

The Failure of Intellectuals to Analyze the Worldwide Economic and Social Crisis: “Sapere aude!” - “Dare to be Wise!”

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Global Research, April 03, 2020

Theme: [History](#)

The events of the last century as well as today reveal that not only the “simple” people fail in the resistance against totalitarianism and fascism. Intellectuals, too, fail to live up to their responsibility despite an academic education and the opportunity to gain insight into political, economic and socio-psychological contexts. The current worldwide exceptional situation, the deliberately created panic, the disproportionate restriction of civil liberties, the selection of elderly and sick fellow citizens and the economic crash landing, which will drive millions of people into unemployment and hopelessness, hunger and finally to death, requires of us all most urgently to be wise, to distinguish between truth and lie and to act accordingly.

“Have the courage to use your own intellect!”

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Age of Enlightenment, people began to free themselves from medieval thinking. From then on, human affairs were to be guided primarily by human reason. The individual was to free himself from narrow-mindedness, credulity and arbitrary authority, and personal freedom of action (emancipation) was to be extended.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant defined “*Enlightenment*” in the year 1784 as follows: “*Enlightenment is man’s exit from his self-inflicted immaturity. Immaturity is the inability of his mind without the direction of another.*” According to Kant, the immaturity of man is then self-inflicted when it is not a lack of understanding that is the reason, but the fear of using one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. Kant coined the motto of the Enlightenment: “*Sapere aude!*”, which means “*Dare to know*”, or as Kant explained it: “*Have the courage to use your own intellect!*” Enlightenment is therefore the maxim to think for oneself at all times.

But why do people often remain underage throughout their lives – and this also even though they have long since grown up and would be able to think for themselves? Kant said the reason is laziness and cowardice. Being underage is comfortable and independent thinking is a “*grumpy business*”. So it would be easy for others, Kant said, to become “*guardians*” of these underage people. These guardians would also do everything to make sure that the underage people do not only find the step to maturity arduous but also dangerous.

Underage behavior today

Have we today, in the 21st century, already shed this underage behavior? What about our courage to think for ourselves in the present uncertain situation? Is it not more comfortable

for a spoiled and lazy person to make use of the guidance of an authority or a leader, to be in harmony with a supposedly powerful person and his mass media and to belong to the circle of his court vestments? He is then always on the “right” side. Doubts and moral scruples do not then oppress him, since he can always refer to the supposedly infallible power.

It is difficult to think for oneself and to be responsible for the consequences of such mature behavior. Doubts overtake the seeker of truth, the nightly sleep becomes restless. If a self-thinking person then also comes to unpleasant truths that are in conflict with the powerful and with political correctness, previous companions quickly turn away from him. The result of this courage can be loneliness. Loneliness, however, not in the sense of being alone, but in the sense of refusing dialogue.

The German-Jewish professor and writer Hannah Arendt experienced such a refusal in connection with a journalistic slander campaign following the publication of her report on the Eichmann trial in 1961: *“Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report of the banality of evil”*. For her this experienced refusal of dialogue was *“the extreme form of human misery”*(p. 34).

Do what? Think for yourself at all times!

Every individual has to contribute to the solution of the urgent problems of our time. And of course we are able to do so when we are aware that it depends on each and every one of us. Why not have the courage to make use of your own intellect, have the courage not to suppress the monstrosity of today, but to really and to stand up against it – intellectually, emotionally, politically. In the face of all odds, have the determination to find the truth and thus to preserve the dignity as a human being. Overcoming the inertia of the heart and acting.

According to Albert Camus, every person has a more or less large sphere of influence. The Swiss writer Gottfried Keller (1819-1890) put it this way: *“No government and no battalions (...) are able to protect law and freedom where the citizen is not able to come to the front door himself and see what is there”*. (Zürich short stories)

The upbringing of the adolescent at home and at school is very important for development of such responsible behavior in the adult age of elementary importance. The basis is an education of conscience and a sustainable education in values and virtues from early childhood on. What every society urgently needs in order to be able to cope with the future well and to shape it in a self-determined way are responsible fellow citizens who take responsibility for the general welfare of the people.

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