constitutional: the government of the victors has been, is and will be perpetually, a civil monarchy or a military dictatorship. The people have never willingly obeyed anyone but a dictator or an absolute king. That definitely seems to me the meaning of the February revolution; the revolution seems incontestable, invincible. It is possible that, in the course of time, the monarchy will return to France; what seems impossible to me is that it returns to constitutional institutions. What seems impossible to me is that the scattered phalanges of the well-to-do classes, in whose numbers the complicated and vast edifice of those institutions is based, should be reconstructed. The revolution of February is to the middle classes what that of 1789 was to the aristocratic classes, and in the same way that the Restoration returned without a true class of nobles, the monarchy, if it returns now, will return without a preponderant and ruling middle class. In this there is nothing contradictory, and vice versa, there is much of conformity to the measured and progressive evolutions of history.

Who can say what will happen in France? I can say, and it's no small amount of talk, that no matter what will happen, I can tell you what won't happen. Dictatorship is possible, anarchy is possible, civil war is possible. The most outrageous and absurd systems, socialism and communism, can flood the French nation. Monarchy, over time, is not impossible either. If something else does not bring it, crises could make it possible. The only thing that is not possible is what until now has been called constitutional government: the only thing that is not possible is the peaceful and organized preponderance of the middle classes. Revolution makes some things impossible, and the fact of the February revolution has made constitutional government impossible. When I begin to consider that this is precisely the occasion chosen by the legitimist party to raise up to the clouds the institutions born of the completed revolution and the victory achieved by the middle classes in 1789, I remain astounded in the presence of such incurable blindness. That hapless party, the best among the monarchists, has always been condemned to ignore an invincible ignorance of the meaning of the revolutions and the great teachings of history. In 1789 the aristocracies went bankrupt; and at that time the government was aristocratic. In February the middle classes with all their institutions have bankrupted, and since then that hapless party only appears intelligent and requires the love of middle-class institutions. If by chance there comes a day when it becomes democratic, you can be sure that the next day they will bankrupt democracy, and that by a counter-evolution of the times, the feudal centuries will reappear.

To conclude the ministerial crisis, I will say to you that, considered by itself, it does not mean anything, and that it has no importance: the importance given to it is a reminiscence, and nothing else, of the parliamentary regime. In this system the Ministers are the true power, which proceeds, at the same time, from the crown and from the co-legislators: their special and to some extent imposing order is to avoid collisions between the great political powers by acting in the manner of peacekeepers among them all. In the republican system, the ministry is something else. In France there is constitutionally only one minister, and that minister is the President, responsible and irrevocable at the same time. The President and the Assembly are two independent powers among themselves, who have

no need to address, except on very rare occasions, words of peace, words of war, or any words at all.

The election of the ministers who are to serve the President, the sole minister of France, is, to a certain extent, a domestic issue. The custom in which the ministers are to attend the discussions of the Assembly, and to take part in them, is the prolongation of the Constitutional custom, which is not in harmony with the new institutions.

This serves to explain why no famous speaker or statesman enters any of the ministries. Here, all of this is ancient history and parliamentary antiques. This being the state of things, the prolongation of the crisis does not produce any alarm: a ministerial crisis here is what that in Spain we would call an internal arrangement. Everything is reduced to the fact that some employees leave, and other employees enter. Here, only the Presidential crisis is a true ministerial crisis, and a truly formidable one at that.

After long and annoying vicissitudes, the so-called crisis returns today to the point where it was left; and according to the most dignified news, Mr. Billault, with General Bourjoli and General Saint-Arnaud, are about to constitute the ministry. The first of the three is a verbose lawyer, with the conscience that is proper in those of his trade: the great question for him is to find out which side the victory is leaning towards. The last two are brave soldiers who have never been in business. General Bourjoli makes sure that he will take the minister of state position: if so, it will only be to show it off. And this is the state of the crisis.

The real one, that is to say, the formidable crisis will begin at the beginning of November. Beg the Lord that the President won't regret not having started at the beginning by a *coup d'état!*

Affectionately, Your Most Loyal and Reliable  
Servant Who Kisses Your Hand<sup>27</sup>

JUAN DONOSO CORTÉS.

*Translated by M. Blake Wilson.*

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to "muy señor mio" Sebastian Sclofsky for his assistance.

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<sup>27</sup> Although the letter's recipient is unknown, it is clear that Donoso is obliged to show deep respect for them. Donoso's valedictory "*De Vd. Afectísimo S.S.Q.B.S.M*" can mean the following: "De Vd. afectísimo" is translated as "Affectionately Yours," and the initialism abbreviates the phrase "Seguro Servidor Que Besa Su Mano": literally, "reliable servant who kisses your hand." Deeply anachronistic by today's standards, the phrase could be represented by the somewhat less anachronistic "Your Humble Servant," while "Affectionately Yours," standing alone without the remainder of the valediction, seems inadequate when the rank and importance of the letter's intended recipient is taken into consideration.

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