

Konrad Engelbert Oelsner, “What May Be Hoped for from Freedom” (1794)

Abstract

Konrad Engelbert Oelsner, a well-educated merchant’s son from Prussian Silesia, gravitated to Paris in 1790 and became an important reporter for the liberal German press on the French Revolution, for whose cause he suffered persecution before 1806 in Prussia. Here, he expresses his expectation that a regime of political liberty will bring an end to harsh social discipline, self-abnegation in physical labor, and emotional repression. The text exemplifies the utopian force of late Enlightenment and French revolutionary radicalism, from which Karl Marx later drew inspiration.

Source

What May Be Hoped for from Freedom

I love liberty because I love contentedness. No longer will anyone step onto the neck of someone else because of his birth; all will walk upright, no one will be compelled to crawl anymore. One will be able to converse about everything that concerns our interests without holding back, to speak, write, and act more boldly; our mind will enrich itself in manifold ways, our way of thinking will become enlarged and ennobled. Agriculture, industry, and the arts will be released from their fetters; all labor will belong to its natural owner. Prosperity will spread over the entire mass of my fellow citizens. I will see few hungry and naked, and rarely so. The people will dress better and eat better. No mismarriages will be possible any longer. The rich will choose the well-bred daughter of the poor without blushing. The strapping young farmer will make the respectable young women happier than would a debauched Marquis. The children from such a marriage will be active farmers, managers, stewards, or also judicious representatives. Without shame, the poor *Ludwigsritter* will trade in the sword that has brought him so little fortune for the ell. The wealth of the former duke will flow in equal streams over his heirs. They will set up factories, improve the culture, and seek to earn the respect of their fellow citizens through contributions to the public good. No prejudice will stand any longer against this or that honorable work; every step that is not dishonorable will be permitted. Marriages and births will be independent of the willfulness of the parents and the censors of the priests. No cruel law will fuse free hearts together for a lifetime under the yoke of honor. With a more even distribution of the gifts of fortune, there will be fewer insolent desires, and fewer debased slaves.

The priests will cease to be tyrants over conscience. Everyone may use them as they wish, to the degree that they find pleasure in sleights-of-hand and the conjurer’s arts, to the extent that they have confidence in the hocus pocus of the coffee cup, to the extent that he feels sick. The healthy man needs no doctor, and the reasonable man does not go to a quack. Education will be independent of them and therefore better, no theological monstrosities, no false concepts will be crammed in any longer, knowledge that we have to forget if we want to make our way in the world as educated people. Because in the future everyone will be working, each individual person will have less to do, we will thus devote more time to science and the arts, will listen to and watch more and more beautiful concerts and plays.

This is what we can rightly expect of freedom, what it promises to achieve, and what it will accomplish. In fact, if it pursues a different goal, I do not want it. There are people who want to deny us all culture, reduce us to only the most indispensable needs; they are fools chasing a chimera that can make many unhappy, and for which civic society is not destined.

Source: Konrad Engelbert Oelsner, “Erwartungen, welche Freiheit hoffen läßt”, in *Bruchstücke aus den Papieren eines Augenzeugen und unparteiischen Beobachters der französischen Revolution*, 1794; source: Jost Hermand, ed., *Von deutscher Republik 1775–1795. Texte radikaler Demokraten*, Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1968, pp. 225–27.

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