

"GERMAN IDEOLOGY" AS SEEN BY ERWIN SCHRÖDINGER IN LETTERS TO HANS THIRRING. FROM THEIR CORRESPONDENCE (1946 - 1949)

Gerhard Oberkofler, Peter Goller

Archive of the University of Innsbruck, Innrain 52, A-6020 Innsbruck, Austria

In the 1945/46 fall semester Hans Thirring returned to Innsbruck University as a guest professor after having been relieved of his Vienna University Chair for Theoretical Physics by the Nazis in 1938 because he was a democrat and pacifist. In an age of impending nuclear war he aimed his first lecture at students of all university faculties under the title "World Peace as a Psychological Problem."

On May 14, 1946 Erwin Schrödinger wrote from his exile in Dublin [1]: *"I see you believe in the power of the idea. To a certain extent, so do I. But I feel its power is limited to the sphere of ideas, which is indeed the one that counts. Physically, this power is a David up against a Goliath of idiocy."*

After Thirring's guest lecture was published in 1946 under the title "Homo Sapiens", Schrödinger wrote in September 1946: *"Hans, your brochure won me over entirely. ... You have my sworn support. Your "Homo Sapiens" possibly had an even greater impact on me since I was so utterly sceptical of it in advance, mainly because of its ridiculous title. At first glance I felt such a triviality was unforgivable. I herewith forgive it."*

Schrödinger, however, criticized Thirring's optimistic idealism that was anchored in a liberal middle-class view of mankind and held that human beings could employ rational dialogue, intellectual insight and education to bring about an auspicious state of world affairs and "perpetual peace." Although Schrödinger also believed he observed an evolutionary-biological transition from "egoism" to "altruism," namely the "transformation of human beings to social animals," he tended toward Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimistic-conservative anthropology.

Erwin Schrödinger, familiar since adolescence with the history of (metaphysical, particularly that of the German idealists) philosophy and "deeply immersed in the writings of Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Mach, Richard Semon and Richard Avenarius", protested against Thirring's "philosophical materialism": *"You advocate a kind of simple naive materialism, something like that of Ernst Hæckel, as the only ideology that is worthy of or even possible for a level-headed and reasonably thinking person familiar with the progress of modern science, and you constantly sport a scornful smile for the poor souls who formerly or even today are still not satisfied with this simple solution to the mysteries of the universe."*

In his 1925 essay "Suche nach dem Weg" Schrödinger stated that theoretical metaphysics was at its end: *"Kant's opinion in this connection is final. The post-Kant period of philosophy, maybe even to this day, evidences the writhing agony of metaphysics coming into being."* Schrödinger, however, warned against prematurely *"declaring it dead"*: Metaphysics is not part of the *"building of knowledge."* Instead, it is *"the scaffolding that is absolutely necessary to finish putting up the building."* Schrödinger's criticism of "western civilization" that was often antirational, embodied unscientific ideologies and was reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein [2], his tendency to Vedanta philosophy, his conviction that some *"phenomena of value judgment, amazement and of mysteries can be solved neither through formal logic nor much less by the accuracy of natural science,"* his rejection of Mach's criticism of classical education and Mach's thesis that modern

natural science is to be considered a triumph over ancient metaphysics, but also a commentary on the mystic tendencies in the work of the experimental psychologist Gustav Theodor Fechner characterize his standpoint in its differences from that of Thirring: *"And the brilliant Fechner took the liberty of fantasizing not only the plants but also the planet earth and the stars as having a soul. I do not agree with these phantasies, but I also do not want to pass judgment on which of the two comes closer to the essence of truth, Fechner or the bankrupt proponents of modern rationalism [3,4]."*

Schrödinger regarded Thirring's postulate that Nietzsche and Spengler are a dangerous "poison" precisely because of their intellectual brilliance, for very off-track and for "somewhat abridged logic": *"In my opinion a good dialogue would have to draw on a sound understanding of the other person's standpoint, on a profound insight into it. It would have to make us understand how it could happen that a number of deep and famous thinkers advocated it - men who at least in other fields exerted an immeasurably strong influence for hundreds, even thousands, of years and still do (these men include Plato and Heraclitus, for example)."*

Schrödinger supported Thirring in his efforts to eliminate national chauvinism from school history classes: *"Schoolbooks with a patriotic tendency (is there any other kind?) are a chapter for themselves. Each and every one of them is a wolf in sheep's clothing, because under pretenses hallowed by tradition and in the most honorable guise of brotherly love (provided we each stay on our own side of the fence), each makes its personal contribution to the next bit of warmongering, like the old woman who added her stick of firewood to the bonfire under Jan Hus."*

In a letter to Thirring dated March 27, 1948 Schrödinger focuses on their common goal: *"In recent years, and particularly this past year, I have done a lot of reading, all of which centered around the one major and current topic that is briefly rendered by the question: Qui hinc iam prorsus? (How should we proceed from here?). I read works by Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russel, H.G. Wells etc., the last of whom wrote "The Outlook for Homo Sapiens," that would seem to pick up on the title of your work."* And Schrödinger continues with a remark that is resigned, but characterized by elitist cultural criticism: *"The worst thing is that the power sphere of these groups (who share the political and economic say, note by the authors) includes the potent mass propaganda, namely the print media, radio and cinema. These media permit such groups (...) to dominate public opinion, dictate what prejudices, superstitions etc. are to be propagated among the public, even what feelings, preferences and dislikes are to be created, just like for bicycles, cough syrup, toothpaste, brassieres and summer holidays."*

Translated from the German [1] by M.H. Margreiter.

- 1 Oberkofler G, Goller P (1992) *Erwin Schrödinger. Briefe und Dokumente aus Zürich, Wien und Innsbruck*. Ed Zentralbibliothek für Physik, Wien. Univ Verlag Wagner, Innsbruck
- 2 Wittgenstein L (1984) *Philosophische Bemerkungen*. Frankfurt
- 3 Schrödinger E. *My View of the World*. Wien-Hamburg, 1985 (the first concept is dated 1925)
- 4 Schrödinger E (1947) Die Besonderheit des Weltbilds der Naturwissenschaft. In *Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, Vol 4, Wien 1984: 409-453

