

Voltaire was not a radical. His maxim is often quoted:

‘If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him,’ which should be considered as an expression of a kind of ideological and political moderation. Less known is the justification preceding it: ‘I want my lawyer, my tailor, my servants and even my wife to believe in God, because then I will be cheated, robbed and betrayed less often.’

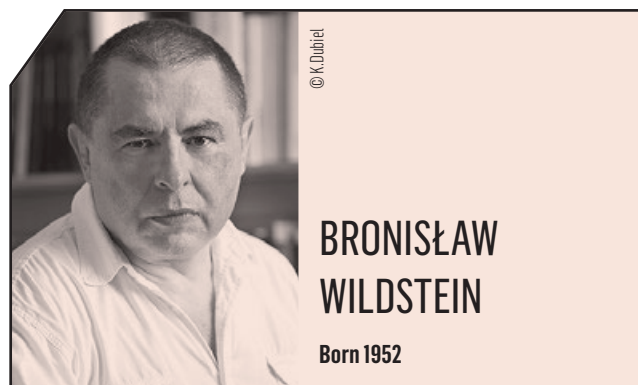
This statement manifests the striking paternalism of Enlightenment intellectuals, which will become the trademark of the vanguard fighting for equality and emancipation. Nothing will change this even today. It sounds a bit paradoxical, but these are merely appearances. ‘You must not rely on the opinion of the crowd on issues of reason and philosophy; the voice of the crowd is vicious, stupid, inhuman and prejudiced. The crowd is dark and stupid. Do not trust it in matters of morality.’ This is Diderot’s statement. I am not saying that he does not indicate the real threats that his countryman Gustave Le Bon wrote about a hundred years later in *The Psychology of Crowds*. Another thing is that the author of *Jacques the Fatalist* was writing not about the specific phenomenon of the human mass, which in its momentary connection can unleash specific emotions and attitudes. The term “crowd” should be rather be translated as “plebeians”. One can agree that humanity as a whole is not particularly inclined to philosophising or moral considerations. The question remains, as to what conclusions should be drawn from this.

Les philosopes were extremely outraged that the people did not follow their enlightened ideas, especially where the “prejudiced” did not want to reject Christianity. And yet: ‘Every reasonable and righteous man must feel disgust at the Christian sect,’ wrote Voltaire. It seems inconsistent with the declaration of the need for God. But the author of *Candide* justified it only as a means of keeping society, along with his own imaginary wife, in check, as until his death he remained a bachelor. The fact that he did not count them among the “reasonable and righteous” seems unquestionable. In this context, his next declaration sounds logical: ‘We never pretended to try enlightening shoemakers and servants; that is work for apostles.’ The waves of literary passion that allowed him to pose as an apostle remained only on paper. Voltaire, Diderot or d’Alembert definitely preferred enlightening Frederick II or Catherine II. No wonder, as this was undoubtedly associated with more tangible rewards.

Without being unkind, it can be assumed that an enlightened despot is a gift from heaven for (not only) an eighteenth-century intellectual who is preparing an all-encompassing and unique project to remake the world. Ordinary politics must take into account the

attitudes of the general public, at least the subjects who are moulded by their devotion to a dark tradition – one that is considered inimical to the enlightened. The ruler embedded in it is bound by custom and religion and though he sometimes breaks the rules, this is not the norm but the exception. Power in monarchical systems is inscribed in an organic, not only social, but even cosmic system, which imposes laws and limits the arbitrariness of those in power. Enlightened despots have already given up these principles, they consider them superstitions, so they do not have to reckon with them.

Excerpt translated by Peter Obst



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**BRONISŁAW
WILDSTEIN**

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