

“War Hysteria”: No Earthly Justification Excuses the Capitulation of Reason to Public Opinion

Enlighten fellow human beings, strengthen them, dissolve irrational fears

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Theme: [History](#)

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At the outbreak of the First World War, Romain Rolland (1), the French Nobel laureate for literature, spoke out in passionate appeals, articles and letters against the war hysteria and chauvinism of the Germans and the French. Hatred of war, which distances peoples from each other and destroys love, was a leitmotif in Rolland’s work. For him, however one justifies the origin of war, with whatever theses and reasons one explains it, it was certain: “No earthly justification excuses the capitulation of reason to public opinion.” (2)

More than 100 years later, we citizens of the West are once again confronted with war hysteria and a deeply racist US-dominated public opinion that makes a mockery of all common sense. Yet again, the common sense of many fellow citizens capitulates to the prevailing opinions and judgements about the Russian people and their president – who has now even been cleared for firing. This fatal behaviour of fellow citizens will only change when we have enough “enlighteners” and “free spirits” to take away people’s individual and collective prejudices and irrational fears and strengthen them.

The sinking of the individual soul into the abyss of the mass soul

In his anti-war novel “Clerambault – History of a Free Conscience in War” (3), Romain Rolland introduces the reader to the incipient mass psychosis before the First World War on the French side. That was over 100 years ago. It is worthwhile to take the time to read about that time again and compare it with today. For Rolland, the war resembles a “cosmic crisis”, a “phenomenon of collective pathology”. In the introduction to his novel, he clarifies:

“The subject of this book is not war, although war overshadows it. Its real subject is the sinking of the individual soul into the abyss of the mass soul. And this, to my mind, is a much more decisive phenomenon for the future of humanity than the temporary supremacy of one nation or another.” (S.11)

Rolland's novel is a call for the necessary struggle of personal conscience against the masses. One page later he calls for learning to "think for all alone":

"Whoever wants to be of use to others must first be free. Love, too, is worthless as long as it is that of a slave. Free souls, strong characters – that is what the world needs most today!" (...) Dare to separate yourselves from the flock that draws you away! Every human being, if he is a true human being, must learn to stand alone within all, to think alone for all – if necessary, even against all! To think sincerely means to think for all, even if one thinks against all. Humanity needs those who offer it chess out of love and rebel against it when it is necessary! You serve humanity not by falsifying your conscience and your thoughts for the sake of humanity, but by defending its sanctity against social abuse of power; for they are organs of humanity. If you become unfaithful to yourselves, you are unfaithful to them. Siders, March 1917, R. R." (p. 12f.)

In the second part of his novel, Rolland vividly describes a phenomenon that we can also observe in discussions today: The protagonist of the novel tries to win his fellow citizens over to the anti-war idea, but he always encounters mechanisms of partly unconscious resistance from his discussion partners:

"Clerambault tried to talk to one or the other. But everywhere he encountered the same mechanism of subterranean, half unconscious resistance. They were all iron-girded with the will not to understand, or actually with a persistent counter-will. Their reason was as little touched by counter-arguments as a duck is by water. In general, people are equipped with a quite inestimable quality for the purpose of their comfort, namely, they can make themselves blind and deaf if they wish, if they do not want to see or hear something. And if by some embarrassing chance they have already noticed something that is annoying to them, they know the art of immediately forgetting it again. How many citizens there were in all the fatherlands who knew exactly how things stood with regard to mutual responsibility in the war, who knew exactly the fatal role of their political leaders, but they preferred to deceive themselves and pretend that they knew nothing about it. In the end, they even managed to believe the exact opposite." (4)

Enlighten people, empower them and dissolve irrational fears

People's reason will no longer capitulate to public opinion only when there will be enough enlightened people who will be able to take away from the broad masses of people those individual and collective prejudices that are the ideological background of humanity's catastrophes. More than ever, therefore, we need "free spirits" to teach us what is truth and what is a lie. In this, the intellectual has a much greater responsibility than one would generally like to admit, because it would be his duty to think for other people and to proclaim freedom in general with the freedom of thought.

In the past two years, unscrupulous financial sharks, together with the eugenicist from Davos and the politicians and corporate media in bondage to them, have "successfully" stirred up irrational fears of an agonising death by suffocation among the people. Church leaders did not oppose this. The intended effect did not fail to materialise: Due to the prevailing religious and authoritarian upbringing, most people look up to politicians like children and therefore they reacted to the unleashed fears of the supposed authorities with an absolute obedience reflex.

Today, due to the irresponsible political actions of immoral and power-hungry “statesmen”, the fear of an intended or accidentally triggered nuclear war is added. Urgent admonitions by recognised personalities such as Albert Schweitzer with his teaching of “Reverence for Life” in the 1954 collection of writings “Peace or Nuclear War” were not heard. In the 1950s, it was a moral authority, a guiding principle in the fight against the nuclear armament of nations.

Due to social constraints and imponderables and because of prevailing educational practices, irrational fears and individual and collective prejudices, it is not possible – I am convinced of this from decades of personal experience – to directly set fellow human beings in motion for a humane, peaceful and free society. The psychological deficits of the great masses are too penetrating for that. If certain popular leaders and masses were able to overthrow the existing power relations somewhere as a result of the favour of certain circumstances, they usually set up copies of the earlier forms of rule, only with other names and other ideological disguises. Consequently, psychological groundwork would have to be done first. But where can such offers be found?

Only through calm and patient psychological education can people be relieved of their irrational fears. At the same time, they must be encouraged and strengthened emotionally. Only after such an uplifting experience will they be able to understand the psychological motivations for their mostly unconscious and involuntary “surrender of reason” to public opinion and draw appropriate conclusions from this understanding.

As long as I breathe, I hope....

For the intellectual enlightener, the point is not to condemn or reject the “good public servant”, but to understand his or her motives and, at times, his or her inner hardships. Even if he or she wanted to, he or she must not and cannot contradict public opinion. It would behoove every free spirit not to place itself emotionally above its fellow citizen. Perhaps the other did not have the same favourable conditions in his childhood and later life. The point is to pick up the fellow citizen where he is emotionally.

In my opinion, intellectual enlighteners and free spirits often delude themselves. They usually write for like-minded colleagues; they do not reach the vast majority of fellow citizens. Nevertheless, they are indispensable.

A final very personal hope concerns the political interest and commitment of the younger and younger generation. Since their near and distant future in particular is at stake, they should not allow themselves to be permanently lied to by the state and corporate media. This does not fit at all with an enlightened, progressive youth.

Finally, a quote attributed to Martin Luther: *“Even if I knew that the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today.”*

The tree represents life and hope.

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Notes

(1) Romain Rolland (1866-1944): with the Red Cross in Geneva during the First World War; 1915 Nobel Prize for Literature; 1936 trip to the Soviet Union, encounter with Gorky; commitment to peace and social justice.

This article takes sections from an article published on 3 June 2015 in the "Neue Rheinische Zeitung" NRhZ No. 513 entitled "Learning to think for everyone alone!" and builds on them

(2) Prologue to the novel, p. 7

(3) Reinbeck near Hamburg (1988). Translated from the French by Stefan Zweig. First published in 1920 by the Paris publishing house Ollendorff. Original title "One against all" (1917).

(4) op. cit., p. 105 f.

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