

Georg Wedekind, “Appeal to Fellow Citizens,” delivered to the Society of the Friends of the People in Mainz (October 27, 1792)

Abstract

Georg Wedekind (1761-1831) was a physician who had studied in Göttingen and subsequently entered the service of the Archbishop of Mainz, one of the three ecclesiastical (Catholic) Electors of the Holy Roman Empire and the ruler of an important territorial principality in southwest Germany. Following the French occupation of the electorate during the war of 1792 (pitting the principal German powers against France), pro-revolutionary activists, including Wedekind and Georg Forster, formed the Mainz Jacobin Club and proceeded to organize a democratic republic in place of the toppled ecclesiastical regime. Their efforts found considerable backing among the German population, which participated widely in the first broad-based modern election in German history, creating the “Rhenish-German National Convention” of February 1793, which sought to govern the new republic. But the highhandedness of French occupation officials and local religious conservatism, among other factors, weakened popular support for the new regime, which then was swept away in 1793 by the German reconquest of the electorate, in the wake of which the Jacobin activists suffered persecution. Wedekind survived to pursue a successful career as court physician in Hessen, medical reformer, and liberal publicist. Here he pillories the regime of the deposed Archbishop Erthal and urges, in Enlightenment rhetoric, the adoption of democratic self-government.

Source

I am having this appeal printed because my fellow citizens desire it, because I think that I must do so. A man who speaks every day to the people, as I do, should not be judged like someone who rarely appears in public. Moreover, it is not as easy to write in a popular way as is believed by many of the gentlemen who know how to write beautifully, elegantly, and sublimely.

I am trying to learn this, for otherwise I would be of little use, and I ask others that they also learn this soon and show me how to do it.

Mainz gains from a *revolution*, the Mainzers are duty bound to undertake a *revolution*, and anyone who counsels them to a mere improvement of their old constitution counsels them badly.

There are still some among us, my brothers, who say: Wherefore a change to our old constitution? We are content. Others say: a change of our constitution is impossible, or it would at least entail so many evil consequences that would far outweigh the good brought about by revolution. Others say: we do not want a revolution, no complete abolition of our old constitution, but merely its improvement. Finally, still others believe that a revolution, indeed a mere change of our current form of government, is impermissible and contrary to our duty.

I want to reveal to you all my thoughts about these things, and may you in return be good enough to freely speak your opinion.

First let us examine whether Mainz would gain from a revolution.

What I have I do not need to win in the first place. And so the question is again: Does our current

constitution have flaws? – Already a few observations will convince you that it does.

Until now, our state of Mainz has been an *elective monarchy*, that is, it stood under the nearly absolute will of a prince not chosen by the people, but by a certain number of noble clerics.

Here I note straightaway the following, major flaws in our constitution.

Every government that is headed by a regent is flawed, that is, all monarchies are worthless.

The proof is:

1. A *single* man by himself is unfit to lead a government, because he is subject to all the fates that can befall individual people. The ruler can thus fall ill, go crazy, he can degenerate into a voluptuary and a wastrel; he can be too old, too young, and so on. If that happens, the state is in a bad way. One example is *Friedrich Karl Joseph Erthal*. At the beginning of his reign, he acted the hypocrite, and thereafter he became a voluptuary and a wastrel. For several years, he suffered from hypochondria, and this had the sad effect of throwing everything into confusion. People who were bandits plundered the land, and intrigue ruled.

2. A *single* man cannot possess all the knowledge necessary for a government that is, after all, supposed to bring about the best for people who are so varied and pursue their trade in such various ways, for it is impossible that a single man could assess the varied interests of so many thousands of subjects. – You can readily see that. – “But” (you will say), “for that every prince has his councils, they must understand the matter.” Well, then; however, if the councils are to run the government, the prince is superfluous.

3. Every prince is a person like other people. Now, every person has his private ambition and private interests, which are very often quite opposed to the interests of the subjects. The following may serve as an example: It was surely not in the interest of the Mainzers that the Elector became so closely involved with the aristocrats that he caroused with them, that he sought to incite all other great lords against them, that he sent 2,000 of his faithful subjects to Speyer to the slaughterhouse and into captivity. His mere vanity was the cause of all this. He wanted to act like a *big man*, he wanted to make himself into the protector of the former kings of France, the former princes, and the former French nobility. That flattered his ambition. The French ladies played their part as well, as did the half-French Lady of *Coudenhoven*. And thus, blinded by his vanity, he forgot the welfare of his subjects. In fact, the archchancellorship in the so-called German Empire was dearer to his heart than the governance of his country, because it was more flattering to his lust for fame. Instead of spending so much time with legations, he should have visited the huts of his miserable subjects in the Eichsfeld and the Spessart. All the lofty business he conducted as archchancellor brought no benefit to his subjects, but it did bring debts. Was it not also his vanity that made him send nearly all of his soldiers to Lüttich to return to slavery a people who were oppressed by a bad prince and whose cause was so just?

4. *The law is to be the expression of the general will of the nation.* But how can a *single* man discern and evaluate this general will, even if he wanted to? “Through his councils?” Oh, certainly not. These people have their private interests, and they have to flatter his lordship, have to say what he likes to hear, so that they will remain in good standing, so that they will receive their bonuses. And then the councils, too, are not able to correctly assess the interests of the subjects, because they deem themselves too exalted to have dealings with them. Who has ever seen a councilor and a craftsman peasant socializing together? The people hardly know each other. Who does not know that the lord councilors are ashamed to go to public places, where the citizens of the common people, as they call them, congregate? And such people, who consider it a disgrace to get to know the citizens better, are supposed to govern the land? Citizens, open your eyes, do not be blind to your own advantage. Remember a certain councilor who spoke rudely to you or even threatened you with the dungeon when you had complaints to bring.

5. Nearly all princes look at their lands like the landowner looks upon his estate. All that matters is that the land yields much for his lordship. An even better comparison: the prince looks upon his subjects as the factory owner (as factory owner) looks upon his factory workers. All arrangements have to be made such that the factory workers earn much for the factory owner. As long as that purpose is attained, everything is fine. Whether the factory workers are happy is of no concern to the factory owner (as factory owner). This kind of thing, my brothers, may be acceptable in a factory; but a land must not be looked upon as a factory. For that, the citizens have not placed the power into the hands of the ruler. They want to be brought up as happy, healthy, joyful, reasonable people. But you now find that the government sees everything with cameralistic eyes. Good institutions cannot arise if they yield nothing for the treasury, that is, the prince's purse. Reading, writing, and arithmetic at most, and a superficial knowledge of the religion of the land is all that is taught the common man, lest he become too smart. This diabolical principle, that the subject should not become too smart, that he should remain as stupid as possible, this infernal maxim you hear everywhere.

6. It is true that there have also been good princes, even though the good prince, too, because he is only *one* person, can never govern a land well. But how many exceedingly bad princes have there been by comparison? What one prince has put in order, the other destroys. Most are under the influence of their confessors, mistresses, valets, personal physicians, and so on. Most, indeed, nearly all princes are people who were badly raised, who never got to know the burgher and the peasant, who from childhood on were spoiled by flattery, who were made to believe from their earliest youth that they were a class of beings greater than the rest of us poor mortals. What can one expect from such corrupted people?

7. Another flaw lies in the fact that our princes in Mainz are elected from the cathedral chapter. What kind of people are these? I do not fail to acknowledge the merits of some among them. Most canons, however, are ignorant people, who do nothing more than stuff themselves, drink, and whore. They are not accustomed to work, and what they are to receive they are given without any effort on their part. How can one expect wise government from such people, how can one believe that such priests of the belly can judge the needs of the subject? – Most electors of Mainz thought about how to enrich their family, for which they built palaces and heaped up capital – When a new elector comes to power, everything is topsy-turvy; in part because the new prince wants to make a show of himself but usually does not know how to do it, in part because now a different aunt or a different cousin has the say. And so you can most certainly expect that if a new lord assumes the government, nearly all the good things the predecessor may have put in place will be suppressed again.

8. A third flaw is that our princes were *clerics*. Prince and priest do not belong together, however. *Jesus* told the Jews who wanted to make him king: My kingdom is not of this world. You would find it ludicrous if I told you about a land in which the cathedral chapter was made up entirely of physicians, and where the elector necessarily always had to be a physician. It is exceedingly dangerous, however, to combine the spiritual and the worldly honor. He who has the worldly power in his hands all too readily abuses the spiritual power in an evil way. Coercion of conscience is introduced, and the people must simply believe what the gracious lord deems good. With one hand the lord cleans out the people's purse, with the other he gives them a blessing. He makes it so that the people believe him to be a true successor to the apostles whom the Lord God appointed, endowed with special power, and whom they must obey blindly. If the gracious lord has got it to that point, he can do what he wants. See, that is why *Jesus* did not want to combine the spiritual with the worldly power. He wanted each priest to support himself with his work, just as the apostles were all artisans and continued to pursue their craft. The Lord *Jesus*, were he to be resurrected here among us, would surely find fault with the fact that people who call themselves his successors keep a large guard, chamberlains, generals, stablemen, heiducks, and so forth, when he, the Son of Man, hardly had a place to lay down his head. Imagine, I ask you again, imagine a successor of *Christ* on earth who comes rolling along in a state carriage, and who so degrades humans dressed like fools that they must run ahead of him like dogs.

And so I believe I have shown that it is unwise to place the government into the hands of a *single* person, especially a *priest*.

[...]

Source: Georg Wedekind, “Anrede an seine Mitbürger,” gehalten in der Gesellschaft der Volksfreunde zu Mainz, (October 27, 1792), in C. Träger, ed., *Mainz zwischen Rot und Schwartz*. Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1963, pp. 161–67; reprinted in Jost Hermand, ed., *Von deutscher Republik 1775-1795. Texte radikaler Demokraten*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1968, pp. 142–48.

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