

Charlotte Garrigue and Tomáš Masaryk – Czech Humanists Create a Nation

Charlotte Garrigue was born in 1850 into a prosperous Unitarian family in Brooklyn Heights. A talented musician, she studied piano in Leipzig, Germany. A neurological condition in her right hand blocked her musical career, but while in Leipzig she met a Czech philosophy graduate student named Tomáš Masaryk. They fell in love. In 1878 they were married in a Unitarian ceremony at her parents' house in Brooklyn. (Tomáš's parents were poor. Charlotte's family paid for the boat tickets.) Unusually for 1878, Tomáš took Charlotte's surname as his new middle name.

Tomas was clear that among the many things he adored about Charlotte was her religion. Tomas particularly admired the way the American Unitarians combined liberal humanism with a Puritan work ethic. Together, Tomáš and Charlotte devoted their lives to creating a new nation, Czechoslovakia, dedicated to what they called a “new religion”, a humanism devoted to social activism. While Tomáš always insisted that he and Charlotte were a team, he was the public leader, a leading humanist philosopher who ultimately became Czechoslovakia's first president, serving from 1918 to 1935.



Charlotte Garrigue and Tomáš Masaryk

He is today a Czech national hero. His personal motto, “Truth Prevails”, is today the national motto of the Czech Republic.

Tomáš Masaryk's views were consistent throughout his long life. His political views were summarized in his famous statement, “I have always supported working people, often supported socialism, but only rarely Marxism.” His philosophical perspective is summarized in his 1901 book, *Humanistic Ideals*.

In *Humanistic Ideals*, Tomáš Masaryk first explains why he rejects utilitarianism, Marxism, and philosophical Darwinism.

Masaryk rejects the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham:

Masaryk: Bentham held that a person is a thorough egoist by nature - that every person seeks only their own pleasure. But how can such an egoism lead to the utilitarian formula –

that the pleasure, well-being, happiness of the greatest possible number of people should be the goal of every action?

Some try to extricate themselves from this difficulty by claiming that when each finds their own happiness, all will be happy.... This might be possible perhaps if each received their happiness direct from heaven, if we had no need of collaboration from others, and if it never happened that some people gained their profit through misfortunes of others. How many are there, reputed to be happy, who have secured their happiness by the trampling down of others? One cannot therefore say, that if each individual is well, all society is well. If people did not have at least a little innate impartial love for their neighbor, there would be no society.

Masaryk also rejects Marx:

Masaryk: Historical and economic materialism, on this basis, yields some further deductions. The most important is that humanity, rightly understood, is not the individual, not even the proletarian individual, but the mass of the proletariat; and not merely the proletariat of a nation, but of all society. From this comes the international rallying cry of Marx, "Proletariat of all lands, unite!" This means the individual, the personal self, has no importance in distinction from the mass; as Engels says, the individual is trivial.

One is startled, at first thought, by such a flat rejection of the individual. Yet socialism here brings nothing new...Political speakers, in fact, achieve easy success by invoking the name of the nation against individuals and parties; and no one asks them if they have been authorized to speak for the nation, or how they know what the people think about the matter at issue. What, furthermore, does the church mean to certain of its believers? It is everything; the individual is nothing. We see, therefore, that this same idea appears in different fashions. Both nationalism and ecclesiasticism are also anti-individualistic.

A question arises, however; if the individual has no value whatever, as the collectivists insist, from where can the mass of individuals derive its value? If the individual is nothing, if a person's consciousness and conscience are meaningless, how then are thousands of individuals not only something but ultimately everything? Here is excess of every formulation of collectivism. Still, let us remember, that one of the most burning questions of our own time is just this conflict between individualism and collectivism, whether it be formulated nationalistically, ecclesiastically, or socialistically.

He emphatically rejects philosophical Darwinism. He has no problem with Darwinism as biology. Masaryk is consistently pro-science. He just hates the use of Darwinism in philosophy.

Masaryk: As for “the struggle for existence”, this is a very modern phrase. The word “struggle” itself is heard everywhere today. Darwin thought that every creature leads a constant battle for existence, for its life, with other creatures; that in this struggle, the stronger overcome the weak, and this struggle is a means of perfection. It is by this teaching that he caught the imagination of the general public, because of the way it explains the advancement of society.

Applied solely to animals at first, this doctrine was extended step by step to society, the history of humanity, and to humankind generally, leading thereby to a far-reaching revolution in thinking. Natural science has always been considered as a great authority, and such an explanation seems clear. It is incontestable that a struggle exists between individuals as well as between classes and nations. The doctrine of the struggle as a means to progress has become quite familiar to the masses, especially to the socialistic classes. Everyone will realize, however, that the theory of struggle is anti-humane, opposed to humanity, even though natural struggle does seem to manifest itself in society in the form of competition....

An absolutely anti-humanitarian hypothesis began to spread. The ethic of humanity, it was said, enfeebles people physically and mentally. A new kind of *Faustrecht**, based on natural science, was trumpeted instead. The idea of selected nations was promulgated, not at all in the sense that one speaks of the ancient Hebrews as divinely chosen people, but in the sense of nations selected by nature. Nietzsche particularly made himself famous by the formula, derived from Darwinism: “Right belongs to the stronger! Might is truth!”

Thus, it happens that now – this is the present situation – not only reactionary but aristocratic and conservative conclusions are being drawn from Darwinism and evolutionism. Only the elite, it is now held, only a small number of the intelligent and strong, have the right to dominate the mass. Millions and millions are born so that a small number may survive. The best-known evolutionists today are committed to aristocratism. Darwin himself was reserved on this point, but Huxley, Spencer, and others accepted the aristocratic implications of their theory.

**Faustrecht*, literally “fist-law”, is a German expression for rule by brute force

Masaryk concludes by expressing his optimistic, humanist alternative to the above.

Masaryk: Modern morality, first of all, is not founded on anything which is new. An old and universally acknowledged law is its basis: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Who however, is my neighbor? We speak of the humanistic ideal; I accept this ideal. It has for me a dual sense. It means, in the first place, the ideal of humanity: be a person! Secondly, it entails consideration for other fellow humans in the widest sense.

Love of humanity, however, readily tends to become abstract – to exist in fantasy rather than reality. Love must be concentrated on specific objects. One cannot love all people equally. We choose and we ought to choose the objects of our love... To love one's neighbor, if this love is to be effective and definite, one must love the person who in point of fact is nearest. To everyone, accordingly, their mother, father, brother, sister, spouse, child is their neighbor...

Love must be effective. We must do something, work, for our neighbor. But restless, excited bustling and fussing is not work; work should be calm and deliberately directed to goals.

Morality is grounded in feeling, but not every feeling is just and good. Because morality is based on sentiment does not necessarily mean that it is opposed to reason. This is why we must strive to educate ourselves. Let us have a practical, but also a general and a philosophical education.

We must believe in progress: that the life of the individual and the whole tends to grow better and to improve continuously. One who believes in progress will not be impatient.

By our very nature, humanity has weaknesses, but is not fundamentally evil. This is why we can progress through the collaboration of all...

Let us not seek profoundly mysterious and new formulae, and final words, for all the perplexities of life. These problems are old, as are the solutions. Many of the answers are good and correct. They will become clearly evident to you, in fact, if you will understand their meaning in your own life and relationship. Much that you have already heard will then acquire new meaning.

Thus, let us push forward, comprehending in a new light that which we already know and discovering new aspects of old things. Depth of thought and penetration are revealed in the art of discerning something new in that which we have long known, in what we hear every day, in that which has been commended to us, and which we are convinced we understand perfectly.