Adapting Ibsen's Nietzschean Ideology to Nazism, Democratic Populism, Empathetic Humanism, and Pitch-Black Neoliberalist Gloom

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Henrik Ibsen's 1882 play, *An Enemy of the People*, has been adapted into four films that let us trace the evolution of one of liberal democracy's most uncomfortable dilemmas. How do we promote reason to the masses so that people do not vote in ways that hurt their own interests? That contentious question felt relevant with this week's US Presidential election, as it also did in the Nietzschean 1880s. Many late-nineteenth-century intellectuals argued that the public sphere was threatened by the emerging mass society's commercialization and individualism, to the detriment of democracy and the common good. Ibsen's question continued to feel relevant throughout the twentieth century, and no less so in our own era of Brexit, Trump, and other populist insurgencies. Studying how *Enemy of the People* has been adapted across geography and time shows us how the play's key ideological question is deeply rooted in context and worldview. Should we view humans as driven by Kantian reason, or was Herder more correct when he interjected, "I am not here to think! But to be, to feel, to live, to be happy!"[1] And importantly, how should our answer to that question translate into politics?

Ibsen's protagonist, doctor Stockmann, offers Nietzschean elitism to save the public sphere from ignorance. When Stockmann finds that the water in his town's lucrative spa is contaminated, his opponents, the petty bourgeoisie, prioritize economic interest over democratic principles to prevent Stockmann from telling the truth, which would hurt the local economy. Infuriated, the doctor argues that the intelligent should lead the dumb, so that everyone can benefit from smart decisions. But Ibsen dramatizes how "the smartest man in town" is no match against small-town minds that prefer a pleasant lie over a painful truth. Such aristocratic radicalism was relevant to its era but later came to be viewed as uncomfortably fascist, although not appropriately fascist by the play's first film adaptors. *Ein*

Volksfeind (Hans Steinhoff, 1937) rejects elitist rule, insisting that only the Nazi Party can straighten out the confused masses.

A Hollywood version (George Schaefer, 1978) instead extolls the wisdom of the masses, making Steve McQueen's protagonist a hero-martyr for grassroots democracy. The film was based on Artur Miller's 1950 stage adaptation, in which Stockmann appears as "a Hollywoodish-heroical Champion of Democracy."[2] *Ganashatru* (Satyajit Ray, 1989) breaks with the theme's geographical origins. Challenging Eurocentric logocentricity through "empathetic humanism," Ray aligns his argument with a critical, or postcolonial, perspective that centers its approach to reason around "universal love for human beings, even when those human beings are innocently irrational."[3] Ray's constructive skepticism toward the Enlightenment turns to pitch-black gloom in *En folkefiende* (Erik Skjoldbjærg, 2004). The Norwegian feature rejects hope, declaring that in the neoliberal era, people's resistance to reason threatens our species' very survival.

Such despondency informs today's populism and democratic apathy, suggesting that the humanistic beliefs of the Enlightenment may have played themselves out. If so, the emergence of a new master-narrative may be required in order to break the ideological deadlock of the twenty-first century. As voters are labelled "deplorables" and journalists "the enemy of the people," Ibsen's play experiences a renaissance on American and British stages. The play and its four film adaptations exemplify how fictional works, particularly those that let timely ideological questions structure their narrative, can be valuable sources for examining how our cultural and political beliefs evolve. The promotion of reason was, arguably, the key mission of the Enlightenment. Rational thinking was a faculty many believed would come to unite humanity, for instance, by leading all nations into becoming liberal democracies for eternity, with peace and prosperity ensured.[4]

The cultural-political crisis of our present era attests to how naïve such beliefs were. Or, at

least that is how such aspirations of the Enlightenment appear in much current discourse. By investigating how Ibsen’s perennially contentious question of democratic participation is staged in Nazi Germany, post-1968 America, India as the Cold War ends, and in social-democratic Norway after neoliberalism, we collect perspectives that can help us make sense of today’s confusion. Ibsen’s play and its adaptations show us how a story, as it adapts to cultural and temporal context, can both perpetuate and challenge the ideologies of previous versions, in addition to building on arguments from previous eras so that an old story can say something new and relevant. And importantly, by having access to such varied versions, we see how ideological positions that one version takes for granted are, in fact, hotly disputable when staged in a different context. An adaptation study thus lets us reveal ideological tensions that merely studying a literary original would not bring our attention to.

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[1] Johann Herder, *Sämmtliche Werke, vol. 29*, edited by Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1889), 366; my translation.

[2] Alan Thompson, “Professor's Debauch,” *Theatre Arts* 35 (1951): 25–27, at 27.

[3] Anway Mukhopadhyay, “Ray Between Two Owls: Satyajit Ray and the Aporias of Enlightenment,” *South Asian Review* 36, no. 1 (2017): 37–54, at 39.

[4] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Penguin, 1992); Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in *Kant’s Political Writings*, edited by Hans Siegbert Reiss, translated by Hugh Barr Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).