Transit

EUROPÄISCHE REVUE

Editorial

Gegenwärtig erlebt die Europäische Union die Erosion der Fundamente, auf denen sie errichtet wurde: Die gemeinsame Erinnerung an den Zweiten Weltkrieg ist verblasst, mit dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion hat die geopolitische Dimension an Bedeutung verloren, der Wohlfahrtsstaat steht unter Beschuss, und der Wohlstand, Kernstück der politischen Legitimität des europäischen Projekts, schwindet. »Wenn heute allenthalben das Risiko eines Zerfalls der Europäischen Union beschworen wird«, schreibt Ivan Krastev in seinem einleitenden Beitrag, »ist das nicht nur Rhetorik, nicht nur ein Schreckgespenst, das alarmierte Politiker hervorholen, um den unglücklichen Wählern Sparmaßnahmen aufzuzwingen. Der Zerfall der Union ist eine reale, gegenwärtige Gefahr. Die Schicksale der Habsburgermonarchie, der Sowjetunion und Jugoslawiens führen vor Augen, dass die enormen wirtschaftlichen Kosten ihres Auseinanderbrechens kein Hinderungsgrund für ihren Untergang waren. Schlicht anzunehmen, dass die Union gar nicht zerfallen könne, weil das die Beteiligten teuer zu stehen käme, ist folglich nur ein schwaches Argument für ihre Stabilität.«

Ein wenig Hoffnung geben die Beiträge von Jacques Rupnik und Janos Matyas Kovacs. Rupnik zeigt, dass die Länder Mitteleuropas der Krise – entgegen weitverbreiteten Annahmen – besser widerstanden haben als der Rest der Europäischen Union. Und Kovacs führt uns durch die osteuropäischen neuen Kapitalismen, die vielleicht keine blühenden Landschaften darstellen, deren Vielfalt jedoch eine gewisse Resistenz gegen die Malaisen der westlichen Varianten bietet.

In Fortsetzung der Diskussion über Russland im letzten Heft attestiert Boris Mezhuev dem Land eine schwere Neurose, welche die längst fällige ökonomische und politische Transformation blockiert.

Die Artikel des zweiten Teils sind aus einem Projekt im Rahmen des von dem Historiker Timothy Snyder am Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM) geleiteten Forschungsschwerpunkts *Vereintes Europa – geteilte Geschichte* hervorgegangen, das die Rolle des Balkans,

Anmerkungen

1 Der »Wahrheitskämpfer« (Mr. Valiant-for-Truth) ist ein tapferer Pilger aus John
  Bunyans *Pilgerreise zur seligen Ewigkeit (The Pilgrim's Progress)*, A.d.Ü.
2 T.S. Eliot, »Burnt Norton«, in: *Vier Quartette*, übers. v. Nora Wydenbruch, Wien
  1953, S. 21.
3 Clive James, »Dreams Before Sleeping«, in: Ders., *Nefertiti in the Flak Tower.
  Collected Verse 2008- 2011*, London 2012, S. 46f.
4 George Bernhard Shaw, *Major Barbara*, mit der Vorrede des Autors, Frankfurt
  a.M. 1990, Vorrede.
5 Vgl. Jessica Martin und Alec Ryrie (Hg.), *Private and Domestic Devotion in Early
  Modern England*, Aldershot 2012, insbesondere Kapitel 3: Erica Longfellow, »»My
  now solitary prayers‹. *Eikon Basilike* and Changing Attitudes to Religious Solitu-
  de«. Ich danke Jessica Martin, die mich auf viele Beispiele aus dem frühmodernen
  England aufmerksam gemacht hat.
6 Vgl. Charles Taylor, *Quellen des Selbst. Die Entstehung der neuzeitlichen Identi-
  tät*, Frankfurt a.M. 1996.
7 Vgl. Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi. Invention of a Hero*, London 2009.
8 Vgl. John Keane, *Tom Paine. A Political Life*, London 1995.

Webb Keane
SECULARISM AS A MORAL NARRATIVE OF MODERNITY

Secularism is not merely a question of state policy, law, or governmen-
tality. Nor should it be defined only in terms of a particular dominant
world view, for instance, as a materialist cosmology shaped by the me-
thods, empirical findings, and models of science. It is certainly all of these,
of course, and these in turn are subsumed, as Charles Taylor (2007) has
argued, by a background framework, a universe of all that »goes-without-
saying«, within which they simply make sense. But there is another aspect
of secularism that I want to point out here. As a feature of public cultures
from mid-twentieth century Kemalist Turkey and Sukarno's Indonesia to
present-day France and India, secularism commonly possesses a certain
affective force that cannot be explained purely in such dry and reasoned
terms. It is not merely that the world has, somehow, become secular. Rat-
her, secularity often presents itself in compulsory terms, even as an ethical
demand. People in a wide range of societies find that they *ought* to be
secular. The compulsory nature of this demand can go beyond the expec-
tations of citizenship and legality, into more emotional and subjective di-
mensions of personhood. Moreover, it can sometimes appear that to fail to
be a properly secular subject poses a danger to others. I would argue that
a considerable part of the power of secularism, beyond its legal and policy
import, derives from what I have called a »moral narrative of modernity«
(see Keane 2007).

What makes the moral narrative of modernity »modern«? There is no
consensus in the human sciences about how we might best define »moder-
nity«, or even whether there is such a thing at all. But this much, I think,
is indisputable: vast numbers of people around the world *think* there is
such a thing. They are worried about whether they are modern or not,
when they will become modern, why they are failing to become modern,
what are the costs of modernity, what the benefits, or how they can escape
modernity. They are also worried about the people and peoples around

them, asking such things as why are others not as modern as we are? Are they going to drag us back?

And when people ask these questions, they are usually not taking modernity as a neutral description of the world, surveyed from afar and with indifference. Modernity is commonly situated within a normative, and often desire-saturated, view of history. This is what makes it »moral«. In the moral narrative of modernity, progress is not only a matter of technological mastery, economic organization, scientific knowledge, bureaucratic rationalization, democracy or totalitarianism, or environmental disaster. It is a story about human emancipation and self-mastery, centering on the transformation of the human subject. If, in the past, humans were in thrall to illegitimate rulers such as kings, rigid traditions such as those given in scriptures, and unreal fetishes such as their religious rituals and relics, as they become modern they realize the true character of human agency. According to this moral narrative, modernity is a story of human liberation from a host of false beliefs and fetishisms that undermine freedom. Conversely, those people who seem to persist in displacing their own agency onto such rules, traditions, or fetishes (including sacred texts) are out of step with the times. They are morally and politically troubling anachronisms, pre-moderns or anti-moderns.

The moral narrative of modernity is a projection onto chronological time of a view of human moral and pragmatic self-transformation. This moralization of history can (but doesn't necessarily) produce a largely tacit set of expectations about what a modern, progressive person, subject, and citizen, should be. The details vary, of course, but characteristic of this subject is rationality and an aspiration to authenticity, manifested in sincere or transparent forms of self-expression. This subject is also characterized by self-knowledge. In particular, it knows itself to be the true agent of its actions, in contrast to those non-moderns who displace their own agency onto gods, demons, spirits, and so forth. Thus may Protestants accuse Catholics of non-modernity because (it is supposed) they expect saints to intervene on their behalf and (worse yet) confound material shrines and rites with what is properly spiritual. Muslims, in turn, are accused of being non-modern because (so some anti-Muslims imagine) they believe all is foreordained and thereby submit the properly autonomous human will to a god. (That some of the most ardent accusations come from people whose theological forebears were predestinarian Calvinists is only one of

many ironies in this history.) To say that the idea of modernity is inflected with a certain moralization, then, means that it includes the sense that one *ought* to become a modern subject, or that to do otherwise is an ethical failing. Moreover, that failing can be dangerous not just to the individual subject, but to entire societies – hence, again, the danger that headcovering seems to pose to the French, minarets to the Swiss, and even the very presence of Muslims on United State soil to some Americans.

The moral narrative of modernity I have sketched here is certainly not the only moral narrative available. Catholic critics of modernity, such as Alistair MacIntyre (2007), for instance, also moralize history, and take modernity to be the outcome of a moral narrative, but his is certainly not a narrative of emancipation. Rather, the trajectory is that of a fall from an earlier, better, condition. It may be there are Orthodox Christian ways of moralizing a narrative of modernity too, to say nothing of non-Christian alternatives. But I would argue that the Protestants have had a disproportionate influence on shaping and disseminating the contemporary understandings of modernity that underlie common views of secularism. There are a number of reasons for this which I cannot elaborate here (but see Keane 2007), but they include temporal ideologies (Protestantism eventually comes to constitute its identity on a historical rupture of the Roman church), logics (for instance, how the impulse for purification can easily go beyond strictly religious domains), and practices (especially the global impact of colonial missions).

Now in many respects the moral narrative of modernity as I have described it converges with Charles Taylor's account in *A Secular Age* (2007) and his earlier work on the modern self, *Sources of the Self* (1989). Both of us stress that secularism is a project, not a return to some natural condition from which humans have deviated, what Taylor refers to as »subtraction stories« about secularism. These are, he writes, »stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons or illusions or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process – modernity or secularity – is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside« (Taylor 2007: 22). The moral narrative of modernity can be seen as one preeminent way in which this story of subtraction has been conceptualized and embodied.

Stripping away their fetishes, people have clear vision restored to them so they may reclaim their natural powers.

What are the implications of seeing secularism as an aspect of the moral narrative of modernity? What might the anthropological perspective, and its starting point outside Europe, bring more prominently into view? Here I will stress three points. The first concerns some of the anxieties that secularism takes on, to the extent that it partakes of the moral narrative of modernity. The second concerns the limits secularism faces, to the extent that it is part of a project of purification. The third point can be no more than a suggestion, that just as secularism turns out, at the limit, to be an impossible project, one that cannot be fully inhabitable in the terms it often seems to propose, so too religion itself may never have been quite as all-encompassing as we sometimes imagine it to have been. In fact, the assumption that religion *was* once a totalizing world view may itself be an outcome of the moral narrative of modernity, at least in some versions.

To turn to the first point, what are the anxieties that the moral narrative of modernity seems to induce? In the first place, they have to do with the co-presence of secularism's others. Focusing on Europe, Taylor finds his chief dimension of contrast to be in historical time: he compares different epochs. The most significant contrast in *A Secular Age* is between medieval and present-day Europe. He portrays medieval Europeans as Christians who participate in a single set of background assumptions (Jewish Europeans seem to play no role in this account, although Taylor would presumably say they too shared this assumption). By contrast, moderns exist in a pluralistic world in which religious belief is only one option among many. But if we approach the question from the colonial world, as *Christian Moderns* does, some other aspects of pluralism come into sharper focus. First, the supposedly emancipated modern always confronts its contemporaneous others, those people who seem to *persist* in displacing their own agency onto such rules, traditions, or fetishes (including sacred texts). We are surrounded by people who are out of step with the times. That is, the story is not just one of a lost past, and a hegemonic present condition, the secular age. The secular modern is troubled by morally and politically troubling anachronisms, premoderns or anti-moderns. This confrontation is, of course, one feature of the present-day hostility to Islam in Europe (see Keane 2009). When the Danes, Dutch, or French say that headscarves or other Islamic practices run counter to, or

even threaten, »our« distinctive values, they surely cannot mean that the values of women's rights and a public space cleansed of religious symbols are of long-standing in Danish, Dutch, or French history. Or at least such claims would not stand serious empirical scrutiny (whatever their ideological power). Rather, if such claims are to be taken seriously, it can only be with reference to the sense of a modern *achievement*, something that separates »us« not only from Muslim others, *but also from »our« own past*. When people impute agency to entities that the outsider does not recognize, such as an interventionist God or a concretely efficacious ritual, they are not only mistaken. They are morally and politically disturbing, even threatening. Secularism's triumphalism is undercut with anxiety.

One source of this anxiety, then, is the threat that »non-moderns« pose to moderns, that they might somehow pull us back from our achievements. But the problem is not merely that others threaten us. In its more liberal or progressive forms, at least, the moral narrative of modernity seems to produce a paradox. A great deal of contemporary academic and political work in the Euro-American north tends to presuppose the moral narrative of modernity. Arguments about agency, rationality, or freedom, for instance, are often tacitly informed by the assumption that self-transformation is not only a central aspect of historical progress, but also a good that exceeds local systems of value. Those people who reject the claims of modern agency – those non-moderns who are seen to defer to excessively material gods, scriptures, or traditions, for example – are subject to accusations of »fetishism«. To accuse people of fetishism is to indict them for misunderstanding their own capacities. The moral narrative of modernity characteristically demands that they recognize their own agency. But this demand, at least as it has been formulated within the liberal tradition, may be impossible to reconcile with another demand of the same tradition, that we accord others their due recognition (Keane 2009). It is this paradox that helps make the debates of Islam in Europe so fraught: they are not merely between left and right, but produce divisions and contradictions within the traditional political positions.

But these ideological and political questions may not be the only source of anxiety. My second point is this: if we look at the practices that make secular modernity an inhabitable project, they seem to encounter unavoidable limits. This has to do with what I have called the »project of purification« (Keane 2007). The moral narrative of modernity tends

to link moral progress to practices of detachment from and reevaluation of materiality. Thus the Calvinist missionaries and converts of whom I write often see the apparent materiality of Catholic practice – everything from verbal formulae to icons – as evidence that their rivals are thinly veiled pagans. (To be sure, materiality and dematerialization are recurrent issues in religious reform movements across the historical record, from early Buddhism to reformist Islam. But in the past, as Taylor has observed, these were restricted to the domain of intellectual elites or religious virtuosi. What Protestantism added was the insistence this purification be taken up by everyone, even the most humble and ordinary people.) The religious attack on semiotic form converges with other ideas, such as Enlightenment thought about morality, autonomy, and freedom, which became central to later secular institutions and habits.

As I suggested, secularism projects onto historical time a moralizing narrative of human emancipation from fetishistic displacements, echoing the dematerializing project of Protestant iconoclasm. People were once under the thrall of false agents, such as their gods, that blinded them to the true agency they held in their own hands. To appropriate proper human agency, in this narrative, requires self-awareness and reason. This must be facilitated by a transformed *semiotic ideology* that allows people to recognize the true significance of things. Accidents are really accidental, not the workings of spirit agents, for instance. Words should be understood as transparent vehicles for the communication of ideas and intentions to which the speaker is sincerely committed. They should not, for instance, be ritualized, rote, or rhetorically excessive. Icons and rituals have no efficacy independent of the human agency they express and the human psychological responses they invoke.

This is one reason I do *not* identify secular modernity with »materialism.« In fact, to think that we are not spiritual enough – that we are *too* materialistic – is a distinctively modern worry (see Keane 2008). In this respect, I would propose a *non-subtractive or non-zero sum account of materiality*. Materiality is not simply the absence of the transcendental, nor does it impose one single or specific kind of determinism such as economic rationality or scientism. A non-subtractive materiality should help us sharpen our focus on the concrete environment for thoughts, values, beliefs: the context that supports and instigates them, such as bodily habits, clothing, kinds of media and the visual imagery they support, the lay-

out of buildings and cities, ways of talking, all that makes them plausible and inhabitable. Thus, for example, to understand the position of Islam in Europe, it's not sufficient to look at theology and political ideologies, people's ideas and words. It is also necessary, perhaps more so, to consider the implications of the lived environment. Whatever else they may be, minarets and headcovering are material responses to the ubiquitous materializations of secular life. But materiality is never a simple matter. Semiotic ideology helps show the mediated nature of these materialities. Just as the colonial missionary who destroys fetishes risks reinforcing the feeling that they must be potent, so too the attack on headcovering risks elevating its power in ways that may undermine the purifying goals of both Protestant modernists and secularists.

If secular modernity is not best understood as »materialist«, so too, it is rarely eliminationist. Few secular regimes have simply aspired to abolish religion altogether (for the fate of Soviet efforts in that direction see Luehr-mann 2009, Rogers 2009). Rather, modern secular regimes commonly establish a distinctive place for religion. In the northern European versions, religion is often identified as one of the fields of activity in which ethical argument and moral justification are to be expected. Indeed, this is the proper place of religion within the modern differentiation of spheres (and the view reinforces the dematerialization of religion, as something peculiarly mental and spiritual). To oversimplify, if economic rationality should prevail in the marketplace, strategic calculation in politics, and sentiment in the family, then moral reasoning is that which is properly found in religious institutions. Thus, according to the moral narrative of modernity, to treat economics, politics, or even education in moral terms too seriously exhibits a failure to be modern. The creedal and evangelistic practices of the northern Reformation contributed to the Enlightenment model that takes the rational capacity for deliberation as a condition for moral actions. The demand that one be responsible for one's thoughts can translate into a demand that those thoughts be objectifiable, available for rendering in explicit propositional form. But the high value often placed on the propositional stance toward one's thoughts has become a general expectation within the frame of secularism (see Warner 2008).

One consequence of the propositional stance is that it encourages us to privilege explicit political, philosophical, and theological discourses when we try to understand people's religious and social commitments.

But such discourses, whether oral or textual, work within peculiar genre constraints that usually impose demands for consistency and coherence onto their arguments that are quite distinct from the quite different kinds of demands (pragmatic, economic, political, emotional, cognitive, and so forth) imposed by the contingencies of social existence. Communities exist with degrees of logical and even moral contradiction that few purely theoretical formulations would permit. The work of religious purification goes hand in hand with that of secularism to the extent they demand that belief be made coherent, consistent, and reasonable. This representational economy, which privileges explicit discourses, and pushes them toward certain kinds of consistency, is a major source of those practices that produce and sustain that reconfiguration and foregrounding of belief that Taylor portrays in *A Secular Age*.

The moral narrative of modernity runs through the long history of Euro-American efforts to escape some of the implications of the ways human subjects are embedded in social and material worlds. These efforts, which have important religious sources but extend beyond explicitly religious domains, often focus on semiotic form as a source or symptom of moral trouble. Attempts to sort out proper relations among, and boundaries between, words, things, and subjects are often driven by the question »what beings have agency«? But these problems are not merely theoretical, and not only the special concern of elite thinkers and makers of grand narratives. In many respects, attention to details in the treatment of money, changes in speech pragmatics, disciplines of sincerity, attitudes toward behavioral rules and prohibitions, sexual mores, and so forth reveal more about how large conceptual problems enter into everyday life than do theoretical texts or utopian models. It is through such concrete activities both that ontological and moral systems become inhabitable. It is through the impossibility of escaping the materiality of those activities that the impossibility of the full project of purification and spiritualization becomes apparent. I propose that secularism is always an incomplete and even, it might be argued, an impossible project.

The final point I want to raise is this: if secularism is a project that can never be fulfilled, so too is religious faith. Now a key defining point of the secular age, for Taylor, is that we have moved »from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among

others« (2007: 3). I accept his major conclusion, that there is a profound change when »belief« has become an option. The condition of pluralism heightens people's awareness of alternative possibilities. This awareness in turn reinforces a tendency to think of religion as something cognitive, and largely subject to conscious awareness, a view famously criticized by Talal Asad (1993), among others. This condition of pluralism plays into the representational economy in which explicit statements of belief are privileged. It is in circumstances of confrontation and disagreement, or of proselytization and conversion, that people are especially likely to find themselves compelled to give an explicit account of themselves (Keane 2010). Such accounting leads people to treat their ethical and even cosmological assumptions as concepts, reasons, and beliefs, matters for conscious elaboration and discursive explication. This is what I call »the creed paradigm«. It identifies religion with doctrine, gives doctrine explicit form, tends to emphasize the believer over the institution, and dwells on doctrinal differences among religions (thus reinforcing the idea that there is one genus, »religion«, of which there are various species, such as »Buddhism«, »Pentecostalism«, »animism«, and so forth).

I think we should accept Taylor's conclusion that the foregrounding of belief and its optional nature is a defining feature of secular modernity. But I am less sure we need to take on board one of the premises behind it, that once *all* people had faith, and that faith was a more or less taken-for-granted matter of unselfconscious acceptance of a shared set of background assumptions – that once everyone lived in an entirely naïve relation to their possibilities. On the basis of ethnographic research in relatively isolated and homogenous societies, as well as historical research in pre-modern ones, there is reason to think that every society has harbored the potential for heresies, unorthodox notions, and heterodox practices. But, one might counter, these can still be viewed as kinds of religious belief. More interesting are those people who are simply skeptical, cynical, or plain uninterested in the religious faith around them, or those who oscillate among different stances over the course of a lifetime. *Religion does not belong only to the pious.* Why does this matter? Because to treat the past as too thoroughly embraced in faith and too consensual and homogenous may reinforce some key assumptions of *both* the moral narrative of modernity embedded within secularism *and* that of the anti-moderns who are nostalgic for the more unified communities they project onto the

past. The danger of nostalgia is not merely an academic matter of historical accuracy. More than that, it risks portraying present-day pluralism and the complex range of possible stances toward religion as deviation or, perhaps, even as a pathology. I hasten to add, this risk is not one to which Taylor himself succumbs – quite the contrary, since his portrayal of the modern social imaginaries is hardly a call for a return to former hierarchies or communal solidarities. But nostalgia can remain a latent possibility in thinking about secular modernity. The challenge, then, is to get right the balance between taking the past as wholly separated from us by a radical transformation, on the one hand, and insisting that nothing significant has changed, on the other – between rupture and continuity (see Robbins 2007). And one way to work out this balance is to look more closely at the range of possible stances toward an apparently shared background framework that may coexist and interact with one another.

Taylor's concept of background is very close to the most influential versions of the anthropological concept of culture. It is not made up of explicit rules, statements of custom and tradition, or self-conscious works of art, but rather the worldviews presupposed by and embedded in habitual, unreflexive practices and social arrangements. It largely consists of all that goes without saying. By contrast, Taylor characterizes the modern secular condition this way:

> We have changed not just from a condition where most people lived ›naïvely‹ in a construal … as simple reality, to one in which almost no one is capable of this, but all see their option as one among many. We all learn to navigate between two standpoints: an »engaged« one in which we live as best we can the reality our standpoint opens us to; and a »disengaged« one in which we are able to see ourselves as occupying one standpoint among a range of possible ones, with which we have in various ways to coexist. (2007: 12)

This is surely correct. There is something peculiarly modern about the sense of epistemic options and choices even among cosmologies (there are some Americans who consider it simply a matter of choice whether they are to accept basic scientific or historical findings). And perhaps this remains peculiarly modern even if we pose against it such pluralistic »nonmodern« situations as the fluid, multi-religious Roman Mediterranean or the complex trading societies of early maritime Southeast Asia, which juxtaposed several varieties of Indian Hinduism, Chinese Buddhism and Confucianism, and a host of local cults. Even in pre-Columbian America,

Navaho encountered adopted deities from neighboring Hopi, as Hopi in turn seem to have taken in rites and narratives from Central America. For, although people in these highly pluralistic worlds clearly knew of alternative possible religions, and could even pick and chose among their elements, perhaps they all shared a fundamentally religious background assumption.

But if pluralism, as such, is hardly new, there may be some ways in which a mode of *disengagement* – of *some* sort – is also not new. A potential for objectification and detachment, even estrangement, from one's cultural surround, seems to be a crucial component of the basic semiotic capacities that make human cultures and histories possible. Rituals, for example, do not only enfold participants within a divine presence, they can also produce schematic models that people can, in a sense, stand outside of (see Keane 2007, especially chapter 9). More generally, it seems that some skill in moving between immediacy and distantiation is *built into* human linguistic – and, more generally, semiotic – abilities in the first place. Certainly modern secular regimes of practice and knowledge place objectification and disengagement on new, privileged footings, and certainly the new forms of pluralism reinforce the cognitive privilege accorded to explicit belief. But this is perhaps more a shift of weighting than a complete rupture from a past world of naïve, taken-for-granted presence.

Why stress so subtle a distinction? The reason is that to overstate the degree to which people in non-secular or non-modern worlds are sunk in naïve faith risks reinforcing the moral narrative of modernity, by endowing moderns with a unique degree of self-awareness and agency. In order to preserve the insight, that there is something distinctive about the kind of distancing and disengagement that goes along with the background assumptions of secularism, without inadvertently contributing to the moral narrative of modernity, I focus on the shifting terrain of people's relations to their materiality. Focusing on materiality may also be a way to make more visible the limits of secularism and the practices that make it inhabitable.

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Sławomir Sierakowski
VERLIEREN FÜR DIE MENSCHEN
Czesław Miłoszs Science-Fiction-Roman »Die Berge des Parnass«

Czesław Miłoszs Biographie umfasst die prägenden dramatischen Ereignisse des 20. Jahrhunderts: die Oktoberrevolution, den Zweiten Weltkrieg, die »Machtergreifung«[1] der Kommunisten, die Ereignisse des Jahres 1968, die *Solidarność*-Bewegung und den »Völkerherbst«. In seinem Tagebuch *Rok myśliwego* (Das Jahr des Jägers, 1990; im Folgenden RM) schreibt er: »Von Kindheit an lebte ich in Ländern, die gerade aufhörten zu existieren.« Miłosz war, auch in der eigenen Wahrnehmung, vor allem Dichter, doch zweifellos wollte er auch als kritische Stimme zu gesellschaftlichen Fragen der Gegenwart gehört werden. »Ein starkes ›metaphysisches Gefühl der Seltsamkeit des Seins‹[2] zu besitzen, hieß für mich ›Seltsamkeit des gesellschaftlichen Seins‹, das heißt der Zivilisation oder wie immer wir es nennen. Wenn man mein Schaffen einteilte in Werke, die dieses Gefühl zu artikulieren versuchen, und den Rest und nur erstere bewahrte – es wäre ganz in meinem Sinne.« (RM, S. 266) Hier sucht ein Dichter Trost in Philosophie und Theologie. Wir kennen es meist andersherum, etwa von Nietzsche oder mehr noch von Heidegger und Adorno, und selbst Max Weber, der Vater der These von der »Entzauberung der Welt«, näherte sich in Heidelberg dem poetischen Kreis um Stefan George. Die Suche nach einem Lebenssinn in einer Welt, in der Gott, der Sozialismus und der Mensch tot sind, führte Miłosz immer weiter: von den Manichäern zu Blake und Swedenborg, von Milton und Eliot zu Dostojewski und den russischen Religionsphilosophen Schestow und Solowjow, von Witkacy zur Bibel.

Miłoszs Abrechnung mit der menschlichen Zivilisation hatte eine doppelte Ausrichtung. Ihn entsetzten die Totalitarismen des 20. Jahrhunderts, aber mindestens ebenso viel Raum widmete er der Kritik des Kapitalismus. *Das verführte Denken* knüpfte an Orwell an, andere Texte an Huxley. Miłosz schrieb: »Man muss die Ursachen meiner Verzweiflung betrach-