

Wilhelm Liebknecht, “Yes, We Want to Destroy What Our Enemies Call ‘Culture,’ ‘Civilization’” (October 22, 1871)

Abstract

Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900) was a co-founder of the German Social Democratic movement and a close associate of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and August Bebel. Together with Bebel, Liebknecht co-founded the Saxon People’s Party in 1866 and the Social Democratic Workers’ Party in 1869. Elected to the Reichstag of the North German Confederation in 1867, Liebknecht and Bebel opposed the granting of war credits during the Franco-Prussian War. For their “treasonous” actions the two men were tried in Leipzig in 1872 and sent to prison for two years. A few months before that trial, Liebknecht delivered the speech excerpted here to his followers in Chemnitz, Saxony. The “culture” and “civilization” Liebknecht wants to destroy is an educational system based on servitude and repression. Instead, he advocates schools that are genuine *Volksschulen*—schools for the people.

Source

[...]

In a few sentences, I want to quickly address the first accusation that I am faced with—that we are the “barbarians of the nineteenth century,” that we want to “destroy our culture,” and that the victory of Social Democracy equals the “downfall of civilization.”

A party that aims to make universal education free for the people and that wants in general to make all educational institutions free cannot feel that this accusation applies to it. However, in a certain respect, we must plead guilty as charged.

Yes, we want to destroy what our opponents call “culture” and “civilization.” We want to destroy servitude and oppression, we want to destroy the seeds of hatred and discord sown among men, we want to destroy the ignorance, the spiritual night into which the vast majority of our brothers have fallen. — Yes, gentlemen of the bourgeoisie, we want to destroy ignorance, we enemies of your culture! Your culture is precisely the opposite of culture: it can save itself only by condemning the people to stupidity, by brazenly withholding from them the treasures of true culture, by closing the temple of education to them. To open this temple to the people, that is our endeavor: science, which you make the monopoly of a chosen few, and for which you will not spare a crumb of bread if it does not flatter your whims, indulge your self-interest—we want to make science the common property of all. And this is to be done by a system of genuine elementary schools—not rote learning as is the rule at public schools today, which make a mockery of the name; not elementary schools whose teachers are starved physically and whose pupils are starved spiritually, and which throw to the children of the poor a few meager crumbs which are not even remotely sufficient to nourish the spirit—not elementary schools in which the lowest measure of knowledge is taught—no, elementary schools in the true meaning of the word, schools for the people, which impart to all children the highest possible measure of education, which awaken and develop in each child all the aptitudes, and do not, as today, stop at an age where real education only begins. Socialism: “hostile to culture”! Because it allows every talent the possibility to develop? A tremendous lever of cultural progress lies in this mere fact of real popular education!

Talents are evenly distributed among people—this is a truth that science has raised above all doubt, and to which we must adhere because it forms the basis of the socialist and democratic worldview; but

today's society allows only the fewest to develop their gifts, and even to these few, with rare exceptions, gives only a one-sided, crippled education. T[he] vast majority of talents are now completely stifled.

One often wonders why in certain epochs so many important men are made. These are precisely epochs in which slumbering talents are given the opportunity to express themselves and to be active; this is especially the case in revolutionary epochs, which call for new forces to defend new ideas and institutions. Take, for example, the mass of great statesmen, orators and generals who characterized the French Revolution. In such times there is no more talent than in ordinary times, but—to use an economic expression—there is more demand for talent.

Opportunity not only makes thieves, it also makes “great men.”

A “great man” is an ordinary man who has had the opportunity to become “great.” This is only to show how infinitely our culture must be improved if society would one day consider it its highest task to bring the talents of all to the highest possible development. In other words, the highest possible level of education for all!

We want to make science accessible and free to all; it should no longer be shackled, its service no longer condemned to material poverty or intellectual prostitution. Yes, we want to destroy your culture—we want to destroy it because it is hostile to true culture; because it is incompatible with true civilization; because it forces science to sell itself to wealth and power; because, based on injustice, it is thoroughly immoral, and has added the prostitution of science to the prostitution of woman—the prostitution of woman, the ugliest stain of our fake culture.

[...]

Source: Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Zu Trutz und Schutz. Festrede, gehalten zum Stiftungsfest des Crimmitschauer Volksvereins am 22. Oktober 1871*, fourth edition. Leipzig, Genossenschaftsbuchdruckerei, 1874, pp. 33–35.

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