

Count Arthur von Posadowsky-Wehner Calls for a Virtuous Renewal of Bourgeois Society (1905)

Abstract

The Silesian estate owner Arthur von Posadowsky-Wehner (1845-1932), a member of the Free Conservative Party [*Freikonservative*], rose from local politics in Silesia to the Prussian House of Representatives and, in 1897, to State Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior and Vice-Chancellor. During his term in office, government policy toward the Social Democrats changed from legal repression and discrimination to social legislation that sought reconciliation with the workers' movement by implementing some of the SPD's political demands. In close cooperation with the Catholic Center Party [*Zentrumspartei*], Posadowsky-Wehner worked out reforms of the pension and accident insurance systems and paved the way for the Child Protection Act [*Kinderschutzgesetz*] passed in 1903, which sought to curb some of the abuses of child labor in factories as well as in other trades. Posadowsky-Wehner's support for these policies cost him support from Conservatives and National Liberals, however, and after disagreements with Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, he resigned from his offices in 1907. Still, he remained active in politics and—skeptical of the new Republic—even ran against Friedrich Ebert as the conservative candidate for Reich President in 1919.

In this excerpt from a speech Posadowsky-Wehner gave in the Reichstag in 1905, he calls for the “spiritual and moral renewal” of civil society (namely, of respectable citizens, i.e. the middle class) which should give up its materialistic mindset. Only in this way, he argues, could the propertied classes regain their influence and authority, and thereby overcome the threat posed by social democracy. This short excerpt makes it clear that Posadowsky-Wehner's social reform policies came not just from moral motives but were also a maneuver to pull voters away from the SPD.

Source

Bourgeois society will not overcome social democracy with grand words, but only by looking within itself, by abandoning its materialistic standpoint, and by allowing a greater degree of moral seriousness to enter into the whole life of bourgeois society. At the beginning of the sixteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, we experienced periods in which a great moral and spiritual purification process came over the German people. And it is actually thanks to this spiritual rebirth of the German people in those two great periods that we have come to have a German nation-state. I hope, and it is imperative, that the German people will once again experience such a spiritual and moral rebirth, full of self-sacrifice and selflessness for the great tasks of the age. Then the propertied classes in Germany and bourgeois society will gain the influence and gravitas that they must possess in every state and under every constitution, despite any electoral system, and which they indeed possess in every civilized state.

Source: Arthur Graf von Posadowsky-Wehner, Reichstag speech, December 12, 1905. Recorded 1928. Stiftung Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv

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