

Waterworks and kings, Aldous Huxley

WATERWORKS AND KINGS

In the chancelleries of eighteenth-century Europe nobody bothered very much about Hesse. Its hostility was not a menace, its friendship brought no positive advantages. Hesse was only one of the lesser German states—a tenth-rate Power.

Tenth-rate: and yet, on the outskirts of Kassel, which was the capital of this absurdly unimportant principality, there stands a palace large and splendid enough to house a full-blown emperor. And from the main façade of this palace there rises to the very top of the neighbouring mountain one of the most magnificent architectural gardens in the world. This garden, which is like a straight wide corridor of formal stone-work driven through the hillside forest, climbs up to a nondescript building in the grandest Roman manner, almost as large as a cathedral and surmounted by a colossal bronze statue of Hercules. Between Hercules at the top and the palace at the bottom lies an immense series of terraces, with fountains and cascades, pools, grottos, spouting tritons, dolphins, nereids and all the other mythological fauna of an eighteenth-century water-garden. The spectacle, when the waters are flowing, is magnificent. There must be the best part of two miles of neo-classic cataract and elegantly canalized foam. The waterworks at Versailles are tame and trivial in comparison.

It was Whit Sunday when I was at Kassel. With almost the entire population of the town I had climbed up to the shrine of Hercules on the hilltop. Standing there in the shadow of the god, with the waters in full splash below me and the sunshine brilliant on the green dome of the palace at the long cataract's foot, I found myself prosaically speculating about ways and means and motives. How could a mere prince of Hesse run to such imperial splendours? And why, having somehow raised the money, should he elect to spend it in so fantastically wasteful a fashion? And, finally, why did the Hessians ever put up with his extravagance? The money, after all, was theirs; seeing it all squandered on a house and a garden, why didn't they rise up against their silly, irresponsible tyrant?

The answer to these last questions was being provided, even as I asked them, by the good citizens of Kassel around me. Schön, herrlich, prachtvoll—their admiration exploded emphatically on every side. Without any doubt, they were thoroughly enjoying themselves. In six generations, humanity cannot undergo any fundamental change. There is no reason to suppose that the Hessians of 1750 were greatly different from those of 1932. Whenever the prince allowed his subjects to visit his waterworks, they came and, I have no doubt, admired and enjoyed their admiration just as much as their descendants do to-day. The psychology of revolutionaries is apt to be a trifle crude. The magnificent display of wealth does not necessarily, as they imagine, excite a passion of envy in the hearts of the poor. Given a reasonable amount of prosperity, it excites, more often, nothing but pleasure.

The Hessians did not rise up and kill their prince for having wasted so much money on his house and garden; on the contrary, they were probably grateful to him for having realized in solid stone and rainbow-flashing water their own vague day-dreams of a fairy-tale magnificence. One of the functions of royalty is to provide people with a vicarious, but none the less real, fulfilment of their wishes.

Kings who make a fine show are popular; and the people not only forgive, but actually commend, extravagances which, to the good Marxian, must seem merely criminal. Wise kings always earmarked a certain percentage of their income for display. Palaces and waterworks were good publicity for kingship, just as an impressive office building is good publicity for a business corporation. Business, indeed, has inherited many of the responsibilities of royalty. It shares with the State and the municipality the important duty of providing the common people with vicarious wish-fulfilments. Kings no longer build palaces;

but newspapers and insurance companies do. Popular restaurants are as richly marbled as the mausoleum of the Escorial; hotels are more splendid than Versailles. In every society there must always be some person or some organization whose task it is to realize the day-dreams of the masses. Life in a perfectly sensible, utilitarian community would be intolerably dreary. Occasional explosions of magnificent folly are as essential to human well-being as a sewage system. More so, probably. Sanitary plumbing, it is significant to note, is a very recent invention; the splendours of kingship are as old as civilization itself.

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