



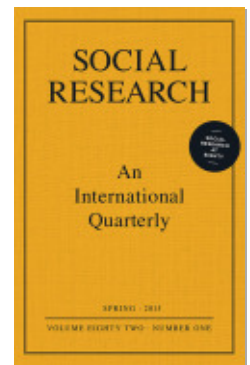
PROJECT MUSE®

The Search for Truth

Emil Lederer

Social Research: An International Quarterly, Volume 82, Number 1, Spring 2015, pp. 15-19 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/578135>

Emil Lederer

The Search for Truth

Originally published in Social Research: An International Quarterly of Political and Social Science, volume 4, number 3, September 1937, pp. 277–82.

FIRST OF ALL I HAVE TO EXPRESS THE THANKS OF THE FACULTY TO ALL THOSE American and European friends who by their contributions to our scientific discussions have given force and significance to our celebration. But the special thanks of our faculty are due to Thomas Mann, who has come the long distance from Switzerland to participate in this celebration; if there is any German who could vindicate our work, it is Thomas Mann.

In the remarkable preamble to the first volume of your *Joseph and His Brethren* you unfolded, Thomas Mann—if I may interpret it in this way—the story of the human spirit; this preamble is like one of those Chinese scrolls which show human life in its endless varieties, minute and clear and yet molded with the vision of the artist. If I am right, your intention there is to say that the remote past is also ours, that every epoch has to answer the same questions, even though conditions may require new thinking, new decision, and consequently reformulation.

The noblest task of mankind is to interpret always anew the intentions of God who brought this world into being and who manifests himself nowhere so clearly and richly as in the human spirit. He who imposes tyranny on mankind wantonly impedes this constant process of unfolding ourselves. This unending reformulation of our purpose in the world is the task of the spirit, however conditioned it may be; and therefore it appears in ideas. But these are times when ideas are

powerless unless they lead to action, action to defend the past and to prepare the future. You, Thomas Mann, have become—by the force of circumstances—a man of action, uniting and giving strength to all those who believe in the spirit and are determined to uphold its liberty. We in our way, with other means, with another type of work, are on the same path, and we are grateful that your presence symbolizes the solidarity of our faculty with the great spiritual forces which are to lead mankind toward peace and freedom.

If I were to offer the gist of all that has been said in this scientific meeting, I would do it in these words: we have given a restatement of our claim to that independence of mind and that awareness of responsibilities without which life is not worth living. This independence is not only the concern of the scholar who desires to be undisturbed in his work. It is the fundamental basis of society. Intellectual freedom is the basis of personal freedom; dogmatic fixation as enforced under dictatorship leads very quickly to the loss of liberty in general. It begins with restriction of public opinion in the press, with control of schools and universities, with a “purge” eliminating all those who dare to resist, and it leads very soon to a situation in which you are told how to invest your money, how much butter you are allowed to consume, and when and whom you can and should marry. Inasmuch as a modern government’s potentialities for interference are infinite unless controlled by the citizens, no guarantee of personal liberty is thinkable without intellectual freedom.

But this liberty may become mere arbitrariness—a vacillating roving—unless its power be concentrated by directing it toward a goal which organizes the scholar’s activities. During a dynamic period this goal needs frequent restatement. Intellectuals, however, have at the present time another responsibility in addition to their participation in the ever-recurring need for formulating this goal: a responsibility and a duty which is the consequence of mistakes they made in the light of the new scientific day that dawned upon them after the darkness of dogmatism was dispelled.

This new scientific era believed in objectivity. It aimed at the coolness and strict regularities that the natural sciences were proud of discovering. In so far as this objectivity aimed at analysis, the result of which should be independent of the personal views of the scholar, in so far as it insisted on the importance of facts which cannot be arbitrarily disregarded, it was certainly justified and responded to requirements of intellectual honesty. But trust in mere analysis caused the intellectual to forget that every question he asks involves a decision. The world—especially in the field which the social sciences undertake to explore—offers various aspects. The Latin phrase *sapere aude*, dare to know, indicates the risk we run as soon as we think; it is a risk which follows from our duty to ask all those questions which seem important in our situation, regardless of the consequences, and to weigh all important facts relating to these questions. Scientific work is not only, as many would have it, a result produced by the intellect. It depends also on character, on the boldness with which we follow a path, though it be dark and full of pitfalls.

The detachment from life which is the danger of specialized analysis has led further to the position that science cannot establish values—that even the struggle for intellectual freedom, for tolerance, for unhampered thinking involves an evaluation which cannot be proved scientifically. Certainly it cannot be proved scientifically that intellectual freedom should exist. Very well. But we can prove scientifically that there can be no science if there is no intellectual freedom, that is, no freedom to choose the working hypothesis. Scientific thinking, especially in the field of the social sciences, implies decisions, as I have already said, and a man who must make responsible decisions cannot be coolly indifferent to intellectual freedom. He must be free to consider all the questions which are implicit in the situation with which he is confronted, and he must make proper use of analytical tools instead of relying on emotions. This obligation no thinker can escape. He has to admit it; he has to stick to it. The intellectual's work is mere play if he does not claim and maintain his liberty, and none has a better reason than he to defend that liberty.

If we accept this, we accept an evaluation, we acknowledge a duty which probably has a deeper foundation than our love for scientific research. What is the alternative to intellectual freedom? It is dogmatism. But it is a dogmatism which nowadays is based not on religious revelation but on blind emotions. Modern dictatorships, founded on amorphous masses which they institutionalize, are bound to succumb to their own murky magic. They extol violence and brutality, they appeal to the ferocious instincts, they build up a sinister mythology of national pride and superiority, and establish crude standards of discipline and of stereotyped thinking to which everyone must conform. This is the level to which the unfortunate citizen living under a dictatorship is reduced.

Thus obviously it is not only the intellectual's desire to be free which is threatened; more is at stake—the dignity of man which depends on this freedom. He who lives without freedom is a slave, however proud he be of his yoke.

But how can we explain that vast masses are ready to accept this slavery? To be free is a burden; to make one's own decisions entails responsibilities which many consider too heavy to bear. Living in a world beset with difficulties, in a society which is threatened with disintegration, they try to escape. But their haven is not the sheltered peace of religion, but the drill ground resounding with harsh command. In such a world the scientist is faced with the decision as to whether he shall retain his spiritual inheritance, whether he shall consider self-consciousness as his fate, or whether he too shall plunge back into an era of blind emotion and faith. If there be any logic in human history, the decision cannot be doubtful. Man cannot long forswear this power bestowed upon him, working within him, this urge which drives him to deep and ever deeper self-consciousness.

These new emotional movements, strangely enough, lead to a condition in which even emotions are standardized and utilized as fuel in the most highly organized state that man has ever designed. Their prophets maintain that thinking is "bloodless" and that it is for the sake of life that they depose the disintegrating intelligence. I

imagine that they do not know what thinking is. They do not know that the spirit is quite as alive within us as the animal, as alive even as our senses. This spirit is not only the functioning of a rational scheme, as they believe; it wells from the deepest depths of the soul. It is the urge for truth against the false certainty of passion, an urge for truth which bespeaks a dignity we are not permitted to renounce once it has been conquered for us. Within ourselves there is a living spirit; it is restless and it may destroy even its own creations in order to replace them by others; but this living spirit in its laboring, in the unfolding of ourselves, is the conquest of the depths within us.

Where the unleashed passions of our modern dictatorships will lead, with their belief in bestiality, no one knows. The greater, then, the responsibility that rests upon those of us who believe that the search for truth is our vocation. In the words of the constitution of the Graduate Faculty, this group has pledged itself “to follow the truth wherever it leads.” And we know that in so doing we live, and that we shall not lose our way in the wilderness.

(Dean of the Graduate Faculty).