

Kurt Tucholsky, “We Nay-Sayers” (March 1919)

Abstract

Writer and critic Kurt Tucholsky (1890-1935) was not only one of the most important publicists of the Weimar Republic, but also one of the most astute and eloquent observers of political developments in Germany. From 1913, numerous articles by him were published in the theater magazine *Schaubühne*, which had been founded in 1905. During the First World War the magazine also began to cover political topics, and in 1918, it was renamed *Weltbühne* to reflect this thematic expansion. After the sudden death of its publisher Siegfried Jacobsohn, Tucholsky took over the editorship in 1926. Politically, *Weltbühne* supported the November Revolution and subsequently the Republic, and during the Weimar period it adopted an anti-militaristic, pacifist stance that urged reconciliation with former enemies.

In this article from March 1919, Tucholsky responds to criticism leveled at *Weltbühne* for being too negative in its articles on German politics and society. The magazine had reported critically on the SPD's collaboration with the Reichswehr and on the continued existence of the old elites, especially among civil servants, who were mostly hostile to the republic.

Four months after the revolution of 1918/19, which brought an end to the monarchy and paved the way for the founding of the Republic, Tucholsky enumerates the persistent social and political liabilities of the postwar period, which stood in the way of the realization of democracy in Germany. At this point, two months had passed since the elections to the National Assembly, which had taken up its work on February 6, 1919 and was working on drafting the future constitution of the Republic.

Source

We Nay-Sayers

How gentle and tender it is herel It wills well-being, and quiet enjoyment, and mild pleasures for itself, for others, for all. This is the theme of Anacreon. Thus by allurements and flattery it works its way into life; but when it is in life, then misery introduces crime, and crime misery; horror and desolation fill the scene. This is the theme of Aeschylus. SCHOPENHAUER^[1]

We at the *Weltbühne* are always being reproached for saying no to everything and not being positive enough. We only reject and criticize and even foul our own German nest. And we have fought—this is taken to be the worst—hate with hate, violence with violence, fist with fist.

The people airing their views in this magazine are in fact always the same ones. And it bears pointing out for once how sincerely we all agree, even though we barely know each other. Some issues of the *Weltbühne* have every appearance of having been created in long editorial meetings, but the truth is that the editor produced them altogether on his own. It therefore seems to me that the reproach that we are negative applies to intellectually independent men, innocent of mutual influence. But are we negative? Are we really?

I want finally to pull out all the drawers of our German dresser to see what is to be found in them.

The revolution. If revolution means merely collapse, then it was one; but no one should expect the ruins to look any different from the old building. We have suffered failure and hunger, and those responsible just walked away. And the people remain: they had their old flags torn down, but had no new ones.

The bourgeois citizen. Citizenship is—how often this has been misunderstood!—a classification of the

spirit; one is a citizen by virtue of predisposition not birth, and least of all on account of profession. These middle-class citizens of Germany are antidemocratic through and through—their like scarcely exist in any other country—and that is the seat of all misery. It simply is not true that they were oppressed before the revolution; it was their deepest need to look up from below, eyes true as a dog's, to submit to forcible correction and to feel the strong hand of God's guardians! Now the guardians are gone and the citizens are chilled by their sense that something is missing. The censor has been abolished; obedient, they continue to pray the old prayers, babbling anxiously as if nothing had happened. They know no middle between patriarchal domination and the banditry of a degenerate bolshevism, for they are unfree. They accept everything so long as they are allowed to continue earning money. And to that we are supposed to say yes?

The officer. We have demonstrated in these pages why and to what extent the German officer failed in the war, and of what betrayal of his people he is guilty. It is not a matter of social status—attacks against a collective are always unjust—but a matter of the bad spirit that animates the status and has eaten its way deep into the citizenry. The lieutenant's and his—we still say it—spirit was a German ideal, and the reserve officer needed little time to grow into the uniform. It was the infernal desire to tread upon one's fellows without penalty, the German desire to appear to be more in service than one was in private life, the gratification of putting on airs for the wife or the lover; and down below grovels a human being. A certain devotion to duty (in a spirit that also characterized many of his subordinates) should not be denied, but duty was done, often enough, only on the basis of insatiability and the worst sort of avarice. The young gentlemen into whose character I acquired some insight during the war made no outstanding impression. But it is not, of course, a matter merely of individuals, and you can't expect improvement if no one says so now! Now, for later, it makes no sense; now, for later, once the new army is established, it would be superfluous to leaf once more through the sins of the old regime. It must be hammered into the Germans that it must never happen again, and the message must be given to all, for indeed it was not the sin of particular reactionary circles but of all: all were involved! The wretchedness of the soldier—and with it the wretchedness of all “underlings” in Germany—was not a consequence of political conviction: it was one of too little culture. The worst instincts were awakened in the unchained citizens of the middle class; the state filled them with the authority of a superior. They did not deserve it. And to that we should say yes?

The civil servant. What do you think of an administration in which the civil servant is more important than the procedures and the procedures more important than the thing in question? How the old apparatus creaks and how impressively it swaggers! What a bother it was with all those offices and little desk sitters! What rapture when one could give orders! Of all the other offices—and there really were so many—the sitter in this one was stifled: now for once he gets his chancel. Meanwhile the thing itself drowned in regulations and decrees; the little cabals and the constant frictions took up entire human lives. And the taxpayer was defenseless against his own creation. And to that we should say yes?

The politician. Politics in this country can be defined as the accomplishment of economic goals by means of legislation. Politics here was a matter of venal office holding, not of the spirit. It was reeled off and pulled apart in precinct clubs, and, against the workers, everyone else stood as one. Forgotten was the spirit, the basis for arriving at proposals and laws; forgotten the underlying mentality that, stimulus and motive in one, was what made what one wanted understandable and explicable. The diplomat of the old school proved a poor manager; “he lacks a modern spirit,” everyone said. Now the businessman is to take his place. But he lacks it too. There commenced a wild overestimation of the economic. Feudal remnants and traders tussled over influence in the state, which in reality was supposed to devolve upon each under the leadership of the intellectuals. And to that we should say yes?

The screeches of the middle-class citizen, to whom proper politics is nothing more than interference in business, do not surprise us. That intellectuals inveigh against us does. Where is the knowledge of the

intellect ultimately to lead if its carriers do not for once clamber down from the heights of wisdom to apply its results to daily life and attempt to form the latter in its image? Nothing is more embarrassing or hated among the Germans than intellectuality become concrete. You are permitted everything: to advance the most dangerous demands *in abstracto*, to foment theoretical revolutions, to depose dear God himself—but the tax laws, they would rather keep that to themselves. They have an uncannily delicate scent and the most reliable instinct for everything capable of disturbing their dreary industriousness; their mistrust is immense, their antipathy insurmountable. They literally smell whether your loves and hates get along with their colonial import shops. If they don't: God have mercy on you!

Here we have a case of will confronting will. No result, no goal on this earth is won according to the logic of proof *ex argumentis*. The goal favored by the emotions is everywhere established in advance; the arguments follow as apology to the mind, as a parlor game for the intellect. Never yet has one persuaded the other with logic. Will confronts will here: as to the goals, we are agreed with others of reasonable mind—I believe what they struggle against in us does not concern the struggle but the tactics.

But how should we approach low-browed louts and iron-hard farm hands except with clubs? That has been the great misery and distress of this country for centuries: that one presumed it possible to acquire unequivocal force with piercing intellect. If those of us who have peered behind the scenes, those of us who believe that the world as it is cannot be the ultimate goal of humanity, have no executor of our intellectual disposition, then we are damned eternally to live our lives with journeymen hawking their wares, where there remains to us only permission to stroll among our books, ink, and paper. It is so endlessly fruitless, if one wants to build, to believe it possible to forego the negative activity of tearing down. Let us be concrete. A speech by [Friedrich] Naumann in Weimar obligates us to absolutely nothing; the resolution of some local council reveals the citizen in all his nakedness.

The unqualified solidarity of all money-earners must be opposed by the equally unqualified solidarity of the intellectuals. It will not do to perform a theater of struggle before grinning citizens; such mere appearance prompts them only to pose their incessant questions: may we continue to haggle or may we not? May we go on profiteering in our cliques and coteries or may we not? Only the prompting will be heard, no metaphysical truth and no critical error.

Has everything already been forgotten? Are we already slipping back into our comfortable trot where peace and quiet is the first and final duty? Already the stale saying is everywhere stirring the air: "It could not have been that bad." "Your good husband has died from pneumonia?" says the man, "well, it could not have been that bad!"

It was that bad. And surely no one would attempt again to claim that the "pioneer work of the German businessman" will "get us out of it!" We are ridiculed the world over for having hidden our best talents deep in the countryside and for having sent our mediocre ones abroad. But already the voices make themselves heard, those trying to persuade the German that everything will set itself right, if he would only deliver cheap goods. That is not what we want! We no longer want to be used because our young people have underbid everyone else in foreign parts, and because everyone here toiled but did not work. We want to be respected for our own sake.

To be respected in the world we must first undertake a thorough cleaning at home. Are we fouling our own nest? But an Augean stable cannot be fouled, and it is nonsense to put an old hayloft on a crumbling roof and then sound the national anthem from above.

We should make positive proposals. But all the positive proposals in the world come to naught if a genuine honesty does not pervade the land. The reforms we have in mind are not to be achieved through regulations, nor through new national agencies from which everyone today, each within his own specialization, anticipates salvation. We do not believe it suffices to establish a great card catalogue and

an extensive personnel and then work the field with it. We believe that what is essential in the world exists behind the scenes and that a decent cast of mind can come to terms with every regulation, even with the worst, and deal with it. Without it, however, nothing is accomplished.

What we need is this decent cast of mind.

We cannot yet say yes. We cannot reinforce a consciousness that forgets from on high the humanity in human beings. We cannot encourage a people to do its duty only because for every toiler a mirage of honor has been created that only hinders essential work. We cannot say yes to a people who remain today in the frame of mind that, had the war somehow come to a happier end, would have justified our worst fears. We cannot say yes to a country obsessed with collectives and for whom corporate bodies are elevated far above the individual. Collectives merely provide assistance to the individual. We cannot say yes to those whose fruits are now displayed by the younger generation: a lukewarm and vapid species infected with an infantile hunger for power at home and an indifference toward things abroad, more devoted to bars than to bravery, with unspeakable antipathy for all *Sturm und Drang*—no longer bearable today—without fire and without dash, without hate and without love. We are supposed to walk, but our legs are bound with cords. We cannot yet say yes.

Persons utterly devoid of appreciation for a will to rise above daily concerns—here in Germany one calls them *Realpolitiker*—oppose us because we see no salvation in compromise, because we see no salvation in new insignias and new documents of state. We know that ideals cannot be realized, but we also know that nothing has happened, nothing has changed, nothing has been achieved without the fire of ideals. And—precisely this, and correctly, seems a danger to our opponents—we do not believe that the flame of ideals is merely to glow decoratively among the stars. It must burn among us; it must burn in forgotten cellars where the wood louse lives, and burn on the palace rooftops of the rich, burn in the churches where rationalism is busy subverting the old miracles, and burn among the money changers who have made of their little stalls a temple.

We cannot yet say yes. We know only this: with brooms of iron, right now and today we must sweep away whatever in Germany is and has been rotten and born of evil. We will get nowhere hiding our heads in cloth of black, white, and red, whispering anxiously: later, my good sir, later! no fuss just now!

Now.

It is ridiculous to reproach a new movement, now four months old, with having failed to produce the same positive accomplishments of a tradition of three hundred years. We know that.

We confront a Germany full of unrivaled corruption, full of profiteers and sneaks, full of three hundred thousand devils among whom each assumes the right to secure his black self from the effects of revolution. But we mean him, precisely him, and only him.

And we have the opportunity of choice: do we fight him with love or do we fight him with hate? We want to fight with hate out of love. With hate against that fellow who has dared to drink the blood of his countrymen as one drinks wine, raising a glass to his own health and to that of his friends. With hate against the clique to which the disproportionate snatching up of property and the misery of cottage workers appears to be the will of God, which orders proofs from professors purchased for the task that it must be so, and which celebrates friendly idylls on the bent backs of others who languish. We fight in any case with hate. But we fight out of love for the oppressed, who are not always necessarily proletarians, and we love in humans the thought of humanity.

Negative? For four and a half years we have been hearing that terrible yes that called good everything that insolent arrogance ordered done. How delightful was the world! How everything worked, how all were *d'accord*, one heart and no soul; how the artificially adorned landscape moved with uniformed

puppets to the glory of our masters! It was the theme of Anacreon. And with a thundering crash it all collapsed, what one earlier thought was iron wasn't even cast iron; the generals get started with their self-justifications, of which they have no need at all, for no one wants to take responsibility; and the revolutionaries, who came too late and were checked too early, are accused of having caused the misery on which in truth generations had been at work. Negative? Blood and misery and wounds and trampled humanity—it should at least not have been for nothing. Let us continue to say no when necessary. It is the theme of Aeschylus.

NOTES

[1] ¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E. F. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 569.

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