Theodor Lessing – The Prophet

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"The English physicist Rutherford proposes . . . to split atoms artificially. The amount of energy released by this atom-smashing process is still as unknown as it is unimaginable. But one can foresee that future physics will bring about the release of energy which will place the entire existence or non-existence of the earth in the hands of man, probably even in the hands of a few individuals . . . a murder technique that makes it possible that a very small band of determined villains or fools . . . would be able to impose their will on entire countries and peoples without resistance . . . "

Prophetic sentences, once ridiculed, whose terrifying truth was unrecognizable at the time. Published in 1923 by a man who was killed ten years later on the orders of just such determined villains. For Theodor Lessing—and he is the one we are talking about—challenged taboos and violated conventions in a way that is still subversive today, regardless of the danger to his own person. Who was this professor of philosophy in Hanover? A descendant of the prophets? A great-grandson of Cassandra? One of the thirty-six righteous to whom the fate of the world is entrusted? Or merely a clever but speculative mind to whom intuition had provided astonishing insights?

Lessing and his work cannot be reduced to a single denominator. Apart from the surprising variety of different genres in which he expressed himself, such as in short stories, feuilletons, poems, aphorisms, personal portraits, factual reports, and essays, we encounter an extraordinarily vital man in all his writings, partly attached to his own epoch, partly looking far beyond it. Lessing, for example, speaks of people, race, and blood in keeping with his time, and the "Edda", the Germanic myth, is more important to him than the Christian myth. A peculiar reversion to an idealized archaism, prompted, I suspect, by the sufferings of a sprawling industrial civilization, forms something of a counterweight to Lessing's analytical and critical radicalism. And as far as radicalism is concerned - no one could match him there. In particular, his view of the forces driving his contemporaries, which are only just becoming visible, is of unclouded sharpness. He recognizes America, the United States, as a global engine.

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"The American," he writes, "*melds the peoples and landscapes of the whole earth no differently than militarism. Similar to how abstract socialism addresses itself to the proletarians of all the countries of the world, without taking into account that these people, who are otherwise alien to each other and do not understand each other beyond their economic wants, are not mere brains and spirits, but are guided by powers quite different from the powers of rational human will*." So he foresees the Americanization of the continents, associatively links it with a foreboding judgment on socialism, which, wherever it stirs, is condemned to future failure. Elsewhere he notes that, despite their mutual hostility, socialism or capitalism are pulling in the same direction under the banner of European progress, intending to transform the world and society into a machine.

That superpower bearing the name "The Market" forces capitulation of everything that has been created to date. This power is unstoppable. It values and uses, no, "utilizes [vernutzt]," as Lessing pejoratively transforms the verb "to consume," everything imaginable, be it material or idealistic. And in this lies the germ of death for the earth's population, at least, for Lessing, the predominantly "*Caucasian*," i.e. white-skinned population, until that final date, until the "Last Day of Mankind."

Whatever Lessing considers, whatever comes into his field of vision, it becomes a sign and signifier of the steamroller-like approach of industrial civilization. Resistance seems pointless.

"We are born in Europe," writes the prophet in his book, *Europe and Asia*, "*only to be poured into a machine that consumes us whether we like it or not*." What causes this helplessness which we are experiencing depressingly and painfully today, is the ineluctable ambivalence of our existence, the paralyzing dichotomy that affects our thoughts and actions more than ever. Lessing's commentary and conclusion:

"We have no choice. We cannot abolish the reality of science. Because without this science and its reality, we would not continue to exist as human beings."

So where is the positive, Mr. Lessing? Didn't a colleague of yours once develop the theory that an idea becomes a material force when it takes hold of the masses? Doesn't Marxism—despite its current slump—nevertheless provide salvation, provided it is handled more humanely? Lessing just shakes his bearded head, resigned that the purpose of all ideals is just to transform man into a robot.

"Nowhere, however," he says, "*can this aim of Europe be more surely understood than in the study of the works of Karl Marx, in which one is almost startled if words such as: soul, life, people, ever come up without being immediately replaced by: Profitability-coefficient, exponent of labor, index of the average rate of profit, substitute of the circulating surplus*

value, or by other countable and interchangeable units of validity of a bled-out and soulless logicism."

In view of such statements, is not the example of "a real existing socialism" implied? Did this creature [socialism] — already rachitic in the cradle, conceived in self-alienation and faithless chiliasm, kept alive for a time with blood, or rather money transfusions — not have to die quietly at some point?

Although Lessing claimed to be a socialist, even a communist, no one was further removed from the relevant parties and their ideologies than he was. He was completely useless as an ideologue. And that seems to be one of the reasons why he has been forgotten. He could not be clearly assigned to any political front, not even after the war, nor could any group instrumentalize his work or parts of it. Lessing, the man between all chairs, did not want to sit in any armchair or take his place on any throne. His astonishing and, unfortunately for most people, inimitable talent consisted, among other things, in making himself unpopular with every constituency. This was easiest for him with the Nazis. As a Jew, he was already on the outside. And with the Jews, his book *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1930), was enough to label him a "Jewish anti-semite". And then there's the Christians, for whom he is and will remain a nuisance to this day.

Because for Lessing, monotheism and Christianity are the beginning of all evil. Especially the Christian—but secretly blasphemous—assertion that every believer is capable of an individual afterlife after death, whether in heaven or in hell. Such belief, though hardly relevant in the present, legitimizes individualism. And if a person is accountable only to the extent of their individual conscience, as demanded by Protestantism, their isolation is enforced. Further, what masquerades as science is mistaken as a new spiritual beginning, as some kind of break with a past entrenched in superstition. But Darwin just continued this ancient thread using different terminology and images. The underlying pattern remained untouched by the current scheme. The origin of species, with man as the culmination and crowning point of a long journey from the amoeba—via the dinosaurs and our cousins the apes—to Privy Councilor Müller, provides our justification and our authorization as masters of the world to abuse and exploit that world. Christian teleology thereby gets fur, claws, and wings because the natural sciences extend belief to fur, claws and wings.

Lessing places Karl Marx precisely in this line of evolutionary teleology. While Darwin established the biological ascent of man to the detriment of all other creatures, indeed of earthly life in general, Marx fills out the old model with social context. Now the proletarian is the next higher stage of development above the bourgeois, whose replacement is to be carried out almost as a natural progression. And just as in secularized Christianity, nothing extends past the human being, so for Marx history ends with the "dictatorship of the

proletariat," after which the true history of humanity can begin. The heavenly Jerusalem is taken away from the then current church and handed over to a political party tasked to fulfil this so-called "historical mission."

And so it has long been preached that those who belonged and belong among the believers will mutate into "new people."

But of such people, Lessing—ever the fan of Schopenhauer—thought little. Though he never experienced the full bestiality of *Homo Sapiens*, at least he knew:

"The search for the self is immeasurable. Anyone would wish death on everyone if he could only earn 50 pfennig. Anyone would unhesitatingly set the whole world on fire if he could only save himself at that price. The earth revolves around the self. And just as man stands on his head in the mother's womb, so in the womb of nature he still seems to stand on his head for the course of history."

Not a "good grade" that we are being given. But events have confirmed Lessing's view. His hired killers were compensated with small salaries. And the killers' employers [the Nazis] did indeed set the world on fire, out of lust for power and to prolong their miserable existence.

But what might be considered Lessing's split consciousness, namely his penchant for the exotic and religiously different (combined with his uninhibited passion for polemics and caustic condemnation of contemporary conditions), as set against his capacity for reflection and intellectuality, does not strike me as contradictory at all. No, his almost Rousseauian ideas of a more innocent humanity, not to say of the "good savage," were guaranteed to counterbalance the harshness and bitterness of his consequent philosophizing. Out of ethnological ignorance, Lessing contrasts American-European civilization with an idealized Asia created in his own head. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are given the glimmer, if not the glory, of sheltering, nature-protecting religions; forces for meditation rather than heathen missions. In an almost touching way, he contrasts the Indians, Japanese, and Chinese with Europeans who have become denatured and alienated. Only in the Far or Near East is what we have lost still present: namely, a balance between wisdom and knowledge, between life and aesthetics, between devotion to enduring nature and the duties and chores of everyday life. The idealization of peoples who were still quite remote at that time gave rise to an insurmountable aversion to the culture from which he himself came. Lessing's statements already contain the later longing of West German left-wing intellectuals who were intoxicated by the Chinese "people's communes," who marched through the streets for their Vietnamese brothers and uncle Ho Chih Min or even in Cuba for Castro or in Nicaragua for the Sandinistas, only to return home to the terror of consumerism

and the insincere climb through their institutions, continually disappointed by their present conditions.

Lessing projected his ideal types into a geographical or historical distance. Natural man, or pre-Socratic man, that fantasy figure, was always in undisturbed harmony with nature, with his myths, with his community. What Hans Peter Duerr called "dreamtime" in our day was the spiritual and mental home of otherwise homeless intellectuals.

It remains now, as ever, the crucial need of intellectuals to compensate for the loss of life's immediacy with fantastical theories. This results in the seduction of the intellectual, his susceptibility to ideologies. Lessing's work also bears this stigma. He, too, seeks the inner calm that thought alone can never provide. His relationship with Judaism makes this clear. In an early phase of personal emancipation, he left the Jewish community, only to turn to Judaism again later in life, influenced and impressed by Zionism. But what kind of Judaism was Lessing actually talking about? A Judaism, one must say, that only wishful thinking can create, a longing for an ever-missing locus of absolute congruence. In anticipation of a formulation by Ernst Bloch that has become a standard quotation, Lessing says characteristically and self-revealingly: "*We long for home and do not know where to go*." (This sentence, included among the aphorisms in the appendix to "Europe and Asia," is not an original Lessing sentence, however, but comes verbatim from Eichendorff's poem "The Pilgrim." How did this quote get lost in the collection of his own texts? My somewhat-justified hypothesis is that with an excess of literary knowledge, some things just slip into dim corners of the memory and return as a newborn idea, stripped of their origin).

Lessing reproaches the contemporary and assimilated Jews, especially their appointed representatives, not just for their assimilation, not just for the fact that they had blended into society. He is bitter, almost offended, that they had exchanged their spirituality, painstakingly acquired over thousands of years, for an apparent commoness. Five thousand years of persecution and diaspora had helped Judaism to achieve an extraordinary spirituality and transcendence, and now they had degenerated into everyman. Through the specific art of dealing with the holy scriptures, namely through interpretatively subtle, dialectical interpretation, which outside the Jewish community was for centuries only permitted to certain Christian theologians, they, the Jews, had achieved an aimless way of thinking free from worldliness and worldly "utilization." But after legal equality, after the opening of the ghetto gates, this rare ability would have been irretrievably secularized in the bourgeois public sphere, that is to say, misused.

Yet Lessing was not just some introverted scholar, nor a philosopher who eschewed all practicality. And just as in his thinking, he was also far ahead of the times in his overarching activities in an era that was still stuck in the 19th century. We remember his lecture tours,

during which he appeared as a "feminist," as a pioneer for women's rights, for the equality of women—no small thing in those days after the lost First World War and the consequent, traumatic neutering of the so-called "German Man," who had lost his male self-confidence. In this he stood in stark contrast to the mendacious nationalist construct that the actual German soldier had remained undefeated in the field. Klaus Theweleit rightly notes that the right-wing extremist movements in Germany were given an enormous boost by the desire to restore the vainglory of men. It is no wonder that Lessing's feminism also got him into hot water in this respect.

Another major undertaking: The founding of the "Freie Volkshochschule," an institution whose importance can hardly be underestimated. Whereas education had previously been a class-specific privilege, here the fund of knowledge was opened up to everyone. I cannot find an answer to the question of whether Lessing believed in the classic social democratic slogan, "Knowledge is power!" or whether he, who tended to be skeptical, even contemptuous of all abstract knowledge, did nonetheless believe that it was still better than ignorance, than incognizance, than being uninformed about subject matter and specialist areas.

The contradictions in his person are none other than the contradictions in ours, who without hope for the necessary humanization of the plane, are still unable to relinquish humanitarian action.

Still another activity that probably seemed quirky at the time was the founding of an association to combat noise pollution. Here, too, was an undertaking before its time, though it was never really successful.

One may regard such activities disparagingly and as a limitation of Lessing's own mission, but I believe that they feed from the same source as his writings—from a strongly emotional sense of truth and justice. It is not only his stupendous education, his astonishing energy, his admirable diligence that have made Lessing what he is to me, and what I hope he is to others. Lessing's secret—which is no secret at all because it is revealed on every page of his books—was his sensitivity, his sentimentality. He lacked what is deceptively called "objectivity." His inner turmoil guided his pen. This was not a brain without a heart. Anger, rage and scorn, irony and hatred, affection and love, indeed a deep love that rarely manifested itself verbally for individual persons, in a word, *passion* runs through all his texts. The man was not lukewarm; he was uncompromising to the point of self-harm. He refused to be co-opted, which I can well understand, because in conditions governed by special interests and groupthink, there is only one choice: either surrender your conscience to the respective uniform or choose dissident status. Nothing has changed to this day. Anyone who does not play along, regardless of the banners under which the teams compete, becomes a

pariah as a matter of course for negating the otherwise unquestioned agreements that create consensus. That Lessing refused to abide is still a source of annoyance to ideologues today, on both the left and the right, as German post-war history, exemplified by the city of Hanover's treatment of its unloved son, impressively demonstrates. Even the left—intolerant and ideologically blinded—was not afraid to throw a stone at Lessing, though grossly delayed. A professor of literature who spoke in 1969 at the 50th anniversary of the adult education center co-founded by Lessing gave a rather infamous "tribute" to the murdered philosopher.

"*Theodor Lessing*," said the famous emeritus professor, "*is not a thinker of distinction. The anti-intellectual impulse always rumbled within him. This enemy of dialectics became a victim of dialectics.*"

How wonderful if Lessing had been exclusively a victim of dialectics. Of course, we know only too well that he was a victim of those powers that saw him as more than just a thinker without rank. And what was presented as an "anti-intellectual impulse" to devalue Lessing and enhance the status of this critic's own righteous persona, is, in an almost psychopathological reversal, the very thing that Lessing's work feeds on and that has kept it alive to this day. It is that aforementioned passion that breathes from every line. Nothing other than this, transformed into thought, entices and seduces us into a dialogue with this author of modesty, as he seeks neither to persuade nor convince his reader. In this respect, Lessing's work is autonomous, stable in itself, resistant to time because of its independence from historical catastrophes and twists and turns. It is historically irrefutable, which is something that can rarely be said of intellectual creations. It has passed the test without becoming, like Bloch's "*Principle of Hope*," waste paper.

I would not want Lessing's main theses to be misunderstood under the title variant "The Principle of Hopelessness." I would rather call it "The Principle of Realism." For two fundamental motivations of being human seemed indisputable to him, and I agree with the author in this. The one motive that forms reality is want, necessity, like a wine press that squeezes out of people what is inside them. The other motive is the addiction to endow the senseless history of mankind with meaning.

"For everything," writes Lessing, "*which for thousands of years has been called culture, development, history, the world process, is at its core nothing more than the subsequent self-justification of the most extraordinary, always existing necessities. This has not changed man's soul in the least. Man robs, steals, lies, plunders. Man murders, assassinates, massacres. The 'Logificatio post festum'* [Rationalization after the fact] *calls it spiritual care, Christianity, service to the ideal. So the ideals are just masks for the human beast. Woe betide anyone who plays this game. Woe to anyone who believes in it.*"

Strong stuff, isn't it? Rejection and repudiation arise like saliva from Pavlov's dog when the bell rings. No, Lessing is not talking down to us, nor is he raising people to an undeserved pedestal. He is not handing out pills from the pharmacy, "*Zur goldene Utopie*", where the majority of our intellectuals still go to get their sedatives. Lessing considered himself an Enlightenment philosopher, but had recognized the flip side of the Enlightenment long before Horckheimer and Adorno.

Lessing, although dead for over sixty years, is still passing on bad news to those born after him. He tells us what has happened to us across the gulf of the past. Without a time machine, he transports himself into the future and writes:

"*But we the people, around the year 1950, out of arrogance and self-righteousness, have made this mechanism for coping with life the master of life, indeed its substitute and representative, and now we live like puppets and machines for it and through it. Thus nature has taken revenge for the fact that it has become man's material value and object. The element of life is transformed into the play of mechanical forces.*"

Does that sound like an anti-intellectual impulse? I call it anticipatory clairvoyance. An unparalleled lucidity, albeit of an uncomfortable and unpleasant kind.

"*As the last link*," the prophet continues, *"in a long chain of laborious and scientific discoveries, we have recently succeeded in developing time- and space-transcending vision and hearing so that we will probably one day be able to overpower the whole earth, regardless of the immediate presence of the living . . . The whole human world can then persist as an automaton . . . And such is the realization of an earth in which God became man and man an immortal God.*"

Contrary to the belief in progress of his time, Lessing uses very personal language to warn of a future into which we have been inexorably bound, disabled. Of course warnings always come too late, because they are misjudged and suppressed the moment they are uttered. This, too, is the nature of our collective knowledge, which knows nothing of itself. Lessing offers the additionally bleak insight that the crowd loves the transfigurer and kills the enlightener - of which his own fate is an example.

Whether enlightenment in Lessing's spirit is possible at all, namely enlightenment *ex negativo*, is probably questionable anyway. We know what happens to the bearers of bad news.

Lessing was also aware of this, and so he summarized the expected treatment of his work in the sentence: "*Posterity is always repeated by our fellow man*." And if that were not the case? What if Lessing had become a bestselling author during his lifetime? Would German history have taken a different course?

Tired, purely rhetorical questions. For irrefutable truths ultimately prove their impartiality and serve as an alibi for the resignation of those who bravely face them. Lessing’s verdict that all cultural achievement is just compensation for suffering, both physical and mental, applies to every philosophy, whether affirming or destructive. Ultimately, every cultural asset finds its utilization and exploiters. The ineffectiveness of Lessing's work is already "pre-programmed" in the way he himself predicted its reception. What is admirable about Lessing is his "nevertheless," his "even-so;" his resistance both to the overwhelming agenda and gearing of a society that has been transformed into a machine. The title to one of his texts pronounces this fearless attitude in a single sentence:

"*I threw a message-in-a-bottle into the icy sea of history*."

A message-in-a-bottle can only ever reach people individually, never the entirety of them, otherwise it would lose its message. It certainly reached me. And in deciphering its message, I experienced a strengthening of myself, as if it were an elixir. The message is: Do not be afraid! However and whoever you are, you are not alone. That's all you can expect from a message-in-a-bottle.